

## Evolutionary Psychology

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### Book Review

#### Demonic Males and Missing Daughters

A review of Jonathan Gottschall, *The Rape of Troy: Evolution, Violence and the World of Homer*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, 236 pp., US\$34.99, ISBN 978-0521690478

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Anthropology has a long history of engagement with the classics. The founder of American anthropology, Lewis Henry Morgan, was a classical scholar who both drew from Greek and Latin sources in studying American Indians, and informed classical scholarship with his inputs from ethnography. He and others saw that the history of the ancient world was the history of the change from tribal and barbarian (in the technical sense) societies to political states, and there was much to learn there. Anthropology unfortunately moved away from the study of social evolution in the twentieth century, and the connection with classics eventually collapsed. Also, classical education declined, and it was no longer the case that we could assume that any educated person, even a scientist, would have had some Latin and Greek in his background. The Latin requirement for entrance to science faculties in British universities, for example, was dropped in the sixties, as being archaic. The close connection that my mentor, the expert on the Navajo and fine Greek scholar, Clyde Kluckhohn, wrote about in his *Anthropology and the Classics*, was lost.

But here comes Jonathan Gottschall, himself a Greek scholar and Homer expert, who has taken the trouble to learn the best of evolutionary theory and information and asked himself the question: can our knowledge of behavioral evolution inform our interpretation of Homer and archaic Greece? Not to explain away Homer at all, but to elucidate what is happening in the great epics. He asks the simple question: Why did the men in the Iliad and the Odyssey fight? What were they fighting about? The Trojan war was not typical of Greek fighting in the Dark Ages (12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.) More usually “war” was raiding expeditions of one tribe against another. Huge armies engaged in 10-year sieges was exceptional, and while the Iliad may have been a literary fiction nevertheless it is an incomparable record of life and fighting at the time. Erick Havelock (*Preface to Plato*) called it, and its companion volume, a “tribal encyclopedia” and so it is. Gottschall mines it for information on the motives and methods of the Greek warriors in a tribal society (not a nation) addicted to conflict, not unlike the Vikings. What was the conflict about?

He first must establish the nature of the poems and deal with the paradox that these incomparable works of literature were originally the product of a pre-literate society. How can we be sure that they were not a later literate fantasy, or a layer of literate fantasies from different hands? Could their almost 30,000 lines of verse have been contained in the memory of any preliterate singer? He describes how Milman Parry, early last century, through studies of folk poets in (then) Yugoslavia, established the method of formulaic, improvisational composition the bards used, thus solving the problem of memory, and showing that the poems could indeed be a genuine source of information for the Dark Age societies. They were an ethno-ethnography in fact (my term not his) of society after the great Mycenaean collapse. He does not make the comparison, but the descent into fragmented warring tribalism after the Mayan, or Anasazi, or Angkor Wat collapses could be instructive. He has to establish this point first: from the Homeric epics we can reconstruct a lot of the culture and society of the period.

This is what he does next: an ethnography of post-Mycenaean Greece. The language of kingdom or empire or feudalism so often used in “translating” Homer is misleading. I used to quibble with Robert Fagles about his use of “prince” or even “field-marshal” for example. Gottschall shows that this was a tribal society rising to the level of chiefdoms and alliances, but no more than that. This opens up a world of comparisons with its ethnographic equivalents. The *basileus* of the Achaians, usually translated “king” was more like a “big man” than he was a monarch. As is common at this level, the Greeks mostly fought each other, only making temporary alliances, as against the Persians. This was chronic, persistent fighting, largely for vengeance and retribution, again comparable to the conflicts of the Plains Indians, or New Guinea or Amazonia. And the Greeks in Homer were fatalistic about it: they deplored it but saw no alternative. Thus he comes to his main theme: the evolutionary biology of violence. Why do men fight?

Male violence is easily predicted from the differential Parental Investment of the sexes (Trivers): males must compete for the scarce resource of female reproductive capacity. Males give away their endless supply of sperm: females can't do the same with their finite supply of eggs. So male competition is a given in a mildly polygynous species like ours. But is the answer simply “men fight over women”? Gottschall pretty much thinks yes. It might appear that men fight over honor, status, territory or wealth, as the Greeks seem to do, but these are all means to reproductive success: they are ways of getting fertile women.

Here he might have difficulty with skeptics. Phrases like “ultimately” and “in the final analysis” hide an explanatory problem. Are we explaining proximate motivations; that is, that these particular men fight over an insult to their honor? Or are we explaining why men in general come to be prone to fighting in the first place? He understands the proximate-ultimate issue of course, but opts for the ultimate. But while men do fight directly over reproductive success – in the sense of women as child-bearers, they also fight directly over all the other things listed. To say that these things ultimately lead to reproductive success may be true, but it does not say that this is what motivates men to fight over them. What about the young men in the trenches of WWI? They went voluntarily out of patriotism, idealism, shame at staying behind, or just for the thrill of adventure or because their friends were going. To say that they were ultimately advancing their reproductive success is rather lame. Gottschall, as I say, understands this, but I think he might be giving hostages to his critics here. The fact is that men rarely fight directly

over reproductive success *as such*. They fight over the things they claim they fight over (including women.) If they succeed – if they stay alive and win that is, then reproductive success may follow. But we must keep the distinction clear.

However, Gottschall then does go on to make a powerful case that Homeric violence, personal and collective, was largely directly about women, and this is true. Here is where knowing Homer the way he does really counts. From Helen through Briseis to Penelope, the heroes were driven by their sexual possessiveness for the most prized women, and the soldiery could also expect women as booty after a victory. Rape was part and parcel of this and he is rightly critical of the “rape is always about something other than sex” school. However, “strategic rape” does happen. The Serb militias in Bosnia and Kosovo did not just rape Muslim women, they kept them prisoner for nine-months to make sure they had 50% Serb children. But the possibility of raping enemy women has always been a strong motivator (along with alcohol) to soldiers, as their commanders knew and both used and feared. The Greeks were no exception.

He then looks at van Wees’s *Status Warriors*, the most thorough treatment of the causes of Homeric fighting. As the title suggests van Wees thinks it is all about status – rather than material goods, territory etc. Gottschall asks: why fight about status as an end in itself? This raises the explanation issue again. Both status and wealth can be seen by observers – and of course by natural selection, as a means to reproductive success; that is, access to breeding females. Thus any particular warrior may fight over an insult, but in doing this he is asserting his status, which is measured by wealth and access to women, including the numerous slave concubines that made up a leader’s household. Thus Gottschall says, men do not fight because of any one of these things, but because of the evolutionary complex that ties them together. This formulation helps, I think, to solve the explanation problem. Status brings wealth, wealth translates into bride-price, but that only gets the one legal wife and her offspring. The numerous references to bastards in Homer however shows that reproductive success worked via the slave women gathered as booty. None of this worked if a man died young in battle and many did: but that was an acceptable risk given the rewards.

If the man had no choice but to pursue the warrior path, women had fewer choices in “negotiating the fitness landscape.” He examines how women survived in a world of violent men, and how they even, through “female choice” helped to determine the qualities of the males. Beauty was important for the women and the heroines played that card brilliantly. The women could survive and thrive if they privileged the successful warriors, despite the men’s violence and promiscuity. It was tough. Paris was an exception that proves the rule, and Helen berated him severely for fleeing the fight with Menelaus. (Why did she go with him in the first place? Was Menelaus that bad?)

If women are the scarce resource over which men compete, then any shortage of women will intensify the competition. This can be an absolute shortage as with female infanticide or a high female mortality rate, or a relative shortage as with “operational polygyny” where a few men monopolize the women. Either will leave hordes of frustrated young males who are universally the major source of violence. Gottschall searches through Homer for evidence of these variables and admits the evidence can be thin. He is secure on polygyny. Despite the rule of one legal wife, which was for succession and property, the Greeks even more so than the Romans, practiced plural mating (my term) through slave concubinage. Homer gives much detail on this. On the exposure and neglect of daughters,

the evidence is sparse, but it makes sense in context. Either way, the excess young-males-without-mates are easily deflected into raiding neighboring tribes to get their own women. If we think this is all ancient history, we are wrong, as the alarming excess of unmarried males in Islamic countries will convince us.

Why were Homer and his heroes so fatalistic about the horrors of the war they all deplored? Because, says Gottschall, they were caught in the Prisoner's Dilemma; or it could be the tragedy of the commons, or the parable of the tribes. There was no way any tribe could opt out of the situation. As long as only one tribe was going to be warlike, it would expand exponentially at the expense of the others. Defect wins over cooperate every time, and the vicious cycle turns on and on. It is fate, it is *fortuna*, it is the cynical cruelty of the gods. And this (I observe) was Morgan's basic question: how did such a society give rise to democratic Athens? The major shift involved was to be the major question of early sociology and anthropology, and we have dumped it, not because it has been solved, but because we got bored with it.

There is no way to get bored with Gottschall. He has written a small masterpiece of evolutionary-literary analysis. Only someone with such a thorough knowledge of Homer and Homeric scholarship as he has could do this. This ability to marry disciplines with confidence and authority is rare and should be cherished. As someone who has tried for half a century to ignore the science-humanism barrier and pursue ideas where they lead, I know the problems. We must somehow have the respect of both sides of the divide, and this is hard in the academic world dominated by its disciplinary categories and little-minded turf protection. As the social anthropologists taught us, witchcraft and pollution are that which disturbs established categories. Dirt is matter in the wrong place. But we have to risk getting dirty if we are to show how evolutionary science can illuminate great literature. Progress is being made, and Gottschall's remarkable book should inspire us all to do better. Lord knows there are quibbles enough here to keep us all busy, scholars and scientists alike, and that is how it should be. But for a Homeric moment let us be free to wonder and applaud.