

## *Logos and the Manipulation of Self-Representation: Helen of Troy as a Rhetor*

Helen of Troy stands out among the female characters of the *Iliad* not only because she is the *causa belli* of the Trojan War, but also because she is one of the most accomplished orators among the poem's cast of characters. Helen is gifted in her use of *logos*, or rhetoric, and in her awareness of its effects on her audience, but the way in which she manipulates language to assert herself is qualitatively different than the way in which Odysseus, Agamemnon, and others employ their rhetoric. In particular, Helen uses formulaic unobtainable wishes to both assert her agency by manipulating the audience's perception of her, and to almost immediately subvert their ability to blame her.

Scholars and commentators (cf. Kirk, 1985; Pantelia, 2002), for the most part, agree that Helen is a gifted *rhetor*. Helen demonstrates a clear understanding of *logos*, its effect, and how to best utilize it for her own advantage. Her speeches are filled with metrical devices like enjambment (i.e. in her speech to Aphrodite, III.400-401, cf. Kirk *ad loc*) and with using meter to replicate her current emotional state (i.e. such as using spondees to replicate sobbing in her confrontation with Aphrodite, III.399-412, cf. Kirk *ad loc*). Moreover, Helen performs the final lamentation for Hector in Book XIV, carefully balancing the self-pity necessary within a lamentation with the need to preserve Hector's *kleos* through *logos*, something Andromache and Hecuba are unable to do in their laments (Pantelia).

But Helen's strength as a *rhetor* goes even deeper. Blondell (2010) notes the peculiarity of Helen's self-reproach and suggests that Helen's self-abuse is a rhetorical strategy to assert her agency as a woman in a society which normally does not allow female agency. In contrast to others who say that Helen is a helpless character (cf.

Groten, 1968), by reproaching herself for past actions, Helen acquires the capacity to actively cause change within the world. In these instances, Helen's blame is structured as past contra-factual wishes. These kinds of wishes express a desire for that which cannot be realized, allowing Helen to assert agency and to clear herself of blame. An example of this follows.

ὥς μ' ὄφελ' ἦματι τῷ ὅτε με πρῶτον τέκε μήτηρ  
οἴχεσθαι προφέρουσα κακῇ ἀνέμοιο θύελλα  
εἰς ὄρος ἢ εἰς κῦμα πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης,  
ἔνθα με κῦμ' ἀπόερσε πάρος τάδε ἔργα γενέσθαι.  
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ τάδε γ' ὄδε θεοὶ κακὰ τεκμήραντο...  
(VI.344–349, Monro and Allen)

Would that on the day my mother first bore me  
A black gust of wind carried me away  
Into the mountains or the loudly-churning sea,  
Where a wave could have swept me away before these deeds came to be.  
But since the gods decreed these evils in this way...  
(translations are my own)

In this example, Helen blames herself to reclaim her own agency. She creates a desire for some ideal world in which she had not yet performed disgraceful actions, thereby acknowledging her culpability in the past, but robbing current critics of the chance to blame her by actively partaking in female self-disparagement, a notable characteristic of

a ‘good wife’ (Blondell, 2013). This desire to assert agency is seen through the statement, “would that I,” an utterance that acknowledges her culpability. But her immediate transition to directly blaming the gods (VI.349) does not allow men to blame her. The violent embellishment of the central three lines underscores that Helen has done something that she should feel remorse over, but by ascribing it to the will of the gods, Helen creates a situation in which she logically cannot be held accountable for their actions or their results.

This use of rhetoric is ingenious in that it both claims agency and shields the agent from censure. Moreover, Helen’s similar instances of this sort of “blame discourse” occur at major points within the text, specifically Helen’s attack on Aphrodite (III.399-412), Helen’s disparagement of her marriage to Paris (VI.344-358), and Helen’s lamentation for Hector (XXIV.762-775). Helen utilizes the same unobtainable wish formula almost universally, highlighting her skill as a *rhetor* and the way in which she uses *logos* to control the people around her, thereby demonstrating a formidable control of her self-representation and others’ perception of her actions.

#### Works Cited

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