

## Reexamining Helen in *Iliad* Book 3

In a recent SCS presentation, Caroline Murphy-Racette convincingly argues that Helen's behavior in the *Iliad*, where she blames herself and wishes for death, aligns with individuals experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder and continuous traumatic stress following a sexual assault. Thus, the epic represents Helen as a traumatized figure (Murphy-Racette 2024). Building off this paper, I argue that Helen builds a Trojan persona to prevent or mitigate the trauma that she experiences before and during the Trojan War. Specifically, Helen uses this persona to assimilate into Trojan society. This argument develops from a thesis I wrote for my undergraduate degree and examines Helen's speech in her three Iliadic appearances. The time allotted for this conference paper, however, does not allow an examination of all three appearances. Rather I will focus on Helen's speech in the *teichoskopia*.

As other scholars show, Helen's self-blame and death wishes fall within gendered and ethnic ways of speaking of in the *Iliad*. For example, Nancy Worman observes that blame speech is commonly found in women's laments or in men's battlefield exchanges (Worman 2001). The word Helen uses to construct her death wishes – ὄφελεν – tends to be used by Greek warriors as an insult against their Trojan enemies. By contrast, Trojan soldiers tend to refrain from insults and instead engage in de-escalation tactics (Mackie 1996). So when Helen aims a typical Greek insult at herself in front of the Trojan elders it prompts them to de-escalate their hostility toward her. Indeed, the elders go from gossiping about her beauty (*Iliad* 3.156-60) to supporting her account of Odysseus (*Il.* 3.204-24).

Since ὄφελεν is also used in women's laments, Helen's death wish mimics typical speech patterns found among the Trojan women, who include stylistic choices typical of laments in their

everyday (i.e., non-funerary) speech (Derderian 2001). Not only does Helen connect with the Trojan women by participating in their subculture, but she proves herself a worthy and talented member of this group. For, as Christos Tsagalis argues, death wishes are among the most moving stylistic devices that lamenters can use (Tsagalis 2004). Indeed, the Trojan women – and the Trojans as a whole – accept Helen into their society when she becomes one of three chief mourners at Hector’s funeral (*Il.* 24.762-75).

Recent scholarship regarding speech acts and gender in the Homeric epics support my argument. Jonathan Ready, for example, argues that the elders show off their own speaking skills when they praise Helen (by likening her to a goddess) and blame her (by naming her a source of pain) in the same breath. When Helen likens Idomeneus to a god, she appropriates the elders’ simile and shifts objectification from herself to the Greek hero (*Il.* 3.230). Alongside her descriptions of the other Greek heroes, the simile helps establish Helen as an “authoritative interpellator” who is “far more integral to the discussion than the elders.” (Ready 2011, 110-9). Essentially, Helen reuses a Trojan speech act to present herself as more of a Trojan elder than the Trojan elders themselves.

This paper hopes to recenter scholarly research on Helen’s speech rather than her beauty. Scholars such as Ruby Blondell, who has written extensively on Helen in the past decade, seem more interested in questions concerning Helen’s beauty - namely the implications and representations of her beauty (Blondell 2013 and 2023). While Helen’s beauty is integral to her mythic identity and should not be ignored, I believe there are new and more exciting questions we can ask about her. In doing so I hope we can break Helen out of the model as a seductive and/or manipulative character. And by building Murphy-Racette’s argument, I hope to present an alternative model that also interprets Helen as more than a traumatized victim.

## Bibliography

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