

Politics as an Extension of the Harem

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Genetic evidence indicates that during human evolutionary history, relatively few men have been reproductively successful when compared to women. Archaeological, anthropological, and textual evidence deepens our understanding of this phenomenon, at least for late prehistory and early history. Such evidence indicates that certain men's reproductive success occurred through the severe *political* oppression of women, and also of low-status men. This paper will argue that prehistoric and early-historical gendered oppression lies at the origin of what we think of as politics, with widespread and often surprising implications that continue to the present day.

For example, military glory, or *kleos*, may be a holdover from this earlier social pattern, under which soldiers accepted *kleos* as a substitute for the reproductive success that their rulers enjoyed in their stead. The transition to recorded history coincided with a gradual tendency toward monogamous marriage, but women's political objectification remained, as did free access to women's bodies for powerful men. And men often remain motivated by *kleos*, an ideology

that has long outlived its original purpose. Significant holdovers from conquest polygyny thus remain with us and inform politics today.

Indeed, governing in itself has long been a male-dominated activity, and this may well be the reason why. In ways both genetic and cultural, we are the heirs of conquest polygyny. Must we remain so forever? This paper will close with an extended speculation on humanity's far future, informed by its distant yet ever-present past.

1. The Genetic Evidence and Its Social Implications

Western literature begins with two men fighting over a sex slave. To explain this unusual narrative choice, students are commonly told that the *Iliad* begins in medias res. To open with the Trojan War already well underway heightens the drama of the story. My argument, though, will be the *Iliad* does not begin in medias res. It begins at the beginning, with a man's control over a woman's body. This, I will argue, should be understood as a fundamental matter of politics, on which the *Iliad* is a commentary. To make this case requires some scientific background, to which we now turn. Although it is unfortunately somewhat technical, it is also highly illuminating.

Some human genetic information is uniquely transmitted by men; this information is located in, and transmitted through, the Y chromosome. Y chromosomes are uniquely passed from a biological father to approximately 50% of his offspring; possessing one usually means that these offspring are phenotypically male. Apart from a tiny number of mutations, each human male's Y chromosome is identical to that of his biological father.

Other human genetic information is almost uniquely transmitted by women; this information is encoded in, and transmitted through, mitochondrial DNA. Occasional male transmission of mitochondrial DNA has been recorded, but it is exceedingly rare.¹ Mitochondrial

¹ Shiyu Luo, C. Alexander Valencia, Jinglan Zhang, Ni-Chung Lee, Jesse Slone, Baoheng Gui, Xinjian Wang, Zhuo Li, Sarah Dell, Jenice Brown, Stella Maris Chen, Yin-Hsiu Chien, Wuh-Liang Hwu, Pi-Chuan Fan, Lee-Jun Wong, Paldeep S. Atwal, and Taosheng Huang, "Biparental Inheritance of Mitochondrial DNA in Humans" PNAS December 18, 2018 115 (51) 13039-

DNA is almost always passed from a biological mother to all of her offspring via the egg cell. Apart from these rare cases, plus a tiny number of mutations, a human's mitochondrial DNA is likewise identical to that of their biological mother.

The distinct inheritances of the patrilineal Y chromosome and of the matrilineal mitochondrial DNA allow geneticists to estimate the genetic diversity and hence the relative sizes of the reproductive populations within each biological sex over the course of human evolutionary history. Recent analysis reveals that women as a group have been much more reproductively successful than men. The typical reproductively successful man impregnated many different women, but there were few such men. The typical reproductively successful woman probably bore the children of just one man, or of only a few. But many more women had offspring in total. This state of affairs seems to have prevailed across all human populations and for many thousands of years. The authors of an important recent paper write:

Our results confirm the controversial assertion that genetic differences between human populations on a global scale are bigger for the NRY [non-recombinant Y chromosome] than for mtDNA [mitochondrial DNA]... Model-based simulations indicate very small ancestral effective population sizes (<100) for the out-of-Africa migration as well as for many human populations. We also find that the ratio of female effective population size to male effective population size (N_f/N_m) has been greater than one throughout the history of modern humans...²

The authors add that “our results indicate a consistent strong excess of N_f [number of reproductive females] versus N_m [number of reproductive males] starting even before the out-of-Africa migration...

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<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1810946115>.

² Sebastian Lippold, Hongyang Xu, Albert Ko, Mingkun Li, Gabriel Renaud, Anne Butthof, Roland Schröder and Mark Stoneking, “Human paternal and maternal demographic histories: insights from high-resolution Y chromosome and mtDNA sequences,” *Investigative Genetics* 5, no. 13 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1186/2041-2223-5-13>.

These results suggest, in turn, that sex-specific processes that reduce N_m , such as polygyny and/or sex-specific migration, have characterized humans over most of our prehistory.”³

From a normative perspective, “sex-specific migration” sugarcoats a set of conditions that probably merit no such treatment. In plain English, humanity’s evolutionary nursery appears to have been a harem, likely populated by conquest, in which many women were made available to only one man.⁴ And if our social conditions did not literally resemble a harem, then the best that may be said is that these conditions cannot readily be distinguished from one.

We can add with confidence that a great many of the women who populated prehistoric and early historic societies saw their reproductive fates determined by conquest. Victorious men reproduced with vanquished women; vanquished men may never have reproduced at all, or if they did, their children were killed. Even in recorded history, low-status victorious men have certainly reproduced much less often, and left less of a genetic legacy, than those of higher status. It is estimated, for instance, that Genghis Khan is a direct male-line ancestor to one in 200 living men⁵ and that Charlemagne is an ancestor to all living persons of European descent, though not through the male line alone.⁶ A saying attributed to the former, well known through a paraphrase in *Conan the Barbarian*, captures the ideal of conquest polygyny. Genghis Khan is said to have held it best in life

³ Ibid.

⁴ The term “harem” is culturally fraught and should not be taken uncritically by the reader. Other terms exist to describe similar institutions, but reasons of economy and familiarity still seem to weigh in its favor. As I note below, I use this term in a notional way that does not coincide exactly with the institution to be found in historical time.

⁵ Tatiana Zerjal et al, “The Genetic Legacy of the Mongols,” *American Journal of Human Genetics* 72 (2003), pp. 717–721.

⁶ Joseph T. Chang, “Recent Common Ancestors of All Present-Day Individuals,” *Advances in Applied Probability*, 31, no 4 (1999), pp. 1002-1026.

to crush your enemies, to see them fall at your feet—to take their horses and goods and hear the lamentation of their women. That is best.⁷

The notion of a primordial matriarchy also seems more doubtful in light of the genetic evidence.⁸ This should not surprise, prehistoric “goddess” figurines notwithstanding. In recorded history, misogynist cultures have also worshipped goddesses with no discernible gains in social status for actual women. And even the divine interpretation of the much-celebrated Venus figurines is disputed. They may have had an apotropaic function without reference to a deity. To which we add another, distinctly sinister interpretation: Given that women were commonly treated as possessions, these figurines may have been used as tokens of possession, that is, as adornments that reminded viewers of a man’s privileged status. They may even have been tokens that entitled a man to possess a woman in the near future, perhaps when the spoils of war were divided. The figurines seem to have changed gradually over time from fully formed but stylized representations into ever more abstract shapes—culminating in globular, perfunctory tokens that show only a set of breasts or buttocks. The stringing together of many such tokens in necklaces recalls the familiar practice of stringing together coins, which, with some speculation, perhaps they were.⁹

Without written records, however, our speculations may be only the product of contemporary prejudice.¹⁰ Caution is in order, yet

⁷ Harold Lamb, *Genghis Khan: The Emperor of All Men* (Doubleday, 1927), p. 107.

⁸ Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why An Invented Past Will Not Give Women a Future* (Beacon Press, 2000), openly questioned this hypothesis before the evidence discussed here became available. Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), is the most familiar text taking the affirmative view.

⁹ Ina Wunn, Davina Grojnowski. *Ancestors, Territoriality, and Gods: A Natural History of Religion*. (Springer, 2016), p. 100.

¹⁰ Vandewettering, Kaylea R., "Upper Paleolithic Venus Figurines and Interpretations of Prehistoric Gender Representations," *PURE Insights* 4, article 7 (2015), offers a caution of just this type.

we would also be remiss not to speculate at all. What, for example, does this evidence suggest about the origin of government? It would be strange indeed if a reconceptualization of prehistory and early history left our understanding of government untouched. Feminists have always insisted that government has been about the conquest of women's bodies by men; this contention is hardly new. But we may now add details to this claim, including the following:

- Conquest polygyny has been long-lasting and pervasive enough to have left legible genetic traces in present-day humans;
- Conquest polygyny probably motivated a large share of the violence found in the archaeological record; and
- Modern theories of governance are implicated in that the historical origins of government in the west have often been used to justify and reify current arrangements. Theories seeking to explain the state and other forms of governance will therefore require various degrees of rethinking.

For example, the genetic record alone significantly challenges contractual theories of government. Philosophers from David Hume to Carole Pateman have faulted social contract theory for putting a set of aspirations where a description belongs.¹¹ They were clearly correct as to historical time, and we can now say that they were all but certainly correct about prehistory as well. Government has been about conquest all along, said Hume; Pateman added that the domination of women in particular has been omnipresent but elided in the standard accounts of political theory. Other voices can be added as well, such as the anarchist sociologist Franz Oppenheimer, whose early 20th-century analysis of the formation of the state seems newly apposite: "The first stage [of state formation]," wrote Oppenheimer, "comprises robbery and killing in border fights, endless combats broken neither by peace

¹¹ David Hume, "Of the Original Contract," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. Originally published as volume 1 of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (London: Printed for Cadell, Donaldson, and Creech, Edinburgh, 1777). Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

nor by armistice. It is marked by killing of men, carrying away of children and women, looting of herds, and burning of dwellings.”¹²

The word “harem” may require some unpacking, at least as I deploy it here. Although polygyny and female domestic seclusion are distinct social practices, they commonly overlap one another, and they would have left similar genetic evidence. Secluded women have fewer opportunities to commit adultery than the patriarch, and their offspring are less likely to survive. Nonpatriarchal men would be similarly disadvantaged. These men were in effect secluded from women, either because the women were kept in special women’s quarters, or because the men were away at war. I therefore refer notionally to the harem as a nexus among institutions that we cannot and perhaps should not disentangle, including polygynous marriage, sequestration of women, and gender segregation in hunting and warfare.

Among hunter-gatherers, women were not confined in physical structures, of course; but reproductive access does seem to have been radically inegalitarian and must have been controlled by practices that would have been available at the time, including social sanctions, geographic gender segregation without physical confinement, and possibly infanticide.¹³

We have evidence from historical time that women and men were often reproductively limited by all of these methods. Why, though, would prehistoric men do such things? We do not have an entirely satisfying answer to this question. Recent consensus in the field of deep history holds that prehistory, before the development of intensive cereal grain agriculture, was in some respects a relatively pleasant time to be alive. Nutrition levels and other measures of overall health appear to have been fairly good, if not in comparison to industrialized societies then certainly in comparison to the first intensive grain

¹² Franz Oppenheimer, *The State: Its History and Development Viewed Sociologically*, trans. John M. Gitterman. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1914) p 56.

¹³ Mays, S & Eyers, Jill. “Perinatal Infant Death at the Roman Villa Site at Hambleton, Buckinghamshire, England,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 38 (2011), pp. 1931–1938.

cultivating societies. The hunter-gatherer lifestyle, supplemented by occasional low-intensity agriculture, allowed early humans a significant amount of free time and geographic mobility.¹⁴ Social units were also small: The consensus view, supported by the genetic work we rely on here, holds that humans were generally organized into populations of around 100 or 200 individuals. Cities, nations, and states were unknown.

Such societies might seem to have little need of warfare. Possessions were few. Land was in low demand because agriculture and mining were rudimentary. Violent ideologies, like nationalism or communism, did not exist. And yet prehistoric men seem to have filled their abundant free time with murder. As Steven Pinker memorably asked, “What is it about the ancients that they couldn’t leave us an interesting corpse without resorting to foul play?”¹⁵

Presumably one thing lurking behind all that foul play were fights over women, who were treated as valuable chattels. The disparate reproductive lives and the forensic evidence of prehistoric violence can both be parsimoniously explained using a small set of social institutions that are familiar to us from recorded history: The first warfare was conducted in significant part for the possession of women. The victors enjoyed sexual access thereafter, and they excluded all others. Men of this type were largely successful for thousands of years. This hypothesis is confirmed in light of prevailing sexual arrangements among hunter-gatherer populations that survived to the era of modern anthropology; in these populations, high-status males still reproduce more frequently, and polygyny is still prevalent.¹⁶

Meanwhile the low-status men implicit in the genetic evidence present one of the most poignant vignettes in all of deep history. These

¹⁴ See James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), for a book-length summary of the recent literature.

¹⁵ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 3.

¹⁶ Gary R. Lee, *Family Structure and Interaction: A Comparative Analysis* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 76.

men's lives have left almost no evidence at all. We can only discern them owing to an absence that they have left: Their failure to reproduce has created a lack of diversity in men's uniquely transmitted genes relative to women's. Until only a few years ago, we had little inkling of how ubiquitous such men were, or that they even existed at all. It is difficult to imagine a more complete yet still legible effacement from the record.

And for all the labors of the prehistoric patriarchs, they likewise left a mostly illegible (and decidedly ironic) legacy: Thanks to them, and to the many women whom they kept in various forms of bondage, women's uniquely transmitted genes are more diverse today. Yet among all known cultures that have practiced female seclusion and/or polygyny, these institutions also left a gender imbalance among potential marriage partners that created a significant social strain. Historically this imbalance has been mitigated by recourse to warfare, in which the surplus of frustrated, unmarriageable young men is liquidated, and in which the gender ratio among living adults will usually incline toward women.¹⁷ Polygyny in recorded history has been shown to increase intrastate social conflict; this conflict is hypothesized to be prompted by the surplus of unmarried young men, and "the primary motives for engaging in warfare in the ancestral environment were most likely reproductive."¹⁸

How, then, were prehistoric and early historic men and women of reproductive age kept loyal to a system that appears to have viciously exploited most of them for the benefit of a few powerful men? Both in the present day and in the ancient world, normative accounts of politics often serve to reconcile populations to intolerable social conditions. Like humanity itself, political philosophy may have been born in the harem. In the earliest written accounts of politics, the functionalist imperatives of harem-keeping can and should be discerned, along with a normative apparatus enabling them. Later political theory does much to obscure these questions, though curiously it preserves the

¹⁷ Douglas R. White, "Rethinking Polygyny: Co-Wives, Codes, and Cultural Systems." *Current Anthropology* 29, no. 4 (August-October 1988), p. 530.

¹⁸ Satoshi Kanazawa, "Evolutionary Psychological Foundations of Civil Wars." *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 1 (January 2009), p. 26.

functionality of some key aspects of the harem, which continue to exist to the present day. We will explore the implications for historical political theories in greater detail below. For now, let us take a brief tour of some ancient literature.

2. The Homeric Epics, Clio, and the Gendered Politics of the West

As mentioned above, in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, King Agamemnon claimed the concubine Briseis from Achilles; Briseis had previously been given to Achilles as a reward for his valor. Agamemnon had claimed the girl Chryseis in a parallel manner, showing that such actions were not unusual. But the god Apollo intervened in the case of Chryseis and forced Agamemnon to return her to her father. Agamemnon then took Briseis for his own. The resulting conflict animated the rest of the epic.

Agamemnon declared his entitlement to Chryseis, in the following terms:

The girl—I won't give up the girl. Long before that,
old age will overtake her in *my* house, in Argos,
far from her fatherland, slaving back and forth
at the loom, forced to share my bed!

Now go,

don't tempt my wrath—and you may depart alive.¹⁹

But Agamemnon could not keep her. Achilles reminded him that he might get three or four other women in the event of victory—apparently a standard practice—but it did not help.²⁰ Agamemnon himself later made a similar promise to all the Argives²¹ and

¹⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 1.30-40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.140-150.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.270-280.

specifically to the archer Teucer.²² Among the Trojans, Paris brought back women from Sidon;²³ and indeed, whenever the *Iliad* mentioned the spoils of war in any context, women were almost always among them. But in this case Agamemnon was not content to wait for more women later; instead he seized Briseis, who had already been apportioned to Achilles.

Given the *Iliad's* antiquity, it is reasonable to read these episodes in light of the genetic evidence discussed above. And indeed, this paper is hardly the first to have considered that evolutionary biology was at work in the Homeric epics. Jonathan Gottschall's 2008 book *The Rape of Troy* does likewise, and more recent genetic evidence seems to have both confirmed and broadened the applicability of its thesis that Homeric violence owed chiefly to a shortage of marriageable women, which prompted fights between men all across the relatively fragile and undeveloped societies depicted in the epics.²⁴ It was not only the Homeric world that suffered the shortage; it was a *pervasive* shortage, one that endured for many thousands of years. Whereas Gottschall is concerned primarily to demonstrate this dynamic within the Homeric texts, here we are interested in what those texts suggest to us about political theory in particular, and about the continuing, if unobserved, legacy bequeathed to us by this type of chronically unbalanced society.

Within the *Iliad*, Agamemnon clearly occupied the role of the reproductively successful male of deep history. Notably for us, his name literally meant "ruling mightily," and he already had a mate and children. Agamemnon's actions in Book 1 relegated the unmarried and childless Achilles to the role of a reproductively unsuccessful male. It was a common fate, but one that seemed grossly inappropriate to the author(s): Given Achilles' exceptional valor, he should presumably have received a sex slave-wife, and perhaps more than one, as a reward. Through much of the *Iliad*, Achilles' loyalty to the social order remained in the balance precisely because this reward was denied him.

²² *Ibid.*, 8.320-330.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.340-350.

²⁴ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Rape of Troy: Evolution, Violence, and the World of Homer*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Achilles' assent to a dangerous and perhaps celibate future was necessary for his social order to continue. An ideology was needed to make him fight for this order, one that otherwise treated him poorly. That ideology was also found in the *Iliad*. It was expressed in the Greek term *kleos*, meaning the glory earned in battle, from whom the muse of history, Clio, derives her name. As everyone knows, Achilles did meet a violent death, shot in his vulnerable heel by Paris. Achilles would die without children, but he would have as his substitute the glory of being recounted in history—an immortality that is not genetic but intellectual, founded in iconography and poetry. Achilles' fame after a childless death made him a key archetype of the warrior in western political thought: family life was abandoned, and with it genetic immortality. Historical immortality would take its place, ensuring him the honor that was purportedly his due.

The *kleos* of Achilles also purportedly sustained the very social structure around him, making it an ideology in the most political sense of the term. We know this from one of the *Iliad*'s most beautiful and striking passages, Book 18's extended description of the shield of Achilles. That shield, the work of the god Hephaestus, bore a fantastically intricate series of images, one that is often and I believe correctly interpreted as a microcosm—a depiction of Greek society as a whole, including its natural surroundings as well as the human works of war, agriculture, commerce, and law.²⁵ As described, the shield's imagery was extraordinarily complex, but one thing is clear from its symbolism: Society itself purportedly needed warriors like Achilles, that is, it needed young men willing to trade their reproductive success for *kleos*. Achilles may be no father of children, but he is in a sense a father to his people; without his *kleos*, they cannot endure. The Myrmidons' otherwise unexplained terror on first beholding the shield of Achilles makes sense when we understand that they faced a similar bargain: They too were asked to sacrifice their offspring, and their lives, for *kleos*. No wonder when they beheld the shield, "each fighter shrank away."²⁶

²⁵ P. R. Hardie, "Imago Mundi: Cosmological and Ideological Aspects of the Shield of Achilles," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 105 (1985), pp. 11-31.

²⁶ *Iliad*, 19.18.

Kleos may have begun as a motivation for celibate fighting men, but it was soon found to motivate married men as well. *Kleos* went on to become a constant and decisive force in the political theory of Greece and Rome, in which the martial virtues are constantly described as foundational to a good polity. To give just one example, Herodotus counted the Athenian Tellus as the happiest man of all time *only after* his otherwise successful life had concluded with a heroic death in battle. The crowning happiness of Tellus was *kleos*.²⁷

From Rome, the idea of a manly, heroic power that rules by its own strength would be translated to the present day through Machiavelli's notion of *virtù* and through classical republicanism. Indeed, the belief that valor undergirds all of human society has transplanted quite well into the present day: "Love your freedom?" asks a popular contemporary slogan. "Thank a veteran," it concludes. Communist and fascist polities likewise made a cult of military service, a cult that most of us obviously cannot accept in a like manner. And yet valor seemingly remains a key motivator for the kind of self-sacrifice that, when combined with various technological advances, makes large-scale politics possible, if not necessarily ethical.

In retrospect we can speculate that the prehistoric and early historical search for immortality through conquest—offered as a substitute for mating and forming a family—has birthed a vicious circle of grudges and collective defensive alliances. These were later dubbed *polities*. If this speculation is correct, then political organizations are a key legacy of human prehistory, and they survive owing to the successful transplant and widespread appeal of *kleos*. The spell of Clio has been a nightmare from which we have been trying to awaken ever since.

Within the *Iliad* two individuals stand out as particularly disaffected: Achilles, whom we have already discussed, and Helen of Sparta, whose treatment paralleled that of Briseis. Like Briseis, Helen had been won as a prize by a powerful man, Menelaus. But then she was claimed by another, Paris. Some of the most poignant passages of

²⁷ Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt. (New York: Penguin Books, 1954) book I, 30-31.

the *Iliad* arrive when Helen ponders her fate. Clearly it wracks her with guilt and revulsion, as when she confronts Aphrodite, whom she blames for her troubles:

Maddening one, my Goddess, oh what now?

Lusting to lure me to my ruin yet again?

Where will you drive me next?

Off and away to other grand, luxurious cities,

out to Phrygia, out to Maconia's tempting country?

Have you a favorite mortal man there too?

But why now? —

Because Menelaus has beaten your handsome Paris

and hateful as I am, he longs to take me home?

Is that why you beckon here beside me now

with all the immortal cunning in your heart?

Well, go to him yourself—*ou* hover beside him!

Abandon the gods' high road and be a mortal!

...suffer for Paris, protect Paris, for eternity...

until he makes you his wedded wife—that or his slave.²⁸

Perhaps the gods should also take part in the system they made, a gesture toward an idea of fairness that political theorists should readily recognize. Achilles and Helen, the system's most notable victims, both reveal its fault lines. Neither can be entirely loyal to a social order that treats them so.

That disloyalty is articulated in Helen's reproach to Aphrodite and in Achilles' refusal to return to battle, not even after Agamemnon's emissaries offer him a series of extraordinary gifts:

²⁸ *Iliad*, 3.460-480.

Seven tripods never touched by fire, ten bars of gold,
twenty burnished cauldrons, a dozen massive stallions...

Seven women I'll give him, flawless, skilled in crafts,
women of Lesbos—the ones I chose, my privilege,
that day he captured the Lesbos citadel himself...
...and along with them will go

the one I took away at first, Briseus' daughter,
and I will swear a solemn, binding oath in the bargain:

I never mounted her bed, never once made love with her...

I will even honor him on a par with my Orestes...

Three daughters are mine in my well-built halls—

Chrysothemis and Laodice and Iphianassa—

and he may lead away whichever one he likes.²⁹

Achilles refused, saying ,

Will Agamemnon win me over? Not for all the
world...

No, what lasting thanks in the long run

for warring with our enemies, on and on, no end?

One and the same lot for the man who hangs back

And the man who battles hard...

Agamemnon... would take it all

he'd parcel out some scraps but keep the lion's share...

From me alone, Achilles

of all Achaeans, he seizes, he keeps the bride I love...

²⁹ *Iliad*, 9.150-180.

I loved that woman with all my heart,
though I won her like a trophy with my spear.³⁰

Agamemnon and Achilles are clearly not keeping to the same set of sexual mores. And although Achilles won Briseis through conquest polygyny, his actions point the way to that system's eventual demise. For this we turn to the *Odyssey*.

Where the *Iliad* begins with a captive woman, the *Odyssey* begins with a captive man, the title character. The *Odyssey* is ultimately a paean to the marital bond—while preserving high-status men's continued sexual access to other women. This social model, which I will refer to as monogamy-plus, brings us uncomfortably close to the present day.

The *Odyssey*'s central struggle is the voyage of Odysseus back to his wife and marriage bed—while avoiding the snares of various foes, many of them female and highly sexualized. His wife Penelope faces a counterpart struggle, in that she is pursued by no less than 108 suitors, each of whom wants to marry her in Odysseus's absence. She resists them, and Odysseus braves many dangers, until ultimately they are reunited, at which point Odysseus kills all of them.

Odysseus's sexual temptations were many, and he certainly did not resist them all. They began with the nymph Calypso, to whom he had already capitulated when the story begins. Calypso held him captive for seven years. His captivity was apparently a pleasant one, though it was not entirely welcome. Calypso would have made Odysseus her husband—directly reversing the gender polarity of conquest polygyny—but Odysseus refused. Various adventures then brought him, crucially, to Circe. Circe once again possessed a powerful and untamed female sexuality, one that was inherently dangerous and that threatened the mind and the manhood of all men who drew near. Her power was even more a gender-swapped image of Agamemnon's, for she collected men exactly as he collected women:

'Come, sheathe your sword, let's go to bed together,
mount my bed and mix in the magic work of love—

³⁰ Ibid., 9.380-420.

we'll breed deep trust between us'

So she enticed

but I fought back, still wary. 'Circe, Circe,

how dare you tell me to treat you with any warmth?

You who turned my men to swine in your own house and now

You hold me here as well—teeming with treachery.³¹

The cunning of Odysseus consisted in large part of governing women and of subjecting them, and himself, to sexual disciplines that maintained the power of upper-class men. In Circe's case, he used a drug, the mysterious *moly*, and a vow to the gods, both of which restrained her. In this there was a recapitulation of monogamous Greek political and sexual life: Men of the upper class made some sacrifice in order to enjoy monogamy-plus, in that they could not openly keep extensive harems any longer. But the payoff for their society as a whole was that men of lower classes had greater reproductive success, which ensured their greater loyalty to the system and may also have helped to populate it. And the upper-class men certainly continued to enjoy enhanced sexual access, as Odysseus did with Circe.

The character of Odysseus effectively encouraged high-status men to minimize the consequences that might befall them for their capricious sexual behavior, just as Odysseus himself escaped (or was delivered from) the lures of Calypso, Circe, and the sirens. It is difficult to imagine Agamemnon employing similar strategies, but craftiness was required of high-status men in the new sexual regime of monogamy-plus, in which control over women was not usually so brutal or direct. The payoff was that the specific discontent of Achilles would not arise anymore. The form of dominion over women known as monogamous marriage was insofar as possible to be share and share alike; this arrangement was likely optimal for securing men's loyalty to the social system, though it was not always optimal for loyalty to their mates.

³¹ Homer. *The Odyssey*, trans Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1996) 10.370-380.

Taken together, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* form an extended commentary on sexual and gender ethics. The *Iliad* addresses the inherent problems of conquest polygyny: It entails constant warfare over women, who are nonetheless portrayed as guilty, inconstant, and dangerous. There was every cause, and every incentive, for women actually to have been so. Conquest polygyny likewise tempted kings to mistreat not only women but also their male subordinates. Subordinate men risked their lives for an uncertain access to women, a fact of which they were keenly aware. Men's loyalties were constantly in doubt, and *kleos*, while appealing, was always a fairly uncertain reward.

Although monogamy-plus brings its own challenges, it at least somewhat credibly promises a family life to the men whose societies practice it. Domesticated women become a constant and a known quantity. Men experience less sexual deprivation, and women's loyalties are not automatically in doubt. The archetypal woman is no longer Helen, but Penelope; no longer inconstant, but legendary for her fidelity; no longer a prize of war, but a helpmeet and a place-keeper: Penelope never leaves Ithaca at all. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* thus represent a transition from one sexual governance regime to another, from conquest polygyny, which originated in a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, to monogamy-plus, which was more appropriate to the newly sedentary societies of intensive grain cultivation and the specialized household labor that accompanied it.

3. Conquered Women as Cultural Ambassadors and Unifiers

Hebrew scripture complicates the thesis at hand, in that the Israelites are not described as actually practicing conquest polygyny. Deuteronomy 21:10-13 admittedly authorizes it in the following words:

When you go to war against your enemies and the Lord your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife. Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured. After she has

lived in your house and mourned her father and mother for a full month, then you may go to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife.³²

Curiously, though, the most detailed accounts of the Israelites' conquests, found in the Book of Joshua, do not describe them as acting in this way. Throughout the book of Joshua, foreign women were almost invariably killed, and they were certainly not married. The women of Jericho, Ai, Makkedah, Debir, and numerous other cities were subject to this treatment. Tellingly, Rahab the prostitute of Jericho was the only foreign woman who was so much as given a name in the whole book of Joshua.³³ Rahab aided the Israelites, and a later tradition even claimed that she married Joshua, but this, while authorized, would have been highly unusual. Besides Rahab, Aksah was the only woman ever mentioned by name in the entire book of Joshua. Aksah was the daughter of Caleb, who offered her as a prize to whichever warrior could capture Kiriath Sepher—an offer that was altogether consistent with the behaviors of high-status men in the *Iliad*.³⁴ The exceptional case in Judges 19-21, in which the Israelites did practice conquest polygyny, in delivering conquered women to the tribe of Benjamin, appears to have arisen when the only alternative was the extinction of an entire tribe from among them.³⁵

What can explain this behavior? Although the Israelites are familiar to modern western audiences, they were highly unusual for their time: At least their scribal class feared foreign cultural contamination so much that they described femicide as preferable to concubinage, and in so doing, they adopted a much bloodier rule than the one found in Deuteronomy. The scribal view of intermarriage with foreign women was made clear in the book of Joshua:

But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations

³² Deuteronomy 21:10-13 (New International Version).

³³ Joshua 2 (New International Version).

³⁴ Joshua 15:16-17 (New International Version).

³⁵ Judges 19-21 (New International Version).

before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you.³⁶

The scribes' view was not uniformly obeyed, however. In 1 Kings 11:1-10, King Solomon infamously violated this rule:

But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites—from the nations of whom the Lord had said to the children of Israel, “You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. The Lord became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the Lord's command.³⁷

Solomon behaved as a high-status male of his era usually did; he impregnated many women, including women won through conquest and/or tribute. The scribal class did not approve. They were eager to preserve the Israelites' distinctive culture, and with it their class prerogatives, and so they saw foreign women as a dire threat.

If the scribes' fears were justified, it tells us that ancient women on the wife-concubine-slave spectrum were vectors of cultural transmission. Women thus occupy an intriguing role in deep history: They were the bearers of culture, its creators and sustainers, even as men oppressed them; ironically, the men often benefited from the culture that the women preserved and transmitted. In this paradigm, it is not the case that gender oppression resembles class oppression; rather the opposite is true: Gender oppression was the *original instance* of class oppression, in which a male warrior class oppressed a female creative class. To be conquered, or to be of a subaltern class, is rhetorically a feminized condition, giving rise to derisive and highly

³⁶ Joshua 23:12-13 (New International Version).

³⁷ 1 Kings 11:1-10 (New International Version).

gendered terms of abuse. But conquered or subaltern status may have begun literally as a gendered condition as well, and the latter may explain the former.

It is thus notable how the Homeric epics so often praise women not only for their beauty and fertility, but for their skills. Foreign women of exotic accomplishments are especially prized. The transfer of such women among high-status men would have knit together ancient cultures and extended them into something larger than a hunter-gatherer band. Syncretisms of religion, art, craft, and language across sometimes quite long distances would have been mediated by captured women. Such connections would have frequently emerged among groups who practiced conquest polygyny on one another. The lore that women transmitted would have been polytheistic almost of necessity; whenever a woman was stolen from a group with different gods, she might have brought them with her. Conquest polygyny therefore sits awkwardly with monotheism, at least when tutelary gods are common.³⁸ Later scribes, who were almost certainly more rigorously monotheistic than the historical figures they sought to depict, were probably aware of this difficulty.

Ancient Rome had few compunctions about foreign gods, and the story of the Sabine women represents an obvious case supporting our argument: Shortly after its founding, Rome purportedly faced a shortage of women; the Romans held a festival to which they invited the members of nearby tribes:

Great numbers of people assembled, induced, in some measure, by a desire of seeing the new city... especially the whole multitude of the Sabines came with their wives and children. They were hospitably invited to the different

³⁸ The thesis offered here is similar to but distinct from the one advanced by Leonard Shlain in *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999). In particular, this paper makes no claims about brain function, alphabeticity, or their relationships to the character of human individuals or societies. All that is argued here is that, in the case of Israelite society, two specifically gendered vectors of cultural transmission were in competition: the scribal vector, whose messengers were male, and whose message was monotheist; and the conquest polygyny vector, whose messengers were female, and whose content was potentially polytheist.

houses... When the show began... on a signal being given, the Roman youth ran different ways to carry off the young women. Some they bore away, as they happened to meet with them, without waiting to make a choice; but others of extraordinary beauty, being designed for the principal senators, were conveyed to their houses by plebeians employed for that purpose... The terror occasioned by this outrage put an end to the sports, and the parents of the young women retired full of grief, inveighing against such a violation of the laws of hospitality...³⁹

Romulus somehow managed to persuade the women “to soften their resentment, and to bestow their affections on those men on whom chance had bestowed their persons.”⁴⁰ As Livy put it, mutual regard often followed harsh treatment, and the husbands—presumably out of guilt—supposedly treated their wives all the better going forward.

And the Sabine women clearly played the role of inter-group peacemakers and cultural ambassadors that was previously described. When the remaining Sabines made war against Rome, and when that conflict had reached grave proportions, the women intervened to stop it:

At this crisis the Sabine women [threw] themselves in the way of the flying weapons; and, rushing across between the armies, separated the incensed combatants... The commanders then came forward... and they not only concluded a peace, but combined the two nations into one, associating the two sovereigns in the government, and establishing the seat of empire at Rome.⁴¹

³⁹ Titus Livius (Livy), *The History of Rome by Titus Livius. Translated from the Original with Notes and Illustrations by George Baker, A.M.. First American, from the Last London Edition, in Six Volumes* (New York: Peter A. Mesier et al., 1823). Vol. 1. 1/8/2018.
http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1754#lf1023-01_label_056

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Titus Livius, *The History of Rome*, at
http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1754#lf1023-01_label_064.

If the Sabine women were real, then they fulfilled the surprising, liminal purpose that has been described above. Although they were the victims of sexual violence, they were also agents in the system that produced that violence; their role was one of pacification, of crossing battle lines and uniting previously hostile camps. In the context of arranged dynastic marriages, European women continued to play this role even into the modern era.

We who severely punish rape, rather than treating it as a permitted cultural strategy, are allowed to find this agency incongruous and from a moral standpoint almost incomprehensible. If the Sabine women were merely legendary, their story, and their role, would remain normative to the Romans all the same, and with the support of the evidence already discussed it would indicate once again how thoroughly rape itself was integrated into ancient political and family life.

4. Gilgamesh, the First Night, the Sacred Prostitute, and the Theft of Brides

Let us turn to some of the earliest human legends ever recorded. The *Gilgamesh* epic was first translated into modern languages in the mid-19th century. It is therefore remarkable that *Gilgamesh* contained much that was familiar, including a deluge, a hero's quest forming a story arc—and, key to our purposes—the practice of *prymae noctis*, under which kings and other rulers were said to enjoy sexual access to brides on their wedding night. *Prymae noctis* has been much more discussed than practiced in European history, usually as a mark of an especially wicked though legendary king. The Roman story of the rape of Lucretia by the son of the last Tarquin king is a familiar example; the transition to the republic coincides with a renunciation of the king's right of sexual access. The appearance of *prymae noctis* in *Gilgamesh* indicates similar anxieties about the sexual power of kingship from a very early date:

[Gilgamesh] has no equal when his weapons are brandished,
his companions are kept on their feet by his contests.

The young men of Uruk he harries without warrant,
Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father.
By day and by night his tyranny grows harsher,
Gilgamesh, the guide of the teeming people!
It is he who is shepherd of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
 but Gilgamesh lets no daughter go free to her mother...
Though powerful, pre-eminent, expert and mighty,
Gilgamesh lets no girl go free to her bridegroom.
The warrior's daughter, the young man's bride,
to their complaint the goddesses paid heed.⁴²

The strain of conquest polygyny again fell, unequally but severely, on both genders. Young men were forced to serve in the king's (surely martial) contests, and young women were raped. The *Gilgamesh* epic appears to record the anxieties of a civilization in transition, one that recognized the practice conquest polygyny, although the practice was perhaps to some extent in decline. It was certainly open to question, as the text itself demonstrates.

Enkidu, the wild man whom the goddesses created to check the power of Gilgamesh, has his own story to tell regarding sex and civilization. It begins not at the harem, but at the brothel—a different place of confinement for women, but one that would have left a similar genetic legacy, in that the women who populated brothels would have frequently borne children, while the men who were their clients would only seldom have fathered them. Once again, women would more often pass along their unique genetic legacy.

The brothel is a counterpart institution to polygyny, serving to satisfy male sexual desire in an environment where female marriage partners are in short supply. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, prostitution was

⁴² *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Andrew George. Standard version, tablet I. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1999), pp. 3-4.

closely identified with civilization itself. From a functionalist standpoint, prostitution helped perpetuate the society that practiced it by easing the tensions inherent in a skewed sex ratio. Prostitution was perhaps no one's first choice of a social institution, but it did civilizing work after a fashion: Male sex drives were satisfied even while men were kept away from other potential mates. Men's integration into the social system as childless warriors demanded no less.

One final institution bears mention as a likely survival from prehistory: During recorded history and even to the present day, grooms in many cultures often go through great trouble to stage the elaborate symbolic theft of their brides. Bride kidnapping takes place across the world and in a wide variety of otherwise quite disparate cultures. But from whom are these brides being stolen? Why is it necessary to steal them? The answer that now suggests itself is that the theft of brides commemorates or re-enacts the conditions of conquest polygyny and the transition to monogamy-plus, in which non-elite men symbolically claim for themselves that which had been sequestered, but which has become their right under the new regime: an individual bride. In some present-day societies, the kidnapping remains all too real, and what follows is by all accounts a rape followed by a coerced marriage. In other instances, it is a ritualized, festive, and essentially benign event. Yet in either case it recalls nothing so much as the union of Achilles and Briseis.

5. The Inheritance and the Dreamtime

To summarize, governance began in prehistory with millennia of men fighting for access to, and control over, women. Men sequestered these women and exchanged them as the spoils of war. Women in early human societies were treated as property, and yet they were also the creators and the sustainers of much ancient culture. They were probably peacekeepers and in effect diplomats as well. Low-status men reproduced relatively rarely; *kleos* was offered as a substitute. But *kleos* has drawn a vicious circle ever since; "politics" is the name we sometimes give to this vicious circle. As an inheritance from prehistory, politics remains with us today, along with persistent gendered structures of domination.

This fact pattern squares quite well with certain critical accounts of government, particularly those based on the conquest theory of the state. A fuller account of the development of the state across all of history (and prehistory) is impossible to give here, but a re-orientation of our thinking now seems in order: What if we approached more recent political theory with the understanding that implementing and disciplining a harem was at least initially the thing that governance was about? There have certainly been changes in the meantime, including the rise of normative monogamy, along with its many exceptions. Yet so much remains the same.

Our re-orientation should begin by noting that in all recorded political arrangements, from republican equality to absolute monarchy, powerful men have always retained, and still retain, sexual access to less socially powerful women. This access has been particularly discussed in the United States recent years, as well it should be, in the high-profile sexual misconduct cases of men as diverse as Anthony Weiner, Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, and Donald Trump—a man whose career has gone from conducting beauty pageants to serving as the President of the United States. Nor was Trump the only such president; many before him have had affairs even while in office, of course, including Bill Clinton, John F. Kennedy, and—shall we say—a few others. All have been sometime beneficiaries of the social expectation that holds that high-status men get enhanced sexual access to women. What has been unusual, and quite recent, has been the resistance to this expectation.

Less socially powerful men have likewise retained their traditional obligations; as in Sumer, low-status men are “kept on their feet” by conscription, from which they are lucky to escape. The fallen still get *kleos* as a consolation; we are still told that civilization itself continues only because of their sacrifices. The warrior class still appears to believe it. And until very recently, women were still overwhelmingly excluded from politics. Naturally so: If politics was about distributing women to men, what possible role could women play? It remains an open question whether the era of women’s political participation will further erode the legacy of conquest polygyny, but we should certainly hope that it does.

Many other existing and/or familiar cultural and political institutions may stand in need of reconceptualization in light of our paradigm. Chattel slavery in the United States, for instance, is certainly an example of the conquest of individuals and even whole cultures, along with their transportation to the land of the victors. In addition to coerced labor, chattel slavery also provided sexual access for those of high status within the dominant culture. In some crucial ways, the legacy of conquest polygyny remained the business of government even when that government was purportedly dedicated to Enlightenment ideals. Government was not initially meant to be a contract, and the institutions and mores that first created governments continue to incline them away from contractualism and toward something else entirely.

Other accounts of politics, and particularly those that cast the state as a form or an idea akin to the homestead and/or the nuclear family, must also be treated with skepticism, or at least with a better sense of what they may entail. Feminists and anarchists should consider that harem-keeping was once and in many ways still remains exactly what states are for. Ideologies, meanwhile, still serve to reconcile populations to an otherwise unpleasant set of objective facts; these facts must be understood to include a set of sexual norms whose heritage is tens of thousands of years old. Having traveled a certain path, political theory and political practice both conceivably remain dependent upon it, and we should interrogate them accordingly. We are less removed from the harem than we may care to imagine, and politics remains its primary instrumentality.

Let us close on a bold note. From our vantage point, the era of conquest polygyny has lasted tens of thousands of years longer than the era of monogamy-plus. We have every reason to believe that conquest polygyny is a resilient social structure. Rapid technological and social changes now mean that monogamy-plus may be drawing to a close, and it remains an open question what might replace it. The risk of recrudescence may seem slight, and yet the reappearance of conquest polygyny must not be ruled out. After all, it would constitute a reversion to the mean.

The economist and futurist Robin Hanson argues that modernity represents a sort of dreamtime - an era that is relatively

wealthy and unconstrained when compared to the twin abysses of economic subsistence in the past and also in the future, when the diminishing marginal returns to everything will eventually meet the non-diminishing human tendency to reproduce. To Hanson, both of these eras of subsistence, past and future, are necessarily characterized by a lifestyle relatively more in harmony with humanity's evolved social psychology, which developed under severe economic constraint. It is the dreamtime—that is, the present day—that constitutes the exception, at least for the wealthy among us. In the dreamtime, we are relatively free to imagine things as they might be, and to work toward those ideals.

To those of us in the dreamtime, conquest polygyny appears gravely immoral and objectively immiserating. Occasional voices that we still have from that era, like Achilles and Helen of Sparta, agree. The return of conquest polygyny would be the return of a misery and an evil, one that makes the inequities of monogamy-plus seem small by comparison. In particular, the low-status men who complain of lack of sexual access today should think very carefully about their claims, and about the fate of similarly situated men, in a neo-primitive future.

Considering our era, Hanson writes:

Our delusions may [lead] us to do something quite wonderful, or quite horrible, that permanently [changes] the options available to our descendants. This would be the most lasting legacy of this, our explosively growing dreamtime... before adaptation again reasserted a clear-headed relation between behavior and reality.⁴³

Let us consider doing something quite wonderful, or at least something quite audacious: Let us ponder whether and how to remove conquest polygyny from our psychological repertoire, such that even when our dreamtime ends, conquest polygyny does not return. Let us consider foreclosing this option, if we possibly can. It is not clear how we might achieve this end, but revisions to mores, social structures, and even our genetics may be in order, dangerous as these may be. It

⁴³ Robin Hanson, "This Is the Dream Time," *Overcoming Bias*, September 28, 2009, <http://www.overcomingbias.com/2009/09/this-is-the-dream-time.html>.

has perhaps become a commonplace that we should take lessons from some of our nearest evolutionary relatives, chimpanzees and bonobos, as we reconsider human sexual mores today. Yet some consideration of their behaviors may indeed be in order. It is probable that humans bear some genetic propensities that, in the context of appropriate cultural cues, can result in social formations akin to theirs.

Chimpanzees appear to exhibit patterns of violence and sexual competition that are at least roughly similar to those of prehistoric though biologically modern humans. As with early humans, chimpanzee males commonly initiate violence to secure and/or restrict sexual access to fertile females. Bonobos, by contrast, have adopted radically different patterns of sexual and violent behavior. Their social structures are usually dominated by groups of genetically nonrelated females, and while the popular perception of bonobos as highly sexualized creatures who spend most of their time copulating is false, still, bonobos' patterns of sexual behavior are quite different from either of their two closest evolutionary relatives, chimpanzees and humans. In particular, bonobos appear to resort to sexual contact, notably female-female contact, as a signal that violence is *not* intended. Sexual contact is often initiated, for example, to signal an intent to share a newly discovered resource, or to end a conflict between groups.⁴⁴

None of this is to say that we should straightforwardly imitate bonobos and thereby shed our chimp-like behavior. Indeed, the use of free sexual access to females so as to mitigate group conflict strikes us also as morally repellent; bonobos offer no acceptable solution to the problem of human hostility. The lesson to my mind, rather, is that we should recognize that while sex and aggression are common to all human societies, and to both of our nearest evolutionary relatives, the relationship between sex and aggression can and will vary within the primate world.

⁴⁴ Cawthon Lang KA. "Primate Factsheets: Bonobo (*Pan paniscus*) Behavior." *Primate Info Net*, December 1, 2010. Accessed April 23, 2019, <http://pin.primate.wisc.edu/factsheets/entry/bonobo/behav>

It is not clear what sort of control abstract thought and symbolic communication may exert over these primal instincts over the longest of long terms; indeed, this is one of the enduring questions about the civilizing process itself. Yet it seems manifestly improper, when confronted with a problem like this one, to settle for the lot of the chimpanzee. Or for that of the Homeric sex slave. We should certainly aim higher. If we succeed, there will not be another Helen of Sparta, not another Achilles. Our descendants, both men and women, may thank us for that. We, the heroes of the dreamtime, may deliver our descendants from the harem, and from Clio's vicious circle, and perhaps from politics as well.