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Helen as the Erotic Crisis of Myth: Desire, Divine Transgression, and Cultural Anxiety in the Greek Literary Tradition

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Abstract

Helen of Troy occupies a contested position in Greek literature, where her desirability repeatedly intersects with questions of blame, agency, and divine intervention. This article examines how Helen functions as a recurring site of erotic crisis: a structural tension in which desire (*eros*) exceeds conventional categories of responsibility and divine action destabilizes the distinction between compulsion and choice. The study draws on close readings of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Herodotus's *Histories*, Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, Sappho's fragment 16, and Euripides's *Helen* and *Trojan Women*, interpreted alongside relevant scholarship. The analysis identifies three interlocking dimensions of this crisis: Homeric configurations of blame and voice; rhetorical and mythic strategies through which divine transgression displaces human responsibility; and cultural anxieties surrounding female beauty (*kalon*) and its purported quasi-supernatural influence over male judgment. Across these dimensions, Helen's shifting representations expose the difficulty of assigning responsibility where desire, divine intervention, and human action intersect. Her enduring literary significance rests on the tradition's sustained refusal to resolve her ambiguity, allowing successive texts to reconsider the relationship between erotic attraction and moral accountability. The article concludes that this unresolved ambiguity makes Helen a diagnostic figure for Greek thinking about gender, causation, and the limits of self-mastery. By conceptualizing these tensions as an erotic crisis, the study offers an interpretive framework connecting representations of Helen across epic, historiography, rhetoric, lyric poetry, and tragedy.

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Introduction

Helen of Troy endures in the Western imagination because she is never allowed to be only one thing. She is remembered, in the popular shorthand drawn loosely from Christopher Marlowe, as the face that "launched a thousand ships," yet within the Greek literary tradition itself she is a woman who weaves, argues, weeps, defends herself, is defended by others, and is never fully believed by anyone, including, at moments, herself. Across epic, historiography, rhetoric, lyric, and tragedy, Helen is assigned contradictory roles: captive and instigator, victim and *casus belli*, silent possession and public speaker, mortal wife and quasi-divine cult figure. No other figure in the tradition is so consistently used to think about what happens when erotic desire outgrows the moral and legal vocabulary available to explain it.

This article treats that pattern as more than incidental. It argues that Helen operates across the tradition as a kind of pressure point: a figure through whom Greek literature repeatedly tests the relationship between desire, agency, and blame, and repeatedly declines to resolve the test. Three claims organize the discussion. First, the Homeric poems construct Helen through a distinctive grammar of blame in which she is treated as property and casus belli by the men around her, while being granted, in a small number of carefully placed scenes, a voice that complicates any simple verdict on her culpability (Blondell, 2010; Roisman, 2006; Worman, 2001). Second, later texts - Gorgias's sophistic *Encomium*, Herodotus's rationalizing history, and Euripides's tragedies - do not so much resolve the Homeric ambiguity as formalize it, converting Helen's culpability into an explicit forensic question and, in doing so, exposing how thoroughly Greek thought associated female desirability with divine and rhetorical compulsion (Blondell, 2018; Johnston, 2023). Third, the entire tradition is saturated by an anxiety about female beauty (*kalon*) that predates Helen and is inherited from Hesiod's Pandora: beauty is imagined as an aesthetic good that is simultaneously, and inseparably, a danger to male self-governance (Blondell, 2013; Hesiod, trans. 1914).

The term *erotic crisis* is used deliberately rather than as embellishment. It does not imply that Greek culture was uniquely obsessed with sex, nor does it flatten the real differences between Archaic epic, Classical rhetoric, and tragedy, or between the sympathetic

Helen of the *Iliad* and the exculpated phantom of Euripides's *Helen*. It names something more specific: a recurring narrative structure in which (a) an act of desire has occurred, (b) the tradition cannot agree on whether that desire was chosen, coerced, or divinely imposed, and (c) that unresolved uncertainty becomes itself the generative engine of the story, prompting speech, defense, blame, and reinterpretation across seven or more centuries of transmission. Helen is the figure in whom Greek literature returns most often, and most self-consciously, to this structure.

The remainder of the article proceeds in five stages. It first situates the argument within the substantial modern scholarship on Helen, from Clader's (1976) study of her divine antecedents to Blondell's (2013) monograph on beauty and devastation. It then outlines the conceptual vocabulary - *eros*, *kalon*, *aidōs*, *nemesis*, *aitia* - that the ancient texts themselves use to negotiate responsibility, together with the comparative method used here. Three analytical sections follow: one on the Homeric construction of blame and voice, one on the mechanics of divine transgression from the Judgment of Paris through Gorgias, Herodotus, and Euripides, and one on the ideology of female beauty as a source of cultural anxiety. A discussion synthesizes these threads before a short conclusion addresses the limits of the argument and directions for further work.

Literature Review

Modern scholarship on Helen divides, roughly, into three overlapping traditions, each of which this article draws on and seeks to connect. The first is philological and mythographic, concerned with Helen's pre-Homeric identity as a Spartan cult figure with divine or semi-divine status. Clader's (1976) foundational study, *Helen: The Evolution from Divine to Heroic in Greek Epic Tradition*, argues that Homeric epic inherits and partially suppresses an older Helen who was venerated as a fertility or vegetation goddess in Laconia, and that traces of this divinity survive in the epithets and similes applied to her even within a poem that treats her, on the surface, as fully human. Nagy's (1990) work on Greek myth and cult reinforces this picture, connecting the tradition of Stesichorus's palinode - in which the poet was said to have been blinded for slandering Helen and healed only after retracting his account of her journey to Troy — to a broader pattern in which Helen retains the power, unusual for a mortal woman in epic, to punish transgressive speech about herself.

A second tradition is narratological and centers on the Homeric poems specifically, asking how Helen is characterized, how much interiority and speech she is granted, and what function her voice serves within a poem organized around male honor. Bergren's (1980) early essay on Helen's weaving in the *Iliad* reads Helen's tapestry, which depicts the very war fought over her, as a self-reflexive image of the poem's own project. Roisman (2006) extends this inquiry across the whole epic, arguing that Helen moves across her six appearances from a "silent weaver" manipulated by the plot to a "public speaker" who delivers the final lament of the poem, and that this arc constitutes a deliberate, if constrained, assertion of moral subjectivity. Blondell's (2010) study of Helen's self-blame makes a related but sharper claim: Helen's repeated self-condemnation in the *Iliad* is not evidence of her guilt so much as a rhetorical strategy that allows her to claim responsibility, and therefore agency, on her own terms, before anyone else can assign it to her. Worman (2001) approaches the same material through the concept of voice, arguing that Helen is granted a linguistic register unlike that of any other Homeric woman, one that lets her narrate and interpret her own story even as the men around her try to fix her as an object of exchange.

A third tradition, more explicitly informed by feminist and gender theory, treats Helen as a diagnostic site for Greek ideology about women, beauty, and sexual autonomy. Suzuki's (1989) *Metamorphoses of Helen* reads Helen alongside Briseis as a scapegoat figure onto whom male communities displace responsibility for war, while also crediting her, following Clader, with a residual divine authority that makes her an author of poetry in her own right. Zeitlin's (1995, 1996) studies of gender in Greek literature situate Helen within a broader pattern in which female sexual autonomy is simultaneously eroticized and treated as a threat to civic and domestic order. Blondell's (2013) monograph, *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation*, is the fullest synthesis of this line of inquiry, arguing across genres that Helen is best understood as the primary vehicle through which Greek culture articulated and managed its anxieties about the destructive potential of female beauty. Most recently, Johnston (2023) has traced how the "divine defense" - the claim that Helen's actions are not her own because a god caused them - operates differently in Homer and in Euripides, showing that the instability of divine and human agency was, for Greek audiences, a live and unresolved question rather than a settled premise.

This article's contribution is to draw these three traditions together around a single organizing concept. Where existing scholarship tends to treat the questions of Helen's voice, her relationship to the gods, and the ideology of beauty as related but separable problems,

this article argues that they are better understood as three faces of a single structural crisis, one that the tradition repeatedly stages and repeatedly declines to resolve. Reception-oriented work, including Dixon's (2017) study of Helen's agency from antiquity to modern young-adult fiction and Lesser's (2018) application of queer theory to Helen and Penelope, suggests that this refusal of resolution is precisely what has made Helen so exportable to later periods and later theoretical frameworks - a point to which the discussion returns.

Theoretical Framework and Method

The analysis proceeds by close reading of primary texts in dialogue with secondary scholarship, attending in particular to a small cluster of Greek terms that the ancient sources themselves use to negotiate the question of Helen's responsibility. *Eros* denotes desire in its most acute, often destabilizing form, frequently personified or treated as a quasi-divine force capable of overriding deliberation; it is distinct from the gentler *philia* (affection, friendship) and is associated in both epic and rhetorical texts with compulsion rather than choice (Blondell, 2013; Gorgias, trans. 2021). *Kalon* (beautiful, or, adjectivally, *kalos*) is a term whose semantic range spans aesthetic and moral value simultaneously - the "beautiful" and the "fine" or "honorable" are not fully separable concepts in Archaic and Classical Greek - which means that a judgment about Helen's beauty is never merely descriptive but always carries a latent ethical charge (Blondell, 2013). *Aidōs* (shame, or the internalized sense of what is proper) and *nemesis* (righteous indignation, or blame directed outward) are the twin poles between which Helen's self-assessments oscillate, most visibly in the *Iliad*. *Aitia* and its adjectival form *aitios* ("to blame," "responsible") is the term that recurs at the precise moments when characters attempt, and fail, to settle the question of causation for the war - as when Priam tells Helen that he holds not her but the gods *aitioi*, responsible, for his suffering (Homer, trans. 1924, *Il.* 3.164). Finally, *eidolon* (image, phantom, likeness) names the device, central to the Stesichorean and Euripidean tradition, by which the "real" Helen is separated from the Helen who acts in the story - a literalization, this article suggests, of the same splitting that the blame tradition performs figuratively.

Methodologically, the article combines close reading of primary texts, cited by the standard book-and-line or section numbers used throughout classical scholarship, with a synthetic engagement with the secondary literature identified above. It does not attempt a comprehensive survey of every ancient text in which Helen appears; the corpus of vase

painting, lyric fragments, and later mythographic summaries (the *Cypria*, the *Little Iliad*, Apollodorus) is vast, and this article focuses instead on the texts in which Helen speaks, is judged, or is explicitly defended - the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Herodotus's *Histories*, Gorgias's *Encomium*, Sappho's fragment 16, and Euripides's *Helen* and *Trojan Women* - because these are the texts in which the erotic-crisis structure identified above is most fully dramatized. Where useful, the article also draws on Hesiod's Pandora narrative as a comparandum that establishes the beauty-as-danger ideology independently of Helen, allowing the analysis to distinguish what is specific to Helen from what she shares with a broader pattern in Greek thought about women.

Homeric Helen: Blame, Voice, and the Grammar of Possession

The *Iliad* is not, on its surface, a poem about Helen; it is a poem about the anger of Achilles. Yet Helen structures the poem's world from its margins, appearing in only a handful of scenes and speaking only a few dozen lines in total, and it is precisely this scarcity that has made her so interpretively productive. Homer could have kept her offstage entirely, a name invoked to explain why the armies are at Troy. Instead, the poem repeatedly brings her forward at moments of high structural significance - book 3, book 6, and the poem's final book, 24 - and in each case complicates rather than resolves the question of her culpability.

The clearest instance is the *teichoscopia*, the "viewing from the walls," in book 3 (Homer, trans. 1924, *Il.* 3.121–244). Iris finds Helen already at her loom, weaving a robe that depicts the very war being fought over her, then summons her to the wall to watch the duel below - an image, as Bergren (1980) argues, of the poem's own self-awareness about its subject. Led to the walls, Helen is greeted not with the hostility one might expect from a city suffering a decade of siege on her account but with a startling aesthetic verdict: the Trojan elders, watching her approach, remark to one another that no one should feel resentment (*nemesis*) that Trojans and Achaeans have suffered so long for a woman who so closely resembles the immortal goddesses in her looks (Homer, trans. 1924, *Il.* 3.156–158). The line is often read as a compliment; it is better read as a symptom. The elders explicitly invoke and then set aside the vocabulary of blame (*nemesis*) in the same breath in which they acknowledge Helen's devastating effect on their city, modeling in miniature the very oscillation between admiration and censure that structures her reception throughout the tradition. When Priam himself addresses her moments later, he goes further, telling her directly that he does not

hold her responsible for what has happened; the gods, he says, are *aitioi*, the ones to blame, for bringing this "tearful war" upon him (Homer, trans. 1924, *Il.* 3.164). Blame is displaced onto the gods before Helen has said a word in her own defense.

Helen's own voice, when it appears, does not simply accept this exoneration. In the same book, after Aphrodite compels her, against her will and over her open resistance and mockery of the goddess, to go to Paris's bed following his ignominious rescue from single combat with Menelaus (Homer, trans. 1924, *Il.* 3.383–420), the scene stages with unusual clarity the coercive dimension of desire that this article calls divine transgression: a mortal woman, granted enough interiority to object, is nonetheless physically threatened and overruled by a goddess whose favor she cannot safely refuse. Later, in book 6, Helen speaks to Hector in starkly self-accusing terms, calling herself a contriver of mischief, detested by everyone around her, wishing that a storm-wind had swept her away before any of this happened or that she had been wife to a better man than Paris, and predicting that she and Hector are fated to become subjects of song for generations to come (Homer, trans. 1924, *Il.* 6.344–358). Blondell (2010) reads this self-blame not as confirmation of guilt but as a rhetorical achievement: by condemning herself before anyone else can, Helen claims the position of a moral agent capable of judgment, including self-judgment, rather than remaining a passive object of male appraisal. Roisman (2006) traces the same trajectory across the poem's structure, arguing that Helen develops from the "silent weaver" of book 3 into the poem's final speaker of lament in book 24, where she alone among the mourners for Hector recalls his personal kindness to her and openly names her fear of the rest of the Trojan royal house (Homer, trans. 1924, *Il.* 24.762–775). That the *Iliad* grants its last human speech before Hector's funeral to Helen, of all people, is a structural choice, not an accident, and it is difficult to reconcile with any reading of her as a purely passive cause of the war.

The *Odyssey* complicates the picture further rather than settling it. In book 4, Helen appears not as a captive but as the restored, apparently contented wife of Menelaus in Sparta, dispensing a drug into the wine - described as *nēpenthes*, "banisher of grief" - to numb her guests' painful memories of Troy before she tells her own story of recognizing Odysseus in disguise within the city and choosing not to betray him (Homer, trans. 1919, *Od.* 4.219–264). Menelaus immediately follows with a counter-story in which Helen, circling the Wooden Horse, called out in the voices of the Achaean wives to lure the hidden warriors into revealing themselves (Homer, trans. 1919, *Od.* 4.265–289). The two stories cannot both flatter her equally, and the poem does not adjudicate between them; it simply lets them stand side by

side, doctored, quite literally, by Helen's own pharmacology (Doyle, 2010). Doyle's (2010) reading of this scene in *Akroterion* emphasizes that Helen's control over perception here is not only sexual but cognitive: she manages what her guests, and by extension the poem's audience, are permitted to feel about her own history. This contrast between a wife who narrates her own contested history and a wife, Penelope, whose fidelity the poem takes pains to authenticate through other means, has long been recognized as structurally significant (Foley, 1978; Katz, 1991): the *Odyssey* seems to need Helen's example of managed, uncertain female speech in order to define, by contrast, what secure female fidelity looks like. The Homeric Helen, in other words, is never merely accused or merely exonerated. She is surrounded by a structure of blame that is persistently offered and persistently withdrawn, and she is given, in a handful of pivotal scenes, just enough voice to participate in that structure rather than simply endure it.

Divine Transgression and the Machinery of Desire

If the Homeric poems establish Helen as a figure whose culpability is never quite settled, later texts make the mechanism of that unsettlement explicit: they ask, directly and often as a matter of formal argument, whether Helen can be blamed at all if a god caused her to act. This section traces that argument from its mythic premise in the Judgment of Paris through its most rigorous statement in Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, its rationalist rejection in Herodotus, and its dramatic literalization in Euripides.

The precondition for Helen's abduction, in the tradition inherited by all of the authors discussed here, is a divine dispute: the goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite compete for the title of most beautiful, and the Trojan prince Paris is enlisted to judge among them, with Aphrodite securing his vote by promising him Helen, the most beautiful mortal woman, as a reward (Gorgias, trans. 2021, *Hel.* 6). The episode is preserved only in fragments and later summaries rather than in a single continuous ancient text, but its logic is presupposed everywhere Helen is discussed in the Classical period, and it establishes from the outset that Helen's desirability is not simply a human fact but a stake in a contest among gods. Her beauty precedes and exceeds her own agency; she is the prize in a competition she did not enter.

Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, a rhetorical showpiece probably composed in the later fifth century BCE, takes this premise and turns it into formal argument. Framing itself

explicitly as a defense rather than a simple eulogy, the speech proposes four, mutually exclusive explanations for Helen's departure to Troy, and argues that she is blameless under every one of them (Gorgias, trans. 2021, *Hel.* 6–20). She may have acted through the will of the gods and the compulsion of fate, in which case responsibility belongs to divine necessity, not to her; she may have been taken by physical force, in which case she is a victim of violence; she may have been won over by speech (*logos*), which Gorgias compares to a drug (*pharmakon*) capable of altering the soul against its own intentions; or she may have been overcome by *eros* itself, which the speech treats not as a personal failing but as an affliction with the force of divine compulsion, transmitted through the eyes and lodging in the soul beyond the reach of the will (Gorgias, trans. 2021, *Hel.* 14–19). What unites all four branches of the argument is a single premise: that desire, however it enters a person, is categorically different from ordinary voluntary action, and that a legal or moral vocabulary built for voluntary action cannot fairly be applied to it. Blondell (2018) and Johnston (2023) both note that this "divine defense" is not merely a rhetorical trick specific to Gorgias; it recurs, with variations, in Homer, in Herodotus, and in Euripides, suggesting that it named a genuinely contested question in Greek thought about moral responsibility rather than a sophistic curiosity. Isocrates, writing a generation or so later, pointedly criticizes Gorgias's speech for being an apologia dressed up as praise (Isocrates, trans. 1980, *Hel.* 14), and offers his own *Helen* as a corrective encomium that grounds her worth directly in the extraordinary and quasi-divine nature of her beauty rather than in an argument about her innocence — a telling indication that even ancient readers recognized the earlier speech's exculpatory structure as unusual and worth contesting.

Herodotus takes a different route to the same underlying anxiety. In the second book of the *Histories*, he reports, and appears to endorse, an alternative tradition in which Helen never reached Troy at all: driven off course, Paris and Helen landed in Egypt, where the local ruler, appalled at the violation of guest-friendship, detained Helen and sent Paris away empty-handed, so that the Helen besieged at Troy for ten years was never there to begin with, and the Greeks only recovered the real Helen from Egypt after the city had already fallen (Herodotus, trans. 1920, *Hist.* 2.112–120). Herodotus's reasoning is explicitly rationalist: he argues that if Helen had truly been in Troy, the Trojans would have surrendered her rather than endure a decade of destruction, and that Homer knew the Egyptian version but suppressed it because it suited epic poetry less well (Herodotus, trans. 1920, *Hist.* 2.116–120). What is significant for this argument is not simply that Herodotus offers a variant plot but

that his variant is structured as a displacement of responsibility away from the erotic altogether: it resolves the crisis not by explaining Helen's desire but by removing her desire from the causal chain, substituting a story about property, hospitality, and international law for a story about eros. Even so, the substitution is incomplete. Herodotus cannot fully evacuate Helen from the war's causation; the Greeks besiege Troy for ten years precisely because they refuse to believe the Trojans' protestations that she is not there, which is to say that the erotic logic of the myth persists as a kind of cultural conviction even after the historian has dismantled its factual basis.

Euripides dramatizes this same displacement rather than merely narrating it. His *Helen* (412 BCE) stages the Herodotean premise directly: the Helen at Troy was an *eidolon*, a phantom fashioned by the gods, while the real Helen waited faithfully in Egypt, and the play's plot turns on reuniting Menelaus with a wife he does not recognize precisely because her reputation has been so thoroughly separated from her person, a splitting of name from body that Austin (1994) treats as the central and most revealing device in the entire Helen tradition (Euripides, trans. 1938, *Hel.* 31–40). The device literalizes, as image, the same split that the Homeric and rhetorical traditions perform through argument: there is a "Helen" who is blamed, desired, and fought over, and a Helen who may or may not be identical with her. Euripides's earlier *Trojan Women* (415 BCE) takes the opposite tack, staging an open forensic contest over the "real" Helen's guilt. Confronted by Hecuba in the presence of Menelaus, Helen delivers a formal defense speech that draws directly on the logic later systematized by Gorgias: she blames Hecuba for giving birth to Paris in the first place, blames the goddesses' competition and Aphrodite's promise for her departure, and insists that after Paris's death she attempted to escape the city and was prevented by force (Euripides, trans. 1891, *Tro.* 914–965). Hecuba's rebuttal is scathing and explicitly rejects the divine defense as a convenient fiction, arguing that Aphrodite, a goddess, would have no need to leave Olympus on Helen's behalf, and that it was Paris's wealth and foreignness, together with Helen's own lack of self-restraint, that carried her to Troy (Euripides, trans. 1891, *Tro.* 969-1032). Menelaus, on stage for the entire exchange, is left to judge between them, and the mythic tradition outside the play - most famously the image of his sword arm dropping at the sight of Helen's beauty - suggests that the aesthetic force of her appearance ultimately overrides whatever verdict reasoned argument might have reached. Read together, Gorgias, Herodotus, and Euripides do not offer three independent treatments of an incidental question; they offer three formal attempts to resolve the same problem the *Iliad* first

dramatized, and each attempt, characteristically, produces not resolution but a new venue in which the crisis can be restaged.

Beautiful Evil: Female Beauty and Cultural Anxiety

The mechanism that makes Helen's culpability so difficult to settle is not simply divine intervention in the abstract; it is the specific association, pervasive in Greek thought, between extraordinary female beauty and danger. This association predates Helen and is not unique to her. Hesiod's account of Pandora, composed before or roughly contemporaneously with the earliest strata of the Homeric tradition, describes the first woman as a *kalon kakon*, a "beautiful evil" (Hesiod, trans. 1914, *Theog.* 585), fashioned by the gods at Zeus's command as a punishment disguised as a gift, her loveliness explicitly presented as the vehicle of the harm she brings to men (Hesiod, trans. 1914, *Op.* 59–105). The pairing of these two words, one aesthetic and one moral, encapsulates the semantic problem named in this article's theoretical framework: in a linguistic and conceptual world where *kalon* denotes both "beautiful" and "good," a being who is beautiful without being good is not simply an exception to the rule but a source of category confusion with real ethical stakes. Blondell's (2013) analysis of this ideology argues that Greek culture treated female beauty as objectively real and objectively powerful rather than as a matter of subjective taste, which meant that a woman's beauty was understood to act on men causally, almost mechanically, rather than merely to please them; responsibility for what beauty caused was consequently difficult to locate in any single party. This mechanistic model of beauty's power was not free-floating; it was embedded within a broader set of assumptions, documented across the literary and material record, about women's structurally circumscribed legal and social position within the Greek household and city (Blundell, 1995), assumptions that made it difficult, even in principle, for a woman's desire to register as fully and simply her own.

Helen inherits and intensifies this Pandora template. She is repeatedly described in language that stresses the objective, almost weaponized character of her appearance rather than her individual charm; the elders' remark at the *teichoscopia*, framed as an aesthetic judgment shared collectively rather than as one man's private response, exemplifies this pattern (Homer, trans. 1924, *Il.* 3.156–158). The Odyssean drug scene reinforces the same idea from a different angle: Helen's power over the men around her is figured quite literally as a matter of pharmacology, her control extending not only over how she is perceived but

over what her guests are permitted to remember and feel (Homer, trans. 1919, *Od.* 4.219–232; Doyle, 2010). In the *Trojan Women*, Hecuba's argument against Helen turns on precisely this anxiety: she accuses Helen not of an isolated act of poor judgment but of embodying, in her very presence, an appetite (associated in the Greek with *akolasia*, a lack of self-restraint) that beauty licenses and even rewards, and she pointedly notes that Helen adorned herself and gazed out at Menelaus rather than displaying the visible shame appropriate to a woman restored to her wronged husband (Euripides, trans. 1891, *Tro.* 1020–1030). What Hecuba fears, in other words, is not only what Helen may have done but what her continued beauty threatens to do again, to Menelaus and by extension to Greek domestic order, regardless of any verdict reached about the past.

This anxiety is not confined to hostile voices within the tradition. Sappho's fragment 16, probably composed in the early sixth century BCE on Lesbos, offers a striking counter-reading of the same material from a woman's poetic perspective. Rejecting conventional catalogues of what is most admirable on earth — cavalry, infantry, ships — the speaker proposes instead that the most beautiful thing is simply whatever a person loves, and offers Helen as proof: a woman whose beauty exceeded every other mortal's nonetheless left the best of husbands and sailed to Troy, forgetting her child and her parents, led astray, the poem implies, by Aphrodite (Sappho, fr. 16 Voigt, in Campbell, 1982). Where Hecuba treats Helen's desire as a moral failure requiring explanation, Sappho treats it as a paradigm: the poem uses Helen's choice, without apparent irony or censure, to validate the speaker's own longing for an absent beloved. The juxtaposition matters because it shows that the erotic-crisis structure identified in this article was not monolithic in its evaluative charge even within antiquity. The same narrative core, a woman's desire overriding domestic obligation, could be staged as catastrophe (Hecuba, the Trojan elders' unspoken war-weariness) or as the most defensible impulse available to a human being (Sappho), depending on genre, speaker, and audience. What remains constant across both readings is the premise that Helen's desire is exceptional, that it exceeds the ordinary run of human choice enough to require either condemnation or validation rather than indifference.

Agency, Ambiguity, and the Symbolic Work of Helen

The preceding sections have shown Helen accused and defended, silenced and voiced, blamed and exonerated, without the tradition ever settling on one verdict. This

section asks what work that persistent irresolution performs, and argues that the ambiguity itself, rather than any particular characterization within it, is the source of Helen's cultural and literary power.

Johnston's (2023) comparison of Homer and Euripides on the question of divine agency is instructive here. He argues that the relationship between divine causation and human responsibility was not, for Greek audiences, a solved problem awaiting poetic restatement, but a genuinely open question that different texts probed in different, sometimes incompatible, ways. Helen is the figure onto whom this open question is most often projected, in part because her case combines every aggravating factor available: a divine dispute set the terms of her fate before she was involved (the Judgment of Paris); a goddess is shown, within the *Iliad* itself, physically coercing her (Homer, trans. 1924, *Il.* 3.383–420); and the consequences of her actions are catastrophic and public rather than private, implicating an entire community rather than a single household. If the tradition had made Helen simply guilty, she would have functioned as a cautionary tale and little else; if it had made her simply innocent, she would have functioned as a straightforward victim narrative. Instead, as Suzuki (1989) and Roisman (2006) both emphasize in different registers, the tradition preserves her as what Suzuki calls a "perfect ambiguous sign," a figure whose meaning is never allowed to close.

This irresolution has a gendered dimension that recent scholarship has developed productively. Lesser's (2018) reading of Helen through the lens of queer theory argues that Helen functions within the *Iliad* as a figure of deviance from the poem's own norms of feminine conduct - established by contrast with the faithful, home-bound Andromache - whose self-determined and shifting erotic attachments make her, in Lesser's terms, structurally "queer" within the epic's own logic, and whose narrative importance depends on that deviance rather than existing despite it. On this reading, the poem's evident discomfort with Helen, expressed through the persistent vocabulary of blame that surrounds her, coexists with an equally persistent narrative investment in keeping her present, articulate, and central, because the war, and the poem, cannot function without the disruption she represents. A parallel point emerges from reception scholarship: Dixon's (2017) study of Helen's afterlives in modern young-adult fiction finds that contemporary retellings, writing in a cultural context far more sympathetic to female autonomy, are able to grant Helen a stable, coherent agency that the ancient tradition never allows her, precisely because ancient Helen was never constructed as a stable object to begin with. The instability is not a gap later

authors happened to fill; it is the tradition's original and defining feature, exported into every subsequent retelling as an open interpretive slot.

Read this way, the question that has organized much of the modern scholarship on Helen, whether she is victim, agent, or something in between, is not a question the ancient sources leave unanswered by oversight. It is a question the tradition is structurally organized to keep open, because the openness itself does the cultural work that a settled answer could not. A Helen who is simply guilty offers no occasion for the repeated speeches, defenses, and reinterpretations that constitute so much of her textual presence; a Helen who is simply innocent offers no occasion for the anxious, admiring, and hostile scrutiny of female beauty that runs throughout the tradition discussed in the previous section. It is only a Helen suspended between these poles who can support both functions simultaneously, and it is this suspension, rather than any single trait, that the phrase "erotic crisis" is meant to capture.

Discussion

Bringing these three threads together, the Homeric grammar of blame and voice, the rhetorical and mythic machinery of divine transgression, and the ideology of beauty as danger, clarifies what is distinctive about Helen relative to other female figures in Greek myth who are also blamed, desired, or divinely manipulated. Clytemnestra, for instance, is also a figure of transgressive female agency with catastrophic consequences, but the tradition treats her culpability as far more settled; she plots and kills, and the *Oresteia* is organized around the working-out of consequences for an act whose moral status is not seriously in dispute. Pandora, as discussed above, supplies the template of beauty as danger but does so as a one-time aetiological figure rather than as a character who speaks, defends herself, or is fought over across multiple genres. Helen is distinctive in combining an act of world-historical consequence with a persistent, text-spanning uncertainty about whether that act was hers to own, and in being granted, unlike Pandora, enough voice across the tradition to participate in the argument about her own responsibility.

This combination suggests a way of refining, rather than simply repeating, the claim with which this article began. To say that Helen embodies an "erotic crisis" is not to say that Greek culture uniformly stigmatized female desire, nor that it uniformly excused it through divine displacement. It is to say that Greek literature returns to Helen, more than to any comparable figure, precisely because her story furnishes the clearest available test case for a

set of unresolved conceptual problems: whether desire caused by a god counts as one's own; whether beauty that acts on others without the beautiful person's intent constitutes a form of agency or its opposite; and whether communal catastrophe requires a locatable human cause at all. The tradition's treatment of Helen is best read not as a set of competing answers to these questions, arranged chronologically from Homer's ambivalence to Euripides's exculpation, but as a sustained, multi-genre argument in which the questions themselves are never allowed to lapse.

It is worth registering two limits on this argument. First, the corpus examined here, while substantial, is not exhaustive, and earlier or fragmentary material, particularly the lost *Cypria* and the visual record of Archaic and Classical vase painting, likely preserved traditions about Helen's culpability that do not survive in the texts analyzed above; a fuller account would need to engage that material directly rather than at second hand. Second, the argument risks, if pressed too far, implying a single continuous "Greek attitude" toward female desire across nearly a millennium and multiple genres with distinct conventions and audiences; the differences Blondell (2013), Zeitlin (1996), and others document between epic, lyric, oratory, and tragedy are real, and this article's synthetic argument should be read as identifying a recurring structure that these genres share and adapt, not as claiming that they treat Helen identically. With those qualifications, the pattern traced here nonetheless holds across a remarkably wide span of Greek literary history, from the Archaic epic of Homer to the Classical rhetoric of Gorgias and Isocrates and the tragic stage of Euripides, which is itself evidence that the erotic crisis Helen embodies was not a passing preoccupation of any one period but a structural feature of how Greek literary culture thought about desire, causation, and gender across its major genres.

Conclusion

Helen of Troy is not simply a beautiful woman blamed for a war. She is the figure through whom Greek literature repeatedly tests, and repeatedly refuses to close, the question of what happens when desire exceeds the ordinary categories used to assign responsibility for human action. The Homeric poems establish her as a figure surrounded by displaced blame and granted, at pivotal moments, enough voice to contest that displacement herself. Later texts, from Gorgias's forensic *Encomium* through Herodotus's rationalizing history to Euripides's tragic doublings, do not resolve this ambiguity so much as formalize and

dramatize it, turning an implicit narrative tension into explicit argument and spectacle. Underlying both developments is a persistent cultural conviction, inherited from the Hesiodic figure of Pandora and given its fullest expression in Helen, that extraordinary female beauty constitutes a kind of objective, almost involuntary power capable of overriding male judgment and, with it, ordinary structures of responsibility. It is the coexistence of all three elements, contested blame, divinely inflected desire, and beauty imagined as danger, rather than any one of them alone, that makes Helen the clearest and most durable site in the Greek literary tradition for imagining erotic crisis. Understood this way, Helen's persistence into modern retellings and modern critical frameworks, from feminist reappraisal to queer theory, appears not as a departure from her ancient character but as a continuation of exactly the interpretive openness the ancient tradition built into her from the start.

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