

Arms and the Woman: Female Combatants in the *Aeneid*

Female combatants tend to enter the epic genre either as members of a deviant, uncanny society of female Others (the Amazons) or as extraordinary individuals (Camilla). The contributions of ordinary women to the war effort are confined to the domestic sphere—so Hecuba and the Trojan women supplicate Athena (*Il.* 6.270-311), while Andromache prepares a bath for Hector (*Il.* 22.442-446). When a civilian woman does attempt to offer military advice, she is sent back to her domestic responsibilities with the admonition that “war is men’s business” (πόλεμος δ’ ἄνδρεςσι μελήσει, *Il.* 6.492). Vergil’s *Aeneid*, however, includes a striking example of ordinary women taking up arms: the Italian *matres*, inspired by patriotism and the example of Camilla (*monstrat amor verus patriae, ut videre Camillam, Aen.* 11.892), man the walls of Laurentum in defense of their countrymen. Though fearful (*trepidae*, 11.893), they are eager to die for their homeland (*primaque mori pro moenibus ardent*, 11.895). Their intervention constitutes a rare incursion of civilian females into the male-gendered sphere of epic combat.

Many scholars have mentioned this episode briefly (e.g. Quinn: 251, Zarker: 20-21, Toll: 114-115, Fratantuono: 290-291, Lovatt: 217-218; more extensively, Arrigoni: 118-124, Rossi 2004: 115-124), yet none has offered a sustained treatment of the women’s intervention or its implications for the gendered experience of war and violence. This paper addresses this issue by examining the passage through the lens of contemporary accounts of the participation of women in modern paramilitary organizations and guerrilla units (Non-State Armed Groups, or NSAGs). I focus especially on two recent examples. In October of 2016, a group of women in the Jawzjan province of Afghanistan took up arms to aid local forces against ISIS. Though initially responding to an immediate need, like the Laurentine *matres*, these women have maintained an all-female NSAG and continue to take action against IS and the Taliban. Similarly, in 2014 a

Yazidi woman formed an all-female combat unit to oppose ISIS in Iraq. Many women from both groups have lost family members to ISIS or the Taliban and describe themselves as filling a “vacuum” left by the deaths of professional fighters, as the Laurentine women respond to the loss of Camilla and the *miserrima caedes* of the Italian troops (11.885). In both cases, these women, like the Laurentines, have radically transgressed the conventions of their conservative societies. Yet, like Vergil’s *matres*, they are willing to take extreme action as a last resort (*summo certamine*, 11.891) on behalf of their homelands.

I draw on recent studies of the way ancient and modern narratives of war can serve as mirrors for one another, admitting new perspectives on both ancient and modern experiences of war and combat (e.g., the edited volumes of Cosmopoulos, Caston and Weineck, and Konstan and Meineck). My purpose in this paper is to consider the episode of the Laurentine *matres* in terms of the recent emergence of all-female NSAGs in the Middle East. What compels women to defy social convention and arm themselves, rather than leaving combat to professional, male soldiers? Are the Laurentine women acting to avenge their losses and to defend themselves from capture and rape, as are the Afghan and Yazidi women? The experiences of contemporary female combatants will help unpack this brief Vergilian passage and give it greater context and meaning within the poem’s depiction of violence and trauma. While the women of epic are often portrayed as the victims or passive observers of war, Vergil demonstrates that women could respond to conflict proactively, even eagerly (*ardent*, 11.895), and meet violence with violence. I will conclude by considering whether Vergil ultimately portrays the Laurentine women’s intervention as a positive contribution to the war effort or a futile and deviant challenge to the normative gender pairing of *arma virumque*.

Bibliography

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