4-19-2013

The Bridge From Heaven to Helen: Reconciling the Divine and Mortal Forms of Helen

William Clay Shrout IV

Trinity University, wshrout@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/class_honors

The Bridge From Heaven to Helen: Reconciling the Divine and Mortal Forms of Helen

William Clay Shrout IV

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of Classical Studies at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with departmental honors.

April 19, 2013

_____
Dr. Thomas Jenkins, Thesis Advisor

_____
Dr. Thomas Jenkins, Department Chair

_____
Dr. Sheryl Tynes, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs,
Curriculum and Student Issues

Contents

Introduction

Some introductions to classical scholarship chronicle the hardships and sufferings of their authors and editors. Others touch on the state of academia, sometimes in lament over the waning quality of new students or of grouchy librarians. My introduction will cover none of these topics, because the only true hardship I have suffered over the past 11 months has been that I have nothing woeful to complain about. In fact, the process of researching and writing "The Bridge from Heaven to Helen" has been nothing but rewarding.

This enriching experience began during my term abroad in Istanbul when my advisor, Dr. Thomas Jenkins, agreed to take me on as an advisee. We both sifted through a sizable number of sources before I returned, and the magnitude of what I had agreed to take on began to set in. The prospect of writing a thesis of this size was daunting, but I adopted an entirely uncharacteristic attitude of unshakable optimism and began to write.

At first, I was possessed by a desire to exonerate Helen of Troy from her charges of adultery: after all, Helen of Troy was, according to Stesichorus and Euripides, Helen of Egypt. However, over the process of researching and meeting with Dr. Jenkins, I extinguished this desire, which I then realized was based on my desire to pigeonhole the ambiguous. Before taking on Helen and her many receptions, I was under the impression that categorization clarified ambiguity, and I counted on being able to make a clear distinction between a "guilty" Helen or an "innocent" Helen.

Thankfully, this notion was quickly overshadowed by the sheer number of receptions and reiterations of Helen from Homeric epic to 20th century Modernism: slowly, a pattern began to emerge from her earliest appearances in poetry and Spartan cult: Helen of Troy certainly flirted with the divine. However, ambiguity surrounded Helen's character, and I could not pin her down

as either a goddess or a mortal. I was still struggling with my desire to *elucidate* something regarding Helen's divinity, which seemed to be mutually exclusive with the notion of ambiguity. Eventually, after some guidance from both Dr. Jenkins and my academic advisor Dr. Corinne Pache, I was led not only to embrace ambiguity as one of Helen's critical character traits, but also that the only way to understand Helen as a semi-divine figure would be to accept that she could exist as both mortal and divine, both intertextually and intratextually.

It is not without the unfaltering support of the Trinity University Classics Department that this project is possible. I would especially like to thank Dr. Thomas Jenkins, Dr. Corinne Pache, and Dr. Erwin Cook, all of whom offered not only countless lines of inquiry and research, but also invaluable opportunities and guidance to become both a better student and a better human being.

Two Sides to Helen's Story: The Makron *skyphos*

Before diving headlong into her literary representations, it will be helpful to examine her

visual representations, and in this case, a fifth century painting on an Athenian *skyphos* by the

painter Makron. While Helen's various episodes and relationships, from her egg-birth to her

connection with the Dioskuri, are explored in exhaustive detail in our extant texts, the visual

aspects of vase painting tell time-honored stories in very different ways, which certainly warrants

a view in Helen's case, as her story is arguably one of the most familiar in Western literature. By

beginning with Makron's bifold representation of Helen's character, we can then explore how

Helen has moved from an ambiguously divine cult figure in Sparta, to an increasingly complex

and humanized literary figure, and then back to her cultic origins in the modern era.

A pair of particularly common vase motifs are Paris' seduction of Helen and Helen's

subsequent return to Menelaus[1]. An analysis of such images not only helps us understand how

the Helen myth differs from that of the literary remnants left to us, but in analyzing the images,

we uncover the particular narrative elements that are employed in visual representation. Guy

Hedreen underlines the problems inherent in trying to map visual narrative onto the extant texts[2].

In doing so, he opens a gap between the transcription of oral narratives and visual narratives.

However, the production of vase paintings is intimately related with the transmission of oral

poetry, the fragments of which were "important enough in their own (or subsequent) time to have

left an impression on vase painting" (Hedreen 154). As Hedreen points out, a useful way for

analyzing visual narrative in vase paintings is to identify a substratum, the sequence of temporal

or causal events that coheres into a story. This provides the material for the production of

---

[1] Kahill, Lilly and Noëlle Icard. "Helene." *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Vol. 4, pt. 1. 1981. 16 vols.: 537
[2] Hedreeen, Guy. "Image, Text, and Story in the Recovery of Helen." *Classical Antiquity* 15.1 (1996): 152-84.

discourse, or what Hedreen calls the "concretized medium" through which the substratum is expressed[3]. For our purposes in this section, the "concretized medium" will be the Makron *skyphos*, as opposed to the textual sources in later sections. In this overview, we will examine the elements of visual narrative on the Makron *skyphos* that not only relate two key moments in the Trojan cycle, but that also alludes to the ambiguous nature of Helen as she develops from Spartan cult.

The *skyphos*, attributed to the fifth century Athenian painter Makron, depicts an armored Paris leading Helen from Sparta (Side A: see Appendix 1) and an armored Menelaus threatening Helen with a drawn sword (Side B: see Appendix 1). On Side A, Paris grasps Helen's wrist with his left hand and bears a spear in his right. Wrist-grabbing, a common gesture found in visual representations of both the rape and return of Helen, alludes to an implicit violence alongside deities of seduction and attraction. Helen is being led with inclined head, on top of which Aphrodite is adjusting a sort of diadem[4]. Between Helen and Paris, Eros seems to be ushering along the crowned Helen. A young boy, possibly Helen's son Nikostratos, watches the scene unfold. One of the more interesting figures on the cup, Peithô, stands behind Aphrodite holding a flower.

Helen seems to be under the influence of both Aphrodite and Peithô, and her acquiescence to these influential deities is conveyed by her rather demure posture, although ultimately, we cannot ascertain just how willingly she departs. Paris, on the other hand, is depicted in full motion; he still bears the spear, which is loaded with connotations of eroticized violence. Christine Sourvinou-Inwood calls this scene of explicit eroticism and implicit violence

---

[3] Hedreen 1996: 155.
[4] Helene 166: 530. The *LIMC* posits that this gesture could either be an adjustment of Helen's headwear or one of protection.

an "erotic pursuit"[5]. In this case, Paris bears the spear that serves to "increase the emphasis" of violence in the scene. However, Sourvinou-Inwood also posits a continuum that spans the "'almost consensual' to 'implicit connotations of violence/menace'"[6]. By the fifth century, as we will see in Gorgias and Euripides, dialogues concerning Helen's agency and her submission to forces beyond her control began to split off from cultic practices and the Homeric tradition. The elements of πειθώ and ἔρος, personified by the deities themselves on the *skyphos*, and βία, implicit in the wrist-grabbing gesture and the drawn spear, appear in Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* later in the fifth century.

Side B skips ahead ten years to Menelaus' recovery of Helen at Troy. Aphrodite is present behind Helen again, but the goddess seems to exert more control over the situation. Her arms are extended over Helen's head, in an effort to expose Helen's face to Menelaus, who is in the process of drawing his sword. A female figure stands behind Aphrodite, bearing a flower similar to Peithô's on Side A. As opposed to the erotic pursuit on Side A, Side B exhibits an explicitly violent situation in which Aphrodite serves to protect Helen. Hedreen explores the use of the sword in vase imagery, and classifies Side B as an 'attack scene.' Helen seems to be throwing her arms out in a gesture of alarm or fear as Menelaus, furious and ready to slay his wife, draws his sword.

While Hedreen is focused on the likelihood that Helen is grasping her mantle out of fear rather than an attempt at defensive seduction[7], there are parallels between the two sides that should be addressed. While Aphrodite and Helen both remain constant presences on both sides, the moods of the scenes are changed by the substitution of Paris with Menelaus. Also, the figure

---

[5] For more on the erotic pursuit, see Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. "A Series of Erotic Pursuits: Images and Meanings." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987): 131-53.
[6] Sourvinou-Inwood 1987: 131n4.
[7] Hedreen 1996: 170

of Peithô on Side A has been replaced with a female figure labeled 'Chryseis,' accompanied by

another labeled 'Chryses.' The young boy on Side A has also been replaced with a figure labeled

'Priam,' who is observing the situation from under the *skyphos'* handle. Eros, on the other hand,

is conspicuously absent from the attack scene. Conceptually, these two scenes are similar: Side A

depicts the erotic pursuit with undertones of violence, and Side B depicts an attack scene with

undertones of eroticism. Aphrodite presumably works her charms on Menelaus either by

adjusting Helen's disheveled headwear or is, in fact, showing her beautiful face to the livid

Menelaus. Both illustrate, implicitly or explicitly, important forces that play into the rape and

return of Helen: an erotically charged πειθώ and a winged Eros preside over Paris' seduction,

while βία lurks in his arms and gesture.

Side B places the violence at the forefront, evident in Menelaus' drawing of the sword

and Helen's apparent response. This side also relates a Trojan War narrative, in which violence

would have dominated both Helen and Menelaus' respective domains for a decade- the explicit

violence, therefore, is not surprising, but the methods Makron used in conveying the violent

atmosphere are worth examining. In Peithô's place on Side B stand the figures of Chryseis and

Chryses, who are regarded by Hedreen as possible indicators of setting: that the priest of Apollo

and his daughter make an appearance could be indicative of Helen's flight to the sanctuary of

Apollo[8]. Hedreen explores the implications of Aphrodite's presence in this particular setting:

"By situating the recovery in a sanctuary of Apollo…the artists made one final point: that

Aphrodite did not come to Helen's aid merely to honor her request as suppliant in her sanctuary.

The presence of Aphrodite in the sanctuary of Apollo…tells us that she has gone out of her way

to protect Helen, that her concern for the woman has not completely dried up. Thus the setting is

---

[8] Hedreen 1996: 177 also explores the thematic juxtaposition of Chryseis and Helen as
contested women who brought strife and destruction upon their respective locales of rape.

also an index of Aphrodite's character"[9]. Taking into account the explicit shift from erotic

pursuit to attack scene as well as the implications of Side B's setting, all based in the substitution

of characters from one scene to the other, the vase as a whole can be seen to communicate a

conceptually unified narrative based in the Trojan cycle's substrate. Makron's narrative, then, is a

transposition of violence and sexuality.

If we subscribe to the idea that vase-paintings tell a story, then we can analyze the

concretized form of discourse in terms of the substratum, or in this case, the visual elements of

Makron's vase in terms of the rape and return of Helen. Ann Steiner gives us a good basis from

which to work in deciphering the parallels between Sides A and B of the Makron vase: "As

Bowditch puts it, with my modifications, 'In order to understand the point of a story [vase-

image], listeners [observers] must understand that the linguistic utterance to which they are

attending [at which they are looking] is indeed one text, and neither a series of unrelated

sentences [images] not a sequence of different texts [images].' Such cohesion can be created

either through repetition of forms and/or through repetition of content"[10]. Makron's parallel

characters, acting out the cause and result of the Trojan war, can be understood in terms of one

another: Helen and Paris are being acted upon by the forces of Peithô and Aphrodite on Side A.

Similar forces are reflected on Side B in Aphrodite's recurrence and the presence of Chryses and

his daughter in Peithô's position; Chryseis is even bearing a similar flower to Peithô's. Helen and

the raging Menelaus, who is depicted as analogous to the lust-stricken Paris, are presumably

acted upon by the same forces that are present on Side A. The moods of both scenes are inverted:

while the implicit violence on Side A is overlaid with the personifications of love, desire, and

---

[9] Hedreen 1996: 183.

[10] Steiner, Ann. "New Approaches to Greek Vases." Greek Vase Painting: Form, Figure,
and Narrative : Treasures of the National Archaeological Museum in Madrid. Ed. P.
Gregory. Warden. Dallas: Meadows Museum, SMU, 2004. 35-45.

persuasion, the passion on Side B is appropriated as rage and fear, illustrated by Menelaus' intent

to attack and Helen's gesture of alarm.

Peithô's conspicuous absence from Side B gives way to the power of the setting in the

sanctuary of Apollo and Aphrodite's role in protecting Helen from Menelaus. According to

Hedreen, the substratum of the Trojan cycle does not indicate that Menelaus killed Helen upon

seeing her for the first time, and would thus indicate that Menelaus was persuaded not to plunge

his sword into Helen. The figure of Peithô, then, is not explicit, but the conceptual πειθώ is

present in the same way that βία is communicated through Paris' arms and gesture. "[O]nly

Aphrodite has the power to make her beloved again and, in that way, to insure that Menelaos

does not kill her the minute the gods turned their backs on him"[11]. In addition to Aphrodite's

ability to employ the power of πειθώ, Chryseis bears a similar flower to Peithô's own,

reinforcing the power of persuasion through a visual element. The repetition of the flower, held

upside down by a female figure located directly behind Aphrodite and Helen, is what Steiner

calls a 'minimal formal unit:' "In attempting to identify a coherent text, narratologists look for,

among other things, repetition of 'lexical items' and repeated 'syntax.' The visual equivalent of a

'lexical item' is the 'minimal formal unit' or the 'smallest definable iconographic unit…[,] the

one which cannot have anything removed without disintegration of the recognizable form'"[12].

The bundle of flowers that Peithô and Chryseis bear on their respective sides acts as a minimal

formal unit, conveying to the observer a conceptual continuity in the temporal progression from

---

[11] Hedreen underscores Apollo's ambivalence and clarifies that the setting, merely alluded to by Chryseis and Chryses' presence, but highlight's Aphrodite's effort to swoop in and protect Helen.
[12] Steiner 2004: 41 continues her definitions by identifying 'lexical items' with 'figures.' 'Syntax,' then, is "both the compositional structure of individual fields of the vase and the decorative program of the vase as a whole". These visual-linguistic constructs can be roughly mapped onto Hedreen's overarching production of discourse.

Side A to Side B. Peithô, although not explicitly personified, is mirrored in Chryseis, whose presence also does double duty in indicating the setting of Helen's recovery.

Deciphering the narrative of the Makron *skyphos* is not a mere exercise in observation and visual analysis; understanding how Helen is treated in a visual narrative will help us appreciate her literary appropriations more fully. In the larger context of "Helenic" history, Helen is a liminal figure, oscillating between agent and object, mortal and divine. Makron depicts not only the familiar narrative of the Trojan War, but also two distinct sides of Helen on two different sides of the *skyphos*. On the two sides, we can surely discern only small differences in Helen's character: on Side A, Helen's position is ultimately ambiguous. She could be willing or unwilling to accompany Paris, depending on the power of the forces acting upon her. On Side B, we can see Helen's employment of persuasion and her possible expression of fear and alarm. Most importantly, though, Makron has illustrated two sides of Helen in the most literal terms; with this bifold model applied to literature and textual appropriations of Helen, we will be able to examine Helen as a labile and ambiguous character in her appearances throughout literary history.

Shades of Divinity: Helen in Spartan Cult

Communication from one side of a vase to another is one matter, but understanding how the substratum can provide material for visual, oral, and textual compositions is key in identifying how contemporaneous representations of Helen grew from her cultic origins.

Rene Girard explores the intimate relationship between sexuality and violence in relation to the sacred: [T]he shift from violence to sexuality and from sexuality to violence is easily effected, even by the most 'normal' of individuals, totally lacking in perversion. Thwarted sexuality leads naturally to violence, just as lovers' quarrels often end in amorous embrace"[13]. This sort of oscillation between violence and sexuality almost perfectly characterizes the ritualized marriages of Spartans.

Marriage in Sparta was a contested rite, one rife with anxiety, but one that was essential for the maintenance of a healthy society. Spartan marriage "began with a rape- normally a purely symbolic and ritualized rape, no doubt, but the symbolism in itself was revealing of the potential for masculine violence and violation"[14]. This anxiety is clear in an account by Herodotus, who recalls the story of a young Spartan girl beautified by an epiphany of Helen:

> ἐοῦσαν γάρ μιν τὸ εἶδος φλαύρην ἡ τροφὸς αὐτῆς, οἷα ἀνθρώπων τεὸλβίων θυγατέρα καὶ δυσειδέα ἐοῦσαν, πρὸς δὲ καὶ ὁρῶσα τοὺς γονέαςσυμφορὴν τὸ εἶδος αὐτῆς ποιευμένους, ταῦτα ἔκαστα μαθοῦσα ἐπιφράζεται τοιάδε· ἐφόρεε αὐτὴν ἀνὰ πᾶσαν ἡμέρην ἐς τὸ τῆς Ἑλένης ἱρόν. τὸ δ᾽ ἐστὶ ἐντῇ Θεράπνῃ καλεομένῃ ὕπερθε τοῦ Φοιβηίου ἱροῦ

> For the nurse, considering her trivial looks and although a daughter of a rich family, was still unattractive, and seeing that her parents considered her form to be unfortunate, learning each of these things, she contrived the following: she kept carrying her every day to the shrine of Helen. It is in a place called Therapne above the shrine of Phoebus[15]

---

[13] Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977.: 35.
[14] Cartledge, Paul. The Spartans: The World of the Warrior-heroes of Ancient Greece, from Utopia to Crisis and Collapse. Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 2003.: 171
[15] Herodotus 6.61.3

Herodotus illustrates an important event for both the daughter and her parents: her nurse had it in mind to beautify her so that she might be desirable for marriage. To achieve this end, the nurse beseeched Helen at her altar, at what is now known as the Menelaion. Both the Spartans' ritualized rape and Herodotus' account of the young Spartan girl's beautification fall into Girard's oscillatory relationship between sexuality and violence. We shall see that through Helen, the foundational institution of marriage and the liminality of maidenhood manifest as separate, but highly interrelated cults that will come to define Helen as both a faithful wife and the object of mythologized seizure.

According to Jennifer Larson, one of the "oldest known heroic cults" is that of Helen and Menelaus in the Peloponnesian Therapne, its continued use spanning a period of time from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period[16]. Both Herodotus[17] and Pausanius mention the existence of such a cult, Pausanius giving the more detailed account of its existence in history. Pausanius writes of what he calls the 'Menelaion,' (Figure 1: see Appendix 2) or the Temple of Menelaus[18]. Identifying separate votive offerings from this Menelaion, Larson posits that the specific dedications to Helen and Menelaus, as well as inscribed dedications referring to Helen as the "wife of Menelaus," indicate a focus on the two as a married couple, which she interprets as applicable to the mores of marital life in society. "Helen and Menelaos' cult enhances the prestige and self-esteem of Sparta as the home of these famous figures, but the marriage of Helen and Menelaus at Sparta also has a social significance that directly affects the girl about to be married" (Larson, 1995: 61). Some of these dedications, namely a large number of votive lead

---

[16] Larson, Jennifer. *Greek Heroine Cults*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1995.: 80
[17] See Herodotus 6.61.3
[18] See Pausanias 3.19.9

figurines, are "identical in form and content to the *ex-voto* figurines found on the site of the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia" (Calame, 1997: 201). The association with the cult of Artemis Orthia, the site at which Plutarch locates young, if not barely pubescent Helen's abduction by Theseus (Figure 2: see Appendix 2), serves to strengthen the Menelaion's association with marriage and the liminality of adolescents, especially young girls. Calame rightly shies from making any certain connections between the role of young girls at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, a site famous for the ritual initiation and education (ἀγωγή) of young Spartan men[19], stating that the "continuity can only be seen through the rites of passage of youths," as the only extant proof of the association is via myth related by Pausanias (Calame, 1997: 201). If we are to connect Helen's cult at the Menelaion with Spartan rites of initiation, which Helen of the Platanistas seems to be, this Helen could be the fortifying, faithful wife who Spartan women aspire to be- one who lends honor and power to the Spartan state.

Larson also identifies the Menelaion as a structure that saw a period of reconstruction and reuse in the eighth century BCE, contemporary with the spread of epic poetry and the appropriation of Helen in such poetry[20]. It would seem that the information we do have concerning the Menelaion comes from a time of post-Homeric influence, when Helen would have been associated with Menelaus, and the couple would have been established culturally as Spartans. This is underscored by another one of Pausanius' assertions: that Helen and Menelaus are supposedly buried at the shrine in Therapne (3.19.9). Larson posits that "the period when the Menelaion was founded coincides with the great flowering of hero cult and the dissemination of Homer so that the cult at Therapne is more likely of heroic origin, while the Planes cult [and the

---

[19] Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*. Trans. John Raffan. N.p.: Wiley, 1987.: 262 and Calame, Claude, Derek Collins, and Janice Orion. *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece: Their Morphology, Religious Role, and Social Function*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.: 158-9.
[20] Larson 1995: 81

Rhodian cult of *Helena Dendritis*—authorial note], with its tree worship, suggests its Helen was a goddess" (81). Taking into consideration Carla Antonaccio's work on hero and tomb cult, looking at the Menelaion's eighth century BCE revival becomes a struggle to contextualize ancestral veneration and the dissemination of epic poetry. "[E]pic and cult therefore function for contemporary purposes. Tombs, rather than avenues to supernatural relics, allowed direct access to this authority[21][my footnote], but by way of an active creation of ancestors"[22]. We can see that in an effort to reach back and possibly legitimize Spartan claim to their Peloponnesian settlements[23], the Spartans had been bridging the gap between the divine Helen and the human Helen by both acknowledging her mortality and preserving her ability to enforce social mores. While the Menelaion seems to be focused on a humanized Helen, one who had bones to bury and a husband with whom she could be buried, the cult of the Plane tree, which worshipped a younger, virginal Helen, represented her as a maiden lost to marriage.

Helen of the Platanistas, or Helen of the Plane-Tree, was worshipped nearby across the banks of the Eurotas, and presents us with the virginal Helen who served adolescent girls in their transitional period between παρθένοι and γυναῖκες. This cult, which is alluded to in Theokritus' "Epithalamium of Helen," illustrates not only the liminal period in a young girl's life before marriage, but also the contested nature of Helen herself.

οὕτω δὴ πρωιζὲ κατέδραθες ὦ φίλε γαμβρέ;
ἦ ῥά τις ἐσσὶ λίαν βαρυγούνατος; ἦ ῥα φίλυπνος;
ἦ ῥα πολύν τιν᾽ ἔπινες, ὅτ᾽ εἰς εὐνὰν κατεβάλλευ;

---

[21] See Antonaccio, Carla. ""Contesting the Past: Tomb Cult, Hero Cult, and Epic in Early Greece." *American Journal of Archaeology* 98 (1994): 408 and Appadurai, A. (1981) pp 201-19 for the "rules that govern the past's debatability" (Antonaccio 408).
[22] Antonaccio 1994:
[23] For more on the Spartan virtue of 'snatching,' see Link, S. "Snatching and Keeping." *Spartan Society* (2004).

> εὕδειν μὰν σπεύδοντα καθ᾽ ὥραν αὐτὸν ἐχρῆν τι,
> παῖδα δ᾽ ἐᾶν σὺν παισὶ φιλοστόργῳ παρὰ ματρὶ
> παίσδειν ἐς βαθὺν ὄρθρον, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἔνας καὶ ἐς ἀῶ
> κεἰς ἔτος ἐξ ἔτεος Μενέλαε τεὰ νυὸς ἅδε.
>
> So you fall asleep the day before, O dear groom--
> Are you some lazy man? Do you really love sleep so much?
> Did you drink too much, that you throw yourself down in bed?
> If it's necessary for you to sleep, hasten on alone at this hour,
> Leave a child to play with children by her affectionate
> mother in the early morning. For at this dawn and in all the
> years to come, Menelaus, this bride is yours[24]

Placed into the larger framework of worship next to Helen's shrine at Therapne, her arc of development from παρθένος to γυνή betrays a tension in her very nature as a goddess, as well as the tension inherent in her desirability. Theokritus gives us this tension as what nearly amounts to an elegy for Helen's status as παρθένος: Helen's peers beg Menelaus to leave Helen to frolic with the other maidens for one more day, that he has won her and that they will have the rest of their lives to sleep together and make children[25]. However, there are also elements of competition present in the comparative language[26] and her departure from the tight-knit group of maidens she will be leaving in maidenhood. Matthew Gumpert explores the implications behind the language: "Helen's superlative beauty raises the authority of the choral leader to epic or Pan-Hellenic levels. Affirming this authority both maintains the unity of the choral group (in other words, *collects*) and provokes schisms of rivalry (that is, *divides*). That paradoxical gesture of

---

[24] Theokritus *Idylls*, 18.9-15

[25] Theokritus. *The Idylls*. Tr. Robert Wells. 1988. "If you're the worse for drink, send back your bride./ She'll find more comfort by her mother's side,/ Drawing out the hours til late in girlish play./ Sleep by yourself. Spare her for one more day." This translation is particularly striking and worth mentioning; not only does it generate a rhyme in English, but it also has a sort of chanted sound about its short sentences.

[26] "But none/ Who gathers by Eurotas for our sport/ Dares match herself with Helen. Each falls short" Tr. Robert Wells.

fracturing within a unified collectivity is acted out on a global scale in the Trojan war"[27]. We will return to the discursive political implications of this association as we move towards Gorgias and Euripides, but for now, it is important to get a sense of the tension in Helen's movement towards marriage, and how this marriage is the cause of divisiveness among members of her community, yet it is also a unifying departure from maidenhood that Theokritus appropriates as an *aition* for her cult. Viewed in context with the mature Helen's cult at the Menelaion, the virginal Helen of the Plane Trees is a liminal figure, one whose status as a bride is contested through associations with Homeric epic and Theseus' abduction. These two cults complement one another in that they express the anxieties within the Spartan marriage institution, namely, that the liminal παρθένος has the power to divide the community from within, but if executed correctly, a marriage to a worthy woman can produce honor and fame both within Spartan society and to others looking inward at their society.

In addition to the opposing forces within the group of adolescents that Theokritus illustrates in the Epithalamium of Helen, it is important to acknowledge Helen's ambiguity in Spartan cult as a whole. Looking at the shrines to Helen on opposite sides of the Eurotas, we can imagine that the cultic worship of Helen was not easily divided along 'human' or 'divine' lines. I hesitate to even label either manifestation of Helen in Sparta as distinctly divine or human, because both cults, as analyzed by later authors, preserve elements of her divine and human forms that are expressed through varying degrees of agency. Pausanius relates the story of an epiphany of Helen that appears from what we would deem a tomb cult[28]. Helen of the Plane

---

[27] Gumpert, Matthew. *Grafting Helen: The Abduction of the Classical past*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2001.: 96
[28] Pausanias 3.19

Trees resonates as a cult that ushers young girls through their liminal period before marriage[29], but also contains elements of tree cult possibly derived from a Minoan vegetation goddess[30]. In addition to this blurring of the human and the divine, the dedications at the Menelaion to the married Helen, the very ones identical to those found at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, seem to pertain to younger adolescent girls associated in their rites of dance with the youthful Helen abducted by Theseus. As an aside, it is important to note Theseus' abduction of Helen is "an eerie harbinger of things to come," as Thomas Jenkins calls the episode in "*Homêros ekainopoiêse*"[31]. Jenkins also makes a cogent observation on the nature of variation and ambiguity in myth, specifically Helen's: "If the poetics of lyric allow multiple variations to run rampant, if lyric indeed thrives on telling myths in myriad ways, how then do the poetics of oral epic function? For Stesichorus, there are many myths about Helen, many insinuations about Theseus, and *all of them are true (or false) as the moment demands* [my italics]"[32]. This is of paramount importance to keep in mind as we move into Homer, Gorgias, and Euripides, as the variation in tradition and the selective adherence to Helen's diverse mythological pedigrees will yield not only different stories, but also different Helens.

We can attempt to interpret this ambiguity by preserving it and acknowledging the fluidity of Helen's role as παρθένος and a γυνή; she is both a figure pursued and attained. Opposing cults on either side of the Eurotas illustrate the tension and anxiety surrounding marriage that Spartans performed in their nuptials, and the patron figure of marital anxiety, Helen, acts as a negotiator

---

[29] Calame 1997. See pp. 195 for the relation between Aristophanic and Euripidean imagery and the 'taming' of young women before marriage.

[30] Larson 1995: 81

[31] Jenkins, Thomas E. "*Homêros Ekainopoiêse*." *Nine Essays on Homer*. Ed. Miriam Carlisle and Olga Levaniouk. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999. 207-235.

[32] Jenkins 1999: 218

of these problems in young girls seeking a husband. If we are to accept the association of these cults, especially that of Artemis Orthia and Theseus' abduction of Helen as a young girl, within the context of Spartan initiation, then we may see the pattern of the rape-return cycle present in the substrate of the larger Trojan cycle myth: as a παρθένος, she is snatched away, but then returns and is celebrated as a wife, an essential part of the functioning Spartan society. However, she is not merely the 'good wife' who bears children- she exerts a degree of agency as a sort of goddess of beauty. We will see this very same negotiation of the anxiety of agency, especially within the context of marital and gender roles, as Helen is appropriated into various iterations of the Epic cycle.

Power in Ambiguity: The Semi-Divine Helen in Homer

Homeric narrative within the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* places Helen in a position of great

flux, both physically and conceptually. Her place as a semi-divine figure has been appropriated

within a structure not only of rape and return, by means of which Homer calls her agency into

question, but also a distinctly Spartan movement from desirable παρθένος to legitimate γυνή. In

the *Iliad*, the question of agency manifests as a strained relationship between Helen, Aphrodite,

and the Trojan elders in which Helen inspires a divine dread in the elders, and Aphrodite inspires

a similar dread in Helen. The *Odyssey* presents the question of agency as an indictment of

Helen's status as a legitimate γυνή as she and Menelaus recount very different tales concerning

Helen's semi-divine aspects and abilities[33]. There is no singular Homeric Helen, but rather a

character who oscillates between divine and human, divisive and unifying.

The τειχοσκοπία and the epiphany of Aphrodite in *Iliad* 3 are important illustrations of

Helen's negotiation between the divine and the human realms. The Trojan elders introduce Helen

with an explicit allusion to her "dreadfully" divine nature:

> οὐ νέμεσις Τρῶας καὶ ἐϋκνήμιδας Ἀχαιοὺς
> τοιῆδ᾽ ἀμφὶ γυναικὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἄλγεα πάσχειν:
> αἰνῶς ἀθανάτῃσι θεῇς εἰς ὦπα ἔοικεν:
> ἀλλὰ καὶ ὣς τοίη περ ἐοῦσ᾽ ἐν νηυσὶ νεέσθω,
> μηδ᾽ ἡμῖν τεκέεσσί τ᾽ ὀπίσσω πῆμα λίποιτο.
>
> There is no cause for wrath that Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans
> Both for such a woman to suffer so much pain for so long:
> Her face seems dreadfully like one of the immortal gods':
> But even so, being such a woman, let her depart on the ships,
> And leave calamity to neither us nor our children after us. (*Il.* 3.156-160)

With an explicit allusion to divinity setting the stage for Helen's oral composition, Priam invites

her to accompany him on the wall, creating an opportunity for Helen's agency within the Trojan

---

[33] *Od.* 4.237-288

cycle to manifest:

οὔ τί μοι αἰτίη ἐσσί, θεοί νύ μοι αἴτιοί εἰσιν

For me, you are not to blame, but rather the gods (*Il.* 3.164)

Within the course of seven lines, Helen metamorphosized from a θεα στυγερη into an

"endearing, and even innocent" victim of divine contrivances[34]. Helen is by no means a simple

warrior's prize as she stands gazing over the Achaeans and the Trojans below; her character

maintains a centralized position for the opposing elements in the *Iliad*. Her entrance onto the

scene is immediately accompanied by an obfuscation of her very nature, whether divine, human,

or (as we shall see) somewhere in the middle. This placement contextualizes her within a

subject-object paradigm; she is introduced in a physical form, and thus our gaze is directed at the

centrality of her body in the narrative. Nancy Worman deftly explores Helen's duality within a

subject-object paradigm and focuses on Helen's bodily form as a 'narrative pawn.' "The flutter

that Helen causes among the Trojan elders arises at least in part from the fact that she—the

exemplary object of male desire—is showing herself in public, something the male contenders

over her body both strongly desire and deeply fear"[35]. Indeed, she exerts an uncanny command

over the men who reproach her- Helen's contested nature is articulated as their desire for her

absence, despite her marvelous form.

Before Priam calls Helen to the walls and invites her to sit with him, she is literally

weaving the Trojan cycle into a great web of tapestry:

> τὴν δ᾽ εὗρ᾽ ἐν μεγάρῳ: ἡ δὲ μέγαν ἱστὸν ὕφαινε
> δίπλακα πορφυρέην, πολέας δ᾽ ἐνέπασσεν ἀέθλους

---

[34] Gumpert 2001: 9

[35] Worman, Nancy. "The Body as Argument: Helen in Four Greek Texts." *Classical Antiquity* 16.1 (1997): 158

Τρώων θ᾽ ἱπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,
οὓς ἔθεν εἵνεκ᾽ ἔπασχον ὑπ᾽ Ἄρηος παλαμάων

She found her in the great hall; Helen was weaving a great tapestry
Purple with double folds, she wove in many battles
Of the horse-taming Trojans and the bronze-clad Achaeans
Who suffered on her account by the hands of Ares (*Il.* 3.125-128)

The movement from Helen's physical weaving to the oral construction of a similar tableau complements the ambiguous description of her physical form in *Il.* 3.158 in that her power as an agent on the walls and within the citadel becomes more pronounced. On one hand, as Worman argues, Helen is constantly in flux between an object viewed and the viewing subject. "Helen's body vacillates continuously between the position of the viewing subject, whose eyes pick out other bodies and whose hands or voice describes them and narrates their fates, and the position of the viewed object, whose body is the site around which narrative swirls"[36]. On the other, she fully takes on the position of "authoritative disseminator of signs" (Worman 159) and suspends the action, both past and present, by immortalizing it in tapestry and narrative.

In this respect, Helen seems almost to have an awareness of the story of which she is both an integral part and an agent in its transmission. Ann Bergren articulates Helen's awareness of her place within the story of the war as a matter of agency: "Both the role and the tapestry of Helen share the contradictory, double status we noted before in weaving. She is both the passive object of the war and the creator of its emblem"[37]. Bergren provides us with a link between this dualistic Helen on the walls of Troy and the Helen who acts as a contested site of marriage and maturity in Spartan cult: via Claude Lévi-Strauss, we are to understand that a woman, within the

---

[36] Worman 1997: 162
[37] Bergren, Ann. *Weaving Truth: Essays on Language and the Female in Greek Thought*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University, 2008.: 23.

context of marriage, stands for a sign of communication between peoples[38]. "In the matrimonial dialogue, woman is never purely what is spoken about…each woman preserves a particular value arising from her talent…woman has remained at once a sign and a value"[39]. In Helen's case, her contested nature is internalized in Spartan cult as a fertility and initiation rite that keeps a measure of social cohesion, and it is externalized in the *Iliad* as a meta-narrative tool that illustrates both her ambiguous agency as a semi-divine being and the construction of the very narrative of a marriage that rends social cohesion in two. Helen's role within the *Iliad*, then, completely relies upon her ability, through both her *value* and her *role* (as a war prize), to keep the two military forces (established for so long they become part of their respective social structures) in stasis. She is not only a catalyst, but also an active author (thus perpetuating the war) by virtue of her very existence. In the τειχοσκοπία, Helen takes on two roles: that of the object-desired and that of the narrative's internal composer. Within this realm, in which Helen demonstrates knowledge of the battlefield and the actors in the narrative, she is also placed in a liminal area between mortals and immortals; Priam makes no adverse move against the δεινή Helen whom the other Trojan elders fear, but rather invites Helen, whom he considers to be blameless, to weave the narrative of the battle below.

Helen's scene in the τειχοσκοπία has resonances later in the poem: in *Iliad* 16, Zeus watches over the battle in which Patroclus kills Zeus' son Sarpedon. Zeus and Helen act as analogous overseers of the battle below, both in their knowledge of the battlefield and their

---

[38] See Lévi-Strauss, Claude, and Rodney Needham. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston: Beacon, 1969: 496: "But a woman could never just become a sign and nothing more, since even in a man's world she is still a person, and since in so far as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs".
[39] Lévi-Strauss 1969: 496

reactions to the battle itself. In *Iliad* 3, Helen briefly remarks that she might rather have died than have the Trojan War start:

> τὸν δ᾽ Ἑλένη μύθοισιν ἀμείβετο δῖα γυναικῶν:
> ʽαἰδοῖός τέ μοί ἐσσι φίλε ἑκυρὲ δεινός τε:
> ὡς ὄφελεν θάνατός μοι ἀδεῖν κακὸς ὁππότε δεῦρο
> υἱέϊ σῷ ἑπόμην θάλαμον γνωτούς τε λιποῦσα
> παῖδά τε τηλυγέτην καὶ ὁμηλικίην ἐρατεινήν.
> ἀλλὰ τά γ᾽ οὐκ ἐγένοντο: τὸ καὶ κλαίουσα τέτηκα.
> τοῦτο δέ τοι ἐρέω ὅ μ᾽ ἀνείρεαι ἠδὲ μεταλλᾷς:

> And Helen, heavenly among women, answered him:
> "You are revered to me, father-in-law, and powerful;
> Would that evil death was my pleasure when
> I followed your son here, leaving my chamber, my kinsmen,
> My darling child, and my girlhood companions.
> But these things didn't come to pass: and now, weeping, I pine away.
> I will tell you these things which you ask me: (*Il.* 3.171-177)

Helen's lament before launching into her catalogue of heroes is echoed by Zeus in Iliad XVI:

> διχθὰ δέ μοι κραδίη μέμονε φρεσὶν ὁρμαίνοντι,
> ἢ μιν ζωὸν ἐόντα μάχης ἄπο δακρυοέσσης
> θείω ἀναρπάξας Λυκίης ἐν πίονι δήμῳ,
> ἦ ἤδη ὑπὸ χερσὶ Μενοιτιάδαο δαμάσσω

> My heart is split; I yearn in my heart, pondering
> Whether I should snatch him up while he lives and
> Deliver him from this tearful war in the rich land of Lycia,
> Or whether I should slay him under the hands of the son of Menoetius
> (*Il.*16.435438)

These two passages illustrate the conundrum that their two powerful speakers face: in Helen's case, she is confronted by the sight of two armies, represented by two great men, fighting over her. Zeus, on the other hand, is confronted by the pain of what he has fated, an event he knew would take place and that would cause him grief: the death of Sarpedon. It is also interesting to note that Zeus articulates an internal duality (διχθὰ) and the ramifications of his 'split heart' correspond intratextually with Helen's own lament. Both Helen and Zeus are linked through their

lamentations, beginning with Helen's tears (κλαίουσα) and ending with Zeus' emotional confrontation with the woes of the 'tearful war' (δακρυοέσσης). Wilson 2007 interprets Zeus' grief and subsequent inability to alter what is causing him grief as a metaphor for the efforts of poetic composition itself: "Should Zeus, as a metaphor for the poet, exercise his right to save Sarpedon, any other poet may in turn save any other character. Should this happen, the tradition itself, which has not been substantially threatened by the other rescues of mortals in the work (instead, the tradition has been maintained and the poem itself has been enhanced), would collapse"[40]. Helen, both a composer of a meta-tapestry within the composition of the Iliad itself and a catalyst within the Trojan Cycle's substrate, acts as a metaphorical poet and the element of μοῖρα that demands the poem's composition; both Helen and Zeus are critical characters of the story they are actively creating. Zeus' intratextual equation with Helen does less to bring him closer to humanity (although certainly grieving over one's child is a very human expression) than it does bring Helen closer to divinity.

Even more interesting is the incident that follows the τειχοσκοπία, in which contact between the ambiguously and certainly divine come face to face; that is, the conversation between Helen and Aphrodite. Upon sweeping Paris off the battlefield, Aphrodite appears to Helen, thronged by Trojan women, as a weaver herself (εἰροκόμος Il. 3.387), contriving to fashion a new story for her and Paris. However, Helen reveals a shockingly sharp side of herself, as well as another element of obfuscation of her character's agency ash she rebukes the goddess:

> ἦ πή με προτέρω πολίων εὖ ναιομενάων
> ἄξεις, ἢ Φρυγίης ἢ Μῃονίης ἐρατεινῆς,
> εἴ τίς τοι καὶ κεῖθι φίλος μερόπων ἀνθρώπων:
> οὕνεκα δὴ νῦν δῖον Ἀλέξανδρον Μενέλαος
> νικήσας ἐθέλει στυγερὴν ἐμὲ οἴκαδ᾽ ἄγεσθαι

---

[40] Wilson, Joseph P. "Homer and the Will of Zeus." *College Literature* 34.2 (2007): 150-73.: 167

> Will you now lead me further to another well-populated city,
> Whether in Phrygia or lovely Maeonia,
> If there is one of the mortal men dear to you?
> Now that Menelaus has conquered heavenly Paris,
> He will lead me, loathed, to his home (*Il.* 3.400-404)

Helen is clearly exasperated with Aphrodite, tired of being an intermediary between a mortal and a goddess. She continues on and tells Aphrodite that the goddess should have married Paris if she was so fond of him:

> ἀλλ᾽ αἰεὶ περὶ κεῖνον ὀΐζυε καί ἑ φύλασσε,
> εἰς ὅ κέ σ᾽ ἢ ἄλοχον ποιήσεται ἢ ὅ γε δούλην
>
> But always wail about that one and guard him,
> Until he makes you his wife instead- or even his slave (*Il.* 3.408-409).

Helen meets Aphrodite's exhortations with reproach and accordingly, the goddess bites back, threatening Helen and inspiring fear (δείδω) with her immortal rage. Richard Rutherford explores the psychology behind divine and human relations in this particular scene, dissecting why Helen might have retreated to Paris' chamber: "[P]erhaps she [Aphrodite] played the part of a go-between at the time of the original seduction? The parallelism would be a further example of the way in which episodes of the early years of the war are recalled or remolded in the early books of the Iliad"[41]. He pairs this observation with the theory that Helen could very well have been overcome by Aphrodite's considerable influence; not far-fetched, considering that she had been badly threatened by the angry goddess.

On one hand, Helen exhibits characteristics analogous to the highest deity, her father Zeus, through the construction of narratives (as a literal weaver of the unfolding story in *Iliad* 3.125-128 and as an oral poet in *Iliad* 3.175-245) and her knowledge of her own part within the

---

[41] Rutherford, R. B. *Homer*. Oxford: Published for the Classical Association, Oxford UP, 1996.: 84.

narrative itself. In this respect, Helen exerts a considerable amount of agency as a semi-divine force among the Trojans. However, her semi-divine agency is called into question when she encounters the unambiguously divine Aphrodite; this encounter certainly generates conflict between Helen and Aphrodite, but more importantly, the scene brings them together (and nearly to blows). At this juncture, we wonder what role Aphrodite played in Helen's abduction, and how much of a choice Helen would have had after the Judgment of Paris.

Moving from the τειχοσκοπία to the Telemachy, Helen takes on a considerably more powerful position as an agent of action, having effectively been reintegrated into her household in Sparta. Within her own domain in *Odyssey* 4, Helen performs three critical acts of agency that establish intertextual and intratextual parallels. These critical acts are recognition, deception, and prophecy. These acts also seem to establish a link between Arete, wife of Alcinous and a perfect hostess, and Kirke, a mystical enchantress and a deceptive hostess. We shall begin with recognition and from there explore how Helen reaches into both the Iliad and later episodes of the Odyssey as a character who eludes concrete characterization as completely human and wavers ever closer to aspects that can be considered mystical and divine.

Our first set of intertextual allusions comes from Helen's recognition of Telemachus and the story of her recognition of Odysseus in Troy. What strikes us about Helen's recognition scene in both accounts involving Telemachus and Odysseus is her ability to identify them without the use of σήματα. Consider the scene itself, and we shall examine how her words foreshadow her next story, as well as mark her conceptually to a perfect hostess and wife:

> ἴδμεν δή, Μενέλαε διοτρεφές, οἵ τινες οἵδε
> ἀνδρῶν εὐχετόωνται ἱκανέμεν ἡμέτερον δῶ;
> ψεύσομαι ἦ ἔτυμον ἐρέω; κέλεται δέ με θυμός.
> οὐ γάρ πώ τινά φημι ἐοικότα ὧδε ἰδέσθαι
> οὔτ᾽ ἄνδρ᾽ οὔτε γυναῖκα, σέβας μ᾽ ἔχει εἰσορόωσαν,
> ὡς ὅδ᾽ Ὀδυσσῆος μεγαλήτορος υἷι ἔοικε,

Τηλεμάχῳ, τὸν ἔλειπε νέον γεγαῶτ᾽ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ
κεῖνος ἀνήρ, ὅτ᾽ ἐμεῖο κυνώπιδος εἵνεκ᾽ Ἀχαιοὶ
ἤλθεθ᾽ ὑπὸ Τροίην πόλεμον θρασὺν ὁρμαίνοντες.

Do we know, Zeus-cherished Menelaus, who these
Men that arrive at our house profess to be?
Should I disguise the truth or speak? My heart
Urges me: For never yet, I declare, have I seen
A man or woman who seems-wonder seizes me to behold-
 Who looks like the son of great-hearted Odysseus,
Telemachus, whom that man left a newborn in his house,
When on account of bitch-faced me, the Achaeans
Came under Troy, desiring spirited war (*Od.* 4.138-146)

It's no small coincidence that Helen should also relate a similar experience with Odysseus during

his reconnaissance mission into Troy. This first instance of recognition leads to Menelaus'

recollection of Odysseus and he gladly receives Telemachus according to the rites of ξένια. After

slipping a φάρμακον into their wine (to which we shall return when we examine Helen's

deceptive nature), Helen proceeds to relate the story of Odysseus' clandestine foray into Troy

and her subsequent recognition:

τῷ ἴκελος κατέδυ Τρώων πόλιν, οἱ δ᾽ ἀβάκησαν
πάντες: ἐγὼ δέ μιν οἴη ἀνέγνων τοῖον ἐόντα,
καί μιν ἀνηρώτων: ὁ δὲ κερδοσύνῃ ἀλέεινεν.
ἀλλ᾽ ὅτε δή μιν ἐγὼ λόεον καὶ χρῖον ἐλαίῳ,
ἀμφὶ δὲ εἵματα ἕσσα καὶ ὤμοσα καρτερὸν ὅρκον
μὴ μὲν πρὶν Ὀδυσῆα μετὰ Τρώεσσ᾽ ἀναφῆναι,
πρίν γε τὸν ἐς νῆάς τε θοὰς κλισίας τ᾽ ἀφικέσθαι,
καὶ τότε δή μοι πάντα νόον κατέλεξεν Ἀχαιῶν.

With this likeness, he entered into the Trojans' city, and they all paid him no mind
I alone knew him, being in such a disguise,
And I questioned him in his cunning to avoid me.
But then I bathed him and anointed him with oil,
I placed a cloak around him and swore a mighty oath
Not to reveal him as Odysseus among the Trojans
Until he reached the swift ships and his bed-
And then he recounted every intention of the Achaeans (*Od.* 4.249-256)

On the surface, this tale implies two things about Helen: that she is a fine hostess who observes

guest-friendship relations and bore an allegiance to the Achaeans during the war. Her storytelling should remind us of her role in *Iliad* 3; she is taking an active role in the construction of the epic cycle, but this time looking backward. Norman Austin comments on the more positive aspects of her use of the φάρμακον and the new web she has spun: "In the *Iliad*, Helen is, literally and figuratively, the weaver of sorrows; in the Odyssey, she has become the anesthetist of sorrows…she herself is the true Nepenthes when she begins to divert heavy hearts with encomiastic stories of Odysseus' cunning (working herself again, we might add, into her own tapestry)"[42]. What we are presented with, then, are opposing Helens, one weaving sorrows and one alleviating them, within the parallel recognition scenes in both epics. However, despite her opposing aims in weaving different stories, Helen nonetheless demonstrates her sympathetic position in the context of recalling Odysseus. This is further underscored later in the text when we encounter Arete, wife of Alcinous of the Phaeacians in *Odyssey* 7, who similarly is the first to recognize Odysseus before her husband:

> τοῖσιν δ᾽ Ἀρήτη λευκώλενος ἦρχετο μύθων:
> ἔγνω γὰρ φᾶρός τε χιτῶνά τε εἵματ᾽ ἰδοῦσα
> καλά, τά ῥ᾽ αὐτὴ τεῦξε σὺν ἀμφιπόλοισι γυναιξί:
>
> White-armed Arete was the first to speak:
> For she recognized the cloak and tunic, and seeing the beautiful
> Garments, which she herself wrought with the handmaids (*Od*. 7.233-235).

Athena is not sparing in her praise of Arete, and we should heed this parallel between the woman onto whom her husband heaped τίμη[43] and onto Helen herself. However, Helen is still not without suspicion, and her very use of the anesthetizing φάρμακον leads to Menelaus' revelation of her duplicitous nature.

---

[42] Austin, Norman. *Archery at the Dark of the Moon: Poetic Problems in Homer's Odyssey*. Berkeley: University of California, 1975.: 127-8.
[43] *Odyssey* 7.67.

From recognition we move to Helen's deception, or rather her actions that relegate her to the realm of ambiguity once again. As we have seen, she imbues the feasters' wine with the opiate-like φάρμακον, which inspires an uncanny happiness in the formerly despondent atmosphere. However, Menelaus proceeds to relate a story that demonstrates Helen's uncanny ability, but now of mimesis:

ἦλθες ἔπειτα σὺ κεῖσε: κελευσέμεναι δέ σ᾽ ἔμελλε
δαίμων, ὃς Τρώεσσιν ἐβούλετο κῦδος ὀρέξαι:
καί τοι Δηΐφοβος θεοείκελος ἕσπετ᾽ ἰούσῃ.
τρὶς δὲ περίστειξας κοῖλον λόχον ἀμφαφόωσα,
ἐκ δ᾽ ὀνομακλήδην Δαναῶν ὀνόμαζες ἀρίστους,
πάντων Ἀργείων φωνὴν ἴσκουσ᾽ ἀλόχοισιν

Then you went there: it must have been the intent of some god
To drive you on, who wished to grant glory to the Trojans;
And godlike Deiphobos followed you on your way.
You went around the hollow ambush three times, feeling it,
Calling the best of the Danaans out by name,
You imitated the voice of the wives of all the Argives (*Od*. 4.274-279).

While Menelaus blames her actions on the influence of some δαίμων, her previous tale, in which she appears to be perfectly agreeable and accommodating, given Odysseus' situation, is certainly called into question. Shouldn't these endeavors contradict one another? Froma Zeitlin analyzes the conundrum and raises an interesting point about Helen's mimetic nature: "Menelaos' story intimates that Helen's previous story may be a fiction and suggests in the process that Helen and storytelling may be one in the same…Helen is the figure who by her imitation of the voices of different men's wives, links *eros* and poetics under the rubric of mimesis"[44]. From this perspective, Helen herself, in addition to playing the textual counterpart to the poet through her

---

[44] Zeitlin, Froma I. *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996.: 410.

weaving of tapestries and oral compositions, represents the power of the story. Within the context of this particular episode, the Achaeans were at the very moment of trouncing the Trojans with Odysseus' cunning ruse and could very well see the end of the war approaching. Unable to see the origin of the voices (*Od.* 12.189-191) , the Achaeans were roused much like Odysseus was when he heard the calls of the Sirens; completely oblivious to the trick being played on them, the men nearly fell to the onset of desire for their wives. Via mimesis, Helen is able to inspire the men with the ridiculous notion that their loved ones are calling for them on the other side of the horse's wooden walls. Her power over the men increases, as she literally becomes the story of victory and return, implied by the presence of their wives' voices.

Just as we saw with Helen's portrayal of herself as a pristine hostess and a perfect wife like Arete, she has a deceptive counterpart who appears later on in the *Odyssey*. Kirke is a notoriously terrible hostess; duplicitous on all counts and dangerously seductive. She is the analogous figure we might expect to complement Helen:

ἀνέμισγε δὲ σίτῳ
φάρμακα λύγρ᾽, ἵνα πάγχυ λαθοίατο πατρίδος αἴης

But in the food she mixed
A baneful drug, so that they might completely forget their native land (*Od.* 10.235-236).

Kirke's φάρμακον is not only 'baneful,' but it also has a similar effect on the men who drink it- that is, it will cause them to forget (ἐπιλανθάνομαι) precisely what its administratrix wants them to forget. Arete's parallel recognition scene in *Odyssey* 7 is then complemented by Kirke's deception scene in *Odyssey* 10, leaving Helen with two strangely contradictory natures: that of the good wife and that of the wicked enchantress. Not only is her nature obfuscated further, but also her position towards the Achaeans remains ambiguous. Throughout the entirety of *Odyssey* 4, Helen occupies a liminal space in which she takes control of the hearts and minds of the

feasters, her husband, and Telemachus. Her methods are not unlike those she employed in the Iliad, weaving webs and tales into which she injects herself. The result is that her audience, both the characters within the story and we, the readers or listeners, are captivated by her constructions. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* portray Helen as a slippery figure whose allegiance is questioned, but more importantly, Helen is portrayed as a semi-divine being whose agency is ambiguous. Her movement from abducted παρθένος to reintegrated γυνή should arouse suspicion as to what her true role within the Trojan cycle actually was- the Homeric Helen not only acts as an agent of conflict on the walls of Troy and within the walls of Sparta, but she is also a conscious construction of cultural elements that we have seen in Spartan cult. Just as the complementary Spartan cults along the Eurotas portray Helen as a bifold character, so too does Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*- both the Spartans and Homer could recognize and incorporate two different Helens into a single figure: a maiden beset by liminality and sexual violence, and a wife acting as a paragon of legitimate married life. As we move further into Helen's literary development, we will see that this bifold representation breaks down, but Homer's Helen stands on the cusp of cult figure and poetic legend. In both of the epics, we can see that the act of narrative creation is a divine act; Zeus must let Sarpedon die, the Sirens relate Odysseus' woes back to him, and Kirke spins lies with the help of her baneful φάρμακον. As opposed to Penelope, who continually weaves and unweaves (thus destroying the narrative she creates, resulting in 20 years of reliving the same battles with the suitors), Helen creates in only one direction with her loom and voice in the Iliad and with her voice and a φάρμακον in the *Odyssey*. She takes on many forms, from a dreadfully beautiful bane on Troy to the obedient and loving wife of Menelaus, but these forms can be encompassed by Helen's status as a divine creatrix.

What's In a Name: Helen in the Fifth Century BCE

The fifth century BCE was a period of revisionism and inquiry into the nature of Helen's divinity and how the woman of myth fit into a world of literary self-consciousness. Beginning with the Palinode of Stesichorus[45], this tradition of revisionism emerges in sophistic strains in later compositions by Gorgias and Euripides. Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* and Euripides' *Helen,* as we shall see, are important representatives of the variance in Helen's mythology. Through amendments to the Trojan cycle, they prod the nature of truth and mythic variability by calling Helen's divinity into question. Euripides even fashions a Helen who explores her own ambiguously divine nature, employing rationalistic terms like λόγος to question the ambiguous stories she has presumably heard about her own birth[46]. We begin by examining Stesichorus' *Palinode* and the rippling effects of this recantation on Helen's status as a liminal goddess-woman in both Euripides and Gorgias.

Stesichorus' fragment appears in Plato's *Phaedrus* and its *raison d'être* is nothing less than a flat-out assertion of Helen's divinity:

> τῶν γὰρ ὀμμάτων στερηθεὶς διὰ τὴν Ἑλένης κακηγορίαν οὐκ ἠγνόησεν ὥσπερ
> Ὅμηρος, ἀλλ᾽ ἅτε μουσικὸς ὢν ἔγνω τὴν αἰτίαν, καὶ ποιεῖ εὐθὺς—
> "οὐκ ἔστ᾽ ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος,
> οὐδ᾽ ἔβας ἐν νηυσὶν εὐσέλμοις,
> οὐδ᾽ ἵκεο Πέργαμα Τροίας"
>
> And robbed of his eyes for the slander of Helen, he did not falter like Homer,
> but, just as musically inclined, and knowing what his responsibility was, he made
> this straightaway--
> "This story is not true,
> you did not step onto the well-benched ships,
> you did not come to the citadel of Troy"
> (Plato, *Phaedrus* 243a-b)

---

[45] Stesichorus can be dated to a few centuries earlier, between the 7th and 6th centuries BCE.
[46] *Helen* 17-21

The text itself, a mere three lines, is the beginning of an intellectual trend that yokes Helen to λόγος. Stesichorus' assertion that οὐκ ἔστ᾽ ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος, that the Homeric tradition of her flight to Troy simply wasn't true, becomes a recurrent theme of the fifth century Helen. But the myth of the *Palinode*'s composition puts λόγος into a grander framework of revision and variability that hinges on Helen's divinity. Norman Austin argues that Stesichorus' intention for the *Palinode* was "not to create a Helen with a twofold logos, but to do the opposite--eliminate the oscillation of Helen's twofold logos by reducing it to one"[47]. We argue the opposite point: Stesichorus' act of revision calls into question the unified nature of Helen on a physical level, which translates her Homeric ambiguity (based on both a virtuous wife and malicious enchantress) into rationalistic terms that culminated in the fifth century discourses concerning the rift between ὄνομα and πρᾶγμα.

According to the myth surrounding Stesichorus' composition of his *Palinode*, he recanted a previous statement regarding Helen's promiscuity after being struck blind by the divine Helen herself. The twofold Helen, then, survives in some form through this myth and Stesichorus' *Palinode*. The deified Helen takes an active role in the construction of her own history, something she was not able to do as a mortal character in the Trojan cycle. Froma Zeitlin examines Stesichorus' respect for Spartan cult as the impetus for the redeeming *Palinode*: "The case of Stesichorus has referred to the violation of cultic norms in Sparta, where Helen was actually worshipped in a cult role as a goddess. By creating the eidolon who remained pure from any taint, the palinode unequivocally confirmed her divine status"[48]. However, Karen Bassi complicates matters for us in her illuminating article "Helen and the Discourse of Denial in Stesichorus' *Palinode*." On the surface, Stesichorus' very composition of a revisionist history of

---

[47] Austin, Norman. *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.: 115
[48] Zeitlin 1995: 406

the Trojan Cycle "finances its own subversion" by calling into question the variability of the

tradition itself[49]. What is so interesting about the self-subversive aspect of Stesichorus' *Palinode*,

if we subscribe to Bassi's argument, is that the myth would have us believe that Helen herself

financed her own subversion by striking Stesichorus blind and rewarding him by restoring his

sight after he had crafted the *Palinode*. She was the weaver of tapestries and composer of

catalogues in the *Iliad*, and took up the relation of epic tales in her halls in the *Odyssey*. It seems

more likely that Helen, deified and offended, would work through a mortal poet to revise that

which she couldn't as the liminally mortal subject of the Trojan War. On a literary level, Bassi is

correct- Stesichorus' *Palinode* certainly underscores the potential for variation in mythology.

However, within the realm of myth and Helen's existence as a divine and human figure, Helen

does not intend to fragment the entire tradition of mythic variability- just her own story. Just as

she employed a story in *Odyssey* 4.274-289 that painted her as a friend of the Argives throughout

the Trojan War, in mortal death and cultic deification in both Spartan society and Homeric

poetry, she acts through a poetic avatar to create a perpetually obfuscated nature regarding her

role in the Trojan Cycle. Stesichorus, then, is on the receiving end of Helen's divine agency, and

we, the audience responding to both Stesichorus' blinding and his subsequent restoration of sight

after penning the *Palinode*, are admonished against blasphemy; while Stesichorus' opinions on

Helen's mortality are unclear from the three-line fragment in Plato, it is plain to see that

Stesichorus not only meant to assert the divinity of Helen, but that she should be respected as a

force of divine wrath.

　　Gorgias, who actively seeks to exonerate Helen within a phantom-less Trojan Cycle,

strips her of any agency she might have within the Iliadic Διός βουλή and asserts the objectivity

---

[49] Bassi, K. "Helen and the Discourse of Denial in Stesichorus' Palinode." *Arethusa*, 26:1 (1993, Winter): 58

of her corporeal self, which inadvertently operates subjectively through visual impact. In Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias' conception of speech and his construction of Helen as a persuasive corporeal force work in tandem: but Gorgias' Helen does not wield power, but is rather 'acquired' and displayed:

> ἐκ τοιούτων δὲ γενομένη ἔσχε τὸ ἰσόθεον κάλλος, ὃ λαβοῦσα καὶ οὐ λαθοῦσα ἔσχε· πλείστας δὲ πλείστοις ἐπιθυμίας ἔρωτος ἐνειργάσατο, ἐνὶ δὲ σώματι πολλὰ σώματα συνήγαγεν ἀνδρῶν ἐπὶ μεγάλοις μέγα φρονούντων

> Being from such parents,
> She had godlike beauty, which, receiving it, she held it openly.
> She aroused many amorous desires in many men. With one body
> she brought together many bodies of well-minded men, great with great thoughts
> (Gorgias, *Encomium* 4)

This passage also sets up the interplay between σῶμα and λόγος, which departs from the Euripidean rift between σῶμα and ὄνομα in that Gorgias is trying to unite the persuasive power of a physical body, exemplified in Helen, with the persuasive power of a 'corporealized' speech. In Euripides, we shall see that Helen's Gorgian attempt to persuade Menelaus of her identity with her speech and her body fails, and thus the Euripidean disconnect between σῶμα and ὄνομα is realized. Nancy Worman gives a detailed examination of Gorgias' reasoning: "By elevating speech to a near-physical status, Gorgias brings it closer to both physical force and sexual desire in its effect on the body"[50]. This is a fairly complicated conclusion, but one that is central to Gorgias' point concerning the nature of speech and Helen's body. George Walsh unpacks the origin of Gorgias' line of reasoning and explains it well: "The mind ignores the gap between the impression of a sensation and the object from which sensation is derived because these impressions are the mind's only experience. Words are 'exactly like' mental impressions because the mind also ignores the gap between words and things. Therefore, words are experienced as

---

[50] Worman 1997: 173

though they were things, not as signs that merely refer to things or describe them…The words do all the work themselves, and the mind is passive"[51]. In equating λόγοι with the physical power and influence of a σῶμα, Gorgias can then employ the persuasion by λόγος, βία, and ὄψις, all of which shift the blame (and agency) Helen might have accrued to Chance and God (and eventually, to the barbarian Paris): εἰ οὖν τῇ Τύχῃ καὶ τῷ θεῷ τὴν αἰτίαν ἀναθετέον, ἢ τὴν Ἑλένην τῆς δυσκλείας ἀπολυτέον[52]. So then does this Helen retain any of her ambiguous nature has been seen throughout her appropriations in Spartan cult, Homeric poetry, and Euripidian drama? She does: Gorgias' affective psychology unites in Helen her ability to persuade and her susceptibility to persuasion. It's no accident that Gorgias had chosen Helen as the site to graft physically compelling speech onto a σῶμα; her body works like speech in that it can seduce and bind men, but speech works like Helen's beautiful body in that it can (and did) seduce Helen herself.

Euripides' *Helen* begins with an introduction by Helen, contextualizing both the play and her own fortunes. We are presented with a self-conscious Helen, one who has heard the stories about her own twofold birth and understands the intricacies of Hera's plot to double her σῶμα. In a way, Euripides presents a traditional Homeric Helen, who weaves herself into the "wider cosmic frame of the Διός βουλή (i.e. her function as a catalyst of a war which is ultimately the will of Zeus)"[53]. However, in the process of telling her story, Helen picks herself apart as she confronts the consequences of her twofold nature and her connections with divinity. For Helen, her paternity is a matter of disputed λόγος:

---

[51] Walsh, George B. The Varieties of Enchantment: Early Greek Views of the Nature and Function of Poetry. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984.: 82-83.
[52] Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen.*
[53] Euripides. *Helen*. Ed. William Allan. 2008.: 28.

> ἡμῖν δὲ γῆ μὲν πατρὶς οὐκ ἀνώνυμος
> Σπάρτη, πατὴρ δὲ Τυνδάρεως: ἔστιν δὲ δὴ
> λόγος τις ὡς Ζεὺς μητέρ᾽ ἔπτατ᾽ εἰς ἐμὴν
> Λήδαν κύκνου μορφώματ᾽ ὄρνιθος λαβών,
> ὃς δόλιον εὐνὴν ἐξέπραξ᾽ ὑπ᾽ αἰετοῦ
> δίωγμα φεύγων, εἰ σαφὴς οὗτος λόγος
>
> My own homeland is not anonymous-
> Sparta, and my father is Tyndareus: there is, indeed,
> some story that Zeus flew to my mother Leda,
> taking the form of a swan,
> by which he achieved a deceitful bed
> fleeing the pursuit of an eagle, if this story is clear (*Helen* 16-21).

As opposed to Stesichorus, who uses the phrase οὐκ ἔστ᾽ ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος, Euripides uses

the idea of a "clear" or "distinct" matter (σαφὴς οὗτος λόγος). In this brief aside, Helen is doing

exactly what the practitioners of her cult and the bards of her Homeric tales do every time they

engage her: she identifies and accepts herself as an ambiguously divine and not wholly human

figure, who occupies a liminal space between the heavens and earth. Euripides uses σαφής again

at line 577, but this time it's employed by Menelaus, who questions Helen's identity in a

dramatic reenactment of Karen Bassi's discourse of denial:

> Μενελέως: οὔ που φρονῶ μὲν εὖ, τὸ δ᾽ ὄμμα μου νοσεῖ;
> Ἑλένη: οὐ γάρ με λεύσσων σὴν δάμαρθ᾽ ὁρᾶν δοκεῖς;
> Μενελέως: τὸ σῶμ᾽ ὅμοιον, τὸ δὲ σαφές μ᾽ ἀποστερεῖ.
> Ἑλένη: σκέψαι: τί σοὐνδεῖ; τίς δὲ σοῦ σοφώτερος
>
> Menelaus: Am I somehow not well-minded, are my eyes sick?
> Helen: Looking at me, do you not suppose me to be your wife?
> Menelaus: Your body is similar, but certainty is lacking for me.
> Helen: Look carefully! What is lacking? Who knows better than you? (*Helen* 575-578).

At this point, Helen is confronted with a problem: her own exhortations for Menelaus to trust his

sight are doing precisely what Stesichorus' Palinode does implicitly- Helen, once again, finances

her own subversion. Although she tries to explain what she knows about her εἴδωλον, even

going as far to lay out the separation of ὄνομα and σῶμα (τοὔνομα γένοιτ᾿ ἂν πολλαχοῦ, τὸ

σῶμα δ᾿ οὔ [*Helen* 588]), Menelaus is still unable to wrap his head around the idea that a

goddess has furnished another body that would bear the same name as his wife. Allen explores

the depths of human ignorance exemplified in this scene: "Thus H.'s phantom embodies the

tragic themes of human ignorance and delusion in a dramatically striking manner, and in its

presentation of language, knowledge, and reality, *Helen* is in many ways as chastening and bleak

as even the most overly pessimistic of tragedies"[54]. Helen feels a very real despair after failing to

convince her husband that she is 'real'- her knowledge of divine matters and her ability to

explain away the εἴδωλον cannot bring Menelaus to understand the difference between *seeming*

and *being*. Helen is far from immune to the suffering caused by the limitations of human

knowledge, despite having unveiled her complete understanding of the Iliadic Διός βουλή in her

opening speech:

> τὰ δ᾿ αὖ Διὸς
> βουλεύματ᾿ ἄλλα τοῖσδε συμβαίνει κακοῖς:
> πόλεμον γὰρ εἰσήνεγκεν Ἑλλήνων χθονὶ
> καὶ Φρυξὶ δυστήνοισιν, ὡς ὄχλου βροτῶν
> πλήθους τε κουφίσειε μητέρα χθόνα
> γνωτόν τε θείη τὸν κράτιστον Ἑλλάδος.
> Φρυγῶν δ᾿ ἐς ἀλκὴν προυτέθην ἐγὼ μὲν οὔ,
> τὸ δ᾿ ὄνομα τοὐμόν, ἆθλον Ἕλλησιν δορός
>
> Again the plans
> of Zeus again are in agreement with these woes:
> For he brought a war to the land of the Hellenes
> and the wretched Trojans, so that he might lighten
> Mother Earth of crowds and of masses of mortals
> and so he might bring fame to the best of Hellas (*Helen* 36-43)

---

[54] Euripides. *Helen*. Ed. William Allan. 2008.: 49.

Allan is correct in saying that "H. thus emerges, within the polytheistic framework of Greek religion, as a typically human (and tragic) victim of divine power and rivalry"[55], but Helen also wields the knowledge of the Διός βουλή- this is a prime example of Helen's twofold nature. Despite inhabiting the mortal realm and being subjected to certain restrictions as a semi-mortal, she nonetheless can perceive with the power of divinity, as her Homeric pedigree of recognition and this expository scene at the beginning of her play. Here, Helen can almost be considered a Homeric narrator. Euripides then dramatizes the conundrum Helen finds herself in as a semi-divine being with knowledge of the rift between ὄνομα and σῶμα: she can only use the λόγος of her σῶμα to reaffirm what the Achaeans think they know about her εἴδωλον. She quickly convinces Teucer of her 'false' identity:

> ὦ θεοί, τίν᾽ εἶδον ὄψιν; ἐχθίστην ὁρῶ
> γυναικὸς εἰκὼ φόνιον, ἥ μ᾽ ἀπώλεσεν
> πάντας τ᾽ Ἀχαιούς. θεοί σ᾽, ὅσον μίμημ᾽ ἔχεις
> Ἑλένης, ἀποπτύσειαν. εἰ δὲ μὴ 'ν ξένῃ
> γαίᾳ πόδ᾽ εἶχον, τῷδ᾽ ἂν εὐστόχῳ πτερῷ
> ἀπόλαυσιν εἰκοῦς ἔθανες ἂν Διὸς κόρης.
>
> Ἑλένη: τί δ᾽, ὦ ταλαίπωρ᾽ — ὅστις ὢν μ᾽ ἀπεστράφης
> καὶ ταῖς ἐκείνης συμφοραῖς ἐμὲ στυγεῖς;
>
> Τεῦκρος: ἥμαρτον: ὀργῇ δ᾽ εἶξα μᾶλλον ἤ με χρῆν:
> μισεῖ γὰρ Ἑλλὰς πᾶσα τὴν Διὸς κόρην.
> σύγγνωθι δ᾽ ἡμῖν τοῖς λελεγμένοις, γύναι.
>
> Oh gods! what form do I see? I see the most hateful
> bloody likeness of the woman, who utterly destroyed me
> and all the Achaeans. May the gods spit on you, you who
> look so much like Helen. If I were not in a foreign land,
> you would have died by this well-aimed arrow for
> your likeness of the daughter of Zeus.

---

[55] Euripides. *Helen*. Ed. William Allan. 2008.: 66

Helen: What is it, O miserable man--who are you? You turn away from me
and hate me for the misfortunes of that one?

Teucer: I was wrong: I gave way to passion, more than I should have:
For all of Hellas hates the daughter of Zeus.
Forgive me for what I said, lady (*Helen* 72-82)

Teucer's complete acceptance of Helen's λόγος is almost ridiculous, but it draws a stark

distinction between this episode and the nearly disastrous encounter with Menelaus. Unlike Troy

in the *Iliad,* Euripides' Egypt is not a land in which rage and arms rein supreme, but rather

appeals to senses and verbal deception. Helen can convince Teucer so naturally because of his

distance from her, both spatially and emotionally. However, Helen ultimately fails in convincing

Menelaus of her 'true' identity without the help of the dissolution of the εἴδωλον (*Helen* 605-

615), then he quickly recognizes that Helen's λόγοι were true. Menelaus believed the lie of the

εἴδωλον in his ship, and consequently could not believe the real Helen's identity without

contradicting evidence. Teucer, on the other hand, had not just traveled with a Helen-εἴδωλον,

and was only responding with rage to her likeness (εἰκοῦς) to the 'daughter of Zeus.'

Helen is not only a victim of the Olympian schemes to eliminate Homeric heroes, but

also a victim of the ignorance of mortal men. Any appeal to the logic of trusting the eyes to see

what "is" is quickly dispelled by δόκησις. For all intents and purposes, the σῶμα of the εἴδωλον

is more persuasive than Helen's λόγος and Menelaus will not allow himself to be mesmerized by

abstract nouns[56]. However, Helen is privy to the Διός βουλή, and the explanation she gives to

Menelaus that reveals her entire predicament (*Helen* 582-588) is rejected in favor of what her

husband has already seen and touched- the εἴδωλον.

Consolidating the complicated interplay between ὄνομα and σῶμα, and the

persuasiveness of δόκησις versus the ἀλήθεια of Helen's λόγος is simply a matter of returning to

---

[56] Euripides. *Helen;*. Ed. A. M. Dale. Oxford: Clarendon P., 1967.:xvi

Karen Bassi's discourse of denial in the misrecognition scene between Helen and her husband.

Helen's earnest attempts to explain to Menelaus the course of events that led to his deception are

met with disbelief- Menelaus sees that Helen is desperate (ἄελπτα), yet he cannot move beyond

the idea that this woman imploring him to see the truth is anything more than similar

(προσφερής) to the figure he has stowed away in the cave:

> Ἑλένη: λείψεις γὰρ ἡμᾶς, τὰ δὲ κέν᾿ ἐξάξεις λέχη;
> Μενελέως: καὶ χαῖρέ γ᾿, Ἑλένῃ προσφερὴς ὁθούνεκ᾿ εἶ.
> Ἑλένη: ἀπωλόμην: λαβοῦσά σ᾿ οὐχ ἕξω πόσιν.
> Μενελέως: τοὐκεῖ με μέγεθος τῶν πόνων πείθει, σὺ δ᾿ οὔ
>
> Helen: Will you leave me, will you lead away your phantom wife?
> Menelaus: Indeed, farewell, since you are similar to Helen.
> Helen: I am ruined! Finding you, I cannot hold my husband.
> Menelaus: The magnitude of our labors in that place persuades me, not you
> (*Helen* 590-593)

Menelaus plainly states the "greatness" of his labors in Troy is enough to convince him that the

εἴδωλον is truly his wife, as opposed to Helen's λόγος, and it will take only its disappearance

into thin air and its exoneration of the 'real' Helen (*Helen* 605-615) for his wife's λόγοι to sink

in. Until then, though, Helen's predicament lies in her subversion of the truth, an *un*conscious

verbal antagonism, "in which one text [speech] affirms its own authority or validity by

contrastively representing the inadequacy, untruthfulness, or insufficiency of another," to

paraphrase Bassi[57]. Euripides, then, is playing with the theme of human ignorance. Menelaus is

necessarily ignorant of the Διός βουλή, and the pain of his labors lies in the pursuit of a phantom

for ten years. Helen is an entirely different case- confined to the mortal world with the

knowledge of the overarching Διός βουλή, her pain and struggle comes from other mortals'

---

[57] Bassi 1993: 51

inability to see or understand what is beyond the concept of δόκησις. In the case of Teucer, Helen is able to use this ignorance to her advantage, but when confronted with the task of convincing Menelaus, who already has the σῶμα he had fought so hard to retrieve, Helen cannot get him to overcome the powerful sway of what he sees and what he has touched, and any attempt on Helen's part to get him to see the wider, cosmic picture is met with failure. Helen may have divine knowledge, but she must interact with mortals who see nothing of the rift between *seeming* and *being*, especially within the context of the Διός βουλή.

Helen and λόγος, then, work in similarly persuasive ways, with λόγος relying on the mind's failure to bridge the gap between the affective force of a physical σῶμα and the seemingly physical force of the affective λόγος. Helen can work the same way; her powerfully beautiful body can work through visual stimulus to exert a persuasive power akin to λόγος. In the *Helen,* her εἴδωλον works with the persuasive force of her σῶμα á la Gorgias, but only within the context Menelaus cites before the εἴδωλον vanishes into thin air-the pain and toil of the Trojan War (*Helen* 593). The persuasive power of the εἴδωλον works in Helen's favor in the encounter with Teucer, but nearly dooms her when she tries to convince Menelaus of her identity. While Gorgias deals with the physicality and corporeality of λόγος, Euripides and Stesichorus explore the nature of ἔτυμος λόγος. Euripides retains much more of Helen's cultic ambiguity, though- Euripides' Helen has multiple existential dilemmas in which she questions her own paternity (*Helen* 16-21), is able to deceive Teucer and assume another identity (*Helen* 70-120), and must reassert her own identity to Menelaus (and fails without the help of the *deus ex machina*) (*Helen* 570-595). Not only does she question her divine origins (all the while exhibiting her knowledge of the Διός βουλή), but she also loses and regains her very identity through the obfuscation of her distinct σῶμα with the employment of λόγος that was buttressed

by the existence of her εἴδωλον. Gorgias, then, lends us the notion of Helen as a verbally-charged construction. By setting up Helen and λόγος in an analogous relationship, he pioneers an affective psychology of beauty that helps us understand Helen as a seductive character who cannot even resist her own charms. While still divinely beautiful, she has lost the agency of the Stesichorean or Euripidean Helen in that her beauty is not her fault, and it acts upon a passive observer independent of Helen's whim or will. What we can take away from Gorgias' Helen, though, is her nebulous, almost mystical beauty that transforms the minds of observers. Slowly but surely Helen is becoming divorced from her divine agency, and Gorgias inadvertently expedites this process of detachment in his attempt to exonerate her.

Facies Invisa: Augustan-Era Receptions of Helen

Before our jump forward to the 20th century, it will be helpful to examine Helen's appropriations in two Augustan-era compositions: Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Heroides*. The purpose of investigating these two works is to introduce the highly intertextual nature of Helen's successive receptions after the fifth century BCE, and it will be important to keep in mind the Latin poets' ability to play with Helen within the Trojan cycle. Ovid, in his *Heroides*, presents us with a self-aware, internally conflicted Helen whose epistolary musings oscillate between outright indignation and the furtive reciprocation of Paris' affection. Ovid plays with forces reminiscent of the ones Gorgias outlines in his *Encomium*, but Ovid treats his readers to a subjective Helen with a voice. Virgil, on the other hand, recounts an entirely different Helen: cowering in the corner near the altar of Vesta, Virgil's 'hateful' Helen is at the mercy of an enraged Aeneas (*Aeneid* 2.567-588). This scene not only hearkens back to Helen's suppliant status at the beginning of Euripides' *Helen*, but it also forms an intratextual connection with Turnus' death in *Aeneid* 12. As authors drawing from a long and rich narrative of "Helenic" history, we should focus on Ovid's and Virgil's self-conscious manipulation of the enigmatic Helen.

As we move forward in time, it will be necessary to address reception theory as the underlying basis for any future arguments and observations. In exploring the progression of Helen from her cultic origins, touching upon successive iterations in both material and literary culture, we have to acknowledge any given author's (or reader's) awareness of these iterations and read his or her texts accordingly. Charles Martindale frames this approach rather neatly with his 'weak' and 'strong' theses in *Redeeming the Text*:

> "The weak thesis is that numerous unexplored insights into ancient literature are locked up in imitations, translations and so forth...The 'strong' thesis is that our current interpretations of ancient texts, whether or not we are aware of it, are, in complex ways, constructed by a chain of receptions through which their continued readability has been affected"[58]

Helen's history is particularly rich in intertextual discourse, one that by definition demands diachronic context to understand the level of manipulation in a given iteration. The understanding of what Stephen Hinds describes as a 'contract' between alluding author and the reader is predicated on the mutual effort of both parties to discern allusions and draw conclusions[59]. With this approach to textual historicism in mind, we can now approach the 'Helen episode' in *Aeneid* 2 with an eye for the underlying *pathos* in a scene that showcases the very human potential for murderous rage.

Aeneas' brief recollection of his encounter with Helen in the burning ruins of Troy calls to mind a number of both intertextual and intratextual connections that serve to complicate Helen's seemingly unsympathetic portrayal. Philip Hardie posits not only that the *Aeneid* is a reworking of a prominent Homeric character's story arc, but also that Homer can be reread in Virgillian terms:

> Virgil's imitation of Homer is thoroughly Alexandrian both in its allusive density and erudition, and in its constant challenge to the reader to compare and contrast source and imitation, to use our knowledge of the Homeric texts as an interpretive filter in our reading of the *Aeneid*, and conversely to read the *Aeneid* as a commentary on the Homeric poems[60]

By taking into account the readings and meanings effected by the modern reader, it is possible to divine some meaning from this heavily referential scene. First and foremost, Helen's position as

---

[58] Martindale, Charles. *Redeeming the Text*: *Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1993.: 7

[59] Hinds, Stephen. *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1998.: 22

[60] Hardie, Philip R. *Virgil*. Oxford: Published for the Classical Association [by] Oxford UP, 1998.: 55

a goddess-like figure is completely undermined by Aeneas' formidable rage. Helen has struck

desire into the hearts of many, but Virgil's Helen episode pointedly forms a reversal of roles

from the first time we encounter Helen at Troy, in *Iliad* 3[61]. While Homer's Helen is a

formidably divine presence, awing the Trojan elders along the wall, Virgil's Helen has been

reduced to a shivering heap:

> Iamque adeo super unus eram, cum limina Vestae
> servantem et tacitam secreta in sede latentem
> Tyndarida aspicio: dant clara incendia lucem
> erranti passimque oculos per cuncta ferenti.
> Illa sibi infestos eversa ob Pergama Teucros
> et poenas Danaum et deserti coniugis iras
> praemetuens, Troiae et patriae communis Erinys,
> abdiderat sese atque aris invisa sedebat.
>
> I stood there, thus far the sole survivor, when guarding the
> thresholds of Vesta and silently secluded in the shrine
> I see the daughter of Tyndaros hiding: the fires give
> bright light to me as I wander, carrying my eyes over
> all things. That one, fearing the Trojans on account of their
> overturned city and the retributions of the Greeks, and
> the anger of her deserted husband, and the unified fury of
> her homeland, she had hidden herself and the hated woman
> was sitting on the altars.
> (*Aeneid* 2.567-574)

As Aeneas observed, Helen is no longer safe as a warrior's trophy while the armies battle below

the walls of Troy- she is in the midst of the invasion, at the mercy of both the Greeks' and the

Trojans' rage. However, this image of a huddled Helen is not only a pathetic inversion of her

former glory in *Iliad* 3, but it also pointedly recalls the scene in Euripides' *Helen* in which the

titular character throws herself as a suppliant upon the tomb of Proteus:

> ἔα, τίς οὗτος; οὔ τί που κρυπτεύομαι
> Πρωτέως ἀσέπτου παιδὸς ἐκ βουλευμάτων;

---

[61] See chapter on Homer for full discussion.

> οὐχ ὡς δρομαία πῶλος ἢ Βάκχη θεοῦ
> τάφῳ ξυνάψω κῶλον; ἄγριος δέ τις
> μορφὴν ὅδ᾿ ἐστίν, ὅς με θηρᾶται λαβεῖν
>
> Ah, who is this? Do I not conceal myself from some
> unholy plot by the son of Proteus?
> Should I not join my limbs to the tomb,
> swiftly like a racehorse or a Bacchante?
> There is something wild as to this man's form,
> who intends to capture me
> (*Helen* 541-545)

Unlike Euripides' comic misrecognition scene, Virgil's construction of a threatening

male/suppliant female scene puts Aeneas, livid at the destruction of his city, firmly in the

position to kill Helen without any hint of comedy and with no mortal to stop him. Luckily for

Helen (and for Aeneas' reputation as pious), Venus steps between her son and the pitiable Helen:

> Non tibi Tyndaridis facies invisa Lacaenae
> culpatusve Paris: divom inclementia, divom,
> has evertit opes sternitque a culmine Troiam.
>
> Neither the hated face of the daughter of Spartan Tyndarios
> nor Paris is blameworthy: the mercilessness of the gods, of the gods,
> overturned these riches and laid Troy low from its apex (*Aeneid* 2.601-603)

In exonerating Helen by placing the blame for the destruction of Troy on *divom inclementia*, she

is also inviting Aeneas to consciously engage in actualizing the Homeric Διός βουλή to which

Helen is privy. We can imagine a moment of metapoetic epiphany for Aeneas[62] and a begrudging

understanding between Helen and Aeneas before he leaves her to be taken by Menelaus. This

episode not only serves to overturn Helen's former power over the Trojan citadel and the people

within, but it also sets up a parallel between Helen and Turnus, both helpless victims at Aeneas'

mercy. Michael C.J. Putnam articulates this relationship as a sort of emotionally charged ring

composition that begins in *Aeneid* 2 and ends in *Aeneid* 12:

---

[62] For Virgil's metapoetic consciousness, see *Aeneid* 1.119

"In book 2, Aeneas ponders killing a suppliant, but is held back by his mother. In book 12, there is no restraint. Turnus is a *supplex* (930), humbled and at Aeneas' mercy. That he kills in anger brings the emotional story full circle from book 2 to book 12, as Aeneas is allowed to yield to his passionate side and to kill his helpless victim"[63]

Putnam claims that Virgil "chooses" to end the *Aeneid* in this way, but does not elaborate as to why this is an important construction within the context of the epic. As James J. O'Hara notes in *Inconsistency in Roman Epic*, the question of Turnus' and the Italians' guilt or innocence, villainy or heroism, raises questions about the nature of Aeneas and the poem itself[64]. However, the debate over Turnus' agency culminates during the final battle between him and Aeneas, during which Aeneas spies Pallas' girdle and decides to slay Turnus (*Aeneid* 12.938-949). The scene is strikingly similar to the Helen episode in *Aeneid* 2, and as Putnam mentions, both Helen and Turnus lay at Aeneas' feet as suppliants:

> Ille humilis supplexque oculos, dextramque precantem protendens,
>
> That one, humble and a suppliant as to his eyes, extending his begging right hand,
> (*Aeneid* 12.930-931)

Both scenes also contain a *signum* of sorts that determines Aeneas' decision to spare or kill his suppliant. In the Helen episode, Venus appeared with the knowledge of the *divom inclementia*, but in Turnus' case, no divinity comes to his aid, and the only *signum* Aeneas registers is Pallas' girdle that was taken from his dead body. The Helen encounter serves as both a foreshadowing device and a point of recontextualization at the point of Turnus' death in terms of the poem's overall structure: that is, Helen is the first point in an instance of ring composition. However,

---

[63] Putnam, Michael C.J. *The Humanness of Heroes: Studies in the Conclusion of Virgil's Aeneid.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2011.: 64-65

[64] O'Hara, James J. *Inconsistency in Roman Epic: Studies in Catullus, Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid and Lucan*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2007.: 96

Helen's scene is both affirming of Aeneas' clemency in *Aeneid* 2 and deeply troubling when

juxtaposed with Turnus' scene in *Aeneid* 12; assuming the Helen encounter is genuine Virgilian

composition[65], Aeneas' reputation, pitted against the instance of Neoptolemus' slaying of Priam

at the altars[66], is nearly compromised in his fit of madness. Just as Helen's story of her

hospitality towards Odysseus conflicts with Menelaus' less-than-flattering tale of her deception

in *Odyssey* 4, Helen's presence in *Aeneid* 2 presents the reader with a dangerously impious

Aeneas and foreshadows his potential to succumb to fury and kill a suppliant.

　　Another foil for Helen as a woman with destructive capabilities appears as the Amazon

Camilla in *Aeneid* 11. More so than the structural relationship the Helen episode and the death of

Turnus might have, Camilla's death in *Aeneid* 11 is evenly spaced with the Helen episode in

Aeneid 2, so that if mapped out, their respective appearances would form a ring structure within

the poem. This comparison hinges on the notion that if Aeneas should kill Helen, his position as

a political refugee of war would be compromised. A.M. Keith, in *Engendering Rome*, makes a

clear distinction between the sacrifice of innocent and 'dangerous' women: "The death of a

beautiful woman repeatedly serves as a catalyst in Latin epic for the epic hero's assertion of

political agency…the death of a 'dangerous' woman—Dido, Cleopatra, Camilla—authorises the

epic hero's establishment of a normative order imperiled by her deviance"[67]. In other words,

Aeneas would have been slaying the wrong woman at the wrong time; for Virgil, Helen's work

is done. In fact, for a Roman audience, Helen would have been a necessary evil in a long chain of

events that Venus herself admitted to allow transpire (*Aeneid* 1.238-239). While Helen

foreshadows Aeneas' ongoing struggle to rein in his passions (that culminates in his failure to do

---

[65] See Putnam 2011: n94 and O'Hara 2007: 87n24

[66] See O'Hara 2007: 63 for a discussion of this scene and Aeneas' character development.

[67] Keith, Alison. *Engendering Rome: Women in Latin Epic*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2000.: 130

so upon killing Turnus), she also anticipates the sacrifice of an immensely powerful woman that

establishes the Teucrians' (movement towards) dominance over the Italian land.

It also is worth noting that Helen's presence in the *Aeneid* is not only limited to her

corporeal form in a recounted story, but also in her remnant veil that is brought to Dido in *Aeneid*

1. Aeneas commanded Achates to bring a load of gifts to offer Dido for her hospitality, but with

Helen's veil, fringed with acanthus, among the gifts, the notion of abandonment has been

introduced with the mention of her name:

> Munera praeterea, Iliacis erepta ruinis,
> ferre iubet, pallam signis auroque rigentem,
> et circumtextum croceo velamen acantho,
> ornatus Argivae Helenae, quos illa Mycenis,
> Pergama cum peteret inconcessosque hymenaeos,
>
> Meanwhile he commands Achates to bring gifts snatched from
> The Trojan ruins, a cloak with figures and stiff with gold,
> And a veil emboidered with yellow acanthus,
> The ornament of Argive Helen, which she brought from Mycenae,
> When she sought Troy and an illicit marriage,
> (*Aeneid* 1.647-651)

While one appearance of the veil might have been enough to suggest some sort of disaster

regarding fidelity and devotion between the new allies, Virgil mentions it again as Cupid charms

Dido in her court:

> Mirantur dona Aeneae, mirantur Iulum
> flagrantisque dei voltus simulataque verba,
> pallamque et pictum croceo velamen acantho.
>
> They marveled at Aeneas' gifts, they admired Iulus
> and the glowing face of the god and his feigned words,
> and they wondered at the robe and the veil embroidered with yellow acanthus.
> (*Aeneid* 1.709-711)

Considering its proximity within the text to the disingenuous Cupid, Helen's veil seems to be associated with deception and future betrayal. Even the acanthus plant itself[68] embodies a contradiction characteristic of Helen; the word ἄκανθος, from ἀκή (sharp) and ἄνθος (blossom), conjures an image not unlike our modern conception of a rose: beautiful but dangerous.

Virgil's treatment of Helen is not kind. However, keeping in mind that Virgil is composing a poem by drawing on a rich tradition of Trojan cycle myth, we can discern an intertextual Helen, who hearkens back to Homer and Euripides, but also an *intra*textual Helen. She acts as a pivotal element in a small internal ring structure between *Aeneid* 2 and 12 and foreshadows two of Aeneas' harsher moments in the poem: his slaying of the suppliant Turnus in *Aeneid* 12 and his abandonment of the lovesick Dido in *Aeneid* 4. In the *Aeneid*, Helen's presence, whether in physical or memorial form, only foreshadows death and endangers the reputation of the pious progenitor of Rome.

While Virgil marks Helen's presence, in body or memory, with madness, abandonment, and impiousness, Ovid ventures down a path trod by Euripides and Gorgias in *Heroides* 17 to create a sort of intertextual interjection in the small, intimate space just before Helen leaves for Troy. Thomas Jenkins articulates the experience of reading the *Heroides* as if they were "purloined *en route*"[69], and we are faced with just such a composition in Helen's case: an intercepted communiqué, a furtive conversation, and perhaps most importantly, a responsive female voice that is weaved directly into the established stories of their respective addressers and addressees.

---

[68] It is also worth noting that our modern biological taxonomy for the acanthus as it appears in antiquity (Corinthian columns, the *Aeneid*) is *acanthus mollis*, adding another level of contradictory nomenclature to the plant.

[69] Jenkins, Thomas E. *Intercepted Letters: Epistolarity and Narrative in Greek and Roman Literature*. Lanham: Lexington, 2006.: 114

Helen's voice doesn't merely respond to Paris' confession of love, though; she calls into question the established canon:

> credere vix equidem caelestia corpora possum
> > arbitrio formam supposuisse tuo,
> utque sit hoc verum, certe pars altera ficta est,
> > iudicii pretium qua data dicor ego

> I can scarcely believe that the heavenly beings
> > would submit their beauty for your judgement,
> and even if that is true, certainly the other part is fiction,
> > that I am said to be given as a prize for your judgement
> (*Heroides* 17.119-122)

This mirrors precisely the Euripidean Helen's skepticism concerning her mother Leda's encounter with the swan and her own subsequent birth from the egg (*Helen* 17-22). Interestingly enough, Ovid seems to have been familiar with another fifth century author's examination of Helen (or at least his strain of thought); Gorgias, in his *Encomium of Helen,* states that λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἐστίν, "speech is a powerful ruler" (*Encomium* 8). However, we are not now dealing with a strictly Gorgian λόγος, which Gorgias reckons to be just as powerful as physical βία and as influential as a beautiful σῶμα, but rather an equation between the written word and persuasive physical force; the speech that Gorgias insisted could have been instrumental in Helen's abdication has been replaced by the written word in Ovid's *Heroides*. Helen's very first line suggests the power of Paris' letter:

Nunc oculos tua cum violarit epistula nostros

Now that your letter has violated my eyes
(*Heroides* 17.1)

While *violarit* could have connotations of a less corporeal "dishonoring" or "outraging," the furtive exchanges between her and Paris at the dinner table demonstrate the failure of speech to deter the written word:

> Saepe vel exiguo vel nullo murmure dixi:
> > "nil pudet hunc." Nec vox haec mea falsa fuit.
> Orbe quoque in mensae legi sub nomine nostro,
> > Quod deducta mero littera fecit, AMO.
>
> Often, even, with delicacy, or without a sound I said:
> > "He isn't ashamed for this." This word of mine was not false.
> On the round table, also, I read under my name,
> > Which had been drawn out with wine, the letters spell, I LOVE.
> (*Heroides* 17. 85-88).

Paris employs no rambling speech at the table, but flusters Helen with gestures and traced writing. Her words are hushed, as not to alert Menelaus, but their weight is nothing compared to that of a simple *amo* traced in wine, not to mention the letter that we can presume led her to Troy.

Both Virgil and Ovid, then, have opened small windows for their readers to view the Greek Helen from a Roman perspective; this avatar of beauty, unruffled even when watching on the walls of Troy the legions of men dying for her, has been substantially humanized. Ovid allows Helen to write with her own hand, and despite her wavering between submission to Paris' flattery and showing outright indignation, she stays her hand and the letter ends (17.267-268). We could argue that her attendants, Clymene and Aethra, counseled her, or that Paris even convinced her face to face (*praesentes* [17.261]), but the letters speak for themselves. It would seem that Paris' letter, which promised gifts that would move goddesses (17.65-66), also convinced Helen that she should desire Paris' affection-- enough, even, to respond to his letter (nam, mens, vox quare, quod cupit esse, neget?, "Why, then, should my voice deny what my

mind desires?" [17.128]). Despite her wavering voice, it seems that Helen's mind has been made up on account of Paris' letter. On the other end of the Trojan War, Virgil delivers Helen from a grievous death at Aeneas' hands, but only just. Her trace within the poem also opens a window to Aeneas' flaws- it would seem that Helen's beauty is not her only characteristic that leads to men's' ruin. Most importantly, though, is the highly intertextual nature of both poets' works; not only do we see a heavy reliance on the Homeric and Euripidean elements and stories, but also general concepts and themes that allow these brief glimpses of Helen to seamlessly integrate into the canonical forms of the Trojan cycle.

A Persistent Memory: Helen in the 20th Century

Moving from the Augustan poets' reception of Helen to the Modernists emerging in the early to mid-20th century, we will discover that both H.D. and C.S. Lewis have picked up the chain of transmission nearly where it dropped from the *Heroides* and the *Aeneid.* Of course, we must not forget the fifth century roots of the Roman receptions, and that H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* and Lewis' "After Ten Years" both play with the Euripidean and Stesichorean versions of the Homeric Helen. As we move rapidly through Helen's reiterations, the final, overarching theme that we will be facing in the modern world is intertextuality. Not only has each of these author's works incorporated a masterful understanding of the ancient, ambiguously divine Helen, but the world in which they lived, our world, has been shaped by the images that Helen herself helped to generate. P. Andrew Montgomery returns to weaving as a metaphor for Lewis' understanding of literature as a "great tapestry;" that each individual work or author is a strand in this tapestry and "[t]o fully appreciate the strand is to see it as part of a larger pattern, properly recontextualized"[70]. This mode of appreciation on Lewis' part is also applicable to H.D.'s mode of composition. "After Ten Years" is a fragment of what seems to be a loose yet clever adaptation of the Stesichorian εἴδωλον concept, but H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* is a staggering revival of the lyric and choral mode that interweaves divinity and Helen's Euripidean pedigree that revivifies her cultic nature; by way of a transfiguration into language and story itself, Helen becomes recontextualized as inhabiting the liminal space between the divine and the human.

Before we begin the analyses of both texts, it will be helpful to briefly paraphrase the stories. C.S. Lewis' "After Ten Years" is a fairly straightforward account of Menelaus' first

---

[70] Montgomery, P. Andrew. "Classical Literature." *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis*. Ed. Thomas L. Martin. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000.: 56

encounter with Helen after having fought for her over the course of ten years in the Trojan War. However, we see the encounter through Menelaus' perspective, and the majority of the story follows Menelaus' thought processes and considerations concerning the treatment and possible punishment of Helen. Lewis' Helen has no discernible character or voice, but rather seems a shadow of the woman both Menelaus knew and the reader had come to know through myth. The unfinished story cuts off just before an unidentified Egyptian (Proteus, perhaps?), who houses the Greeks on their way back from Troy, insists that Menelaus does not have the "real Helen." This figure calls out whom we can only assume is the real Helen. *Helen in Egypt* is a much more complicated story, but meshes both intertextuality and cultural allusion (H.D. uses references to both her Spartan divinity and her Rhodian vegetation cult) to revive a divine Helen who hearkens back to the ambiguously divine Homeric Helen. In the course of H.D.'s lyrical drama, Helen both encounters and relives the variety of variant myths in which she has been appropriated as a single, continuous storyline.

While *Helen in Egypt* explores the psychological afflictions with which Helen must contend (to summarize H.D.'s work in the very broadest sense), Lewis keeps Helen at an arm's length from the perspective of a disgruntled Menelaus, who has found his wife aged and wrinkled, ravaged by time. The story itself is unfinished and Roger Lancelyn Green, a student of C.S. Lewis, leaves us with the possible tantalizing twist on the εἴδωλον myth that Lewis might have been constructing; that "Menelaus had dreamed of Helen, longed for Helen, built up this image of Helen and worshipped it as a false idol: in Egypt he is offered the idol, the Eidolon. I don't think he was to know which the true Helen was, but of this I am not certain. But I think he was to discover in the end that the middle-aged, faded Helen he had brought from Troy was the

real woman, and between them was the real love or its possibility…"[71]. However Lewis had intended to end this story, he does leave us with a Helen who inspires rage in Menelaus, but for reasons entirely based on Helen's all-too-human aging and his army's loyalty to Helen's bloodline. This is not the Menelaus whose sword drops when he gazes at Helen's incomparable beauty: this is a Menelaus who laments his inability to even make an attempt to kill Helen. "Any hired man, any peddler, any beggar, would be allowed to teach his own wife a lesson, if she'd been false to him, in the way he thought best. For me it's Hands Off. She's the Queen, the Daughter of Zeus" (Lewis 142-143). Lewis' Menelaus is crass and indignant, and at the moment of their recognition scene, might very well have killed her out of sheer disappointment. However, the story skips ahead to the Spartans' stop in Egypt, where an unidentified Egyptian entertains Menelaus as his guest. This Egyptian guest, if he were meant to be Proteus, is a far-cry from the Euripidean Proteus, who was entrusted with Helen while her εἴδωλον remained in Troy; the Egyptian man first asks to sleep with Helen, then offers to buy her from Menelaus, who insists angrily "'I tell you the woman's not for giving,' he said. 'And a thousand times not for selling'" (Lewis 144), explaining that the woman is his wife. The Egyptian, though, insists that the woman Menelaus had recovered is not Helen, and that the real Helen had been swept away.

Before the old Egyptian man calls forth his unknown Helen at the end of the story[72], we are confronted by a Helen we have not seen before, possibly the εἴδωλον Helen that Menelaus

---

[71] Green, Roger L. "Notes to "After Ten Years"" *Of Other Worlds.* By C. S. Lewis. Ed. Walter Hooper. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966.: 146

[72] "'Daughter of Leda, come forth,' said the old man. And at once it came. Out of the darkness of the doorway" (Lewis 145). The text ends here, without a period and with the strange "it" instead

believed to be his real wife in Euripides' *Helen*. The only words Helen speaks in Lewis'

fragment are inquiries concerning Hermione, to which Menelaus responds with a choked answer,

" 'I've not seen Hermione for ten years,'" and then is halted by "a deadlock of conflicting

emotions," beginning with resentment of Helen's faded beauty (Lewis 134). As Alastair Fowler

notes, though, love might have prevailed, leading Helen and Menelaus back to their seat in

Sparta: "[Lewis] said that the idea for the book was provoked by Homer's tantalizingly brief

account of the relationship between Menelaus and Helen after the return from Troy…"[73]. As a

whole, "After Ten Years" leaves its readers with a maddeningly ambiguous notion, which

touches upon the experience any man must feel as he consorts with Helen as a suitor. Even in

being captured, she is completely unattainable. As Menelaus bursts into the room and sees Helen

for the first time, she is calmly weaving. She has become "[a]n aging woman; a sad, patient,

composed woman, asking for her daughter; for their daughter" (Lewis 134). This is the most

humanized Helen we have seen thus far, but only because of her aging: her patience and action

echo the distant Homeric Helen (*Iliad* 3.125-128), and we can almost imagine her threads on the

loom forming a picture of the timeless beauty that Lewis left behind. We cannot know what

figure stood on the threshold of the old Egyptian man's abode, except that Helen will remain

ambiguous, and like Menelaus, we cannot know which Helen is which. Lewis' Helen, the one

revealed at Troy, seems not only jarring to Menelaus, who held on to the fantastic notion that his

wife might remain a nubile young woman, but also to us the readers, who have thus far only been

exposed to Helen's divine immutability in beautiful youth throughout all the texts from the *Iliad*

---

of "she," possibly implying, as Green has posited, that the Helen in Egypt is the actual εἴδωλον,
and Menelaus would be forced to make a choice based on beauty or love.

[73] Fowler, Alastair. "Notes to "After Ten Years"" *Of Other Worlds.* By C. S. Lewis. Ed. Walter
Hooper. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966.: 148

to the *Heroides.* Even Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad,* although extremely critical of Helen as a shameless adulteress, portrays her as stunningly beautiful, even in old age[74]. Lewis has taken us away from this notion of the divine Helen, and has replaced it (temporarily, at least, if he was going to follow in Euripides' and Stesichorus' footsteps) with a more realistic picture of a woman who has passed her prime, who veers towards the limits of mortality. In the case of Lewis' Helen, we are fooled, along with Menelaus and the Greek army, into believing that the bloom would never fall off her rose, and we are caught off guard when her divine beauty is stripped from her.

While Lewis left us with an eternally unresolved story of two Helens, H.D. explores a Helen who resides in the middle of a vast and complicated network of intertextual, linguistic, and psychological strands that converge directly on Helen's lyrical narrative. Helen herself is placed outside of time, a narrative that works both as a personal healing project that Susan Stanford Friedman calls "a psychoanalytic narrative that reconstitutes Helen's past"[75]. Friedman also tackles H.D.'s focus on Helen's psychology, christening the work as a reappropriated feminist epic in which Helen explores her own ephemeral nature "through a process of remembering and reinterpretation"[76] that gives a modern audience immediate access to a myriad number of Helens coexisting within a single conceptual figure. Structurally, the poem is divided into three sections (Palinode, Leuké, Eidolon) that address the element of Helen's development after which they were named. Each lyric section is prefaced by an italicized exposition that works not so much as an explanation but as an exploration of the themes introduced in the verses before and after it. The one strand that links the dream-like episodes that explore her relationship with her three

---

[74] Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. New York: Canongate, 2005.

[75] Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity, H.D.'s Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.: 303

[76] Buck, Claire. *H.D. and Freud: Bisexuality and a Feminine Discourse*. New York: St. Martin's, 1991.: 150

lovers (Achilles, Theseus, Paris) and her contested past, is the translation of hieroglyphs, which

is where we will start in order to return back to our cultic Helen.

H.D.'s use of the hieroglyph to introduce Helen is a brilliant way to access the esoteric

nature of Helen's divinity and femininity. There is much scholarship on the Freudian nature of

Helen's attempts to "study and decipher/the indecipherable Amen-script," especially in view of

H.D.'s choice to transform Helen into the hieroglyph itself:

> "*We were right. Helen herself denies an actual intellectual knowledge of the temple-symbols. But she is nearer to them than the instructed scribe; for her, the secret of stone-writing is repeated in natural or human symbols.* She herself is the writing"[77].

This is the point at which Helen becomes more than a character in a story; H.D. has literally

transformed Helen into a symbol that for both the reader and herself is an entirely affective

mode. Helen and H.D. both agree that the script cannot be 'read,' but the following books and

sections do for the reader what Helen does for herself- that is, she becomes detached from time

and space. We, as readers, are in a unique position of sharing a parallel consciousness with

Helen, so as we read the ebbing and flowing narrative that oscillates between past and present,

Greek and Trojan, divine and human, we know only as much as Helen does, having been

exposed to the same accounts and events that H.D. has drawn from in order to create the almost

hallucinogenic romp through Helen's life. Helen becomes the central locus of signification and

intelligibility, but without cold rationality and clear division. H.D.'s Helen is not engaged in a

Euripidean discourse regarding the nature of her identity, but rather becomes an element in the

construction of mythic unity. "On one hand, the hieroglyph represents H.D.'s ideal model of

signification, a language in which there is no separation between signifier and signified, only an

---

[77] Doolittle, Hilda. *Helen in Egypt*. New York: Grove, 1961.: 22-23

adhesion, because meaning and being are identified"[78]. As we progress through the first third (Palinode), it becomes clear that H.D. is very close to achieving what Buck calls "an adhesion" to meaning through the manipulation of symbols; H.D. plunges her reader into a foreign world populated by Egyptian gods, gods that she will juxtapose and blend with more familiar Greek gods. "Is Fate inexorable?/ does Zeus decree that, forever, Love should be born of War?/ O Eros of flaming wings,/ O Horus of golden feathers,/ let my heart be filled with peace" (H.D. 33). This is an important narrative tool for H.D. in her project to break down boundaries between the mystical world of Egypt and the comparatively familiar world of Greece. Helen's familiar form, present only in her name, begins to speak words that are wholly unfamiliar to those who had only heard her narratives in *Iliad* 3 and *Odyssey* 4, and even for those who might be familiar with her lamentations and exultations in Euripides' *Helen*. Through a series of meetings with Achilles, Theseus, and Paris, "she would gradually, it would seem, bring Egypt and Greece together" (H.D. 83). However, her Persephonic aspect is particularly highlighted in H.D.'s work, and as Helen brings the past to the present and Egypt to Greece, she also brings herself closer to the divinity within her through a process of self-discovery.

In the process of devising so many oppositions, H.D. practically dwarfs Euripides' comparatively straightforward divisions between ὄνομα and σῶμα, λόγος and πρᾶγμα. Indeed, H.D. includes so many spatial, numinal, and temporal juxtapositions, she manages to shift our experience of Helen to an ambiguous and affective dimension that draws a considerable amount from her incarnations in ancient narratives. Both implicitly and explicitly, then, we are led to identify Helen with a divine power, but one who speaks with the mouth of a mortal woman and who brings her epic experience to the world through a lyrical, Sapphic lens. The key to this

---

[78] Buck, Claire. *H.D. and Freud: Bisexuality and a Feminine Discourse*. New York: St. Martin's, 1991.: 155

transformation, as mentioned before, is Helen's self-identification with the hieroglyph, the

indecipherable, yet intelligible symbol. H.D. explicitly links Helen with the Egyptian lily, or the

"thousand-petalled lily," which appears at least twice in the first section (Palinode) and twice in

the second (Leuké). The build-up is slow and laborious, but exposes Helen's gradual

identification and transformation into the sacred symbol through its interconnectedness with

Greek deities. What makes this symbol so meaningful, though, is what it meant for the Egyptians

and how it is juxtaposed with Persephone. According to Richard H. Wilkinson, the blue lotus

(*Nymphaea caerulea,* or the Blue Egyptian water lily), was associated with the god Nefertem,

who presided over unguents and more importantly, the cycle of the lotus flower[79]. It seems that

H.D. could have been playing with a proto-Persephone figure at the very least, but we shall see

that she connects the hieroglyphic lily-Helen to not only a hybrid Eros-Horus figure, but also

Helen's Rhodian incarnation *Dendritis*.

In *Palinode*, the lily is introduced as a flickering symbol that mirrors the thousand sails

on the thousand ships, a vision "*wholly Greek*," but she does end her stanza by returning to "*the

sacred lily for her final inspiration*": "I read the writing when he seized my throat,/ this was his

anger,/ they were mine, not his;/ the unnumbered host;/ mine, all the ships,/ mine, all the

thousand petals of the rose,/ mine, all the lily petals" (H.D. 25-6). The next mention of the lily

occurs soon after: "*As Isis seeks to reclaim Osiris with the help of their Child, the sun-god

Horus, so Helen, with the aid of 'the unnumbered host' (symbolized by 'the Hawk with the fiery

pinions' or 'the thousand-petalled lily') would gain spiritual recognition and ascendancy over*

---

[79] Wilkinson, Richard H. *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003.: 135

'Typhon, the Destroyer"[80]. Here, Helen is clearly identified with Horus. The association is

oblique, and we will have to merely skim over the myriad ways in which the Egyptian hawk-god

might have inspired H.D. to connect the two, if not by virtue of textual juxtaposition, then Horus'

own dominion over the sky. Not only did Horus contain the stars of the sky on his back in hawk

form, but also was a mediator between the divine and human realms (Wilkinson 201). Keeping

in mind H.D.'s consciousness of Egyptian mythology, which Eileen Gregory articulates as a

fascination with "the dyad of son and mother-…Achilles/Thetis...and others- increasingly

summed up in the Egyptian mother-brother-son triad of Isis/Osiris/Horus"[81], we can trace a

gradual shift and oscillation of Helen's character throughout the text as an intermediary figure

between Greece and Egypt, personage and text, divine and human. With a chart, we can see how

H.D. blurs Helen's boundaries and weaves her directly into the middle of Gregory's "dyad" by

identifying the mythological figures alluded to in the text and the overarching narrative

movement:

---

[80] H.D. 29

[81] Gregory, Eileen. *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.:

Sections	Characters, Locations and corresponding symbols	Underlying Mythic Motifs
1.2.4	Osiris, Greece, Lily	Rebirth
1.2.6	Osiris, Isis, Horus, Lily, Typhon	Rebirth in the face of monstrous death (Typhon), Egyptian familial relations
1.7.6	Dioskuri, Lily, Hieroglyph	Grafting the Egyptian hieroglyph onto Greek familial relations
2.3.6	Helena Dendritis	Fecundity, Helen's fertility cult, deification
2.4.1	Persephone, Theseus, Dioskuri	Theseus' Rape of Persephone and Helen
2.6.2	Helena Dentritis, Sparta	Fertility cult, reconciliation with death
2.7.2	Persephone, Achilles-Osiris	Helen's identification with Persephone/Kore, Achilles as resurrection figure
2.7.6	Helena Dentritis, Hieroglyphs	Helen as an object of mystery cult and a vegetation goddess via the affective hieroglyphs
3.1.1	Persephone-Helen, Isis-Osiris, Achilles-Dis	Helen-Kore returning from Achilles-Dis to 'Greek Time' and Egypt

This chart illustrates the incredibly tangled web of human and divine interactions that H.D. has constructed that mirror a number of heroic, epic, and divine motifs. Helen has not only a *katabasis* of sorts (one that becomes clearer after her meeting with Theseus and her meetings with Achilles and Paris), but she also becomes unified with the Egyptian deity trio, also a family, which is then mapped onto the triad of Dioskuri and Helen in Greek myth: "'Helena *shall remain one name, inseparable' with the names of the twin-stars or the star host, 'the thousand-petalled lily'*" (H.D. 107). As the story progresses, it becomes increasingly more difficult to disentangle Helen from the myriad references to Egyptian deities and her various lovers- so much so, that she retains an ambiguous quality, even upon closer inspection. H.D. composes with a knowledge of her Rhodian cultic incarnation, *Helena Dendritis*; in this cult, the human Helen becomes deified in a vegetation cult, according to Pausanius 3.19. Towards the end of *Eidolon*, her Persephonic identity is reaffirmed through hyphenated identification and her 'return' to what H.D. calls "Greek time"[82]:

> "*Now after the reconciliation with time, Greek time, (through the counsel and guidance of Theseus), Helen is called back to Egypt. It is Achilles who calls her- or it is the image or eidolon of Achilles who is 'commanded to say, Theseus commands me'*" (H.D. 217).

H.D. has constructed an incredibly detailed view of Helen, one that incorporates all of her lovers from her mythic variants. H.D. also explores the competing accounts of her presence in both Troy and Egypt (while grafting Egyptian imagery onto Spartan genealogy) that works not necessarily as a narrative, but as a lyric pastiche. An analysis of H.D. and *Helen in Egypt* as a concatenation of Greek and Egyptian myth (and examined through a Freudian lens) would be

---

[82] For more on time in Greek tragedy, see Jenkins, Thomas E. (2007). 'The "*Ultra-Modern*" *Euripides* of Verrall, H.D., and MacLeish', *Classical and Modern Literature* 27: 121–45.

beyond the scope of this paper. However, for the purposes of our examination, *Helen in Egypt* is the culmination of centuries' worth of character development and mythmaking. It is no understatement to say that H.D. has captured the numinous nature of Helen by interweaving her various iterations through the human and the divine within both Greek and Egyptian myth. However, H.D.'s greatest achievement is undoubtedly her revivification of Helen's nature as a vegetation goddess. By the end of H.D.'s text, we are left not only with a feeling of unity between Helen and her dead and disenfranchised lovers, as well as their respective story lines within "Helenic" history, we also feel as if Helen has returned to her place within the realm of the divine. Over time, Helen was deracinated from her homeland in Sparta, taken all over the Mediterranean world, reviled and cherished. H.D. returns Helen to her roots:

> the seasons revolve around
> a pause in the infinite rhythm
> of the heart and of heaven
> ...
> *a memory forgotten* (H.D. 315)

Helen's story could have ended here. Her life in *Helen in Egypt*, having come full circle, mirrors that of her literary and artistic incarnations, starting and ending with her divinity. However, Helen will have no such luck. Her ambiguity provokes investigation, her divinity inspires contention, and her agency demands opposition; Helen, of Troy, of Egypt, of Sparta, will never be a memory forgotten.
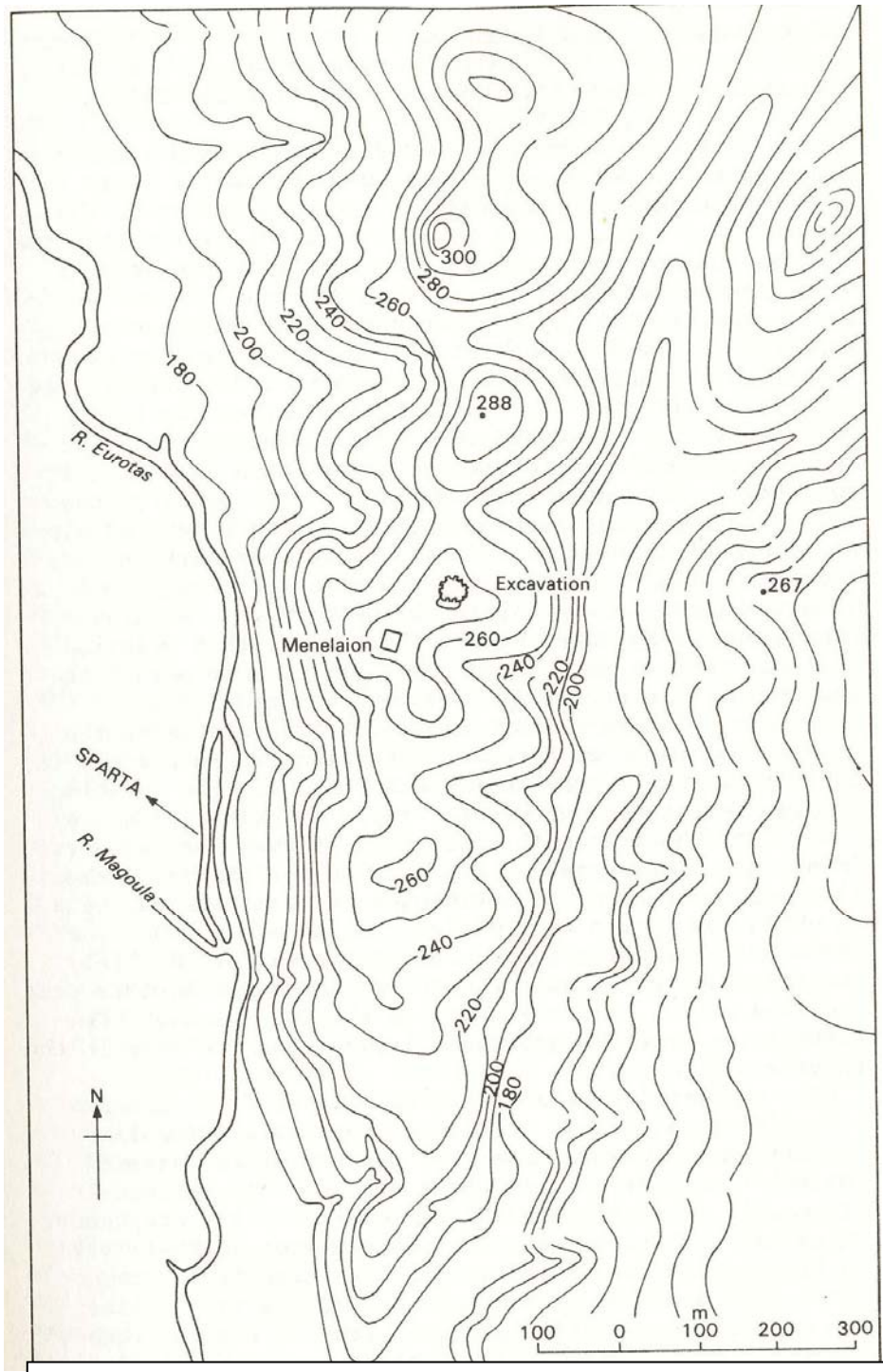
Appendix 1

Side A: "Attic Red-figure." *Makron 'Helen Skyphos'* **N.p., 1997. Web. 10 Apr. 2013.**

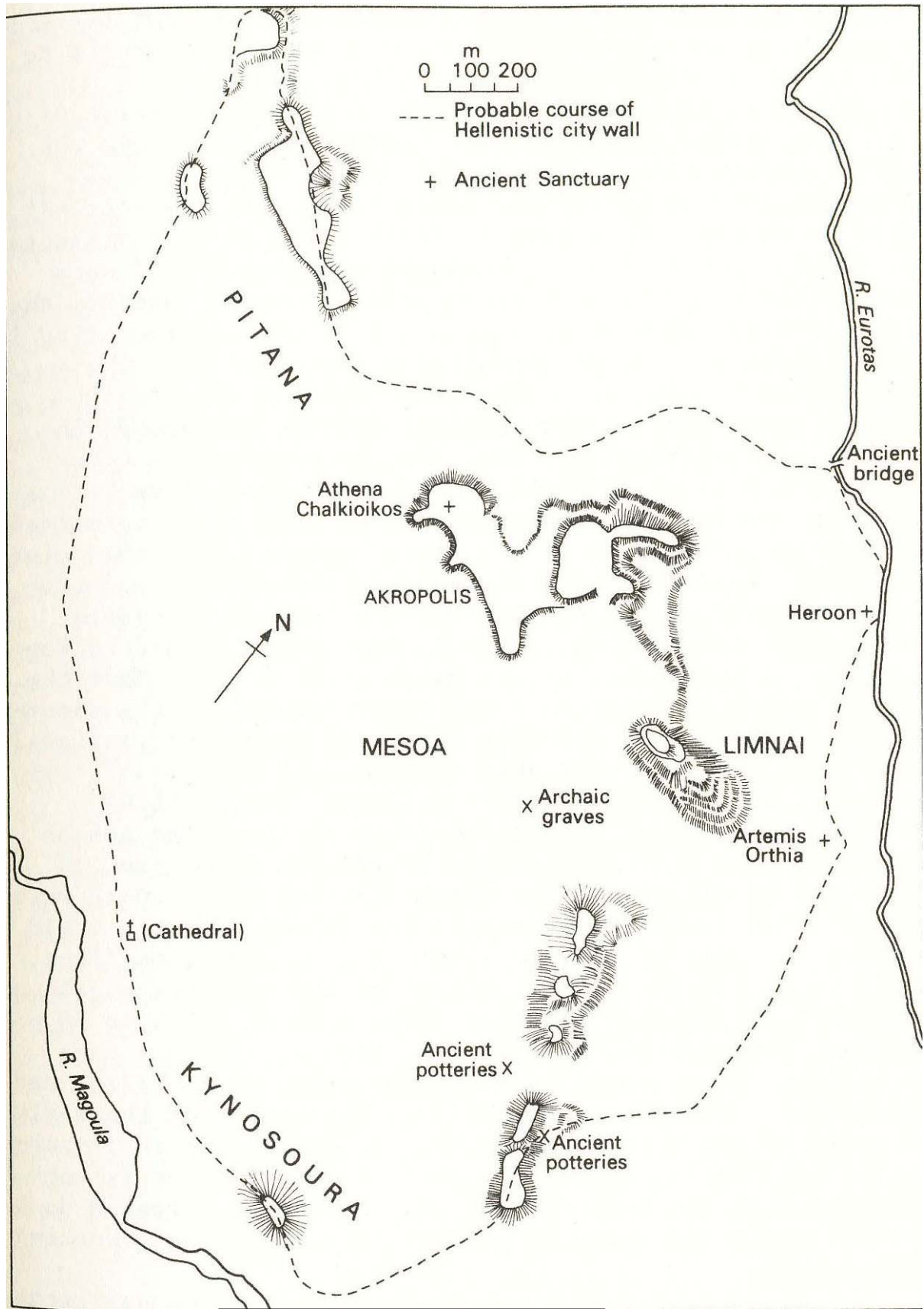**Side B: "Attic Red-figure."** *Makron 'Helen Skyphos'* **N.p., 1997. Web. 10 Apr. 2013.**

Appendix 2

Figure 2: Cartledge 1979: 105