Held Captive by Divinity:
The Identity of Helen of Troy from Caricature to Agent

The goal of this paper is to explore the identity and agency of Helen of Troy in her proximity to divinity. By looking at sections of her original portrayal in the *Iliad* compared to Euripides' *Helen*, and for further evidence, I will examine Euripides' similar treatment of another mythical woman, Iphigenia, in his work, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*.

I argue that the presence of divinity leads to mortal lives being regarded as mere miasmic collateral damage. Insofar as in Homeric texts, figures such as Helen, who are used by the Gods to justify the means, repeatedly lament the physical pains they endure because of the Gods and show remorse over their actions, and—unlike most Greek women present—have a prevalent speaking role. However, this is still considered a narrow-sighted point of view that prevents readers from fully fleshing out Helen of Troy outside the traditional male Greek purview, trapping her in either a victim or whore archetype. In the first section of this paper, I will point out specific sections of book 3 in Homer's *Iliad* where Helen is allowed to speak to a point, but this is attuned to the gods' presence or agenda and she is narratively unable to take full charge of her actions or even her body.

However, I will juxtapose these sections to Euripides' *Helen*, where there is a lack of divinity in the majority of the work, appearing in passing only, until the very end of the play. Because Helen is stuck in this limbo-like state in a foreign land, the gods have left her to her own devices, isolated in Egypt, as seen in select passages from the many singular speaking roles that Helen occupies, such as lines 255-305, 361-374, and 1085-1106. Where in each section Helen is, at once, thinking aloud her woes in an act of disempowerment (Lowe, 2004), but is still outside the Gods' control. Euripides' Helen can beseech the Gods, or even condemn them to a further extent because there is no guarantee of divine reply, she is truly alone in her thinking and subsequent planning. To this effect, Euripides forces the audience to look closely at Helen, leaving only her thoughts and actions to be interpreted, at least before her divine brothers intervene in lines 1642-

1679, where ironically Helen's act of agency in taking ownership of her escape is robbed from her via *deus ex machina*. Finally, I will shift towards Euripides' treatment of another Greek woman left without autonomy, the tragic Iphigenia. She, like Helen, can make a great escape from her fate (Lillicrap, 2021), and similarly steps out of her given Homeric role to take on a more narratively heavy part including both complex emotions and actions that would not traditionally be associated with her. Again, Iphigenia here is responsible for her own autonomy until tangible divinity intervenes at the last minute of the play.

By the end of the paper, readers should begin to take the pieces of Helen and similar tragic female figures that myth and literature have passed down to form a picture that is true to what antiquity has proposed, but also highlights what writers in the classical tradition have worked on, by viewing these women in different circumstances to fill in the gaps of agency and identity lost. It would be a misstep not to take an opportunity to see fictional women like Helen of Troy as multifaceted agents in their own right, instead of relying on the caricatures made in their image.

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