

# WEAVING THE GREAT WEB: HELEN'S POETIC PERSPECTIVE IN THE ILIAD

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Helen makes only six appearances throughout the course of the *Iliad*, but each of these scenes reveals the rich complexity of her character and her relation to the broader narrative. Her first noteworthy description is embedded in the speech of Nestor in book two, as he reminds the Achaeans of their duty to “avenge Helen’s longing to escape and her lamentations” (354-6).<sup>1</sup> Nestor’s one-sided depiction of Helen as an unwilling victim of Trojan treachery does not adequately capture the tensions implicit in her situation that she herself is able to recognize and articulate. The poet takes great care to distinguish Helen from the other characters, emphasizing her role as a woman who simultaneously occupies two realms: she is both divine and human, as well as both *xenos* and *philos*. As a result, she is granted a deeper level of insight into her own character and the universal significance of the Trojan War, an insight that resembles the divinely-inspired omniscience of the poet himself.

Although there are various characters in the *Iliad* who claim divine parentage, the conflict between Helen’s inherited prestige as a daughter of Zeus and the dishonourable reputation that stems from her behaviour as a mortal woman are particularly remarkable. No mortal woman surpasses Helen in loveliness, but her unearthly beauty is revealed to have severe temporal consequences. The poet draws attention to this fact in the conversation between the Trojan elders at the Scaean Gates in book three, for they praise and denounce her beauty all at once: “Terrible is the likeness of her face to the immortal goddesses. / Still, though she be such, let her go away in the ships, lest / she be left behind, a grief to us and our children” (156-60). “αἰνῶς,”<sup>2</sup> an adverb that carries a two-sided meaning of dreadfulness and severity, is used here to describe Helen’s similar appearance to a goddess. In the eyes of the elders, her beauty is powerful enough to absolve the Trojans and the Greeks of blame for their long and destructive war (3.154-155), but it is not wholly desirable, and is ultimately spurned out of fear for the suffering the city will experience on its behalf. Helen may be descended from the immortals and resemble them in form, but she cannot act as they do and transcend the repercussions of such beauty. In this regard, the encounter between Aphrodite and Helen in book three is telling: Helen, wearing an immortal robe, tries to chastise the goddess as a divine counterpart and addresses her as “δαίμονή” (399), mirroring Zeus’ address to Hera in book one (561). When faced with the threat of the goddess’ hatred, however, Helen shrinks with fear and follows her commands (3.413-17). Marked by her physical appearance, which sets her apart from all other mortal women but is insufficient to place her on equal footing with the immortals, Helen occupies a fragile middle ground.

As a Spartan queen who abandons her homeland to become part of the Trojan royal family, but whose past is constantly invoked by the war, Helen’s political position is unlike any other in the poem, for she straddles the realms of *xenos* and *philos*. She is, as Aphrodite harshly reveals in book three, “caught between both sides, / Danaans and Trojans alike,” and her lack of

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<sup>1</sup> Homer. *The Iliad of Homer*. Trans. Richard Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. All English quotations will be drawn from this text.

<sup>2</sup> Munro, D.B. and Allen, T.W. eds. *Homeri Opera*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920. All Greek quotations will be drawn from this text.

complete integration into either community poses a real danger (416-17). The poet often blurs the line between Helen's past and present: in book three, a "sweet longing" for her former life causes her to shed a tear as she is led to witness a duel between her former and her present husband (3.139-142). When she reaches the Scaean Gates, Priam establishes her nearness by calling her his "φίλον τέκος," yet he invokes her otherness in the same breath, instructing her to gaze upon those from her former life in Sparta, "πρότερόν... φίλους" (3.162-163). To the Greeks and Trojans alike, Helen is at once dear and alien, and until the outcome of the war is decided, she will not have a fixed homeland.

Aphrodite's visit to Helen in book three enhances the interplay between Helen's past and present identities. The goddess finds Helen sitting among Trojan women, but she chooses to appear to her as a beloved figure from Helen's life in Sparta (3.386-8). It is significant that Aphrodite appeals to Helen as a Greek, for she has come to lead Helen to Paris' bedchamber, where Helen will, so to speak, reenact her original crime. This scene also reveals Helen's complex relationship with the women of Troy. Although she is later presented in book six as a woman in control of her own *oikos* (323-324), her behaviour in book three betrays a strong feeling of *aidos* toward her female Trojan companions. In Helen's view, sharing Paris' bed would be objectively reprehensible, "νεμεσσητόν," but its subjective consequences are even more severe, for all the Trojan women would reproach her, "μωμήσονται" (3.410-412). Her language mirrors that of Hector in book six, when he tells Andromache that he would feel *aidos* before the Trojan women if he drew back from the fighting (441-443).<sup>3</sup> Near the end of book three, the poet establishes a clear distinction between three spheres of female figures, and Helen is caught in the middle. Her Trojan handmaidens hasten to their work, and Helen, denoted only by the feminine pronoun "ἠ" and the epithet "ἄϊα γυναικῶν [godlike among women]," enters Paris' bedchamber. Meanwhile, Aphrodite's unshakeable Olympian status and comparatively carefree demeanour are emphasized by the epithets "θεά" and "φιλομμειδής [laughter-loving]" (3. 422-424). As she succumbs to the external threats of Aphrodite, but also to her problematical inner passions as a mortal woman, Helen, who has wrapped herself in a cloth in an attempt to conceal her identity, comprehends that she can never fully overcome the opposition between friend and enemy.

The two-sided perspective of Helen's position elevates her to the level of the bard, who also occupies an intermediary role. Helen is able to view and reflect on the particular events of the war from the more universal stance of a storyteller. When the audience is finally granted its first real glimpse of the infamous Helen in book three, she is weaving the travails of the Trojans and Greeks into a great red robe (125-7). Immediately preceding the scene is the arrangement of the duel between Menelaus and Paris, which acts as a foil for the larger conflict. Through this sudden shift in narrative focus, from the men caught up in the action of battle to the woman for whom they are fighting, the tranquil domesticity of Helen's activity and her ability to discern the significance of the war, both in the present and the future, stand in stark contrast to the temporally-bound drama of the warriors unfolding on the plains of Troy. Although she is firmly rooted in the events of the epic, she also stands above them, translating her lived experience into her own narrative tapestry.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting the reappearance of the charged adverb "αἰνῶς," which the Trojan elders employ in book 3, in Hector's speech.

Helen's poetic insight is all the more explicit when she identifies the greater result of her dishonour and Paris' rash deed, "that hereafter / [they will] be made into things of song for the men of the future" (6.357-8). The *Iliad* is driven by personal concerns of *time* and *kleos*, but Helen's words imply that the drama unfolding before them will acquire intelligibility and universal importance only after their deaths, through the medium of art. In the *teichoskopia* of book three, Helen actively carries out the function of the poet by transcending Priam's physical and martial assessments of the warriors and instead revealing the defining characteristics of various heroes.<sup>4</sup> Toward the end of her catalogue, she boldly states, "I see them / all now, all the rest of the glancing-eyed Achaeans, / all whom I know well by sight, whose names I could tell you" (3.233-235). Her bold claim to omniscience contrasts the poet's expression of human ignorance and his subsequent need of the divine memory of the Muses before the catalogue of ships in book two (485-492). Despite Helen's confidence, the poet is careful to limit her insight. Helen's portrayal of Agamemnon as "a good king and a strong spearfighter" (3.178-9) does not fit the man whom Achilles exposes as a coward (225-227) and a ruler of "nonentities" (231) in book one, and whose poor leadership creates chaos among the Greek army in book two (155-156). Moreover, Helen is ignorant of the deaths of her two brothers (3. 243-4). Her use of the verbs "ὄρω" and "γνοίην" in her boast reveals a fundamental connection between the limits of her knowledge and the capacity of her human faculty of sight. Consequently, the poet, although deprived of physical sight, must supply the truth and assert the primacy of his divinely inspired insight.

In book six, Helen's words to Hector, which are her last until book twenty-four, assume a prophetic quality, for she will not address him as a living man again. Her invitation to "come in and rest on this chair...since it is on your heart beyond all that the hard work has fallen" (354-355) reveals her understanding not only of Hector's great suffering on her behalf, but also of his need to defend his city on the battlefield and his self-destructive unwillingness to remain inside the palace. There is a subtle warning implicit in Helen's offer, an attempt to compel Hector to acknowledge the equally important claims of his *philo*i that he cannot seem to reconcile with his duty as the foremost Trojan hero. Hector's automatic rejection of Helen foreshadows his disregard for the pleas of his wife and parents to remain inside the city walls in book twenty-two (90-91). In book twenty-four, the poet skillfully draws all of these narrative moments together in his deliberate ordering of the lamentations for Hector's corpse. Rather than give the crowning speech to an intimate member of Hector's family, the poet allows Helen the final word. Compared to the accounts of Andromache, who speaks of the implications of Hector's death for the Trojan community and shifts the focus to her son in the middle of her lament, and Hecuba, who describes his martial prowess and his immortal physical appearance even in death, Helen's lament captures the essence of Hector not as a warrior, but as a kind and accepting man devoted to all of his *philo*i, including Helen herself: "There was no other in all the wide Troad / who was kind to me, and my friend [φίλος]; all others shrank when they saw me" (24.774-775). Moreover, she alone states that she simultaneously mourns for Hector and for herself (24.773-774). This time, the poet does not need to intervene. Her speech becomes a

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<sup>4</sup> The most significant example is Odysseus, whom Priam describes in terms of his stature and strength, but whom Helen identifies as "resourceful" and versed in "every manner of shiftiness and crafty counsels" (3.200-202).

prophetic dirge for Troy itself and her time spent in the royal house of Priam, and the entire city grieves with her.

Helen's semi-divine perspective is enhanced by an acute mindfulness of her all-too-human culpability. More than any god or mortal in the *Iliad*, Helen frankly reflects on her character and her actions. She expresses the wish that she had died before coming to Troy (3.173, 6.345-349) and assigns herself the derisive epithets of "slut" (3.180), "hateful" (3.404)<sup>5</sup>, and "nasty bitch evil-intriguing" (6.344). In contrast to the Trojan elders' censure of Helen, Priam tells her that he does not blame her for the outbreak of the war, but the gods (3.164-5). It would be natural for Helen to adopt such a position and ascribe her human folly to the whims of the Olympians, as Agamemnon blames Zeus for his treatment of Achilles in book nineteen (86-87), but her response emphasizes her awareness of the fault she committed and its repercussions (3.173-5). Although the poet very rarely imbues his objective narrative voice with ethical judgments about his characters, Helen's overtly moral language acts as a guide for the audience, not only through her self-derision, but also through her harsh reprimands of Paris. After his aborted duel with Menelaus, she exposes his cowardice and wishes he had perished on the battlefield, which would have earned him *kleos* (3.428-429). Helen also designates Paris as inferior to Hector, saying, "I wish I had been the wife of a better man than this is, / one who knew modesty and all things of shame that men say" (6.350-52). The audience's judgment of Paris' character is mediated through the interpretive lens that Helen's words offer. Her statements take on a prophetic tone as she asserts that Paris "shall take the consequence" for his weak heart (6.353), undermining his brazen self-confidence. Unlike Paris, who blindly exonerates the "sweet favours of golden Aphrodite" (3.63-6), Helen does not use her beauty to justify her behaviour and even dares to accuse the goddess of "treachery" (3.405-409). Her ability to recognize the destructive powers of lust which lie behind beautiful appearances is emphasized when she immediately identifies Aphrodite's defining physical traits, despite the goddess' disguise (3.396-8). Among the human characters of the poem, the intensity and scope of Helen's ethical awareness is unparalleled.

Almost all other characters in the poem present Helen as either a blameless victim or a blameworthy transgressor, but the poet's direct portrayals of her resist such polarization. He situates her in a liminal space between the divine and the human, and between *xenos* and *philos*, thus allowing her to overcome the limitations of each side and to provide a poetic perspective on the events of the narrative as a whole and the significance of her own individual actions. In contrast to the Helen of the *Odyssey*, the Iliadic Helen does not need to suppress the memories of her past behaviour with drugs that replace suffering with happiness; rather, it is her keen awareness of her own character and of her situation, in which past, present, and future are interwoven in a grand web, that instills her with such greatness and allows her a unique form of insight.

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<sup>5</sup> The Greek word *στραγερός* is also used to describe war (2.385, 18.309), and considering Helen's partial responsibility for the conflict between the Greeks and Trojans, the term is an apt choice for her.