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## The Women's Issues, Defeat and Warfare in the Iliad

Essentially a tale of warfare, Homer's *Iliad* presents the Trojan War as a traditionally male-focused conflict. However, embedded in the story is the inevitably female-centered core of the battle. While not fully explored in the frame of the epic's narrative, the cause of the war itself is wholly feminine, with its origins in the jealousy and rivalry of the goddesses as well as the destructive beauty of the mortal Helen. Men are the heroes and overseers of the battlefield, but the women of the *Iliad* acquire - in their own varying degrees - involvement and influence over the ongoing action. This influence is represented by the poet through key objects associated with the primary female figures under discussion: Athene's aegis, Aphrodite's zone, and the robe that Helen weaves. Each object enables its owner to either directly or indirectly control the flow of the war, empowering each woman to - in both the literal and figurative sense - weave and construct the events that unfold in the story.

In the character of Athene, the poet creates an interesting dichotomy between Greek concepts of masculinity and femininity. As the goddess of warfare and the primary female deity who actively participates in the war, she plays a crucial role in the battle. While Athene often intervenes to provide the warriors with strategic advice and level-headed wisdom, one of the main ways in which she functions on the battlefield is through her aegis, an animal-skin shield. It is through the aegis that the dual nature of Athene is truly exemplified; while she is the goddess of war - a typically male activity - she is also the patron of weaving, the quintessential female art. In the initial description provided, "the dear treasured aegis, ageless, immortal, form whose edges float a hundred all-golden tassels, each one carefully woven" combines both the skillfulness and beauty of feminine craft with the strength of masculine force as it enables Athene to encourage the weak and demoralized soldiers to continue fighting (2.446). In propelling the war, she conducts the battle in the manner of a male, but the object with which she uses to do so - the aegis, which in its crafting shows signs of a female touch - indicates a clear interplay of both masculine and feminine power. The second time the aegis appears, now described as "detasseled, terrible [...] all about which Terror hangs like a garland, and Hatred is there, and Battle Strength, and heart-freezing Onslaught and thereon is set the head of the grim gigantic Gorgon, a thing of fear and horror," there is yet another subtle implication of feminine power in the reference to the Gorgon, the fearsome female creature of Greek myth (5.741-742). Thus, it is through the aegis that Homer reveals the complex power that Athene holds as a strong female figure, directly controlling the trajectory of the fight and driving the battle onward.

Unlike Athene, Aphrodite is not fully able to directly involve herself in battle, her initiative dismissed by both Diomedes and Zeus in her first disastrous foray onto the battlefield. "No, my child, not for you are the works of warfare. Rather concern yourself only with the lovely secrets

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of marriage, while all this shall be left to Athene and sudden Ares,” Zeus consoles the wounded Aphrodite (5.428-431). Instead of actually fighting, Aphrodite is able to control the flow of the war through her zone, the girdle of seduction:

“...from her breasts unbound the elaborate, pattern-pierced zone, and on it are figured all beguilements, and loveliness is figured upon it, and passion of sex is there, and the whispered endearment that steals the heart away even from the thoughtful” (14.214-221).

By lending her zone to Hera, who uses it as a tool to help the Achaians by seducing and tricking Zeus from interfering in the battle, Aphrodite unknowingly shapes the path of war. Here, Homer reveals a different facet of feminine power - this time, not craft but potent female sexuality, able to overwhelm and overpower even the most powerful of males.

Even more helpless and detached from battle than Aphrodite, Helen is perhaps the most objectified of the women in the *Iliad*. However, Homer implies that she has a greater role in the ongoing action than expected by describing Helen as “weaving a great web, a red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armored Achaians, struggles that they endured for her sake at the hands of the war god” (3.125-128). Although Helen is the person the war is being fought over, she has no actual influence over the battle; it is through the crafting of this robe that she gains a semblance of autonomy and control. The men are busy chasing glory in battle, while Helen - unable to do the same - conducts her own, subversive power in the Trojan palace through weaving and “directing the magnificent work done by her handmaidens” (6.192).

The *Iliad* presents glory, or *kleos*, as the highest value and honor that a person can have. Underlying the battle is the constant striving by warriors to achieve this *kleos* through their military prowess. However, while the women do not actually fight, they seem to be searching for their own form of *kleos* in their own way. Utilizing the key feminine traits of wisdom, sexuality, and perception, Athene, Aphrodite, and Helen are able to have their own moments of glory and redemption, their own forms of *aristeia* separate from the masculine sphere.

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