

## §5. Helen

“Blame is there none, that the Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans  
long years suffer in travail, when such is the woman they fight for,  
marvelous, like in her figure and face to a goddess immortal.”

– *Iliad* 3:158-160

Helen is in some sense the centerpiece of the story of Troy. According to current myth, that story had its beginning in the Judgement of Paris, where three goddesses sought Paris’s decision in a beauty contest; he accepted the bribe of Aphrodite, who had promised him the most beautiful woman in the world for his wife. This, however, is never alluded to in the Homeric poems.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Paris is thought to have simply abducted her, by his own powers of sexual enticement, and gone off with her (in one variant, to Egypt). X is said (0:000) to have made the ships Paris used. Helen describes herself, as a “bitch,” that is, a promiscuous animal, one with no conception of domestic harmony, but ready to go off with anyone who attracts her.

She is portrayed, in the Viewing from the Walls, 3:121-244, as missing her kin and acquaintances from the days with Menelaos.<sup>2</sup> In general, she regrets her departure, and hates her present situation. After Aphrodite saves Paris from Menelaos and whisks him back to his bedroom, she compels Helen to join him, whatever her own wishes (410-420). Helen first refuses:

“Thither I will not go – for that would only be sinful –  
that man’s couch to share; hereafter the women of Troia  
all will denounce me; and now – unending the woes of my spirit!”  
Roused unto wrath, the divine Aphrodite in answer addressed her,  
“Nettle me not, malapert, lest I in my anger desert thee,  
hating thee even as fiercely as now past measure I’ve loved thee,  
lest I devise new enmities, hatreds grievous, among them,  
Trojans and Danaans too, by an evil fate wouldst thou perish.”  
So said she, and Helen, daughter of Zeus, sore affrighted,  
went without words, closely wrapping herself in her shining apparel,  
passing unseen of the women of Troy . . .

All is thus set for Helen to welcome her coming repatriation; this being the way the story of Helen is going to come out, whether she likes it or not.

<sup>1</sup>Nor, be it noted, is the Iphigenia who was sacrificed at Aulis so that the Greek fleet might proceed to Troy. One of Agamemnon’s daughters (offered to Achilles at 9:145) is Iphianassa, who is clearly intended to replace, and indeed to block off, Iphigenia. That Agamemnon has in some sense deserved his wife’s rage and retaliation is not a fact which is comfortable within the chosen moral boundaries of the Menis. Standard Greek myth is less celebrated than kept at bay, in these Homeric literary compositions.

<sup>2</sup>Achilles was not among them. We need not ask if he is missing from the heroes mentioned in the Viewing scene because Homer edited him out. He was never there.

So much for these cardboard characters. If for a moment we allow the literary possibility that Aphrodite is really Helen herself, what then is Helen? She is a creature of desire, as she says of herself. She came willingly enough. She is only ready to go back because the plot of the story requires it of her.

Sooner or later, someone had to ask, What if she *did* go back? What would that resumption of a broken marriage be like? Would it be tolerable for either of them? This the *Odyssey* poet shows us, when Telemachus visits Menelaos.

The answer is: Helen is no longer a bitch; rather, a witch. Menelaos will have no sons by her; rather, by a slave woman. Helen has no part in his lineage. Theirs is a marriage of the bed. But her Egyptian enchantments still work; she gives them to herself and her guests as antidotes for sadness (Od 4:219-232):

Meantime Helen, the daughter of Zeus, planned other devices,  
casting a drug in the wine from which were drinking the feasters.  
Soother of pain is the drug, and of wrath, and of every sorrow;  
whosoe'er should swallow a draught thus mixed in a wine-bowl,  
not for the space of a day on his cheeks would trickle a teardrop,  
nor if his father himself should die, or the mother that bare him,  
nay, not e'en if his brother be slain, or the son that he loveth  
fall by the edge of the sword, and he see them dying before him.  
Many a suchlike drug, both potent and kindly, did Helen  
gain from the consort of Thon, Polydamna, a woman of e\gypt.  
(Here doth the fertile soil breed potent plants in abundance,  
many benign, thus mixed as a potion, and many malignant.  
Every dweller in Egypt moreover surpasseth as healer  
others of mortals, for truly the folk is the race of Paeëon).

The enchantments of Helen eliminate all human feeling, and in particular, all family consciousness. The drug is Helen herself writ pharmaceutical. If some author sought to rewrite the *Odyssey*, and needed a dangerous enchantress for the *Adventures* series, Helen would do just fine.

Something else the *Odyssey* poet manages to share with us about Helen is her attempt to get the men in the Trojan Horse to reveal themselves – and how? By imitating the voices of their wives, that's how, and thereby inspiring desire, her regular stock in trade. Menelaos himself tells it (Od 4:174-274-279):

Testing by touch of thy fingers the hollow ambush, thou passedst  
thrice all round it, and calling by name on the chiefs of the Argives  
madest thy voice to resemble the voice of a woman of Argos.  
Meanwhile Tydeus' son and myself and the godlike Odysseus  
sat in the midst and listened intent to thy voice as it called us.  
Both of us others indeed kept longing to rise and to rush forth  
out of the ambush, or else from within to respond to thy calling;  
only Odysseus opposed our eager excitement and stay'd us . . .

As for how wonderful it is when Helen is brought on, in the tacked-on conclusion of the *Menis*, to join Hecuba and Andromache in mourning Hector, we can consider that merely literary question when we come to it, in §23.