

The Fog of War: Teaching Ancient Warfare with a Feminist Perspective

Ancient warfare remains a popular topic of study, even at modern liberal arts colleges. Given the prominent place of war in the lives of ancient peoples, the subject has a justifiable place in a Classics curriculum. It is also invaluable for teaching skills valued in both Classics and History: responsible source criticism, the importance of philology, how to synthesize archaeological and literary records. Moreover, the diverse approaches brought to bear by ancient military historians—topographical, scientific, reconstructive—make it a fertile field for expanding student’s understanding of how to frame and attempt to answer historical questions. Finally, the study of war naturally leads to questions and conversations about the modern world, serving alternately to denaturalize contemporary attitudes to war or ground them within a Classical legacy.

Yet the popularity of such courses can be a double-edged sword. Classes on ancient warfare can be strong draws for a Classics department, precisely because students perceive the topic to be inherently exciting or ‘cool.’ This is compounded by the sustained engagement with ancient sources that, more often than not, valorize the suffering and death involved in war; indeed, even Tacitus’ much-quoted claim that the Romans “make a desert and call it peace” (Ag. 30.6) is embedded within a larger discourse of Caledonian barbarism and enlightened Roman imperialism. Such classes therefore run the risk of presenting students with the opportunity—even the excuse—to revel in these narratives of martial glory without properly considering their causes and their costs. Subaltern voices—from women to the enemies of Greece and Rome—are often completely suppressed, and there is little secondary scholarship on the former (e.g., Schaps 1982), precisely because of that suppression. Meanwhile, leading scholars in the field famously

build on their work to offer a teleological story of Western military and cultural authority (Hanson 1989, 1995).

To what extent is it the responsibility of the instructor to promote a more critical engagement with attitudes to war—both ancient and modern? Is it possible to do so without taking all the ‘fun’ out of the topic? Should we as Classicists be comfortable exploiting subjects like this for pedagogical and institutional gains?

This paper draws on my experience teaching two semesters of a class on ancient warfare in a liberal arts environment. It outlines the challenges I have faced in constructing a class that I feel meets the needs of students and of my department, and in particular in teaching subject matter dominated by male characters and voices to a diverse student body with diverse issues. Because ancient warfare seems on the surface to be a male-dominated area of study, it can be difficult to convince students—even female students—that a female-oriented or feminist perspective has a place in the classroom, and tricky to create spaces that motivate and support meaningful discussion of such issues.

The paper also explores some of the solutions I have pursued or plan to pursue: engaging with readings that seek to expose the “mythic reality” of war (Shay 1994, Hedges 2002) or that offer controversial perspectives on famous conflicts (Holland 2010); staging discussions about the intellectual or cultural agendas at stake in the scholarly explanations or debates we encounter (e.g. on the nature of the *othismos*), and therefore drawing students’ attention to the political currents of historical inquiry; including representations from the world of music and film that fill out the literary accounts and offer a more affective encounter with the material under study; and expanding the focus of so-called “Face of Battle” studies (after Keegan 1976) to engage students in creative writing projects that explore the experience of non-combatants in ancient warfare.

Bibliography

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