



Rage, Glory, and Despair  
in *The Iliad* and *Trojan  
Women*

A Bunch of Guys Overreact. Lots of People Die.

# Disclaimer

- This is not an exhaustive or even representative sample of war literature
- I really only included my favorite pieces of war literature because I am selfish. And shameless.
- All of these examples are from the Western tradition



# Taxonomy of War Literature

- “Enchanted” vs. “Disenchanted” War Literature (Sarah Cole)
- Literature of “Front Lines” Experience
- Literature of Noncombatants’ Experience
- Literature of the Effects of War

# Glory and War Literature

- In “Enchanted” war literature, glory is the desired outcome for participation in battle
- Glory—and the accompanying fame—drive the soldier to fight and to take risks
- The glorified body is a site of cultural production and the most prestigious transformation available to the soldier



# The Trojan War

- Paris of Troy “steals” Helen, wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta
- Agamemnon (brother of Menelaus, King of Mycenae) rallies the Achaeans (Greeks) to take Helen back and make the Trojans pay for Paris’s perfidy
- Trojan War lasts ten years
- Historical basis of the war still an open question

# *The Iliad*

- Greek epic poem attributed to Homer
- Chronicles the events at the end of the last year of the Trojan War
- An “enchanted” piece of war literature
- Sets the stage for all future war literature
  - Descriptions of battle
  - Psychology of soldiers (and noncombatants)
  - Perception of divine intervention



# First Lines, translated by Stanley Lombardo

RAGE:

Sing, Goddess, Achilles' rage,  
Black and murderous, that cost the Greeks  
Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls  
Of heroes into Hades' dark,  
And left their bodies to rot as feasts  
For dogs and birds, as Zeus' will was done.

# An Attempt at Summary

## Greeks

- Achilles: Child of Thetis (nymph and immortal) and Peleus (mortal)
- Agamemnon: Leader of the Greek troops, brother of Menelaus
- Helen: Wife of Menelaus, apparently the cause of the whole ruckus
- Patroclus: Achilles's closest friend; wears Achilles's armor and is killed by Hector

## Trojans

- Priam: King of Troy
- Paris: Priam's son and the "thief" of Helen
- Hector: Priam's warrior son, killed by Achilles
- Hecuba: Priam's wife, mother of Paris and Hector



# Glory in *The Iliad*

- Glory (kleos) is the motivation for all the fighters in *The Iliad*
- Glory includes fame in terms of stories told about the warrior and prizes (read: women and gold) after the battle
- When Agamemnon takes Briseis from Achilles, he is stripping him of the visible manifestation of his glory in battle

# Aftermath: *Trojan Women*

- A play by Euripides describing the fate of the Trojan women after the fall of Troy to the Greeks (and after the death of Achilles)
- In brief, the women become concubines to Greeks (divided as so many trophies) and male children are killed (so they don't grow up to avenge their fathers)
- Helen is reclaimed by Menelaus and taken back to Greece, where a death sentence awaits her. He is too cowardly to go through with it, however, and decides to just let her be his wife again



# Disenchantment?

- The fate of the Trojan women and their children—and their accompanying lamentations—suggests that this play falls into the camp of “disenchanted” war literature
- To what extent is enchantment the function of victory?
- To what extent is enchantment at the expense of the female body (for whom there is no possibility for glory)?