

Women and Warriors

Henriette Marc

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Talking about war seems outmoded now, apparently, as if everything had been said on this issue, and it is more fashionable to entertain the crowds with the happiness of the future rather than bring them back to this time of disasters. Yesterday's tragic lesson, tomorrow's teaching.

The recent advent of the one whose empty eyes and grey skin tone mimic Death's face makes us fear the return of the bloody and stupid years during which women were dazzled when they read the announcement, ready to open their arms to the most richly brocaded wearer of stripes, be he French, Allied, or even so-called enemies.

It seems like the love for warriors, and thereby for war, is among women the result of a very old heredity.

At the dawn of humankind, women, like other females, had first to accept, then desire that her partner be the strongest among the males. As soon as sexual union became something else than the violent rapt of a woman by the desiring male, as soon as she was able to exercise her choice, and her ruse soon allowed her to, she chose the one she deemed more apt to conquer the best food, the best skins for her, to satisfy her budding appetite and vanity, the best armed to defend her against other men and animals; then, to keep him, and also to avoid being the object of his violence, she made herself submissive and tender to him.

Although the reign of brute force has long been replaced by the reign of ruse, women remain submitted to her atavism and swoons in front of violent men, be them Foch, Carpentier, Jack Johnson or any other.

Few of them have understood that in the 20th century, true superiority is the superiority of the mind and, proud to walk around town with the neighbourhood's strongman on her arm, she would despise a poet or a thinker.

Men, like in many other cases, have done nothing to guide or change women's choices. In every class, can we not see the head of the family narrate, in front of the ecstatic women, the beautiful days of his youth, when giving and receiving blows were enjoyable and cherished interludes in his life as a student or a worker? In schools, in books for young people of both sexes, do we not give the handsome victors all the graces of love, and isn't cinema full of scenes in which fists fall enthusiastically, and in which the one who has been most skilful in cracking skulls and smashing jaws earns, in the final scene, the smile and the hand of the young heroin?

In order to explain, and not to justify the shameful attitude of women towards war, there could be their love of flashy clothes.

No point insisting on this. Anatole France told us how Siberaose was changed when, following the advice from the monk Magus, she wore a long veil and a belt. What she likes, women look for it in the person they love; are we not looking for more of our reflection than our complement, and that is why handsome warriors make good lovers.

There is a cliché we often used during the war to convert women to pacifism. We called on their “maternal instinct”. This would all be good, but unfortunately in complete contradiction with nature.

Although, throughout the animal kingdom, females take care of the young, although they are ready, to defend them, to commit murder or even die, there are no example of this concern surviving the stage when the young become self-sufficient. Although we can call on maternal instinct in favour of babies, this instinct slowly decreases as the child grows, and disappears around puberty, that is, when the mother founds herself faced with another woman or man who doesn't need her care any more and try to mate in turn. (...)

There obviously is nowadays a more durable feeling among humans. But then this “maternal love” is superfluous, an artificial feeling caused by our more refined sensitivity, to customs, to family life, etc. and it is not surprising that it gets things wrong. Whereas instinct is reliable, this feeling is changing and maternal love, like sexual love, which is sometimes derived from it, will manifest itself differently depending on people's tempers. We do not know how to love, only Tolstoy understood and was able to say what such a feeling could look like. What we call love is most of the time nothing but doubled selfishness which makes us rely on someone else to increase our happiness; and therefore why would we be surprised that a mother, desiring honours and glory for her son, send him to battle and can we claim that she loves her child less than another woman who sheltered her child?

All this to say that we should not rely on instinct, on impulse, to make women conceive a fairer idea or their duties, especially in view of such an upheaval as war. While some of them, better gifted in sensitivity and imagination, have perceived the horror of massacres, others, passive in this as in everything in their lives, could only find in themselves the thousands year old attitude of their sex.

Only education and the habit of reasoning will be able to modify in them the ideas and images deposited for so many centuries.

This is the task of comrades already freed from atavistic prejudices, who will have to reach out to women and be pitiful rather than harsh about their mistake.

It is mainly the task of the few women who, having found their own true duty, will indicate it to their sisters poor of heart or intellect.

This is why we can never praise Madeleine Vernet's initiative too high, when she and her devoted comrades: Fanny Clar, L. Rys and many others, created “Women Against War”, a group which, through leaflets, conferences, a journal, works at a rational and useful propaganda. Every woman who wish to act to prevent the return of massacres should join them, offer them her help, and add their numbers to the elite of women who, among the torments of war, understood their role of love and peace.

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