The Bitch that Launched a Thousand Ships: A Feminist Analysis of Helen of Troy and the Women of Antiquity

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Abstract

Recent work in classics has revitalized research on the women of antiquity, both in learning more about their ideas and philosophies which may have been overlooked until now, and in reconsidering the roles that we have traditionally assumed of women in classical literature. Helen stands as the figurehead of women in antiquity, being described in Homer`s Iliad and traditionally considered the cause of the Trojan War. Helens`s fame makes her an obvious candidate for feminist consideration.

Recent work in classics has revitalized research on the women of antiquity, both in learning more about their ideas and philosophies which may have been overlooked until now, and in reconsidering the roles that have been traditionally assumed of women in classical literature. Helen of Troy stands as the figurehead of women of antiquity, being described by Homer, Ovid, Euripides, Herodotus, and countless others, as well as being depicted by Jacques-Louis David in *The Love of Helen and Paris* in The Louvre and by many other artists elsewhere. Her spirit is summoned in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, being immortalized by Faust as "the face that launched a thousand ships," a reference to her usual depiction as the cause of the Trojan War, a role to which she is often confined in classical research. Helen's fame, as well as the many differences between authors in the telling of her story (for example, whether she was abducted and raped by Paris, went with him willingly, or if she even went to Troy in the first place), make her an excellent candidate for feminist consideration. I aim to show that by analyzing Helen using modern feminist perspectives, her myth becomes deeper, the themes become richer, and a wealth of new perspectives and conclusions open up, and that this same process promises equal reward in application to any woman of antiquity who may remain confined in classical literature.

Though it is by no means accurate or fair to say that Helen has not been analyzed before in literature, until recently she has remained more of a *modus operandi*, a cause of the Trojan War, a gift to Paris, a motivation for violence, and other such roles which describe her in terms of major events or male characters, rather than as a character herself. I do not intend to focus on specific results that come from analyzing Helen as an instrumental figure, or from considering her in an active context or from applying to her the various feminist perspectives of more recent literature, but to show that many novel conclusions exist when this is done, and that it will prove absolutely integral to future discussion to make such activities widespread and common.

It is important to have some context regarding the story of Helen to understand the foundation from which research in Classics builds on, as well as to understand aspects of the traditional perspectives which have permeated research into the various characters of antiquity, particularly those who are female. In the traditional telling of the myth, Helen was born to the god,

Zeus, and was considered the most beautiful woman in the world. When it came time for her to be wed, a great many suitors came to vie for her hand. In order to maintain peace, an oath was made among the suitors that, whoever she should end up marrying, the remaining suitors would protect him. In the end, she married Menelaus, king of Sparta. She remained with Menelaus until, later, she was awarded to Paris, son of the king and queen of Troy, by Aphrodite in exchange for settling a dispute among the gods in her favor. Helen and Paris ran off together (in some versions, she was raped and abducted, in others she was seduced, and in others still she was said to have already been in love with him). Menelaus therefore invoked the oath of the suitors, and thus started the Trojan War, hence Helen's description as "the face that launched a thousand ships."

Homer's epic poem, the *Iliad* is read both historically and literarily as the primary source for analyzing Helen. Though it is sometimes used by historians, since it is now known that some events, despite being heavily exaggerated, did indeed happen, it is primarily known as one of the greatest works of classical mythology. It was likely written in the 8th century B.C.E. and chronicles a part of the Trojan War, a conflict which may or may not have any historical basis, but was believed by the Greeks to have occurred in about the 12th century B.C.E.[1] Being a character of literature means that Helen is part of the reader's subjective experience; that is, she is subject to the interpretation of, and more importantly, identification with, the reader. But, as University of Bristol Classics scholar Vanda Zajko puts it:

> "The concept popularly known as 'identification' is under-theorized in contemporary critical debates. It is, however, relied upon in a wide variety of contexts to help account for the mysterious way in which readers may sometimes experience themselves as being transformed by their intimacy with a literary text."[2]

It is for this reason that it is crucial to understand the concept of "identification with the reader". Also, in reference to texts such as the *Iliad*, Zajko tells readers that:

> "The emotional power of a mythic text may be the means of transforming our historical knowledge, and to appropriate the past without deference to its alienness is properly to acknowledge the role of subjectivity in the production of all our representations of it."[3]

The power of the *Iliad*, being what Zajko refers to as a mythic text, is enormous and emotionally profound.

Although Helen stands as an important character for feminist evaluation, it can be helpful to look at identification with other characters as well. The famous feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous looks at reader identification with Achilles and illuminates gender barriers between reader and character. To summarize Cixous's discussion of identifying with Achilles, Zajko says:

> "The Cixousian Imaginary, which is the locus of the unconscious, is conceptualized as occupying a space prior to gender differentiation, and so Achilles' masculinity is not an obstacle to a feminine reader's identification with him."[4]

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[1] (Wood 1998, 19)
[2] (Zajko 2006, 46)
[3] (Zajko 2006, 59)
[4] (Zajko 2006, 60)

This is an important aspect in the understanding of Helen and the analysis of her. The space of identification which precedes gender identification, what Zajko calls the *Cixousian Imaginary*, allows for both feminine and masculine readers to identify with Helen fully and emotionally. Thus, the emotional power of mythic texts becomes available to all readers despite gender identification. Identification with characters is deeply encompassing and multi-faceted, what Zajko calls:

> "…the constant interplay between our sense of ourselves and our sense of what is not ourselves, between, we might say, projection and introjection, that enables any kind of relationship to develop…This applies as much to relationships with literary and mythological figures as it does to relationship with those who inhabit our more prosaic worlds."[5]

Despite the establishment of the Cixousian Imaginary, there remains a difference between our sense of ourselves and our sense of what is not ourselves, and this may indeed allow for a difference in the identification with Helen between masculine and feminine readers, and indeed readers with different backgrounds, race, and many other differences. The most important point of Zajko's research and the concepts of Cixous, however, is that identification with Helen is possible with readers of any gender, and that identifying with her (and any other mythical character) can dramatically transform our historical knowledge by opening up a depth of understanding which comes not only from factual knowledge, but from personal and emotional identification.

Understanding the vast importance of reader identification *and* the fact that, while masculine and feminine readers both can identify with Helen, they may identify quite differently, it is important to explore various historical descriptions and analyses of Helen and what these descriptions might mean. These descriptions come primarily, indeed almost solely, from male historians. In an essay about the history of women and war, Ellen O'Gorman writes that:

> "The feminist project with history has often been glossed as 'writing women back into history', in which case women's role in warfare would seem to be long overdue for revisionist treatment…Feminist historiography attempts to counteract the effects of this discourse by configuring the project of writing women back into history as a transformation not only of women but also of history."[6]

This thought about the transformation of history follows closely Zajko's discussion of reader identification allowing for the transformation of our knowledge of history. Therefore, when discussing the role of women in war historically, we are allowed only (or at least, primarily) descriptions that come from masculine identification, as is the case with Helen, and it is an important project in feminism, according to O'Gorman, to discover what it means to introduce feminine identification with Helen, to re-analyze her historically and transform our knowledge. O'Gorman herself introduces Helen of Troy as a historical example which seemingly begs for writing women back into history:

> "The myth of Helen is an obvious choice when considering a possible role for women in interrogating histories of warfare, since women's position as the implicit reason for war—

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[5] (Zajko 2006, 66)
[6] (O'Gorman 2006, 193)

'this is all *for you'*—is made explicit in Helen's role as the cause of the Trojan War and as the beginning of Greek history."[7]

Helen is the case, as O'Gorman puts it, of the implicit made explicit, the sort of story that lays the foundation for the subtler examples later on, and thus analyzing her story lends conclusions for women's history in war at large.

Of course, the myth of Helen is classically presented in a masculine perspective, that is, Homer's perspective as author of the *Iliad*. And as O'Gorman puts it:

We also see, yet again, Helen's position as cause and as prize of war; the men, central figures, struggle together for her sake. Protected and sought after, Helen is here removed from the field of combat where Hecuba and Andromache placed her in Euripides' play.[8]

O'Gorman is here remarking on a less traditional perspective of Helen which shows her in the field of combat with Trojan queen Hecuba and princess Andromache, a perspective which deviates from the masculine norm of showing her only as a prize or object. Much more interestingly, O'Gorman offers her own perspective, a feminine one, and importantly, an academic one which is bolstered by her knowledge of Greek. She discusses the language used in Helen's speech to Hector, noting that:

[Helen] says that the Trojans endure hardship 'for the sake of dishonoured me' in Richmond Lattimore's translation, but I would prefer to render *heinek' emeio kunos* as 'for the sake of me, bitch that I am.' When Helen calls herself a 'bitch', which she does twice in this speech, far from being merely self-deprecating, she once more transforms and interrogated the assumptions underlying war narrative.[9]

Analyzing this from the perspective of feminine identification reveals a truly interesting critique from Helen. She repeats first the sentiment of the male characters when she says "for the sake of me," simply repeating the fact that she is the cause of the war, but then calls herself a bitch, a veiled critique of the inherent problem in the male telling of war stories involving women, what O'Gorman calls the "contradictory elevation of women to the status of glittering prizes, and debasement of women as the cause of all suffering."[10] The simple inclusion of the word, "bitch," a word specifically referencing Helen as adulterous since the term is also used numerous times in the *Odyssey* to refer to adulterous women, in a context where Helen critiques herself as the cause of the Trojan War, raises questions about boundaries between sexual activity and warfare.

This small change from a feminist perspective adds depth to the story of Helen, a change in how we view her own perception of her role in warfare and perhaps even Homer's meaning in his description of Helen as it pertains to her as the cause and prize of the Trojan War. This new perspective also gives Helen some sort of personal response against the other male perspectives in the *Iliad*, which describe her more traditionally:

If you would have me do battle with Menelaus, bid the Trojans and Achaeans take their seats, while he and I fight in their midst for Helen and all her wealth. Let him who shall be victorious and prove to be the better man take the woman and all she had, to bear them to

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[7] (O'Gorman 2006, 195)
[8] (O'Gorman 2006, 203)
[9] (O'Gorman 2006, 203-204)
[10] (O'Gorman 2006, 203-204)

his home, but let the rest swear to a solemn covenant of peace whereby you Trojans shall
stay here in Troy, while the others go home to Argos and the land of the Achaeans.[11]
This description goes unchallenged, or at least there is no other perspective offered unless Helen has the voice she is found to have through a feminine perspective, a feminine identification with her character.

Another feminine perspective about Helen comes from Bettany Hughes, a modern expert on Helen. She describes in great detail how masculinity transformed our knowledge of history, saying "Helen has become just another nail in the coffin of womankind. Christianity carried on where the classical Greeks – particularly the Athenians – had left off, demonising women and their sexual power…Female physical beauty was coming to be thought of as a mark of evil rather than of inner strength and spiritual merit."[12] Hughes offers an analysis of Helen's character as it has been historically seen through a masculine lens, saying that Helen is "the woman men love to love and love to hate."[13] But when we remove the traditional and historical masculine perspectives of Helen, we come to a different description of her character, one that is more complex and paints her neither as good nor evil, much like the Greeks considered the gods of Olympus. They portrayed the gods not as perfect, infallible beings, but as jealous and capricious, as likely to bestow upon Perseus a shield to vanquish Medusa as they are to subject Prometheus to eternal torment for gifting humanity with fire. In this respect, both the gods and, when stripped of the masculine perspective, Helen might be seen as much more human. Interestingly, Hughes also notes the dissolution of the distinction between sexual activity and warfare, noting that, "As Homer fleshes out the narrative of the Trojan War, we come across a use of language that does not presume a dividing line between the lust for love and the lust for blood,"[14] a point noted by O'Gorman in conjunction with Helen's reference to herself as a "bitch."

We note through Hughes that the feminist perspective changes the story of Helen not so much in her own historical context, but in the history of our study of her, which has been primarily masculine from early Christianity and beyond. This traditional view emphasizes the dichotomy of Helen, beauty and death, cause and prize, delectable poison. And although these perspectives may be somewhat accounted for in Homer's own telling, the reading of Helen through a feminine identification illuminates another meaning, or set of meanings, in Homer's words, and in Helen's words. It allows for a deeper look into Helen's own feelings about herself, rather than just descriptions of others' feelings about her, and redefines her. And the character of Helen of Troy, although commonly associated only with the Trojan War, is described in other texts, in other contexts, outside of war only, and feminine identification with her in these texts is surely as illuminating.

We can also look at feminist perspectives that come from the literary world, rather than just the historical one. For example, feminist poet and novelist Margaret Atwood writes about a modern-

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[11] (Homer 2010)
[12] (Hughes 2005, 144)
[13] (Hughes 2005, 146)
[14] (Hughes 2005, 204)

day Helen of Troy in a poem which grapples with Helen's views of herself and other's views of her, saying:

> I do give value. / Like preachers, I sell vision, / like perfume ads, desire / or its facsimile. Like jokes / or war, it's all in the timing. / I sell men back their worse suspicions: / that everything's for sale, / and piecemeal. They gaze at me and see / a chain-saw murder just before it happens, / when thigh, ass, inkblot, crevice, tit, and nipple / are still connected.[15]

Through a literary feminist perspective, Helen's sexuality is highlighted in terms of its power, something she wields over the men who, in this poem, watch her and pay her. This is in stark contrast to the typical depiction of her sexuality, which holds it only as something alluring to the men who wage war over her. Though both depictions highlight that Helen's sexuality has power, it is in the feminist perspective only that the power is in her own hands, wielded against men. Additionally, Atwood's Helen character references the men around her in this passage, and further characterizes them:

> My beery worshippers! That, or a bleary / hopeless love. Seeing the rows of heads / and upturned eyes, imploring / but ready to snap at my ankles, / I understand floods and earthquakes, and the urge / to step on ants. I keep the beat, / and dance for them because / they can't…[16]

The men that see Helen, that consider her the spoils of war and the cause of it, are now explored through the lens of Helen, a uniquely feminine and literary perspective which paints these men as two-dimensional, looking to Helen as powerful and controlling. They are written to be ignorant of their own weakness and vulnerability to her. Using this perspective is equally effective as using historical ones to reshape our knowledge of history because it implores us to frame Helen differently, consider her story differently.

Helen of Troy may be the most iconic classical mythical female, certainly insofar as classical war is concerned. A reevaluation of her character is paramount for the history of women in war as an entire topic, and many other topics as well, but classic myth contains multitudes of female characters, all of which can be "written back into history" and redefined through the introduction of the feminine identification and perspective. But writing women back into history is only the beginning, as Cixous says; it is now time that woman writes herself, writes her own story, and does not need future generations to retrospectively reinclude her. Helen of Troy can be a vastly different character and play a vastly different role when reconsidered through the feminist perspective, written from feminine identification. More than that, the entire story surrounding her changes, whether it be the interpretation of the *Iliad* or the play of Euripides. We need to now ask, however, what of the other Trojan women? What of every other female classical character? Our understanding of mythology and history hinges on including and understanding the feminist perspective.

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[15] (Atwood 1996, 45)
[16] *Ibid*

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