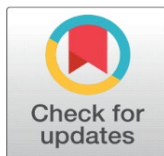


HELEN'S CHARACTER: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

In Greek Mythology, Helen was the daughter of Zeus and Leda, and was considered the most beautiful woman in the world of the time. She was married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta, but fled to Troy with Paris, the son of the Trojan king Priam. This act caused the Trojan War, which lasted for ten years. After the war, Helen returned to Sparta with Menelaus. In order to know the character of Helen clearly, it is analysed at five levels as shown in this article. The five levels are : a) Helen as a daughter, b) Helen as a wife, c) Helen as a daughter-in-law, e) Helen as a mother, and f) Helen as a woman.

Keywords: Mythology, Curse, Dekelia, Eurotas, Sparta, Troy, etc.

1. HELEN'S CHARACTER: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

In Greek Mythology, Helen was the daughter of Zeus and Leda, and was considered the most beautiful woman in the world of the time. She was married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta, but fled to Troy with Paris, the son of the Trojan king Priam. This act caused the Trojan War, which lasted for ten years. After the war, Helen returned to Sparta with Menelaus. In order to know the character of Helen clearly, it is analysed at five levels as shown and explained below:

2. HELEN AS A DAUGHTER

When Leda, the queen of Sparta was bathing on the banks of Eurotas Zeus raped her in the form of a swan As a result of it Leda produced a bizarre clutch of egg. After that the egg was hatched into a beautiful girl child. Leda and king Tyndareus named the child as Helen and brought up the child. Although Helen was a step-daughter of Tyndareus, Tyndareus and Leda brought up Helen very lovingly. Tyndareus treated Helen as his own daughter. And Helen grew up as the most beautiful and loving daughter. When Helen was only twelve years old she was dancing and exercising naked with other young virgins and Theseus, recently widowed, caught sight of her. With eyes for no other, devoured by lust, he seized the Spartan princess. Theseus locked Helen in the hill-fortress of Aphidna near Dekelia. While her assaulter was off in

pursuit of yet another woman, Helen's brothers, Pollux and Castor, stormed the prison. Since Helen was living as a precious daughter of the family, the two brothers saved Helen without fearing the danger that might come while saving Helen. Even though Helen lost her virginity, she remained as a loyal daughter of the king of Sparta. When the times came Helen's step-father gave the chance to Helen to choose her husband from her suitors. Helen chose Menelaus and her father arranged the marriage of Helen and Menelaus as a grand wedding. When Tyndareus and Leda became old, they gave the throne to Helen and Menelaus. Even though Helen was a step-daughter, Tyndareus did not give his throne to his other sons or daughters but to Helen and Menelaus only. The family gave the full power of Sparta to Helen and Menelaus.

In the culture in Sparta all the befitting members of the society performed duties along with self-sacrifice as a part of the duty in Sparta. Helen who has been involved from her girlhood perhaps continues to perform those rituals as a daughter in the kingdom. Consequently she is not only the daughter to her parents but also a precious and valuable daughter to the people of Sparta.

3. HELEN AS A WIFE

In some sources it is written that Helen has many husbands, but among them Menelaus and Paris are the most important ones.

Because Helen was deserving of only the finest, her father, Tyndareus, organised a marriage ceremony in which all the warriors of the land had to compete in shows of strength and offering of wealth. There was no concurrences as to where the contest took place, other than at Tyndareus' home.

The notion of a Bronze Age precinct at Sparta packed with suitors, the tense and sweaty pick of Male Mycenaean society, was graphic - and was inspirational to the earliest known authors in the West. Hesiod catalogues the heroes who came to fight for Spartan princess on that first occasion - because, of course, they are to meet again, competing for Helen on the battlefields of Troy. He mentions one suitor, Philoctetes, and then elegantly, and quickly, moves on to describe the heroes' prize. Throughout this catalogue of the good and the great, Hesiod drops in little reminders of Helen's beauty. She is rich-haired, neat-ankled, girl whose renown spread all over the holy earth.

When the anxious suitors thundered to Sparta, their heroes spittle-flecked and colourful, a caravan of gifts behind in preparation for the marriage ahead, they would have cut quite a sorry figure. All yearning to win a peerless and glorious princess.

As they rode into the Spartan area, the old king of Sparta, Tyndareus, made them promise one thing before they received, fought, sang and bid for the princess. Since there could be only one winner and many losers, they had to testify eternal allegiance to him who was successful. Even if they were not lucky enough to insist Helen, they must remain loyal to each other, must help each other whenever asked. Tyndareus sacrificed a horse as a sign of the enormous importance of the pact. Among the suitors, Helen chose Menelaus and he became the ruler of Sparta with Helen after Tyndareus and Leda abdicated the throne.

After their marriage Helen and Menelaus lived a happy life. In the Spartan palace they had a beautiful daughter, Hermione.

Prior to the events of the epic, Paris is asked by Zeus to determine which goddess is the most beautiful: Hera, Aphrodite, or Athena. Each goddess offers Paris a prize in an attempt to earn his favour and win the contest. Aphrodite eventually wins Paris' vote with a promise to make the most beautiful woman in the world his wife. However, Aphrodite misses out to mention that Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, is already married to king Menelaus of Sparta. This obstacle does not stop Paris from liking Helen. Helen leaves Sparta for Troy and flashes the Trojan War.

It is not long before Helen's love for Paris goes away. She is homesick and feels guilty for those many lives lost for her sake. Most of the people of Troy are angry with her for causing the Trojan War. She misses her family, home and friends.

She deeply regrets her decidedness to be with Paris as his wife. In Book 3 of the Iliad she speaks to her father-in-law, King Priam of Troy, about her grief as:

I respect and admire you, my dear
father-in-law. I wish I had chosen
to die in misery before I came here
with your son, deserting my bridal
bed, my relatives, my darling daughter
and the dear friends with whom I had
grown up. But things did not fall out
like that, and so I spend my life in
tears. [Rieu, E.V, The Iliad: 56]

Helen misses her daughter, Hermione, and the life she had before coming to Troy to be with Paris. Helen regrets her decision to be with Paris, and her hatred of him intensifies as the war progresses. Helen is repulsed by Paris's cowardly behaviour when he fights Menelaus. Initially, Paris retreats out of fear when he is challenged by Menelaus. Paris agrees to fight the Spartan king after he is scolded by Hector for his cowardice. During their battle, Paris was dragged by Menelaus by the strap of his helmet. Aphrodite interferes that she breaks the helmet strap and takes Paris off the battlefield to his room in the palace.

After the Greeks won the war the hatred of the people at large did not much anguish her. Through the latticed windows of the palace filtered the bleats of the populace, drudging and the roar of distant breakers. And even as breakers had no distress for landsmen, so, safe in her husband's home, Helen did not fear the bleats of the folks he ruled. Thus Helen is finally portrayed as a loyal and confident wife of Menelaus in Sparta.

4. HELEN AS A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

In different sources it is written that Helen has many husbands. But among them Menelaus and Paris are the most important. And Helen legally marries only once, that is with Menelaus. But when Menelaus and his elder brother Agamemnon were still young, their father died. At that time Helen was the step daughter of Tyndareus, and many suitors had arrived at the court of Sparta to ask for her hand in marriage. Menelaus became the lucky person to win the hand of Helen. Helen and Menelaus got married and they ascended to the throne of Sparta when Tyndareus and his queen Leda decided to step down. The lucky couple got a daughter called Hermione, but some accounts also mentioned her three sons : Aithiolas, Maraphius and Pleisthenes. Since the father of Menelaus died early before the marriage of Helen and Menelaus, there is no relationship of father-in-law and daughter-in-law on the side of Menelaus.

When the readers looked at the side of Paris they found the fact that Helen got a father-in-law named Priam, the king of Troy. Although Helen and Paris married illegally, her father-in-law treated Helen very nicely. In those ancient days marrying a queen of another kingdom was taken as a token of fame. So even though the abduction of Helen caused a great war that might destroy their great kingdom and which would cause a great loss of life, they welcome Helen very happily and supported the illegal marriage of Helen and Paris. And also Priam and Helen had a good relationship as a father-in-law and daughter-in-law. Priam called out Helen and spoke:

Dear child, come here and sit in front of me,
so that you can see your former husband and
your relatives and friends. I don't hold you
responsible for any of this, but the gods. It
is they who brought on me this war against
the Greeks, with all its tears. And now you
can tell me the name of that awe-inspiring
man over there, that fine, tall Greek. There
are certainly others who are taller but I have
never set eyes on a man so handsome and
imposing. [Rieu. E.V, The Iliad: 49-50]

From the above speech of Priam to Helen it can be easily noted that Priam treats Helen as his own child by addressing as 'dear child' to Helen. He even does not call Helen by her name but calls her lovingly as dear child. Again Priam does not blame Helen for the great war which might cause the fall of Troy in future although the war is the result of the illegal marriage of Helen and Paris. Instead Priam blames the Gods for the cause of the great war. And also Priam gives Helen the room to see her former husband, Menelaus and her old friends while they are fighting. As response to her father-in-law, Helen speaks:

Now I will tell what you
wished to know. The man
you pointed out is Agamemnon,
son of Atreus, a good ruler and
a mighty spearman too. He was
my brother-in-law once, but that
I am - unless all that was a dream. [Ibid.,:50]

From the reply of Helen to her father-in-law Priam, readers can notice that Helen too respects and cares for her father-in-law like her own father. She is satisfied with what her father-in-law wished to know by identifying the man from the opponent's side. She also confesses honestly her regret of coming to Troy and causing the great war which leads to the loss of many lives. She also misses her daughter and her dear ones.

5. HELEN AS A MOTHER

According to many sources Helen had many husbands but Helen has children with only two husbands - Menelaus and Paris. Helen and Menelaus had a daughter, Hermione and four more sons - named Aethiolas, Nicostratus, Megapenthes and Pleisthenes. While Paris and Helen had four children, three sons, named Bunomus, Aganus and Idaeus and one daughter named Helen. The children of Paris died in an earthquake during the Trojan war, so they were not mentioned further. But among the children of Helen, Hermione was the most important one and she was also born before the elopement of Paris and Helen. Hermione grew up as a royal princess of Sparta, as the first child of Menelaus and Helen. Hermione was only nine years old when Helen left for Troy with Paris. When Helen was staying in Troy she missed her dear daughter very much. While talking with her father-in-law Priam, she says :

I respect and admire you, my dear
father-in-law. I wish I had chosen
to die in misery before I came here
with you so, deserting my bridal
bed , my relatives, my darling daughter
and the dear friends with whom I had
grown up. But things did not fall out
like that, and so I spend my life in tears. [Ibid.,:50]

Although Helen was kept with love and care in the palace of Troy, she still missed her daughter. Here readers can see the motherly love and affection in Helen. Helen did not forget her daughter and she had the love of mother in her heart while her little daughter was far away from her. She regretted what she had done and spent her life in tears although she was treated very lovely and nicely by the people in the palace of Troy. While talking with Paris, Helen says:

So you are back from the battlefield -
and I was hoping you had fallen there
to the mighty warrior who was once my
husband ! You used to boast you were a
better man than warlike Menelaus - a
finer spearman, stronger in the arm . Go
and challenge him to fight again, then!
But if you take my advice, you will
think twice before you offer single combat
to auburn-haired Menelaus - or you may
end by falling to his spear.[Ibid.,:56]

Generally one of the qualities of a mother is that she has a soft corner to the weaker child. The above quotation shows that Helen has a motherly feeling by giving advice to Paris, who is more weaker than Menelaus. Like a mother Helen also gives advice to Paris to go and challenge him to fight again by following her advice.

6. HELEN AS A WOMAN

Helen applies a surprising amount of agency throughout The Iliad, which abases her role as a woman within Paris' household. In the sixth book, Hector outfaces Paris about his absence from the battlefield and Helen responds by supporting Hector and asking him to sit down, away from the conflict. While Helen tries to pacify his anger, she frames her argument by calling herself a 'scheming, cold blooded bitch'. Although this may be a continuation of the self-hatred that interpenetrates the third book of the Iliad, this may also hint at the amount that Helen has behind the scenes of the Trojan War. For instance, in the Odyssey, Helen tells Tellemachus how she met Odysseus when he insinuated Troy, and that she saw through disguise and questioned him, though she would not reveal him to the Trojans. Odysseus' stumbling with Helen foreshadows his later adventures, in which he disguises himself during his encounter with the Cyclops and the insinuation of his household to get rid of the suitors. In these instances, nobody recognizes the identity of Odysseus until he chooses to reveal himself; therefore, Helen's ability to see through his disguise demonstrates her intellect. When she tries to talk to Odysseus who remains silent, her action parallels his encounter with Polyphemus, in which his refusal to give information about himself is cardinal to his survival. However, while Polyphemus is depicted as Odysseus' lesser, Helen seems his equal, as neither of them is fooled by the other - first is Helen seeing through his disguise and then in Odysseus refusing to talk to her. Helen's intellect is also supported in other sources like Euripides' Helen, in which she escapes marriage to the Egyptian king Theoklymenos through artifice. Although Helen was calling herself a 'scheming cold-blooded bitch' in the Iliad, it seems like an affront, this may actually be a representation of her agenda, which in this advert seems to require keeping the foremost Trojan warrior away from battle.

The widespread use of Helen by various authors in texts about the Trojan War intertwines diverse interpretations of her character. However, Helen's elusive and contradictory behaviour across ancient Greek literature serves to amplify her powerful influence over the Trojan War and the men who fought in it. In syncretizing the various myths about her life - such as regarding her parentage and earlier abductions - with her epic and tragic delineation, a fascinating image is created of a highly after-sought woman who stands on the bluff between disgust and desirability, godhood and humanity, and ultimately, purpose and perplexity in response to the events of her own life. In examining the liminal figure of Helen of Troy, not only are we able to ask the blood-red fabric that she and the poet use to shape her place in the narrative of the Trojan War, but also, allow her to inhabit the simultaneous role of a weaver pulling the strings and a subject made of thread.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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