

The Poetics of Gender Devaluation in Homeric Heroism

There are systematic differences between how female and male heroes are portrayed in Homeric epic which reveal why the portrayals result in such different receptions and perceptions. Greek heroes are understood to be paragons of extremity, a link between the mortal and immortal realms. Gregory Nagy defines three specific heroic characteristics in *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* and it will be shown that the two most extreme cases of heroism in Homer's *Iliad*, Helen and Achilles, both fulfill these requirements. And Achilles is regularly recognized as a hero – yet Helen is not. Why is this? It is not precisely because one is a woman and one is a man, but because one fulfills heroic requirements with behaviors that reflect ancient Greek ideas of femininity and the other fulfills them with behaviors that reflect masculinity. More specifically, their behaviors reflect gendered relationships with time and movement which were generally accepted as truths in ancient Greece. We will see how these gendered relationships are visible in the actions, characterizations, and roles of these two heroes in the *Iliad*.

First, we must understand exactly what constituted ancient Greek ideas of femininity and masculinity with respect to time and movement. The word 'space' was not as synonymous with 'place' like it is at present. 'Space' was a more abstract concept that had to do with social value and so, like most social values in a highly patriarchal society, was often represented using gender. In *Hestia-Hermes: The religious expression of space and movement among the Greeks*, Vernant asserts that Hestia and Hermes, gods of the domestic domain and symbols of the gestures of women and men, illustrate the archaic representations of orientation in space and motion.¹ Hestia is the hearth so she represents the center, the internal, boundedness, ubiquity, constancy, stability. She is suspended and static, and changes in time do not change her. The Greek word ἰστός "loom" is also associated with women and is connected to the verb ἵστημι "to stand". Hestia stands strong. Hermes represents the door, being the god of travelers and messengers. He represents movement, the exterior, transitions, mobility, instability, change. His movement through time and space defines him, and his beginnings and ends are equally important. Hermes swiftly moves. In this way, space and mobility in ancient Greece were perceived as dualities which characterized the nature of the feminine and the masculine.

Now, we will investigate how Helen and Achilles' Iliadic representations reflect these concepts while fulfilling the heroic requirements. Nagy introduces three fundamental elements of the ancient Greek hero:²

- i. The hero is unseasonal
- ii. The hero is extreme, positively and negatively
- iii. The hero is antagonistic toward the god who seems to be most like the hero

¹ Vernant 1969:132-168

² Nagy 2013:45

Seasonality is defined as being on time, while unseasonality is being not on time or untimely. A hero will be seasonal only at their moment of death and so is unseasonal at every moment before.³ Achilles straightforwardly describes himself as ἓνα παῖδα παναώριον (*Iliad* XXIV.540), the single most unseasonal child of all. παναώριον means “short-lived, destined to be cut off untimely”, suggesting he will be untimely right before the moment he dies and therefore unseasonal during life. Thetis also describes him as unseasonal in her lament when she recounts ὁ δ’ ἀνέδραμεν ἔρνεϊ ἴσος “and he shot up like a sapling” (*Iliad* XVIII.56), comparing Achilles to a young shoot who has not yet reached maturity. However, it is not only this unseasonality which defines him but also his shift from unseasonal to seasonal. Achilles described himself as truly short-lived when asking Thetis for a favor from Zeus, ἐπεὶ μ’ ἔτεκές γε μινυθιάδιόν (*Iliad* I.352), and repeatedly shows himself to be quite aware of his impending death, such as when he states τέθναθι. κῆρα δ’ ἐγὼ τότε δέξομαι, ὁππότε κεν δὴ Ζεὺς ἐθέληι τελέσαι ἢ δ’ ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι (*Iliad* XXII.365-6) after slaying Hector. He is always looking to his moment of death and moves through time towards it. Thetis also refers to Achilles as singularly short-lived several times: αἴσα μίνυθιά περ, οὐ τι μάλα δὴν (*Iliad* I.416), τ’ ὠκύμορος (*Iliad* I.417), and μοι υἱόν, ὃς ὠκυμορώτατος ἄλλων ἔπλετ’ (*Iliad* I.505-6). In these instances, Thetis uniquely characterizes Achilles as having a brief αἴσα and as “swiftly fated”, equating his destiny with his life span.⁴ His certain looming mortality is a great thematic focus in the story and it defines his legacy. Achilles is marked as a hero because of his unseasonality but a great emphasis is also placed on his shift to seasonality, represented as his moment of death and his crossing of the threshold between life and death. This is representative of the Greek concept of masculinity; active change, temporal transience, movement through time, and a definitive end to his story. Achilles moves through time, through his unseasonality, to the ultimate transitional experience.

Helen is equally unseasonal, but it is portrayed in a different way. When replying to a request by Priam, she makes sure to include ὡς ὄφελεν θάνατός μοι ἀδεῖν κακός, ὁππότε δεῦρο υἱεῖ σῶι ἐπόμην “and would that evil death had pleased me, at the time when I followed your son here” (*Iliad* III.173-4). When speaking with Hector, she opens with a lengthier but similar statement: ὡς μ’ ὄφελ’ ἦματι τῶι, ὅτε με πρῶτον τέκε μήτηρ, οἴχεσθαι προφέρουσα κακὴ ἀνέμοιο θύελλα εἰς ὄρος ἢ ἐς κῦμα πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης, ἔνθά με κῦμ’ ἀπόερσε πάρος τάδε ἔργα γενέσθαι (*Iliad* VI.345-8). And when lamenting at Hector’s funeral, she includes ὡς πρὶν ὄφελλον ὀλέσθαι “would that I had died before” (*Iliad* XXIV.764). Helen is untimely because her moment of death should have already arrived. She is only seasonal at her moment of death but the proper moment, whether the moment she followed Paris to Troy or the moment she was born, has passed. It is also known that, regardless of the outcome of the Trojan War, Helen’s life will be safe since she is the prize they are all fighting for. As a result, the moment where she transitions from life to death is not visible in either the past and future. So Helen remains, out of

³ Nagy 2013:32

⁴ Slatkin 1991:35-7

season and out of time, with a constant death wish that she cannot make progress towards. Like Achilles, Helen characterizes herself in terms of her moment of death. Unlike him, who looks to and moves towards it, Helen stands still in time and is unable to move from her position between seasonality and unseasonality. She is more like Penelope, endlessly raveling and unraveling in a prolonged suspension. These are the markers of the feminine in ancient Greece; an unchanging position even as time changes, the standing over a threshold, and an ambiguous end. She cannot cross the threshold from life to death and so remains unresolved and unseasonal.

The second heroic characteristic, that the hero is extreme, is the vaguest one. There are multitudinous ways in which Helen and Achilles epitomize the extremes of humanity but we will only look at their characterizations in relation with two spectrums: gender and morality.

Helen has a unique locution that blurs the lines between genders. One way this can be seen is how she, more often than any other character in the *Iliad*, employs the ὄφελλον phrase which is typically used by either a mourning widow or a threatened hero to express bitter despair.⁵ For instance, Andromache laments ὡς μὴ ὄφελλε τεκέσθαι (*Iliad* XXII.481) after learning of Hector's death. A hero often uses this phrase as a persuasive tactic, like when Odysseus uses it to try and gain sympathy in *Odyssey* Book 5. Helen, however, uses the ὄφελλον phrase in neither of these contexts. She sometimes uses it in a mourning context but only to communicate a hero's concern for κλέος. For instance, when replying to Priam's questions concerning Achaean warriors, Helen inserts elegiac comments on her own life into her responses. Her wish that she had died (*Iliad* III.173-6), which uses the ὄφελλον phrase, shows her attention to and concern for her reputation, while her thought of whether her brothers are absent due to reproaches against her (*Iliad* III.136-42) shows that she is aware of how her reputation affects the lives of others. In her lament for Hector, a style of speech typically used by women, Helen's speech also shows an awareness of her κλέος that is more common for a warrior. She opens with a ὄφελλον phrase before remarking about how Hector never spoke ill of her and would protect her from others who did (*Iliad* XXIV.764-75). In other words, she mourns for Hector (in part) because he protected her reputation. Other times, Helen uses the ὄφελλον phrase to communicate scorn in a domestic setting. For example, she uses it when insulting Paris in their bedroom (*Iliad* III.428-36), employing additional derogatory language that is usually used by warriors on the battlefield. Indeed Hector's earlier insult of Paris, αἴθ' ὄφελες ἄγονός τ' ἔμεναι ἄγαμός τ' ἀπολέσθαι... (*Iliad* III.39-58), has several parallels with Helen's, such as the ὄφελλον phrase and subject matter.⁶ It is clear that her style of speech mixes elements from what is traditionally thought of as belonging to men or to women. She expresses awareness of her κλέος using mourning diction, inserts elegiac language when discussing warriors, and aggressively reproaches Paris in the bedroom. She does not shift between male and female

⁵ Worman 2001:153-5

⁶ Worman 2001:157-8

elements because they are inseparable from each other in her; she stands still holding both at once.

Achilles, on the other hand, moves between intense presentations of either gender. The *Achilleid* describes the story of how Thetis hid Achilles at Skyros to protect him from his inevitable death at Troy. He was disguised as a maiden and was wholly accepted as one. On the other hand, in the *Iliad* Achilles is characterized as the most terrifying warrior of all, epitomized when Hephaestus crafts new armor for him in Book 18 which the other warriors cannot even bear to look at (*Iliad* XIX.14-5). Achilles also freely engages in the boasting and threats that warriors engage in on the battlefield and goes to almost immoral extremes. For example, his last words to and treatment of Lykaon were in such violation of accepted morals that they provoked the river Scamander itself to intervene in vengeance, almost causing the plotline to careen out of control (*Iliad* XXI.122-283). Conversely, when Achilles learns of Patroklos' death, he defiles himself with black ash and tears at his hair like a mourning widow (*Iliad* XVIII.23-7). At the funeral in Book 23, Achilles takes care of Patroklos' body himself and leads the lamentations, taking responsibilities that are usually appointed to women. In his relation to gender, he is again defined by intense changes and movement through transitory stages.

Helen and Achilles also typify the duality of good and evil, or, more precisely, the duality of καλός and κακός. Beauty and goodness are often equated in ancient Greek thought, seen in how καλός means both “beautiful” and “noble”. Similarly, ugliness and evilness are often equated, with κακός meaning both “evil” and “hideous”. Helen is associated with Pandora, the first woman, who was defined by her simultaneous outward loveliness and inward perversity. It is clear that Helen is also perceived this way, for when she arrives at the Scaean gates the elder men say αἰνῶς ἀθανάτησι θεῆς εἰς ὄπα ἔοικεν (*Iliad* III.159), comparing her beauty to the goddesses, while at the same time saying she is ἡμῖν τεκέεσσι τ' ὀπίσσω πῆμα λίποιτο “a bane to us and our children after” (*Iliad* III.160). Homeric poetry has a bipolarity between praise and blame, conferring both to heroes, and Helen certainly embodies this.⁷ The beauty of both Pandora and Helen is most emphasized when they are being deceptive, and indeed they often accomplish their deceptions through their beauty. Pandora uses her allure to manipulate Epimetheus to ignore his brother's advice and accept her as his wife and Helen does the same to seduce Paris, both when they first met and in Book 3 of the *Iliad*. Helen's beauty is also the cause of the Trojan War itself and the reason for such great devastation. Her beauty is what makes her a bane, her allure is the cause of the misfortune she brings, and so her goodness and her evilness are impossible to separate. Helen stands on the threshold between good and evil. κακός also means “powerless” and she is indeed so; she is powerless against Paris, against Aphrodite, against the Trojans, against the Greeks. She causes great devastation to all but it was done so unintentionally and passively, and she is powerless to end it. As shown earlier, she constantly wishes she had already died because there is nothing she can do to change the situation that she has caused. That being so, she represents another combination of extremes for

⁷Nagy 1979:222

she is threatening to all, causing ruin to both Greeks and Trojans, while simultaneously being powerless to all. Everyone perceives her in the same, unchanging way; she is the most beautiful, the most evil, the most threatening, and the most powerless to all. This perception of her is shared by all and does not change with time. Not only is the way she represents the duality of good and evil an embodiment of femininity, but so is her relationship with others because of it.

Achilles also embodies καλός and κακός and, just as Helen stands between the two, he shifts intensely from one to the other. He is known as the best of the Achaeans and will sporadically prove his superiority in war and speech, such as with his ἀριστεία in Book 21 and with his verbal duel with the embassy in Book 9. At other times he is hated and thought to be vile, and he mocks this while marshaling his troops for Patroklos to lead (*Iliad* XVI.203-6). He is sometimes cursed by the entire Greek army and sometimes exalted by them, and their perception of him swings between loved and hated, good and evil. Similar to Helen, Achilles is κάλλιστος while being equally capable of bringing the greatest κακός. Unlike her, the opinions of others about him do not always agree. Achilles' potential for destruction shifts from the Trojans (the beginning of the *Iliad*) to the Greeks (when he refuses to fight) to the Trojans (when he returns to the war) to Zeus (when he repeatedly dishonors Hector's body). He is always a great threat but to who he is threatening is always changing. And he is also variously powerless; he is in turn powerless against the actions of Agamemnon, Patroklos, Apollo, Zeus, Scamander, and so on, but never all at once. His relationships with everyone are varied and constantly shifting, unstable and continuously transitioning.

Continuing to the third characteristic of heroes, it is clear that the goddess Helen is most like and most antagonistic toward is Aphrodite. The most evident similarity is beauty; the concept of female beauty is closely connected with the goddess and she is often used as an object of comparison for mortal women while Helen is also known for her singular beauty, being, as Christopher Marlowe said, "the face that launch'd a thousand ships". Like Pandora, Aphrodite and Helen are both known for their duality of beauty and deception with their power being linked to their beauty. It was earlier seen that Helen participated in deception; Aphrodite is equally well known for her ability to manipulate. In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, it is said that there are only three [women] who Aphrodite cannot πεπιθεῖν φρένας οὐδ' ἀπατῆσαι (7), suggesting that she freely persuades or deceives the hearts of all others. The *Hymn* proceeds to tell how Aphrodite seduces the shepherd Anchises with a disguise and treacherous visual and olfactory aids. In the *Iliad*, Aphrodite assists Hera in the similar seduction of Zeus. There are several parallels in how these seductions are told,⁸ but most relevant is how seduction is again portrayed as a deception. Whenever Hera speaks to Zeus, she does so δολοφρονέουσα "devising a deception" (*Iliad* XIV.300, 329) and Zeus later describes her actions as σὸς δόλος "her deception" (*Iliad* XV.14). Similar language is used in both the deception of Zeus and the seduction of Paris by Helen,⁹ where Aphrodite acts through Helen in a similar way to accomplish

⁸ Bergren 2008:172-3

⁹ Bergren 2008:174

a similar goal (namely to overwhelm Paris with sexual desire). The antagonism between Helen and Aphrodite is also exemplified in this scene when Helen accuses Aphrodite of speaking δολοφρονέουσα (*Iliad* III.405), trying με...ἠπεροπεύειν (*Iliad* III.399), to now seduce and deceive Helen's heart. She refuses to follow Aphrodite's command until the goddess follows up with threats of hating her terribly and devising a plan where Helen κακὸν οἶτον ὄληται "will perish in an evil fate" (*Iliad* III.417). Thus, Helen and Aphrodite's relationship fulfills the third heroic requirement. There are other relevant similarities between the two. Both are held apart from those in their realm in some way; Athena tells Diomedes that Aphrodite is the only one who can be wounded by a mortal (*Iliad* III.131-2) and the other gods agree that Aphrodite alone does not belong in and should not interfere in war (*Iliad* III.428-30), while Helen notes the near ubiquitous hatred from the Trojans and how πάντες...με πεφρίκασιν "all shudder at me" (*Iliad* XXIV.775). They also both share dawn goddess motifs, such as associations with veils and concealment and being agents that bring terrible consequences to men while not being affected by those consequences themselves.¹⁰ Aphrodite is a descendant of the Indo-European dawn goddess and thus has associations with controlling time and being immortal while the mortal men she loves, like Anchises, are doomed to die. Helen's great beauty is also known for bringing great destruction to many while she herself is never in danger of such ruin. They are similarly isolated and bounded, changeless and standing outside of time, and they typify the female duality of beauty and deception. Helen and Aphrodite are epitomes of the ancient Greek concept of femininity.

Nagy asserts that Achilles is most like and most antagonistic towards Apollo because they have similar physical and mental attributes, such as appearance and associations with song, the lyre, and κλέος.¹¹ There are also many parallels between their wraths like, for example, how they both begin with divine anger directed at Agamemnon for the theft of a woman (Chryseis and Briseis, respectively) and how the conclusion of Apollo's wrath in Book 1 echoes the conclusion of Achilles' wrath in Book 24.¹² The antagonism between them is clear, for Apollo is the defender of the city which Achilles is trying to take as well as the killer of Achilles' ritual substitute, Patroklos, which foreshadows Apollo killing Achilles himself. It is also clear that whenever Apollo interferes, he pushes Achilles closer to his fate. The plague Apollo caused in Book 1 provoked the argument with Agamemnon, causing Achilles' ensuing sulk and request to Thetis; Apollo's assistance to Hector in Book 15 led Achilles to send Patroklos into battle; Apollo's actions were a direct cause of Patroklos' death and therefore Achilles return to the battlefield; and so on. Apollo's divine interference causes a shift in Achilles that pushes him nearer and nearer to his eventual doom. So Apollo and Achilles are primarily alike because they shift in a similar way between clearly defined beginnings and ends (μῆνις "wrath" to forgiveness), and they are primarily antagonistic because Apollo is a catalyst and the active

¹⁰ Slatkin 1991:28-30

¹¹ Nagy 2013:142-4

¹² Rabel 1990:432-3

cause of Achilles' crossing of the threshold between life and death. The god emphasizes the change and the transience of Achilles, thus emphasizing the masculine.

So we see that the behaviors of both Helen and Achilles exemplify that of the hero. So why is Helen not recognized as one? Helen represents temporal and physical stability, which aligns with the Iliadic theme of the stability of the divine order. Achilles represents a potential for disruption and the Iliadic theme of the mutability of the human order. Helen's self-blame imitates the *Iliad* questioning its own validity, and so she resembles the self-reflection of the epic.¹³ Achilles's evolution imitates the evolution of the *Iliad*, representing the growth of the idea of the hero in epic.¹⁴ They are two sides of the same heroic coin, so why are they not equally received as heroes? It is known that the ancient Greeks thought of woman more as objects that signified status and wealth, valued somewhere between an oxen and a bar of gold, than as autonomous humans. Perhaps a woman could never be seen as worthy. If Helen was a man, would she be recognized as a hero?

The answer is no. Helen is not recognized as a hero not because she is a woman, but because her actions represent femininity. Her actions would not be recognized as heroic even if she was a man because only actions representative of masculinity are considered heroic by a patriarchal society. A woman displaying masculine attributes will be lauded while a man displaying feminine attributes will be shamed. Marking a woman like Penthesilea as a hero would not be revolutionary because it would simply be acknowledging that a woman has fulfilled the path of the hero with the desirable masculine traits or behaviors. Marking Helen as a hero, however, would indicate a change in how we think of femininity in relation to masculinity because it would demonstrate recognition of feminine traits as also heroic. As it stands, it is impossible for Helen to complete the ritualized path of the hero in the prescribed way because people expect heroism to be delivered via masculinity. She epitomizes feminine relationships with time and space instead of masculine ones and therefore her actions, relationships, characterizations, and thematic roles are automatically valued less. Both Helen and Achilles are heroes. Helen stands on a threshold; Achilles moves. We observe only motion.

There is an interesting analogy to consider. In archaic Greek, the written word was often associated with femininity and the spoken word with masculinity. For example, there is a riddle attributed to Sappho which says, "What creature is it that is female in nature and hides in its womb unborn children who, although they are voiceless, speak to people far away?" (*Antiphanes Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta* fr.196). She answers that it is a written note whose children are the letters of the alphabet. This characterization of the written word as feminine is also seen in how female κλέος is represented as woven objects and male κλέος as song. Furthermore, the written word was often seen as inferior to the spoken. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, he discredits the written word by asserting that it is only an image and merely the appearance of wisdom instead

¹³ Tsagalis 2008

¹⁴ Slatkin 1991:40

of the real thing. He describes writing as only a silent, unchanging symbol of the living, breathing discourse. The connection between the written and the feminine is clear; they are both static, constant, and suspended, standing outside of time. The written is seen as inferior to the spoken word, which is like the masculine because it is dynamic, changing, and moving through time. Even in the current era, phonocentrism is still a relatively popular idea. Another more modern analogy is the relationship between translation and source text. Yevgeny Yevtushenko says, "Translation is like a woman. If it is beautiful, it is not faithful. If it is faithful, it is most certainly not beautiful". Translation is associated with the feminine and is valued either for its dependency and inability to change on its own accord or for its aesthetic worth. It is constant, simply a snapshot of the original source and suspended at one point in time. Written texts or translations are seen as secondary and inferior to spoken word or source texts because they are perceived as a mere representation, derivation, or symbol of the real thing. It is easy to see the connection between this characterization and that of the feminine. But this point of view is plainly incorrect; writing, translation, and the feminine are not representations of speaking, the reference, or the masculine. The former are just a different way of representing the same thing that the latter are representing, and they each have a life of their own. Translations are not required to be faithful to the source text and exist beyond its control, writing systems and spoken language are connected yet autonomous mediums of human communication, and women are not a lesser derivation of men. They are all simply two balanced parts of the larger whole. Achieving this mindset is not an unimaginable goal, for our society does not unconditionally devalue femininity and everything associated with it. For example, Plato's *Phaedrus* is a written dialogue that ends by discrediting written dialogues¹⁵ and the majority of modern people only know Homeric epic through a written translation. Markers of masculinity like change and dynamicity have always been admired and prioritized throughout human history; feminine attributes like consistency and stability deserve to be equally valued.

¹⁵ Carson 1986:165-7

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