

# Helen in the *Iliad*

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THE COMPARATIVE METHOD in Homeric criticism raises more problems than it solves.<sup>1</sup> We have learned, and gratefully, how wrong it is to apply to Homer the concepts and criteria that we are accustomed to apply to written literature; we are beginning to understand how each performance, each song of Homer could be rooted in a long tradition and unique at the same time; and yet, there remains something frustrating in the results of the work of Milman Parry and his student, Albert Lord. Perhaps we feel baffled because we cannot, after Parry, exercise our accustomed intuition on a Homeric formula or simile or theme; or perhaps we expected, somehow, to learn more about Homer than the comparative method was designed to permit.

<sup>1</sup> Our questions about Homer have been given a new direction by the epoch-making work of Milman Parry (for whose bibliography see A. B. Lord, "Homer, Parry, and Huso," *AJA* 52 (1948) 34-44). As discussed by Lord, *op.cit.*, by J. A. Notopoulos, "Mnemosyne in Oral Literature," *TAPA* 69 (1938) 465-93, and by C. M. Bowra, "The Comparative Study of Homer," *AJA* 54 (1950) 184-92, the main contribution of the comparative method to Homeric criticism seems negative: we have learned not to read Homer as we would Vergil. But where do we go from here? On the one hand, E. Howald, *Der Dichter der Ilias* (Zürich 1946), and W. Schadewaldt, *Von Homers Welt und Werk*, ed. 3 (Stuttgart 1959), continue, with no mention of Parry, to stress the excellence of certain very "Homeric" passages, like the farewell of Hector and Andromache; on the other hand, Parry's friend and disciple, A. B. Lord, seems unable in his lucid book, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass. 1960), to make any serious qualitative distinction between Homer's work and that of the most competent Serbian singers of modern times; G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, England 1962), gives no better account of Homer's originality (a misleading word, to be sure); and C. M. Bowra simply reviews the new ground rules (after Parry) in A. J. B. Wace and F. H. Stubbings, *A Companion to Homer* (London 1962). Only C. H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass. 1958), seems adequately to pose the problem of modern Homeric criticism. Seeking anew the unity of the *Iliad*, he finds its track "in the logic of imagery, in the consistency of poetic conception, and in the formal structure" (p. 2); or again, partly in character, partly in "its own unity of structure, textual or imagistic consistency, and the power or finesse of the development of formulaic speech" (p. 12). In his discussion of presentational symbolism (in chapter VI), Whitman justifies the artistic possibilities of oral epic; but Homer's uniqueness seems to remain more in his thought, which Whitman examines through the gods, Achilles' character, and supporting imagery. The present investigation moves inwards, from elements of the artistry of the *Iliad* towards the heroic idea at its center.

Since we cannot account for Homer's genius in any easy or mechanical fashion, it remains for each critic to ask, from his arbitrarily chosen vantage point, the same basic question: what is the "Homeric consciousness" and where can it be found? Having chosen Helen as a focal character for this investigation, I shall move from negative to positive: from the formulas and themes out of which the episodes involving Helen are constructed, to her personality, both as seen throughout the *Iliad* and as concentrated in her confrontation with Aphrodite in Book 3.

## I

The two principal characteristics of oral composition are the singer's use of formulas and of themes. The first, whether they take the form of phrases, lines, or groups of lines, are his building blocks; some very stable through constant use, others less stable, or formed by analogy according to the dictates of metre, syntax, and the psychological moment. These formulas give the singer the security that makes possible the easy and regular flow of language so highly praised by Matthew Arnold.

Most of the formulas used to describe Helen are generic and so, according to Parry, must not be thought to characterize her in particular.<sup>2</sup> Her own radiance emanates from what she says and does, and not from a phrase like *διὰ γυναικῶν*, which would suit any heroine in the nominative case at the end of an hexameter line. For Alcestis too is called *διὰ γυναικῶν*; and so might any other heroine be called, just as any goddess may be referred to as *διὰ θεάων*, or any phrase may be "feathered," not because of its unusual burden of wit, but simply because it is undesirable to re-name the speaker. One cannot say, then, that such phrases as *Ἑλένη λευκωλένω* or the impressive *ικέλη χρυσέη Ἀφροδίτη* contribute to our understanding of Helen. To an "indifferent" audience they have lost all particular relevance, although a more general fragrance lingers—the fragrance of the godlike world of heroic action. The same restriction of meaning holds for Helen's dress, *νεκταρέου ἔανοῦ*. In Parry's terms, the adjectives are merely functional and decorative, however much their use may reflect the unconscious assumption that every hero or heroine is somehow touched by divinity.

<sup>2</sup> The following discussion of Homer's epithets is based on M. Parry, *L'Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère* (Paris 1928) 118–20.

More consciously, Homer seems aware that in descriptions, a little goes a long way. The most that is said directly of Helen is that “she is terribly like the immortal goddesses to look upon.” If we compare a description of Hurrai in the Ugaritic epic of Kret,<sup>3</sup>

Whose beauty is like Anath’s beauty,  
whose loveliness is like Astarte’s loveliness,  
whose brows are lapis lazuli,  
whose eyes are bowls of marble,

we realize that no careful amassing of descriptive adjectives could match Homer’s indirection of praise through the statement of the weary elders. This restraint and tact must be credited to Homer, not to his material.

We must postpone consideration of the value of the formulas ‘*Ελένη Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα* and ‘*Ελένην εὐπατέρειαν*. Parry argues that these special epithets, like the generic epithets, have no particular significance in the poem. But although one cannot dispute what Parry calls their non-particularity, one might still claim, after looking further at Helen and the scenes in which she appears, that these epithets become especially right in context, that the life in them is somehow renewed.

Homer’s themes are “elements of production” like the formulas and no more original. Lord defines them as “groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song.”<sup>4</sup> Such would include the princess on the wall (*Iliad* 3.161–244), the princess seduced or recovered (3.383–447), the embassy and duel on her behalf (7.345–78), and the princess appealing to her brother and mourning for him dead (6.344–56, 24.762–75). Although there are scattered references to Helen throughout the *Iliad*, she appears principally in Books 3–7, a section largely devoted to the Trojan past, where the singer seems intentionally to relate the Achilles story to the larger context of the Trojan War and, at the same time, to surrender as usual to the attraction of a variety of traditional themes impinging

<sup>3</sup> The parallel between the rape of Helen and that of Hurrai in the Ugaritic Tale of Kret (not to mention the Hebrew “princess” Sara) is discussed by C. H. Gordon, *Before the Bible* (New York 1962), especially pp. 142–43, 270. The motif is quite ordinary (see Kirk, *op.cit.* [*supra* n.1] 107); what seems important is the difference between the women concerned.

<sup>4</sup> See Lord, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 68, 72–73.

upon his attention.<sup>5</sup> His control and manipulation of these themes, whatever their inspiration, is a great part of his total achievement.

Take for example some obvious Ur-Helens. There is the princess on the wall, apparently a common figure in the complex tradition of Oriental siege-stories.<sup>6</sup> Menelaus was not the first hero to besiege a town and regain a wife. The ritual nature of Priam's questioning and Helen's answering in 3.161-244 suggests that the recognition of her former kinsmen (friends, suitors) by the princess on the wall may customarily have preceded her recovery. Helen's seduction by Aphrodite and Paris is surely also a reflection, be it of the rape of the princess, or of her recovery by husband or lover, whether through disguise and trickery (here transferred to Aphrodite), or through the formalities of embassy and duel. More familiar to the English-speaking world, through the English and Scottish border ballads, are the traditional themes reflected in Books 6 and 24, the attempt of mother, sister and wife to stay the hero from his fated purpose, and the mourning of the dead hero by the same female group.<sup>7</sup> In both scenes involving Hector, Helen replaces the more usual sister. The folk-tale quality of both scenes betrays their antiquity, the threefold pattern of appeal, refusal, and redirection in Book 6, and the threefold lament in Book 24.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. A. Notopoulos, "Continuity and Interconnexion in Composition," *TAPA* 82 (1951) 91-95, on the use of retrospection to tie the present to the past, to stimulate the memories of the audience, and to help characterization; also G. E. Duckworth, *Foreshadowing and Suspense in the Epics of Homer, Apollonius, and Vergil* (Princeton 1933) 66, on the dramatic uses of retardation. On the unconscious side, Lord, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 94, argues that "the theme in oral poetry exists at one and the same time for itself and for the whole song," and that (p. 97) a familiar theme may be displaced from its usual setting and "submerged," rising elsewhere in the story.

<sup>6</sup> T. B. L. Webster, *From Mycenae to Homer* (London 1958) 58-59, notes that the storming of a citadel is portrayed on a silver vase from the shaft-graves (*S.G.* pl. 122) and on fragments of fourteenth century frescoes of the Megaron at Mycenae. He suggests (p. 61) that the Mycenaean borrowed the story from the Minoans, mixing history and legend. For the Oriental recovered bride of legend, he cites (p. 86; and see *supra* n.3) the Ugaritic Kret, who besieged a town and recovered a wife (not necessarily the one lost). The storming of the Achaean wall in the *Iliad*, Webster argues (pp. 252-53), recalls a successful siege.

<sup>7</sup> Professor A. P. Hudson kindly referred me to "The Braes of Yarrow" (the plea to the lover) and "Bonnie James Campbell" (the lament) in H. C. Sargent and G. L. Kittredge, *English and Scottish Border Ballads* (Boston 1904) nos. 210 and 214 (only the wife appears in the former poem).

<sup>8</sup> G. M. Calhoun, "Homer's Gods—Myth and Märchen," *AJP* 60 (1939) 19, notes the use of the triad as a folk-motif; but Webster (*supra* n.6) 250, may be right in suggesting that "the rising ride of womanly affection" which surrounds Hector was influenced by the Meleager

What in these traditional scenes can be called “Homeric”? On the simplest level, their complex elaboration reveals an experienced and gifted singer. Consider the threefold appeal to Hector. Its basic structure is obvious:<sup>9</sup>

Appeal by mother (245–62), refusal of appeal (264–68), redirection of mother (269–79);

Appeal by sister (344–58), refusal of appeal (360–62), redirection of sister (363–64);

Appeal by wife (407–39), refusal of appeal (440–65, 486–89), redirection of wife (490–93).

Within this ready framework the singer has included character contrast (Paris-Helen and Hector-Andromache), deceived hope and faith (the appeal to Athena), foreboding and premature lamentation, and an unequalled symbolic juxtaposition of love and honor, war and peace (the babe, the helmet, the farewell to Andromache). By contrasting this last Farewell with the relatively incomplete first two, and all three with their simple folk-tale origin, we gain a partial measure of Homer’s achievement.<sup>10</sup>

Unelaborated, these themes would have been epic common-places; elaborated without restraint, they would have been inartistic. But Homer exercises control. Every theme is psychologically in place. The poet may not have cared about time; but if Helen surveys the Greek forces in the tenth year of the war, it is because the absence of Achilles permits a respite not otherwise possible. Like the truce itself, the spears fixed in the earth, the duel of Paris and Menelaus, and the building of the wall and ditch, the View from the Gate has been transferred from the first year of a short war to a significant moment in a long one.<sup>11</sup> Far from being logically incongruous, the static picture

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story. If so, a plea to go into battle (see Howald, *op.cit.* [*supra n.1*], 118ff) would ironically be replaced by a plea *not* to go into battle.

<sup>9</sup> Compare a pattern of entrance-rebuking-redirection in the *Odyssey* discussed by Lord, *op.cit.* (*supra n.1*) 170.

<sup>10</sup> To see Homer against this folk-background may be speculative, but to measure him against hypothetical reconstructions of earlier songs is too narrowing. Thus W. Schade-waltdt, *op.cit.* (*supra n.1*) 171, derives Achilles’ weapons from Memnon’s, but there is no reason why Memnon should have possessed the only special shield before Achilles.

<sup>11</sup> D. L. Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad* (Berkeley 1959) 316–21, is troubled by the wall built in the tenth year (*cf.* Thucyd. 1.11). But Homer’s wall-building, like the other events in Books 3–7, recalls earlier years; as well, it is related psychologically to Achilles’ withdrawal, as he himself points out in 9.348–55. Perhaps Thucydides sensed that the building of the wall in the tenth year reflected an earlier time.

has ironic value, since it reflects a delusion that the first part of the Plan of Zeus might reach permanence. So, too, the duel of Paris and Menelaus and the “seduction” of Helen depend upon the false equilibrium temporarily provided by Achilles’ absence. The duel will be unavailing, the truce abortive, the wall insufficient. The transfer of Helen once more to the bed of Paris marks the failure of peace hopes just as decisively as the breaking of Paris’ chin-strap in the hands of Menelaus.

Less obvious signs of the control exercised by Homer are his subordination and transference of themes. Helen’s rape has become the very paradigm of bride-stealing, but there were other Lochinvars before Paris. Not surprisingly, then, this entertaining theme dominates Homer’s Trojan epic—but not in the form of stealing Helen. There are, to be sure, scattered references to Paris’ theft of Helen and her formulaically accompanying *κτήματα*.<sup>12</sup> Menelaus emphasizes the idea of vengeance (*τίνω, τίσις*) in an appeal to Zeus Xenios which is ignored, at least temporarily, for the sake of Achilles’ *τιμή*. Hector’s criticism of Paris, and Helen’s reproaches to her lover and to herself, show how much, in their minds, the initial wrong of violated hospitality has been compounded by the lovers’ responsibility for the Trojan War. Generally, however, this particular instance of bride-stealing has been relegated to the background, while the theme itself is transferred to the central story of Achilles.<sup>13</sup> It is now the “bedmate,” Briseis, who is stolen, and payment for her is exacted in the form of Agamemnon’s repentance and Zeus-sent honor for Achilles. The comparison between Helen’s rape and that of Briseis is felt strongly throughout the *Iliad*.<sup>14</sup> At one point Achilles even makes it explicit (9.335–43):

τοῖσι μὲν ἔμπεδα κείται, ἐμεῦ δ’ ἀπο μούνου Ἀχαιῶν  
εἴλετ’, ἔχει δ’ ἄλοχον θυμαρέα· τῆι παριαύων  
τερπέσθω. τί δὲ δεῖ πολεμιζέμεναι Τρώεσσι  
Ἀργείους; τί δὲ λαὸν ἀνήγαγεν ἐνθάδ’ ἀγείρας

<sup>12</sup> References to Helen (and Paris) as causing the war are: 2.160–62, 355–56, 3.351–54, 365–68, 5.59–68, 19.324–25, and 24.28–30 (the choice of Paris).

<sup>13</sup> Thus Lord, *op.cit.*, (*supra* n.1) 190, says, “The pattern of the wrath is really a pattern of bride-stealing and rescue.” C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London 1952) 316–21, shows how different versions of a story may be used as separate episodes (doubling of themes) or combined in the same poem, for events may be detached from one character and connected with another.

<sup>14</sup> Note that Briseis is kept against Nestor’s advice (9.107–8), as is Helen against Antenor’s; and Patroclus’ kindness to Briseis (19.287–300) resembles Hector’s to Helen (24.762–75).

Ἄτρεΐδης; ἢ οὐχ Ἑλένης ἔνεκ ἠγκόμοιο;  
 ἢ μούνοι φιλέουσ' ἀλόχους μερόπων ἀνθρώπων  
 Ἄτρεΐδαι;

Characteristic of the *Iliad* is the tragic turn that the vengeance takes. In simpler narratives, as reflected in the *Iliupersis* and *Little Iliad*, the stolen bride was returned and peace thus concluded.<sup>15</sup> In the *Iliad*, Helen is not restored. All attempts to return her and the possessions prove futile. In *Iliad* 3 she is “returned,” ironically, to Paris’ bed. Briseis, her counterpart, is restored to Achilles untouched, but her restoration is powerless to soften Achilles’ wrath or to ward off the destruction threatening Achaeans and Trojans alike.

The theme of the embassy undergoes a similar development. There are various references to the mission of Odysseus and Menelaus to win Helen back and its frustration by Paris’ bribing of certain Trojans.<sup>16</sup> So strong, however, is the attraction of this “submerged” theme for the poet of the *Iliad* that he introduces it anew into Book 7, where Antenor’s proposal to return Helen and the possessions is challenged by Paris (“If you’re serious the gods have destroyed your wits!”) and tacitly refused by Priam. The bareness of detail in this scene suggests its antiquity; so does Paris’ surprising show of strength.<sup>17</sup> By failing to elaborate this theme here, Homer enables the embassy to Achilles in Book 9 to remain unique. The chief embassy, like the chief instance of bride-stealing, is transferred to the central story of Achilles, to which the fortunes of Helen and Paris are made peripheral.

To follow one last theme: like the embassy to the Trojans, the personal combat of Menelaus and Paris must have figured prominently in many renditions of the Helen song. In the *Iliad* it serves to characterize Helen, Paris, and Menelaus, as well as to underline the inevitability of the war; but it is shunted into a place of little importance in Books 3–7, the better to safeguard the climactic effect of the combat between Hector and Achilles. Once more the story of Helen embellishes but does not clash with the story of Achilles.

<sup>15</sup> See the discussion by Bethe, *RE* 7 (1912) s.v. HELENE, 2832.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Iliad* 3.205–6, 11.123–25 (Antimachus bribed with Alexander’s gold not to let Helen be restored), and 7.345–78.

<sup>17</sup> Thus J. A. Scott, “Paris and Hector in Tradition and in Homer,” *CP* 8 (1913) 163, asked, though a good unitarian, why Paris should still be influential in 7.137 after his notorious failure in the duel.

Structurally, then, all the recurrent themes associated with Helen (bride-stealing, embassy, and combat) are carefully controlled, subordinated to the story of Achilles, and even transformed in that story. This achievement in itself reveals the *Iliad* master, the singer who exercises almost unwavering control over his long and involved tale. But our appreciation of the figure of Helen goes further, and through it, our appreciation of Homer.

Two general remarks may be helpful here. First, that throughout the *Iliad*, through diversity of situation—the moment of calm and contemplation in the midst of turmoil, the touching appeal to Hector to rest from his tragic destiny, the lament after that destiny has come to pass—we have one and the same Helen. And second, that she is human. Rachel Bernal's paradoxical statement, that of all the figures of the poem she is the severest, the most austere,<sup>18</sup> serves nicely to dispel misty ideas of Helen as the "eternal feminine," beautiful, lightminded, irresponsible. Helen is no goddess (although she was worshipped in Mycenaean times and even later);<sup>19</sup> and although she is a daughter of Zeus, the epithet *κούρη Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο* (3.426) becomes in its context a kind of mockery of her state.

Helen is distinguished in the *Iliad* not for inspiring passion, but for experiencing it. When we first meet her in *Iliad* 3, Iris has just "cast upon her spirit sweet yearning for her former husband and city and her parents." There is no conflict here between Helen's self-control and her passion, no return to reason;<sup>20</sup> Iris simply provides a counter impulse, a longing for home and its associations that for the time obliterates the attraction of Paris. Iris' prompting not only serves to motivate Helen's ascent to the wall and her talk with Priam; it renews in her that tragic awareness, seen throughout the *Iliad*, of her loneliness and her shame, with which is connected her sensitivity to the feelings of other people, their kindness to her or their unkindness.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> R. Bernal, *On the Iliad*, trans. by M. McCarthy (The Bollingen Series, Pantheon Books, 1947) 61–69.

<sup>19</sup> On Helen's origins, see Bethe *op.cit.* (*supra* n.15), 2824–27; M. P. Nilsson, *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology* (Berkeley 1932) 73–75; and J. Alsina Clota, "Helena di Troja," *Helmantica* 8 (1957) 376–78.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. B. Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Harper's Torchbooks, 1960) 14, 19. A man may oppose his *θυμός*, but there is "no genuine dialogue of the soul with itself."

<sup>21</sup> For Helen's shame, see *Iliad* 3.173–6, 180, 242, 404, 406–12, 428–36, 6.343–46, 356. In the *Kupria* (fr. 6 Kinkel), Helen was the daughter of Nemesis.

Whatever their structural place in the plot or their derivation from traditional motifs of storytelling, all Helen's appearances in the *Iliad* show some facet of this sensitivity. Although, in Book 3, Priam courteously prefaces his questions by absolving her from any blame for the woes of Troy (as, in a different way, the old councilors paid tribute to her godlike beauty by perceiving through it the destiny of Troy, for which she as a person could not be blamed), yet Helen fails to accept the excuse offered. On the contrary, she repents her past, blames her own shamelessness (*κυνώπιδος*) for the woes of Troy, and even disrupts the traditional pattern of questions and answers to dwell once more on her disgraceful action and shameful behavior. Later in Book 3, her feeling of self-reproach reaches such an intensity that she clashes with Aphrodite herself in helpless fury and resentment at the power that will seduce her again to the bed of Paris. Threatened with the full force of men's hatred, she submits to her destiny as though under the strongest physical compulsion. In Book 6, despite her dramatic role as sister, she rails against fate and longs for a lover more understanding than Paris (one who "knew nemesis"). And in Book 24, her grief at Hector's death is intensified by deepening loneliness, for he had given her kindness and understanding amidst the general hatred. She misses his *ἀγανοφροσύνη*, the gentleness of spirit expressed in gentle words, *ἀγανοῖς ἐπέεσσιν*.

The order of the pleaders in Book 6 was Hecuba, Helen, Andromache. By a curious asymmetry, the order of mourners in Book 24 is Andromache, Hecuba, Helen. It is worthwhile asking why Helen is saved for last. But first, more must be said of the scene with Aphrodite, which is far from gentle.

## II

So far we have been examining one aspect of Homer's art: the consistency of his portrayal of Helen, the control with which he weaves different threads of story into the unity of the *Iliad*. Elaboration with economy: these are marks of the master singer; and we are well reminded of that sure control, the rightness of relation between decorative motifs and vase surface, that characterizes the Dipylon Geometric style. But the Dipylon vases are inadequate analogues to the *Iliad*, the excellence of which is more than architectonic. Part of the difference may be seen in a contrast between the figure scenes of the

vases and the more intense dramatic episodes of the poem. The first have value only as they are subordinated to the vase as a whole: the *prothesis*, for example, helps a total pattern to emerge. But in the *Iliad*, as Homer deepens the meaning of a particular scene, transcending the very themes and formulas out of which the scene is composed, he sometimes seems to strike a note of awareness in which is concentrated the total effect produced by the story as a whole.

One such crucial scene is the meeting of Helen with Aphrodite in Book 3. Aphrodite has snatched Paris from battle in a cloud, “easily, as a god may,” and set him down in his sweet-smelling bedchamber. She then goes to call Helen, finds her on the gate, shakes her, and in the guise of a beloved spinning woman, bids her go to her house: for Paris gleams in beauty like a dancer. In the words of invitation we feel the seductiveness of the call, the deep impression it makes on Helen’s spirit. She recognizes the goddess<sup>22</sup> and answers her (395–420):

Ὡς φάτο, τῇ δ’ ἄρα θυμὸν ἐνὶ στήθεσσι ὄριε·  
καὶ ῥ’ ὡς οὖν ἐνόησε θεᾶς περικαλλέα δειρῆν  
στήθεά θ’ ἱμερόεντα καὶ ὄμματα μαρμαίροντα,  
θάμβησέν τ’ ἄρ’ ἔπειτα ἔπος τ’ ἔφατ’ ἔκ τ’ ὀνόμαζε·  
δαιμονίη, τί με ταῦτα λιλαίει ἠπεροπεύειν;  
ἦ πῆ με προτέρω πολίων εὐ ναιομενάων  
ἄξις, ἦ Φρυγίης ἦ Μηονίης ἐρατεινῆς,  
εἴ τίς τοι καὶ κείθι φίλος μερόπων ἀνθρώπων·  
οὐνεκα δὴ νῦν δῖον Ἀλέξανδρον Μενέλαος  
νικήσας ἐθέλει στυγερῆν ἐμὲ οἴκαδ’ ἄγεσθαι,  
τοῦνεκα δὴ νῦν δεῦρο δολοφρονέουσα παρέστης;  
ἦσο παρ’ αὐτὸν ἰούσα, θεῶν δ’ ἀπόεικε κελεύθου.  
μηδ’ ἔτι σοῖσι πόδεσσιν ὑποστρέψειας Ὀλυμπον,  
ἀλλ’ αἰεὶ περὶ κείνον οἴζυε καὶ ἐ φύλασσε,  
εἰς ὃ κέ σ’ ἦ ἄλοχον ποιήσεται ἢ ὃ γε δούλην.  
κείσε δ’ ἐγὼν οὐκ εἶμι· νεμεσσητὸν δέ κεν εἴη·  
κείνου πορσανέουσα λέχος· Τρωαὶ δέ μ’ ὀπίσω  
πᾶσαι μωμήσονται· ἔχω δ’ ἄχε’ ἄκριτα θυμῶ.  
Τὴν δὲ χολωσαμένη προσεφώνεε δῖ’ Ἀφροδίτῃ·  
μή μ’ ἔρεθε σχετλίη, μὴ χωσαμένη σε μεθείω,  
τῶς δέ σ’ ἀπεχθήρω ὡς νῦν ἔκπαγλ’ ἐφίλησα,  
μέσσω δ’ ἀμφοτέρων μητίσομαι ἔχθεα λυγρὰ  
Τρώων καὶ Δαναῶν, σὺ δέ κεν κακὸν οἶτον ὄληαι.

<sup>22</sup> Thus Ajax (13.72) calls the gods ἀρίγνωτοι, and Achilles, Diomedes, Helenus and Aeneas recognize them easily. But clear vision of divinity may be deadly (20.131):

χαλεποὶ δὲ θεοὶ φαίνεσθαι ἐναργεῖς.

“Ὡς ἔφατ’, ἔδεισεν δ’ Ἑλένη Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα,  
βῆ δὲ κατασχομένη ἐανῶ ἀργῆτι φαεινῶ  
σιγῆ, πάσας δὲ Τρωᾶς λάθην· ἦρχε δὲ δαίμων.

Along with her privilege, noticed earlier, of being beyond praise and blame, Helen has an obligation, to be easily swayed, to follow Aphrodite; and on her acceptance of that necessity depends the continuation of her privilege, and perhaps her life. It is not a situation that she would have chosen freely. As Paris says of a similar gift (3.164–66),

Do not cast in my teeth the lovely gifts of golden Aphrodite. You cannot, look you, throw away the fame-bearing gifts of gods, but whatever they give, no man of his own choice would receive.

This is not a boast, an assertion that no man could get such gifts merely by desiring them. It states rather a basic condition of life.<sup>23</sup> Achilles carries the generalization further in Book 24 when he says that mortals receive their life-shaping gifts without right of appeal; they have their portion, whether from the jar of good mixed with ill, or else from the jar of unmitigated ruin.

Helen’s submission has the inevitability of a hero’s death or the taking of a city. What matters, though, is the struggle of which it is the climax. Others recognize the gods and quarrel with them: thus Hector (within his limits) challenges Apollo, or, on a more comic plane, Diomedes wounds Aphrodite and Ares: divine ichor flows and divine voices are raised in protest.<sup>24</sup> But Diomedes’ triumph over Aphrodite sheds less light on the world of the *Iliad* than Helen’s failure.

In the Homeric world, man discovers his nature largely through his

<sup>23</sup> J. T. Sheppard, “Helen,” *G&R* 7 (1933) 32, translates the passage rightly and well:

Taunt me not with the gifts of the gods, by golden Aphrodite given.  
When the gods give, none may refuse  
as none of their own will would choose, the glorious gifts of Heaven.

So too Cowper, in his freer 1814 version, put the emphasis in the right place:

The gods are absolute, and what they give,  
or good, or ill, mere mortals must receive.

Most commentators, however, (including Anthon, Felton, Munro, Leaf and Bayfield, Seymour) interpret ἐκῶν as “for the asking”; similarly, the translations by Pope, Chapman, the Earl of Derby, Butler, Leconte de Lisle, and Lang, Leaf and Myers. Bryant translates ambiguously; Hobbes and Robert Graves impatiently side-step the problem.

<sup>24</sup> Webster *op.cit.* (*supra* n.6) 69, discusses the special situations in Eastern poetry in which a hero affronts a god; in another context (p. 82), he argues for the influence of the Gilgamesh story on Mycenaean poetry. The motif of man rivalling the gods seems especially Greek to Stith Thompson, “Motif-Index of Folk-Literature,” *Ind. Univ. Studies* 19–23 (1929–33) C.54.

confrontation with the gods, much as a child discovers his identity as he learns, little by little, to separate himself from the world around him. Homer views the gods through his epic medium of heroic experience; and since the business of a hero is *aristeuein*, to pursue excellence in word and deed, his experience of the gods must be viewed primarily in terms of effort and limit. Distinguished by closeness to the gods, he is inevitably compelled to recognize that he is a man.

When Aphrodite impresses upon Helen what Achilles learns from Zeus, she acts as one of the Olympian gods. If we compare her to the Babylonian Ishtar or the Ugaritic Anath, both of them fierce, revengeful, and generally unpredictable fertility goddesses, we see how completely Aphrodite has been adopted into the Olympian company. Already she has her proper sphere of activity; she is supreme in matters of love, not battle; and the very indignities visited upon her by Diomedes and Athena serve comically to emphasize the limitations of her sphere. But just as she cannot create havoc in war like Anath, or threaten like Ishtar to upset the very peace of the gods, so she does not appear as a whimsical, independent agent, but rather as an ultimately controllable Olympian goddess, responsible to the Will of Zeus and, behind this Will, to Fate.

Like the other Olympians, Aphrodite must be understood as operating on more than one level. Calhoun says of her: "She is at once the divine entourage, the personification of the impulses that jar and clash in Helen's bosom, and an actor in the drama who follows her own purposes."<sup>25</sup> Although we may doubt that the goddess personifies

<sup>25</sup> G. M. Calhoun, "Homer's Gods—Prolegomena," *TAPA* 68 (1937) 24–25. Thus Iris is both a motivating force and a personification of Helen's impulse; and G. M. A. Grube, "The Gods of Homer," *Phoenix* 5 (1951) 74, well says of Aphrodite that she is "not only the goddess of love, she is love or passion, and she is Helen's passion, both at the same time."

More scholarship than can adequately be summarized here has contributed to our present understanding of Homeric psychology and the relations of gods and men (the two problems are closely bound up together, and with them that of personality). For me, the most thoroughgoing and valuable investigation is that of A. Lesky, "Göttliche und menschliche Motivation in homerischen Epos," *Sitzungsb. d. Heidelberger Akad. der Wissenschaften* (1961) 5–52. (Among other observations, Lesky emphasizes Helen's acceptance of responsibility for her actions even when she is most fully aware of the action of the gods [p. 39].) In shaping my own ideas I was also helped by M. P. Nilsson, "Götter und Psychologie bei Homer," *Archiv f. Religionswissenschaft* 22 (1923/24) 363–390; P. Chantraine, "Le Divin et les dieux chez Homère," *Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique*, I (Geneva 1954) 47–77, followed by a good discussion (see especially Snell's comment on *Iliad* 3.420, on p. 82); E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Beacon Paperback, Boston, 1957), esp. page 17; the articles by Calhoun and Grube cited above; and E. L. Harrison, "Notes on Homeric Psychology," *Phoenix* 14 (1960) 63–80.

clashing impulses, it is useful, following Calhoun, to look at Aphrodite and Helen from roughly three points of view: the power of the gods working as an external force; the same power made psychologically effective, from within; and the triumphant will of an Olympian goddess, enforcing the separation of man from god.

The power of Aphrodite appears first in its outward results. Not only is the second rape of Helen a tragic repetition of the first (which it brings somehow vividly into the later story), but it belongs to a larger tragedy, of the war that cannot be halted until its destined end. In the older tale, Paris' refusal to give up Helen caused the war to take place or continue. But now, after a truce has been proclaimed and a duel arranged, and hopes run high of settling the Achaean-Trojan quarrel by single combat, Paris is suddenly wafted out of battle to his fragrant bedchamber, and Aphrodite has come to bring Helen to him. This new seduction shows the pressure of a fate that cannot be withstood; as its representative, Aphrodite plays a part little different from that of the Achaean partisans, Hera and Athena.

The power of Aphrodite, which is really the power of fate, is felt throughout the speech that challenges it. Helen knows she must go: "Where will you bring me now?" And again, after she scornfully tells the goddess to go herself, sit by her paramour, and care for him, her very refusal seems pregnant with the knowledge that she will have to accept:

But I will not go there—it would be blameworthy—  
to strew his couch: the Trojan women later  
all will blame me. I have untold sorrows at heart.

The refusal is tentative, like Achilles' expressed intention of returning to Phthia. Helen uses the future tense; and Aphrodite's warning, "lest I take anger and let you go," only makes her helplessness explicit. The touching kindness with which Priam treated her, as well as the awe with which the elders refrained from judging her, is revealed as conditional, a present to be revoked at will.

But Helen is not just used by Homer to demonstrate the power of the gods, as shown in the fulfillment of the Trojan War. Homer also asks (and perhaps this is new in his poem), what would a person feel who is being used as a pawn of the gods? Here it is useful to contrast the classic example of an "overdetermined" action in Book 1, where the coming of Athena represents a clearing of Achilles' vision, a

victory of lucid and prophetic intuition over a blind, short-sighted act. By accepting her advice, Achilles at once accepts necessity and profits by his own better judgement: to resist would damage his quest for honor. But Helen's dialogue with Aphrodite is different, for here Helen tries to control an overwhelming force that directs her actions *against* her more honorable impulse.

From this perspective, the measure of Aphrodite's power is not the war that must continue, but the shame of Helen that is overcome. As we saw, Helen is as sensitive as Hector to what people will say. She "knows nemesis," cares about blame, although Aphrodite has protected her from it. And it is precisely her own deep feeling of shame that reveals to her the utter shamelessness of the controlling goddess:

Go now and sit by him—withdraw from the path of gods,  
nor ever again under your feet tread down Olympus,  
but always whine over that man, watch over him  
until he makes you his own wife—or else his slave!

The forced submission of Helen to the shamelessness at which she lashes out shows, like so much in the *Iliad*, the weakness of mankind. For men's limits are within as well as without; to Homer these are the same.

The relations viewed above may be looked at in a third, and encompassing way, as a meeting of the human and transitory with the absolute and divine. This meeting is the tragic prerogative of the hero; for as he shines with god-given radiance, a man will sometimes appear to be more than human, and then he can only be subdued, as he was excited, by a god. Thus Patroclus' newfound strength tempts him to try his limits in *Iliad* 16, and Apollo destroys him.<sup>26</sup> Earlier, Diomedes more wisely (if reluctantly) deferred to the threatened wrath of Apollo (5.440–2):

Think, son of Tydeus, and yield, do not match yourself  
with the gods in thought: never is the race alike  
of deathless gods and men going on the earth.

There is a gnomic ring in the words, *φράζεο, Τυδείδη, καὶ χάζεο*: to think is here to yield.

In a similar way, Helen's dialogue with Aphrodite marks the absolute limit of her assimilation to divinity. For were she to inspire love

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the remark of Whitman, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 221, on Athena: "She represents not only the valor of Diomedes but the limits of that valor."

and not feel it, she might herself be the equal of Aphrodite; but as it is, she must succumb to the same passion that emanates from her person, that she recognizes when she looks upon the “desire-breathing breasts and flashing eyes” of the goddess. To resist is vain; she knows it even before being told. The shamelessness of Aphrodite, the domination of passion, and the driving force of fate, are all magnificently symbolized in the climactic scene in Paris’ bedchamber, when the goddess draws up a chair for the mortal woman. In a final line of submission,

*ἔνθα καθίζ’ Ἐλένη κούρη Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο,*

the non-particular epithet seems effortlessly to point the tragic contrast between the semi-divinity of Helen and her human weakness. The epithet is perfectly right here, and Homer must at least have felt this rightness as he sang.<sup>27</sup>

Not only the coherence of Homer’s song, but its unity of underlying feeling, may be shown in a comparison of the Helen episode just discussed with the larger story of Achilles to which it is dramatically subordinated. There are superficial parallels between Helen and Achilles. Both are children of gods, both possess a special excellence, both are cut off from the normal communal ties of a Hector or an Andromache. But more intimately related are the realizations to which they attain, Helen when she succumbs to a shameless passion and re-enters the bed of Paris, Achilles when he wills his own death by deciding to re-enter battle and take vengeance on Hector. In a different

<sup>27</sup>M. Parry, “Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making, II,” *HSCP* 43 (1932) 7–8, said that with every new poet the formula “must undergo the twofold test of being found pleasing and useful.” Just so: the singer continues to use a certain epithet in its prescribed place more and more because he feels its rightness in context (a ship in the dative must be “black,” not “balanced,” but its blackness may become highly satisfactory). Thus Bowra says of the formulas, in Wace-Stubbings (*supra* n.1) 35, “though they perform an essential task, they must be considered in their individual contexts, since it is from these that they often take their meaning and their worth.” Without following W. Whallon, “The Homeric Epithets,” *YCS* 17 (1961) 97–142, who finds many word-echoes and associations more appropriate to Vergil than to Homer, one might argue that since the traditional epithets show *normal* heroic qualities, we are naturally led by their use in context to feel that such and such a quality is, or is not, fulfilled in the present. Our resulting sense of irony cannot then be unjustified in *Iliad* 9.485

*καί σε τοσοῦτον ἔθηκα, θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ’ Ἀχιλλεῦ,*

or here, in 3.426. The contrast here is not forced, but natural; not consciously invented, but somehow “accepted.” Whallon’s remarks (*op.cit.* 101ff) on the interaction of epithet and epic matter are also helpful. Although Homer sometimes uses an inappropriate epithet, he may nonetheless sometimes be aware that an epithet in context is perfectly “right”.

way, both Achilles and Helen strive for honor and force the issue; each exacts a special revelation from the gods, and each gets one that is intolerable: Aphrodite's carrying of Helen's chair has the same meaning as Zeus' thundering for Achilles. Man cannot, in aspiring to divinity, transcend the suffering of a human being.

A brief contrast, taken from the *Odyssey*, throws into relief the tragic quality of the Helen-Aphrodite scene, its lack of solace. For in the story of Odysseus, which is largely about the acceptance of life, Helen appears after her return from isolation. Although she sometimes daydreams about her past (and the old epithet *κυνώπιδος* dimly recalls her shame), her principal concern is now to make atonement through affection for her husband and attentiveness to his spoken or unspoken wishes (4.259–64):

And so my spirit  
had joy, for already my heart was moved to return  
back home, and I grieved for the blindness that Aphrodite  
gave when she guided me from my dear fatherland,  
when I left my child and bedchamber and a husband  
lacking in nothing, neither in wits nor else in form.

The very structure of Helen's words reveals her attitude. Her mind, her loyalty has returned altogether to Sparta and her husband. In this companionship of husband and wife, not so different from that to which Odysseus himself will return, Helen can even accept herself, accept her past as something foreign to her now, and settle down to a glorified domesticity (her golden distaff and silver yarn basket are not gifts of the gods but Oriental riches acquired by Menelaus). If there is pain in the memories of the past—which is to say memories of the *Iliad*—this pain has its anodyne in drugs brought from Egypt. A little forgetfulness makes it possible to go on living. It is as though the unsolaced tragedy that one faces in the *Iliad* were an adventure of the youthful, the rebellious spirit, that loses its fierce brilliance in the wiser resignation of age.<sup>28</sup>

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