

DISPUTED QUESTION

In the Middle Ages, the disputed question was one of the major forms of academic investigation. A master of theology would pose a question on which great authorities seemed to disagree, and then entertain objections from fellow masters and students. After others attempted to reconcile the various authorities, the master would give a determination that resolved the question.

In our form of the disputed question, two student brothers approach a difficult issue from different angles in order to reveal its complexity. While traditionally the dispute was settled by a master, here we will allow readers to form their own decision.

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

Ephrem Reese, O.P. & Paul Clarke, O.P.

STATEMENT

Br. Ephrem Reese (ER): Recently, there has been a spate of action movies with female leads: for example, there are the four *Hunger Games* movies, the three *Divergent* movies, *Rogue One*, *Lucy*—together, these grossed about 5.5 billion dollars. Some other recent films with female leads who share the lead with a male actor in a thought-provoking way are *Edge of Tomorrow*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and the more suspenseful sci-fi movie *Arrival*. Now, whatever the motives of the makers of those movies, let's consider whether the trend is something to embrace or reject, and why. I'll support this trend, but I'm going to ask you first: what are your thoughts about it?

Br. Paul Clarke (PC): I'm more pessimistic about the trend, on account of the way it warps and shrinks the woman warrior motif, so that the films end up drifting, ironically, in a misogynistic but also, ultimately, misanthropic direction. In a nutshell, I think the way the woman warrior archetype is being revisited today tends to compromise a deeply important dimension of womanhood: the way she is the life-bearer.

ER: I happen to think it's well-timed. American Catholicism will not survive on its current set of domestic virtues and needs to rediscover an older tradition of female power. It may be that these recent films are recalling fundamental things that shouldn't be ignored or dismissed out of hand.

THE PROBLEM WITH ARCHETYPES

PC: So you see this trend recalling older, even perennial ideas of the woman warrior?

ER: Right. I think that, perennially, when women find themselves in battle, they discover a potential to exceed the recognizable limits of courage, or the rules of chivalry. Normally, men fight. So, when women fight, they're able to defy whatever standard may have been set by the men. That can be frightening, but it can also be quite stirring. Emily Blunt's character, Rita Vrataski, in *Edge of Tomorrow* is a kind of paradigm of a stunningly fierce woman warrior who overshadows the normal soldier. Jyn Erso in *Rogue One* is another example of this, as are Jael and Judith in the Old Testament.

PC: Fair enough, but I think there's a danger in resorting to archetype in such a way that we forget where certain ideas or images come from. You mentioned "rules of chivalry," and that's already a historically timestamped notion. That's not to say that there aren't parallels in different cultures and different times, of course, but we should note the difference between meaning and

value, between what a word signifies, and the particular resonance it has in a given culture. With “woman warrior,” there in fact may be a common sense spanning different cultures and times, but this comes with the inevitable additions or subtractions of value, where “woman warrior” might actually gain its particular cogency in a given culture from certain common experiences or shared understandings of woman, battle, ferocity, and so forth.

And here’s an example: the charged atmosphere resulting from the way women are underrepresented and underpaid in Hollywood. In 2015, Jennifer Lawrence—the star of *The Hunger Games*—decried the pay gap between male and female actors, and a swarm of big names, female and male, have followed suit. The point being: whatever its native goodness or badness, the trend of “woman warriors” is going to be enlisted in a particular battle of the 21st century, and since this informs the making of such films, it should inform our critical reaction.

ER: Alright, so let’s try to analyze the woman warrior both in a perennial way, and in a contemporary American way. It would be impossible to go back and try to fix the foundations of this political problem at their sources. I would propose that we just have to hope that the supervening force of good artistry can redirect this trend, and that we table the questions of monetary and gender justice so much on the minds of film-industry people.

PC: Sure. I bring up the politics and “monetary and gender justice” issues mostly to make the point that trends in American pop-art are never neutral. If they have distinguished archetypal forebearers, they also have less benign contemporary guardians.

What does this perennial aspect look like?

THE PERENNIAL

ER: We can look at the character of woman that spans the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Ratzinger points out that Eve receives her name after the Fall, after being cast out of the garden; her role as woman in a fallen world is that she's the mother of all the living. So she's the protector of life and its vehicle through time, through the valley of tears, "the keeper of the seal of life and the antithesis of death" (*Daughter Zion*, 17). With the Assumption of Mary, a woman definitively delivers life, by being herself delivered alive, to a realm where death has no power.

This escape from evil, a form of salvation, is both womanly and the essence of much adventure. Tolkien discusses this in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," defending escape against accusations of escapism, and says that we shouldn't confuse "the escape of the prisoner with the flight of the deserter." Think also of the unnamed woman of Revelation 12, and the adventure of her escape from the dragon. So I think we have a classical Jewish-Christian model of feminine heroism—and we might even set that off against the norm of masculine warfare from Cain onward.

PC: Interesting. In fact, that's why I find it unsettling how these films generally seem to construct a zero-sum universe in which men and women are essentially rivals, where the strength or virtue of one entails the weakness or vice of the other. The purpose of this is to heighten the contrast between the woman warrior and the male characters alongside her, but at what cost?

And so notice the use of foils alongside Rita Vrataski in *Edge of Tomorrow* and Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*: in both films, we find significant male figures portrayed as foils precisely because they're failures. In order to highlight the virtue of the woman, they point up the weakness of the blundering man. Besides being an inept procedure to valorize woman, I think it's a revealing

example of the dialectic we see in the logic of the Fall. The seeds of rivalry and competition in Genesis are growing rank in depictions that try to valorize woman at the expense of man, or, I suppose, to permit woman an escape from man. Post-Fall, there's a fracture in their relationship: man and woman busily trade desire and blame. The way men and women are portrayed alongside each other today in these films takes this logic as *normative*, in the sense that it can't or won't see the deeper truth of who man and woman were created to be, capable of being *together* in a non-competitive harmony.

ER: So you think there's something risky about using biblical narrative when it's being abused by a secular "misandric" impulse?

PC: That's right, though I think it's not so much a consciously invoked influence as the adoption of a certain logic. It's not like the literary clothing of perennial truths or scriptural stories that you find in, say, Tolkien's myths. This is more like a disastrously abridged version of the myth of Adam and Eve, or an adaptation where man and woman were created in a state of war.

ER: I sympathize with your fear. The post-Christian embrace of vaguely Christian archetypes misses important factors; in this case, it conceives of Adam simply as a loser.

PC: And often a *lustful* loser. Another odd feature of this shrunken myth or vague typology is that the woman warrior is at once eminently desirable and yet weirdly dispassionate. I think there's something in this portrait that's simultaneously sophisticated and self-defeating. In the case of *Edge of Tomorrow*, Rita Vrataski is portrayed as both beautiful and fierce, and when Tom Cruise arrives on the scene, you have a portrait of impotent desire: likely a failure as much in love as in war. And yet the woman's indifference to her own attractiveness is at odds with the tendency in the filmmakers' portrayal to heighten the desirability, the sensuality.



Caravaggio — Judith Beheading Holofernes

ER: That makes sense, but I want to try to run with it as something true. I've always been fascinated by the idea that, in Genesis 3:16, woman's attraction to man is a curse: that men don't seem to naturally match the gracefulness of women or to merit the desire that women have for them. Men have great powers that don't always cohere, whereas women have this greater integrity of life and grace of movement and attention to both the whole and the details that men lack. In action movies, that makes women a special kind of weapon. While *Lucy* is a pretty bad movie, we see there a caricature of this feminine integration as an enhancement for battle.

PC: The issue, though, is that the story aims to present the woman as a protagonist—and thus as a subject, someone we can identify with—but the details of the portrayal (e.g. dress, attitude) tilt in the direction of objectification. That's a significant ambiguity, since there's something incoherent about a portrayal of the woman warrior where she acts forgetful of the very thing the filmmaker actually fixates on, i.e., her flesh, and the difference it makes. A focus

on the woman's flesh that intentionally excludes from its meaning the notion of "life-bearer" is falsifying. This kind of reduction thematizes and dramatizes a deeply flawed understanding of how man relates to woman, and vice versa.

THE PARTICULAR

PC [cont.]: The trend seems to rely on the zero-sum concept to the point that a victory for woman is only possible on the condition that man loses or lacks something. This raises a concern with one way of reading your idea of escape. In Genesis 2:18, God says that it's not good for man to alone, but it seems that this is what some of these films are attempting to do, to give woman a way to escape man.

ER: I'm not sure that what's happening in these films is really a portrayal of escape in that negative sense. While the woman warrior is more of a lone assassin, or a strong but isolated protector, men in battle are usually cooperating. The band-of-brothers setting of battle highlights camaraderie, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and (albeit in a problematic way) provides an outlet and a resolution to violence in normal life. Alienated from this cooperative spirit, which softens war and makes a game out of it, women in battle move in a world harsher both for them and for their enemies. Escaping from the battle, Sisera stumbles on a domestic scene; he asks Jael for water, and in a strange detail, she gives him milk, which presumably makes him sleepy, and she kills him, using maternal care and domestic hospitality to do what men couldn't.

PC: Do we necessarily want to delineate so strongly between the political and domestic dimensions of life? The opposition between these two spheres has done no favors for anyone. The (typically Marxist) assumption is that all the power is held out in these male-dominated political strongholds, which are beyond domestic boundaries. I think that woman has cooperative gifts and qualities

that are properly realized in the domestic sphere, which admittedly has less extension—it doesn't invade the entire city—but perhaps its worth lies in its tremendous depth or density, such that any sort of "which is better?" question is just the wrong question to ask. If we forget this, and measure value in a sort of quantitative, extensive way, then the woman warrior becomes the obvious vehicle for restoring power to the disenfranchised woman.

ER: I grant that, but I still want to look at the tensions that admittedly do arise between these parts of life, the domestic and the political. Sophocles' play *Antigone* shows this public/private tension tearing a brave woman apart, and I think that surfaces throughout the Western telling of the story of woman in battle. But in the American setting, this tension manifested in a peculiar way, which fascinated Alexis de Tocqueville. He saw the Americans educating their daughters amidst the dangers of the public realm in order to secure their future private good—using that tension to form strong women.

Tocqueville suggests that, in order to prepare women for democratic and industrial life, Americans raise their girls to have supposedly masculine virtues of reason and will. Since democracy required the passing-away of stable political form and authority, the American girl needed "a precocious knowledge of all things," and rather than "hiding the corruptions of the world from her," as a girl's guardians would in aristocratic society, "they wanted her to see them right away and to exert herself to flee them." This entailed a frank and audacious dexterity of speech and gesture that a 19th century European would have found disturbing in a young girl.

PC: How does this sort of sober, pragmatic, distinctively American model of educating young women relate to the movies we're discussing? Because it seems that the *Hunger Games* series, for instance, offers a romanticized rather than realistic portrait of the woman going to war.

ER: I think we see this technique informing the movies we're discussing, especially *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent*, but on the level of fantasy. Fantasy combat translates into the varieties of real violence that teenagers meet in school, at a frat party, or in moving to Brooklyn—arenas where social barriers which once protected girls from a variety of threats have been annihilated. So, while the exposure to violence seems inappropriate and frightening, the perfected woman warrior loves peace and can secure it. While the American frontiers are different (fewer buffalo), and the idea of mature womanhood has transformed in the minds of many, I still think that these fantasy movies do well to stir the fiercer powers of the female soul.

PC: Right. Then the question becomes, what exactly are the frontiers today? Are we talking about economic or social frontiers? Towards what should feminine ferocity be cultivated?

ER: I think we often see women taking charge in religious matters, where men have dropped the ball. Tocqueville saw the true strength of American public society in its implicit religious mores, which, he said, women created and governed. This could be encouraged, and we might promote strong female figures in the public (my favorite being Dorothy Day) as well as the private (say, Tamara Cesare, a lay Dominican who organizes big youth rallies and whose community publishes this journal). Incidentally, this helps to show that women are not oppressed in the Catholic Church—Catherine of Siena didn't need to be ordained to be powerful in the Church and in politics, and American women could take a page out of her book. Or think of the women of the New Testament, spreading the gospel through their wealth, household management (what the ancients called "economy"), and public presence alongside the Apostles. For this, women have to have *parrhesia* [boldness].

PC: Let me ask this: is this *parrhesia* showing up as a traditional virtue that just manifests itself differently depending on the

circumstances? Or is it the case that the woman is actually embodying a virtue that she didn't have to in previous, more tranquil circumstances? In other words, are we talking about the figure and/or traits of the woman warrior as a sort of stable pattern? Or something that arises as an exception, in circumstances of crisis?

ER: I'm not sure—you might say that the stable order *is* instability. There's a volatile quality especially in the Gospel of Luke, in that, despite "the whole world being at peace," as the Christmas Eve martyrology has it, something major is about to change the order of things. The Magnificat of the Mother of God can sound like a revolutionary manifesto. The Christian attempt to "live at peace with all" (Rom 12:8) can look like an effort to "turn the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

THE PARTIAL

PC: Women are being asked to step into a role which has traditionally been, in American film, a man's role. But simply substituting a woman for a man ends poorly for both of them. One danger in making the *role* the pivot point towards recovering true female identity is that it tries to slough off the narrative as unimportant. But this overlooks the way a role—and therefore a character—relies on the narrative backdrop to be true and *interesting*. It's the world within which the characters move, the explicit and implicit *stuff* that encircles, hangs over, and underlies their actions that enables us, the audience, to perceive qualities like courage and cowardice, and force us to reach for little-used words like *noble* or *treacherous*.

ER: I would agree that these movies lack a context. And because the context or "metanarrative" is lacking, because there is no sense of the human or the real, films seem to resort to this post-apocalyptic moral tale of achieving cooperation—that's in *Divergent* and

Hunger Games, but also *Edge of Tomorrow* and the recent, more contemplative *Arrival*.

PC: In some movies this setting is established intentionally with great effect: culture's demolished and the memory of truth and goodness is receding fast. The characters of *Mad Max* are terribly stark: in the desert, but with histories.

ER: That's also the feel of Old Testament narrative: a people wandering, awaiting a law, and struggling to master their natural-yet-fallen impulses.

PC: Right, and it's that sort of stark storytelling, "fraught with background," that can deploy the warrior woman motif in vastly more compelling ways. I think the comparative strength of *Mad Max* and *Rogue One* results from the way their narratives allow their heroines to serve goals higher than a mere logic of emancipation. Recall the way *Mad Max* portrays the horror and evil of the enslaved women's situation precisely in terms of the reduction of the woman as life-bearer to a vehicle, a producer, a mere means. Furthermore, the rallying cry of the young wives, "We are not things!" and the curiously chaste, reserved way the camera doesn't objectify the fugitive, barely-clothed wives isn't ideological grandstanding, but has a *pathos* that a male character (Tom Hardy) shares. He too has been reduced to a thing, a walking blood transfusion for his captors. In showing how men are also enslaved by oppressive regimes that are not merely misogynist, but misanthropic, there's a deeper critique possible. But these two films are exceptions to the trend, where the absence of context is not because it's unspoken or unspeakable, but because it's thought to be unimportant. And I suppose this is why I find Katniss' character in *The Hunger Games* to be so thin. She's only as deep as her script.

ER: I also found her to be a kind of disastrous, Victorian fainting-away female, who is merely being prodded into hysteria. That's not

new, that a woman's power would be based on some madness or animal passion—that's the pagan vision of female power, but the imagination of "enlightened" culture is also captivated by it.

On the level of political judgments, we would do well to keep in mind the social forms that Tocqueville admired, making sure that girls become sharers in the gymnastics of public life. On the artistic



Utagawa Kuniyoshi — Ishi-jo wielding a naginata

level, I suppose the only solution is better artists in Hollywood. A bad artist produces interactions between puppets; a good one makes a world filled with people.

PC: Fair play. But think for a second about the film adaptation of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Peter Jackson re-shapes Tolkien's female characters ostensibly to give them stronger parts in the story,

but ends up making them narrower, flatter characters. Eowyn is a prime example because of the complex arc of her “shieldmaiden” character in Tolkien’s story. In her conversation with Faramir at the end of the book, we find that she has been in a sort of winter, desiring nothing but “a brave death in battle.” Through the conversation in the Houses of Healing (significantly named), she has a dramatic *spiritual* recovery: “I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren.” Without rejecting Eowyn’s valor in battle, the emphasis of Tolkien’s passage falls squarely on the theme of new life, growth, and spring in contrast to death, barrenness, winter. Jackson’s film interpretation neglects this—foolishly. There are no Houses of Healing because in the film’s view—and I don’t think this is peculiar to Peter Jackson—there’s nothing about this woman warrior to heal.

ER: So this portrayal of Eowyn mythically reconciles two seemingly opposed aspects of the Virgin Mary: that she’s the one who crushes the head of the serpent but is also the handmaid of the Lord.

PC: Brilliant. But these two aspects aren’t merely compatible, either, as if they were two possibilities sitting side by side. They’re both rooted in that theological vision of woman as life-bearer, the mother of all the living, and “antithesis of death,” which expresses her deepest identity.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

ER: I think that using action stories as fantasy, to escape, is not necessarily an attempt to depict or propose the place of woman—it’s an attempt to train the passions and move us to thought. So I think that when we embrace this way of storytelling, what we’re doing is affirming in women certain gifts which are otherwise obscured by quotidian life. Those chivalric codes limit violence to

a ceremonial exchange of property, a game for noblemen and a tragedy for everyone else. So putting women into *that* role is not something I recommend. But what you do in fantasy is present things in a well-wrought and revealing way that shows qualities. Fantasy can communicate in the abstract, for example, the daring of a martyr like Saint Agnes, in a way that might be duller in a realistic telling, and with a gripping and imaginative quality that speaks to many young hearts and inspires imitation.

PC: I think that's an important point to make, because one of the things that's missing from these movies is precisely that power to grant imaginative access to qualities that could help us live boldly and virtuously. To the contrary, the films offer a sort of primary-colors-only moral vision in which meaning and value are simple, basic, and flat. Where there are virtues, they act as moral props for the film. To an extent, this is an artistic problem, and yet also, I think, a symptom of a malnourished moral imagination. If one always feeds the imagination with care, we have to be doubly, trebly circumspect when the imagination is suffering, even diseased.

ER: We can only rely on inspiration—there may be a hundred inferior movies that mess up the idea, so that a good idea strikes suddenly. To steal a line from Yeats, we have to wait for “heaven blazing out of the head.”

Authors' Note: Mention and discussion of particular movies does not imply recommendation.

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