

Conscia Littera: Ovid's Helen as Reader, Writer, and Agent

Ancient authors as varied as Homer, Sappho, and Vergil explore the causes of the Trojan War and especially Helen's role in the war's beginning. Ovid, in the *Heroides*, joins this debate, and he grants Helen the notable opportunity to craft her own complete narrative in a letter, a medium that allows Helen direct expression of her feelings. In addition, the Helen of the *Heroides* joins the letter-writing community of female writers of the *Heroides*.

Lindheim and Fulkerson have demonstrated that the authors of the single *Heroides* write as part of a community, that they have read each other's letters, and that this reading influences how they create their own letters (Lindheim 2003, 75; Fulkerson 2005, 12-14, 27-29). The single and double *Heroides* are most often regarded as separate works—they usually appear as separate texts (e.g. Kenney 1996, Knox 1995)—but I argue that, even though Helen's letter appears in the double *Heroides*, Helen reads, writes, and chooses to act as a member of this same community of female writers seen in the single *Heroides*.

Paris, throughout his letter, employs a rhetoric that asks Helen to act—to return to Troy with him. Among his arguments, Paris claims that no wars will arise as a result of Helen's relatives attempting to reclaim her (*Her.* 16.341ff). He provides several mythological examples, including those of Ariadne and Medea (16.347-350), both of whom write letters included in the single *Heroides* (*Her.* 10, 12). Helen, however, chooses to write to Paris—instead of acting immediately—and refuses to be caught by his rhetoric. For example, Helen does not take Paris' word on their relationship's consequences or on his mythological examples. She knows that her relatives will indeed use war as a means to reclaim her (17.249-250), and she has, in the course of her letter, demonstrated a different reading of Medea and Ariadne's stories—the women may not have caused wars, but they nevertheless experienced disastrous personal consequences due to the faithless men with whom they left their homes (17.193-194, 229-234). Helen, who has read Ariadne and Medea's letters in the *Heroides*, uses the knowledge she has gained from those letters to respond to Paris. Helen's reading of and response to Paris has thus been strengthened by her experience as reader and writer in the community of the *Heroides*.

Helen, therefore, fully understands the consequences of a relationship with Paris; this knowledge derives from reading the single *Heroides*. Despite this knowledge—and despite the fact that up until this point in her letter, Helen has refused Paris' advances—Helen makes clear

that she will stop reading and writing and choose the action Paris has been urging her toward (17.261-262). My paper will explore this disparity between Helen's reading and writing and her action—why has Helen made a choice she knows will bring disastrous effects, both to her personally and on a larger scale? By complicating Helen's agency, Ovid contributes to the larger literary discussion concerned with Helen's role in her abduction and in the beginning of the Trojan War.

Bibliography

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