

# HELEN OF TROY

## A HEROINE IN A MAN'S WORLD!

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Helen is a beautiful woman, some say a Goddess, others say a whore because of her adulterous ways, and she is pursued relentlessly by suitors from all over the ancient world. Homer, Euripides, and Stesichorus all narrate her story, but Homer is the original source in his 2 epic poems, the **Iliad** and the **Odyssey**.



The fairest woman in the world is Helen, the daughter of the King of **Sparta Tyndareos** and his wife **Leda**. Their other daughter Clytemnestra is married to Agamemnon. Such is the fame of the beauty of Helen that every young prince craves to marry her. Superhero **Theseus** abducts her first, but her brothers Castor and Pollux, [both **Argonauts**, who sailed to Colchis through the Hellespont with **Jason** on the Ship **Argo** to get the Golden Fleece], get her back home. So, when suitors from all over Greece assemble in Sparta to ask for her hand, her father Tyndareos, fearing another abduction makes them take an oath to defend whomever he chooses for her husband, and, moreover, that they collectively would punish anyone who **tried to abduct** Helen. Then Tyndareos chooses Menelaos and he makes him King of Sparta. In the meantime,

Goddess **Aphrodite** sends an image of Helen to **Paris** of Troy who at the time is out in the fields shepherding his father's goats; he falls madly in love with Helen, and the rest is history, for love is the strongest force in the whole world!

In the Iliad, Paris, a prince of **Troy**, a city that has accumulated enormous wealth by controlling the flow of merchant shipping through the nearby **Hellespont** [in what is now NW Turkey; the Dardanelles], abducts Helen. As per their oath, the Greeks sail in 1000 ships to Troy under Agamemnon as the Commander in Chief. After 10 years of siege, Troy falls when a wooden horse full of Greeks hidden inside it is brought into the fortified walls of the city, despite warnings from Helen, **Cassandra** [sister of Paris], and local prophet **Laocoon**. The Greeks emerge at night, open the gates, and Troy, the fairest city in all of Anatolia, never recovers after that!

In the **Iliad**, Homer uses the word “weave” to talk about the process of composing his song. As the weaver connects the threads to make a cloth, so the poet brings words together to make a song. In the Iliad then, Homer “weaves” [ὄφαινει] the story of the apotheosis of the war heroes and their heroic deeds. Focusing in war and manly action, the Iliad is a masculine poem.

In the **Odyssey**, poet Homer weaves [ὄφαινει] the “*nostos*” [νόστος = homegoing] of Odysseus who takes 10 years to return to Ithaca. It is a travelogue, in which there are many heroines, the principal among them being Odysseus wife Penelope. Penelope too weaves [ὄφαινει] a cloth [a story] for 20 years waiting for her husband to return. The Odyssey then, as compared to the Iliad, becomes a **feminine epic** in that the idea of domesticity, not war is emphasized. Moreover, Penelope seems to narrate her story the same way Odysseus does. The Odyssey is about **Penelope** almost as much as it is about Odysseus, balancing the world of men and women in a way that the Iliad does not.

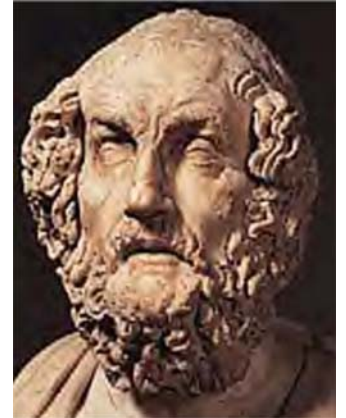
However, in the masculine Iliad, Helen too is weaving [ὄφαινει] her story of the heroes of the Iliad. Homer describes Helen weaving a carpet picturing the Trojan War. Helen is also narrating her own versions of the story in the Iliad, a version much different from the Homeric perspective. Her story is compelling in that Helen seems to be moving between the Greek and the Trojan camp. In a **world rigidly divided** in two hostile camps, Helen is able to see both perspectives. She helps the Greeks when they need it and helps the Trojans when they ask for her help. Helen is loved by **Priam** king of Troy, her father-in law, and she in turn helps him identify all the warriors on the battle field. She cringes with horror watching Menelaos and Paris duel in the sun; laments the loss of Hector

together with his wife **Andromache**. **Achilles**, the strongest and one of the bravest men in the world, is forced to enter the battle when Prince **Hector** of Troy kills **Patroclus**, Achilles best friend [*φιλία*]. Achilles kills Hector and drags Hector's body behind his chariot. With the warriors unable to decide the war, **diplomat Odysseus** comes up with the idea of the Trojan Horse, and the torture of a 10-year war ends. Achilles, however, pays for his sacrilege of depriving a dead man of his dignity. Paris arches an arrow at **Achilles heel**, his micro **vulnerability**, and kills him!

After the collapse of Troy, Helen follows **enriched** Menelaos to Sparta, after visits to Crete and Egypt, and back to **domesticity**, but more ordeals are to follow. Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, blames Helen for causing the Trojan War that brought so much misery to his family and the rest of the Greeks. He kills Helen's daughter. Yet, when **Telemachos**, the teenager son of Odysseus, comes from Ithaca to Sparta seeking to find the whereabouts of his father, Helen weaves [*υφαινει*] a complimentary picture of Odysseus and comforts the young boy.

My doctoral research is academic in that I am researching the nuances of the "**Helenic**" side of the story separate from the dominant **Homeric** narrative. Difficult to categorize and duplicitous, Helen is a **paradigmatic embodiment**, an eidolon of the elusiveness of **female logos** in a man's world.

The steadfast demeanor of Helen under the duress of such ordeals and the aura of her beauty has captivated the imagination of all who read or heard her story, young and old, for **hundreds of generations**; and, as she herself realizes, for **generations to come**!



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