

Helen's Death Wish and the Power of the Epic Sea

This paper examines the sea as an important element of the conversation between Helen and Hector in Book 6 of the *Iliad*, wherein Helen expresses regret that she did not die as an infant in order that the sufferings of the Trojan War might have been avoided. I focus on lines 344-348, in which Helen describes natural forces that might have brought about an alternate sequence of events:

ἄδερ ἐμεῖο κυνὸς κακομηχάνου ὀκρυοέσσης,
ὥς μ' ὄφελ' ἤματι τῷ ὅτε με πρῶτον τέκε μήτηρ
οἴχεσθαι προφέρουσα κακὴ ἀνέμοιο θύελλα
εἰς ὄρος ἢ εἰς κῦμα πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης,
ἔνθά με κῦμ' ἀπόερσε πάρος τάδε ἔργα γενέσθαι.

“Brother-in-law of me, of a dog who is baneful, horrible,
I wish that on the very day when first my mother bore me
an evil, sweeping storm of winds had taken me
to a mountain top or to the waves of the loud-roaring sea
where the waves could have swept me away
before these things came to be.”

The argument in this paper centres on the *πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης* formula. By connecting this phrase to its five other uses in the *Iliad*, I first suggest that its implementation in Book 6 is unusual and therefore highly provocative in its contribution to the impact of Helen's past impossible wish. I point out that this scene is unique in Homer for its use of the 'loud-

roaring sea' in a situation where the sea is not actually given as an immediate backdrop for the narrative, in action or in simile. This use of the sea instead reaches into a physically and temporally distant backdrop, while it also refers to separate narrative moments in the *Iliad* set near the 'resounding sea,' such as the scene in which a silent Chryses is framed by and against the tumultuous din of the sea (*Il.* 1.34), so that remoteness pulls Helen's speech into a broader epic space. I use these ideas as a starting point for the argument that the πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης formula here draws on the foundational connection of the sea to the broader narrative and poetic framework of Homeric epic, and therefore that the phrase here contributes to our understanding of the sea as a primary setting for Homeric epic.

In this analysis I refer to Paulo Vivante's discussion of the specificity of landscape markers in Homer, which can highlight a poetic situation and its immediacy (Vivante, 1991). I suggest that the location of the 'resounding sea' outside the immediate conversational setting reinforces the way in which the sea allows the discussion between Helen and Hector to blur into a broader and more distant epic space. This paper also considers Paul Kiparsky's discussion of the *realis* and *irrealis* modes of representation in oral-traditional narrative, in order to point out that just as the epic setting in itself conjures up the contradictions and potentialities of a mixed historico-legendary 'reality,' the wistful discourse used in Helen's 'impossible wish' develops the potency of the 'unreal' (the potential annulment of the entire epic cycle) as it reflects, questions, and ultimately confirms the 'real' (the plot and characters of the *Iliad*). Because the πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης phrase communicates such a loud, active, and deeply resonant representation of the natural world, particularly as it affects human behaviour (to which it is consistently connected in the *Iliad*; 2.2070-10 and 13.795-799 are obvious examples) this version of the sea serves as a poetic and natural force in the more 'real' narrative moments of the *Iliad*.

The use of the 'loud-roaring sea' in Book 6 then highlights a brief moment of discourse in which the poet and audience step outside of the acknowledged sequence of events to consider an alternative epic past, one that is distinctly 'unreal,' but which might have been brought about by the power of 'real' elements.

Ultimately the impact of the sea as an elemental force in Helen's wish is connected to the potency of the sea as an element of the Homeric landscape. Acknowledging the role of the sea as a normative landscape in Homeric epic (Purves, 2010), I point to the ways in the sea and its potency, as seen in Helen's discourse, are rendered into theme and narrative, informing the creation and understanding of Homeric poetry.

Bibliography

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