

Blaming Helen: Inconsistency in *Aeneid* 6 and *Odyssey* 24

Few textual debates have been as spirited as the war waged over the Helen episode of *Aeneid* 2. The passage has been disputed on narrative, lexical, stylistic, syntactic, and metrical grounds and the same evidence has often been wielded in defense of opposite views. Ingenious arguments have been made on both sides: important arguments in favor of the passage's authenticity include Austin 1964, Reckford 1981, Conte 1986 and 2006; Harrison 1990, Egan 1996, Syed 2005, Delvigo 2006; important arguments against include Heinze 1915, Goold 1970, Murgia 1971 and 2003, and Horsfall 2008. It seems that Wiechmann spoke presciently when he declared that the passage was one *qua de re viri docti iam pridem inter se certarunt semperque, ni fallor, certabunt* (1876: 15).

While not pretending to offer a solution to this thorny problem, I propose to add another piece to the puzzle. I focus on one element of the argument against the Helen episode: that it is incompatible with Deiphobus' account of his own death in *Aeneid* 6. This is one of two objections that Servius claims led to the episode's excision, although contemporary debate has generally centered around other issues. In fact, the contradictory perspectives on Helen offered by Books 2 and 6 may be viewed as part of a larger pattern of inconsistencies that lend themselves to a dialogic, rather than monologic, epic narrative (Suzuki 1989, Bleisch 1999, O'Hara 2007). In this paper, I consider a hitherto-unrecognized Homeric parallel that furthers a polyphonic interpretation of the incompatibility between the Helen episode and Deiphobus' version of events.

In *Odyssey* 24, Penelope's suitor Amphimedon describes his own death at Odysseus' hands (24.123-190). His version of events, while often correct, includes one major error: he portrays Odysseus and Penelope as colluding together in establishing the contest of the bow

(24.167-190), although the reader is aware that they did not, and that in fact Penelope was explicitly excluded from the plot. I argue that the Homeric passage provides an important parallel with Vergil's Book 6: like Deiphobus, Amphimedon gives an incorrect account that places the blame for his death on a deceptive female, displacing the male murderer with his treacherous helpmeet. Further, Amphimedon's narrative attempts to diminish his own guilt by portraying the suitors as hapless victims, just as Deiphobus minimizes his culpability in appropriating another man's wife by referring to Menelaus as Helen's lover (*amanti*, 2.526) rather than her husband. In both passages, Helen and Penelope are scapegoated by the male narrators, and conflict between men is re-inscribed as male victimization at the hands of a woman.

Suzuki (1989: 103) and Bleisch (1999: 206-209) have argued that Vergil's incompatible versions of Helen are echoes of Homer's incompatible stories in *Odyssey* 4. Thus, Vergil's play with conflict and contradiction may be seen as part of a long-standing debate over Helen's agency and loyalties. In this paper, I argue that the incompatibility between the narrator's version and Amphimedon's offers a more comprehensive parallel that sheds light both on the authenticity of the Helen episode and on a sexual politics of epic that persistently inscribes women at the center of conflict between men.

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