

At the start of book 3 Paris darts out into the front ranks, but sees Menelaus and retreats in fear (3.15-41). Hector rails at his cowardice, even wishing him dead (43-68). Paris not only admits that the criticism is fair, but agrees to a duel with Menelaus, which will end the war (70-92). Public shaming led to admission of guilt and introduction of a relatively peaceful mechanism for ending violence—all of this made by men. It might have worked, but for Aphrodite, who rescued Paris because she could, “easy work for a god” (432-441, quote at 440).

At the start of book 7 Athena and Apollo engineer a duel, apparently in order to delay the inevitable killing (7.19-42). Prompted by Helenus, who had been prompted by Athena, Hector issues the challenge (49-105). But victory will not result in peace or the return of Helen. And combat is drawn to a close here not by Aphrodite, but by Trojan heralds; night is coming, time to stop. The men quit, trade arms, and live to fight again.

The contrast seems to tell us something important about Greek culture. When men arrange a duel, the stakes are high, the outcome peace; the life of one man will save others; violence is present but controlled. If not for the petty, meddling god. When gods arrange a duel, the stakes are low, the outcome a mere pause in the slaughter; the loss of life a mere amusement for petty meddling gods; violence is entertainment. Here again we see Greeks’ conception of their gods as petty, self-concerned, beyond caring or consequence. But we also see an early witness to a deeply rooted culture of humanism. Not only that but perhaps also some insight into another kind of cultural conflict: on the nature of heroism and the good. The one ‘good’ is competitive, violent, and its champion heroic, godlike; the other is cooperative, less-violent, and its champion also heroic and humane.

[325 words]