

Arms and the Woman: Female Combatants in Vergil's *Aeneid*

"The mere fact that it is necessary to specify 'female combatants' indicates their historical rarity and symbolic position as unconventional figures." (Miranda Alison, 2004: 447)

I. The Latin *Matres*

The Latin troops are driven back against the city walls and a miserrima caedes follows:

ipsae de muris summo certamine matres
(**monstrat amor verus patriae**, ut videre Camillam)
tela manu **trepidae** iaciunt ac robore duro
stipitibus ferrum sudibusque imitantur obustis
praecipites, **prymaeque mori pro moenibus**
ardent. (11.891-895)

The matrons themselves from the walls, **at the last resort (true love of their country showed them the way**, as they saw Camilla), **fearfully** hurled weapons from their hands and with hard wood imitated steel with staffs and fire-hardened stakes—in a **headlong rush**, and they **burned to be the first to die before the walls.**

II. The Afghan *Matres*: "The Vacant Womb"

A. Headline: "In northern Afghanistan, **bereaved** women take up arms to fight Islamic State"
(Zabihullah Nori, Reuters)

"Gul Bibi, an Afghan grandmother well into her eighties, never expected to become a fighter. But now she is one of more than a hundred women in Afghanistan's northern Jawzjan province who have taken up arms against Islamist militants. **Nearly all of the women have lost a husband, son or brother to the Taliban or the newly active Islamic State in the province bordering Turkmenistan... Determined to protect their families**, the women approached a local police commander, Sher Ali, in December and asked him for guns and ammunition."

B. Headline: "Afghan women **seeking revenge on the Taliban who killed their relatives** graduate from 'Sandhurst in the sand' training centre set up by British troops"
(Larisa Brown, *The Daily Mail*)

"**Grieving** Afghan women are seeking revenge on the Taliban and Islamic State after being trained up by British forces at 'Sandhurst in the sand'. **Hundreds of females are taking up arms in retaliation for the deaths of their husbands, sons and other relatives in the war-ravaged country.**"

But in the women's words:

"Nafisa Rasuli, 22, said: 'I want to help **my country** be safe and secure. I am ready to defend **my country** and I would rather die defending **my country** than not try. I hate ISIS and the Taliban, they are the enemy of **this country.**'"

"Somaiya Haidari, 25, still training at the academy, said: 'I, as an Afghan girl, always wanted to serve **my country**. I am ready to join the fight against the Taliban and Daesh. They are a real enemy and we won't let them win.'"

III. Female Suicide Bombers: "The Deviant Womb"

A. Hanadi Jaradat (detonation 10.4.03, Haifa)

- "Unlike men, who tend to be motivated by national pride, the women more often act out of personal loss and family pressures, Palestinian and Israeli experts say. Jaradat was angry at Israel, and possibly unhappy at home. At 27, she was not married, an unenviable status in Palestinian society." ("Suicide attacks get personal," Peter Hermann, *Baltimore Sun*)
- "Hanadi al-Malek, for example, was a spinster at 27, but as a suicide bomber in a Haifa restaurant in 2003, she became the 'Bride of Haifa' and earned symbolically in death what she could not have in life." ("Pawns in a Gambit," Hannah Hess, *Harvard Political Review*)

But in Jaradat's words:

"By the power of Allah, I have decided to become the sixth female martyrdom-seeker, who will turn her body in to shrapnel, which will reach the heart of every Zionist colonist in my country, and every settler or Zionist who has tried to sow death in my country."

B. Reem al-Riyashi (detonation 1.14.04, Gaza)

- "A Palestinian woman with two toddlers chose murder over motherhood yesterday when she strapped on a bomb and blew herself and four Israelis to smithereens." ("Bomb-Ma Madness," Habboush and Siemaszko, *New York Daily News*)
- "Riyashi's suicide attack shocked the world, particularly as she had posed with her small children in photos taken before her attack. The appalling photos of a mother brandishing an automatic rifle with a rocket-propelled grenade in the foreground standing alongside her young children defied all understandings of normal motherhood." ("Mothers as Terrorists: When Mothers Kill and Die to Attain So-Called 'Martyrdom' Status, Anne Speckhard, *HuffPost*)
- "Observers struggled to find a motive behind [Riyashi's] attack: she was a wealthy woman, married with children, and had no close friends or family members to avenge." ("Explosive Baggage: Female Palestinian Suicide Bombers and the Rhetoric of Emotion," Toles Patkin)

But in Riyashi's words:

"I am the *shahida* [female martyr] Reem Saleh Riyashi. I hoped that the shredded limbs of my body would be shrapnel, tearing the Zionists to pieces, knocking on Heaven's door with the skulls of Zionists... Since eighth grade I have striven... how often I desired to carry out a *shahadah*-seeking operation inside Israel, and by perseverance and with Allah's grace my wish was fulfilled."

IV. Dido: "The Vacant Womb"

saltem si qua mihi de te suscepta fuisset
ante fugam suboles, si quis mihi parvulus aula
luderet Aeneas, qui te tamen ore referret,
non equidem omnino capta ac deserta viderer.'
(4.327-330)

"At least if I had conceived a child by you before your flight, if some little baby Aeneas were to play in my halls, who would remind me of you in looks, then I would not feel myself so entirely overcome and abandoned."

V. Camilla: "The Deviant Womb"

multae illam frustra Tyrrhena per oppida matres
optavere nurum; sola contenta Diana
aeternum telorum et virginitatis amorem
intemerata colit. (11.581-584)

Many matrons throughout the Etruscan towns desired her in vain to be their daughter-in-law; content with Diana alone she (unviolated) cherished an eternal love of weapons and virginity.

... nihil ipsa nec aurae
nec sonitus memor aut venientis ab aethere teli,
hasta sub exsertam donec perlata papillam
haesit virgineumque alte bibit acta cruorem.
(11.801-804)

... Camilla herself noticed not at all the breath of wind or the sound, or the weapon hurtling from above until the spear plunged in under her exposed nipple; it clung there and, driven deeply, drank her virgin blood.

VI. The Latin *Matres*

ipsae de muris summo certamine matres
(**monstrat amor verus patriae**, ut videre Camillam)
tela manu **trepidae** iaciunt ac robore duro
stipitibus ferrum sudibusque imitantur obustis
praecipites, **primaque mori pro moenibus ardent.**
(11.891-895)

The matrons themselves from the walls, **at the last resort (true love of their country showed them the way**, as they saw Camilla) **fearfully** hurled weapons from their hands and with hard wood imitated steel with staffs and fire-hardened stakes—in a headlong rush, and **they burned to be the first to die before the walls.**

sit Romana potens Itala virtute propago. (Juno, 12.827)
“may the Roman offspring be strong through Italian virtue.”

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