**Gender and Sexuality in Ancient Greece**

**Pomona College — Spring 2021**

**Workshop Five : Fate, Force, and Finding our Felt Experiences of the *Iliad***

**General Instructions: (10 minutes to check in, read the instructions, and get settled in for the workshop)**

For this workshop, you’ll be organized in a Zoom Breakout Room with a group of approximately four students. Once you have landed in your Breakout Room, please take a few minutes to check in. Select one person to be the *timekeeper*. You will not need a scribe today; everyone is encouraged to take notes. Reminder to give yourself permission to be as present as possible for the experience of the workshop by turning off alerts, etc.

This **100-minute** workshop includes a 10-minute break. We will also take a break after reconvening. Please note your start time \_\_\_\_\_\_ and end time \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

**1. Rules and Roles: Gender and Status in the *Iliad* (15 minutes)**

Please reflect on the set of questions in this part of today’s workshop for five minutes independently and then discuss for ten.

Picking up from your small-group work last week, please consider whether the female goddesses or female human characters in this poem have powerful voices or agency to determine their own actions (consider, among others, Aphrodite, Hera, Helen, Andromache, and Hecuba)? Do the male gods or male human characters have powerful voices or agency (consider, among others, Zeus, Hephaestus, Achilles, Hector, Paris)? How does “fate” factor into the dynamic?

**2. Force in the *Iliad* (20 minutes)**

Writing in the summer and fall of 1940, just after the fall of France to Hitler’s Germany in WWII, the French scholar Simone Weil describes the *Iliad* as a “poem of force.” She begins:

The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man’s flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to. For those dreamers who considered that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past, the *Iliad* could appear as an historical document; for others, whose powers of recognition are more acute and who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very center of human history, the *Iliad* is the purest and the loveliest of mirrors.

To define force — it is that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all; this is a spectacle the *Iliad* never wearies of showing us. (Weil 1940, 1-2)

Weil, or her translator (?) use “man” as the universal here. While this may circumscribe the spaciousness of her argument, I nevertheless feel that there is something profound in her analysis -- and that we can take her work a step further.

Force overpowers both those identified as “men” and those identified as “women” in the *Iliad*. Please consider quietly for a few minutes and then discuss: Does force affect female characters differently than male characters in the *Iliad*? Please try to provide specific examples from the poem to illustrate your answer.

One intractable force in the *Iliad* is that of war itself. Do you read the poem as primarily pro-war or anti-war? Is the answer to this question the same from a “female” perspective as it is from a “male” perspective? Again, please pause for a moment to reflect and then discuss these questions.

**Please take a 10-minute break now.**

**3. Ring Composition & Counter Narrative (45 minutes)**

One of the characteristics of the Homeric epic poems, attributable to their initial orality, is a tendency to circle back around to themes previously presented. Segments of the poem, as well as the poem as a whole, come full circle: that is, they begin and end on a theme (rather than starting at one point, escalating to a peak of action, and concluding with a dénouement, as modern works conventionally do). This circular pattern is known as “ring composition.”

Looking back to the beginning of the poem, recalling the most affecting passages throughout, and then recalling the end, what themes recur cyclically throughout the poem? What theme do you feel organizes the whole of the *Iliad*? Take five minutes to reflect independently about these questions and then another five to discuss with your group. Try to agree on a single, coherent answer to the question: “What is one (or even *the*) central theme of the *Iliad*?” (1o minutes)

Once you have agreed on one (the) central theme of the *Iliad*, please try to select one passage of approx. 20 lines (give or take – the length really doesn’t matter) from the poem that evokes your theme. The connection between the passage and theme may be oblique, but it should be salient to you. (5 minutes)

After you’ve selected your passage, please work together to prepare a counter-narrative to the passage that you selected. Your counter-narrative could be a version of the scene from the a subaltern perspective or a speech in the voice of a non-dominant character from the poem. Imagine a subaltern character’s (perhaps unnoticed or unexpressed) experience of the scene, or the ramifications of the scene on a character whose experience isn’t centered in the poem. The counter-narrative could be in your own voice(s), exploring your own experience of the poem, from a radical, critical, or otherwise non-dominant perspective. What else could a counter-narrative to the *Iliad* look like?

To support your creation of this counter-narrative, you may want to take a moment for private reflection. You may also want to review [Luna Castelli’s Introduction to Critical Race Theory and Counter-Storytelling.](https://pressbooks.claremont.edu/clas114valentine/chapter/chapter-1/) Please remember that this work – of creating counter-stories to the *Iliad* is an innovative, experimental act of queer, anti-racist, embodied engagement with the poem – and so your initial (rather quick!) effort here will necessarily be more provisional rather than perfect. Allow your emotional response to the poem as much or more than your intellectual analysis to guide your creativity and try to participate in this exercise thoughtfully and conscientiously but without overthinking or judgement.

Select one (or more) volunteer(s) from your group to perform your narrative for the reconvened group. Try to select a performer (or performers) who would most benefit from the experience. This may or may not be the person who initially feels most comfortable volunteering. (30 minutes)

***Note: We will take another break after returning to the main Zoom meeting.***