

Recognizing Helen¹

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In Book 4 of the *Odyssey*, Helen and Menelaus, now home again in Sparta, are entertaining Telemachus, the son of Odysseus. Along with their hospitality, they each offer an anecdote about Odysseus as they saw him in a moment of great stress at Troy.

These anecdotes have been the subject of much scholarly speculation, not only about their content, but also about the behavior of the tellers. Froma Zeitlin, for example, sees each of the stories as having two levels. In the upper, they are "tales from the past that seems to have been forgiven, transmuted into a play of symmetrical reversals that charm instead of dismay." In the lower level, they are about Helen as the embodiment of fiction itself. In a less theoretical vein, Douglas Olson concentrates upon the possible function of the stories within the greater narrative, suggesting that the anecdotes "prepare us for what is to come many books later, in another household, between another couple." Another interpretation, that of Charles Rowan Beye, is that these are stories both about a missing hero and about Helen's loyalty—or lack of it.²

That there are so many differing interpretations of these two stories is not surprising. On the surface, they *are* what they purport to be: tales of Odysseus, told to his son, Telemachus. Just below that surface, however, they *do* appear to be about something else. Helen's story, for example,

¹ My thanks to the following people for their assistance in creating this essay: Carolyn Higbie, Gregory Nagy, Victor Ortiz, David Sansone, and the readers at *ICS*. Thanks as well to the Center for Hellenic Studies, its directors, Kurt Raaflaub and Deborah Boedeker, and the fellows for 1998–1999.

² See F. I. Zeitlin, "Travesties of Gender and Genre," in H. P. Foley (ed.), *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (New York 1981) 203–05; S. D. Olson, "The Stories of Helen and Menelaus (*Odyssey* 4. 240–89) and the Return of Odysseus," *AJP* 110 (1989) 387–94; C. R. Beye, *Ancient Epic Poetry: Homer, Apollonius, Virgil* (1969; repr. Ithaca 1993) 161. Sheila Murnaghan would understand the scene as providing Telemachus with a model for enduring loss: S. Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton 1987) 161–62 n. 23. M. A. Katz, in *Penelope's Renown* (Princeton 1991) 192, suggests that the stories of Helen "refocus the question of Penelope's fidelity around remarriage rather than betrayal." For a very different view, see Victoria Wohl, who presents the two stories as a dramatizing of the "problem of the essentially indeterminate and undeterminable quality of (female) speech or creativity," in "Standing by the Stathmos: The Creation of Sexual Ideology in the *Odyssey*," *Arethusa* 26 (1993) 19–50, specifically 32–35.

opens with Odysseus entering the city on a spying mission. To do so, he had changed shape, Helen says (*Od.* 4. 244–50), but, for all of Odysseus' masterly disguise, Helen tells Telemachus that she herself was never taken in (4. 250–56). She explains that Odysseus' subsequent spying was a success (4. 257–58), and concludes by stating that she was experiencing at that time a change of heart and had begun to wish for a return to her husband and family (4. 259–64). Thus, a story whose initial focus is on Odysseus and his cleverness quickly becomes a story about Helen and *her* cleverness, as well as about her (self-described) shift in loyalties.

Rather than comment upon his wife's story, Menelaus uses a variation of a formula familiar to us as the response commonly made to Nestor in the *Iliad* (*Od.* 4. 266): *ναὶ δὴ ταῦτά γε πάντα, γύναι, κατὰ μοῖραν ἔειπες* ("yes, indeed, wife, you've told everything in a fitting fashion"). In Homeric verse, this is always a polite answer, but also commonly the signal that, whatever has just been said will be put aside immediately after its saying. Menelaus, therefore, makes no direct comment on Helen's story, but proceeds to tell his own tale instead. Like Helen's, Menelaus' story offers Telemachus an example of his father's quick wits and courage. Also like Helen's, it begins by being about Odysseus, but quickly becomes a story about Odysseus—and Helen. When the Greeks are hiding in the wooden horse (4. 271–74), Helen and her current husband, Deiphobus, appear and Helen attempts to smoke the Greeks out of the horse by calling to them in the voices of their wives (4. 274–79). The Greeks, including Menelaus, are seduced and are about to reply when Odysseus hushes them and Helen leaves, drawn away by Athena (4. 280–89).

Although not a direct comment, this could easily be understood as Menelaus' response to the previous story and to the behavior of its teller. Instead of a Helen whose longing for home spurs her to aid the courageous and cunning Odysseus, we are presented with a Helen who replaces one Trojan husband with another and who is no more loyal than she was when she eloped with Paris years before.

Thus, when it comes to the interpretation of this scene, it would not be difficult to maintain that, at the least, Helen's story functions both as an encomium for Odysseus and as a piece of self-justification, and that Menelaus' story acts as a mini-praise-poem for Telemachus' father as well as a criticism of Helen in Troy. Without disagreeing with this or with the wealth of other interpretations, I would suggest that we might approach this pattern of story-counterstory from a new direction, focusing not upon Helen and Menelaus, as has often been the approach, but upon the two main characters within the stories, Helen and Odysseus. By doing so, I believe that we may add new facets not only to our understanding of this trading of stories, but of Helen and Odysseus, of Helen in comparison with other female characters in the *Odyssey*, and, perhaps most important, of the real power of Helen in the story of Troy.

As she seems to dominate the scene, let us begin with Helen. In her story, Helen lays particular emphasis upon the contrast between the Odysseus one might encounter among the ships and the spy who slips into Troy. To become the latter, Odysseus takes special care, not only to wear the right clothes, but even to disfigure himself by giving himself the marks of the kind of beating which one would expect on the body of an unruly slave.³ The hero who is a mainstay of the Achaean army has become "Nobody" for the first time—and yet Helen recognizes him at once and it is at this point in the story that the emphasis has changed from Odysseus to Helen.

At first glance, one might understand this change as a part of Helen's attempt to show herself in the best light possible. For those in Sparta who question her loyalty, this is a reply: "Odysseus was the enemy, but, though I might still have been in Troy, I was now so friendly to the Achaean cause that I sheltered an Achaean spy." If this were completely true, however, what do we make of the fact that she compromises that spy, first by identifying him and then by bathing and clothing him, thereby removing the very disguise he had assumed to spy on Troy?

Further, Helen implies that, somehow, she then aided Odysseus in his reconnaissance. Odysseus, since we subsequently hear that he goes back to the Achaeans with information (4. 258), clearly has gathered it in the city. We have, however, no evidence in Helen's story that, once she had recognized him, she actually helped him to do so. It would also appear that, stripped of his convincing disguise by Helen, Odysseus could not slip out of Troy so easily as he had slipped in. He may have been forced to fight his way from the city (4. 257–58) and Helen makes no mention of aiding him in his escape.⁴ Since she does not really help him and, in fact, seems actually to have endangered him, it would not appear that this story puts Helen in a favorable light—or does it?

Consider how Helen has constructed her tale. Odysseus has done something that no Achaean warrior has done in years: He has succeeded in penetrating the defences of Troy, fooling the entire city of Trojans with his cunning disguise, but *Helen* recognizes him. He attempts to avoid her probing, but, after a bath, oiling, fresh clothes, and a great oath by Helen not to betray him to the Trojans, he has fallen, at least in *her* telling, completely

³ Is there, in these few lines, the echo of a longer story which parallels that of Sinon the later Greek spy? Sinon is disfigured, either by himself (Triphiodorus' 3rd- or 4th-century A.D. *Taking of Ilion*, 219–20), by the Greeks as part of his disguise (the anonymous *Excidium Troiae*, p. 14, lines 12–14), or by the Trojans, in order to make him reveal the Greek plans (Quintus of Smyrna, 12. 36–37). Odysseus' disguise and purpose here may also, as Norman Austin suggests, act as a foreshadowing of Odysseus' secret penetration of his own home, later in the *Odyssey* (*Helen of Troy and her Shameless Phantom* [Ithaca 1994] 79).

⁴ For a further—and very probing—questioning of the credibility of Helen's story, see A. L. T. Bergren, "Helen's 'Good Drug': *Odyssey* IV 1–305," in S. Kresic (ed.), *Contemporary Literary Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Classical Texts* (Ottawa 1981) 201–14, and particularly 208–09.

into her power. Thus, although we may doubt that Helen's story makes her appear to be quite the pro-Achaean she wants to be in her explanation of her behavior, it does show that she is a powerful person, one so powerful as to be able to do something which no one else at Troy (or in the *Odyssey*, for that matter) can manage to do: make Odysseus, against his will, admit to his real identity, and thus put himself in her power.

Helen's method of persuading Odysseus bears a close resemblance to the *xenia* offered to Odysseus at the court of Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians, in *Odyssey* 8. 454–56.⁵ As in Troy, a battered Odysseus arrives in others' clothes, with nothing about him to indicate his true identity. After initial rounds of hospitality, the maids of Queen Arete bathe Odysseus, anoint him, and dress him, just as Helen says that she does. Odysseus is never at risk, of course, in the land of the Phaeacians, as he is at Troy—Phaeacian kindness finally prompts him to reveal his identity (9. 19–20), and so no one ever swears a great oath, as Helen does. Such a need for oath-swearing leads us, instead, to another and more dubious display of *xenia* in the *Odyssey*, at the house of Circe.

Whereas, among the Phaeacians, Odysseus has nothing to fear from *xenia*, he has been warned twice about the quality of Circe's hospitality, first, by his lieutenant, Eurylochus, and then by Hermes. Eurylochus, who remained outside, has seen half of Odysseus' crew enter Circe's house and not return and thus can only convey a sense of mistrust (10. 251–69). Hermes, however, knows very well the fate of Odysseus' men, as well as the fate of Odysseus, if he should fall under Circe's spell (10. 281–85). To prevent this fate, Hermes gives Odysseus the plant μῶλυ, tells him how to react to Circe's sexual advances, and then says (10. 299–301):

ἀλλὰ κέλεσθαί μιν μακάρων μέγαν ὄρκον ὁμόσσαι,
μή τί τοι αὐτῷ πῆμα κακὸν βουλευσέμεν ἄλλο,
μή σ' ἀπογυμνωθέντα κακὸν καὶ ἀνήνορα θήη.

But call her to swear the great oath of the blessed ones,
lest she plan some other evil mischief for you,
lest she put evil on you when you're naked and vulnerable.

Odysseus follows Hermes' advice and, after he has confronted Circe and overcome her, he allows himself to be bathed, oiled, and dressed, the pattern echoing that at Troy and Phaeacia (10. 357–65). And, as at Troy with Helen, Odysseus is protected by an oath (10. 345–46).⁶

⁵ Or in his own home, in the treatment Odysseus receives from Eumaeus, Penelope, and Eurycleia. It is interesting to note that only Eurycleia, who bathes his feet, recognizes Odysseus.

⁶ Helen's oath in 4. 253–54 is only "a strong oath" (κρατερόν ὄρκον) that she would not betray to the Trojans that he was Odysseus. Since, presumably, Circe is accorded near-god status (her father being Helios), Hermes insists on the oath sworn by the gods themselves, probably the one which uses the Styx as its focus. See *Il.* 14. 271–74, for example, when Sleep

Not content with keeping himself free of Circe's spells, Odysseus then pressures the sorceress into freeing his crew members. Upon their arrival, Circe has given them a drink which, if we may use the *Iliad* as a source for our conclusion, looks like a standard recipe for a kind of tonic. When Nestor, in *Iliad* 11, withdraws from the fighting, his slave, Hecamede, makes him a drink of Pramnian wine, cheese, and barley, which is clearly refreshing (11. 637–42). Circe provides for Odysseus' men a drink of Pramnian wine, cheese, barley, and honey (10. 233–35), but this drink is not meant to refresh (10. 235–36):

ἀνέμισγε δὲ σίτῳ
φάρμακα λύγρ', ἵνα πάγχυ λαθοῖατο πατρίδος αἴης.

. . . but she mixed with the drink
mischievous drugs, so that they might forget completely their homeland.

Helen, too, as we will remember from *Odyssey* 4. 220–32, mixes a drug of forgetfulness with wine just before she tells the story of her encounter with Odysseus inside Troy. Circe, however, does not stop with forgetfulness (10. 237–40):

αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δῶκέν τε καὶ ἔκπιον, αὐτίκ' ἔπειτα
ῥάβδῳ πεπληγυῖα κατὰ συφροῖσιν ἔεργνυ.
οἱ δὲ σῶν μὲν ἔχον κεφαλὰς φωνήν τε τρίχας τε
καὶ δέμας, αὐτὰρ νοῦς ἦν ἔμπεδος ὡς τὸ πάρος περ.

And so, when she had given and they had drunk it, right away then she struck them with a staff and drove them down to the pig sties. And they had the heads and squeal and bristles and look of pigs, but the consciousness was as before.

When Circe attempts to work the same magic upon Odysseus, her method is slightly more elaborate (10. 316–19):

τεῦχε δέ μοι κυκεῶ χρυσέῳ δέπαι, ὄφρα πίοιμι,
ἐν δέ τε φάρμακον ἦκε, κακὰ φρονέουσ' ἐνὶ θυμῷ.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δῶκέν τε καὶ ἔκπιον οὐδέ μ' ἔθελξε,
ῥάβδῳ πεπληγυῖα ἔπος τ' ἔφατ' ἔκ τ' ὀνόμαζεν·

She made for me the brew⁷ in a golden cup so that I would drink it, and in it she put the drug, evilly disposed in her heart. And so, when she had given and I had drunk it, it did not enchant me.

makes Hera swear an elaborate form of that oath. Curiously, when Odysseus actually forces Circe to swear, however (10. 342–46), it is only a “great oath” and not the greatest oath of all.

⁷ The word used here is *κυκεῶ*, which is glossed as a mixture of wine and other ingredients. Thus, although Circe is not actually described as making up the “tonic” used on Odysseus' men, she appears to be offering him the same drink. The same word is also applied to the brew created by Metaneira for Demeter, when she declines the wine offered to her (*Hymn to Demeter* 206–10), although there the ingredients are simply barley, water, and pennyroyal. By its use in the *Odyssey*, are we to imagine that its effects, combined with the appropriate magic, go beyond the restorative to the transformative?

She struck me with a staff⁸ and spoke a spell and summoned me.

When the spell does not have the desired effect, Circe is more than a little puzzled (10. 326–29):

θαῦμά μ' ἔχει ὡς οὐ τι πῶν τάδε φάρμακ' ἐθέλχθης·
οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐδέ τις ἄλλος ἀνὴρ τάδε φάρμακ' ἀνέτλη,
ὅς κε πῆ καὶ πρῶτον ἀμείψεται ἔρκος ὀδόντων.
σοὶ δέ τις ἐν στήθεσιν ἀκήλητος νόος ἐστίν.

Wonder holds me that, drinking these drugs, you were not enchanted.
For never ever has any other man withstood these drugs,
who drank and it first entered the ring of teeth.
Yours in your breast is some uncallable spirit.

Odysseus' invulnerability to enchantment, in turn, provides Circe with the clue to his identity (10. 330), an identity previously given by Hermes to the sorceress when he prophesies Odysseus' eventual appearance on her island (10. 330–32). Neither Circe nor Odysseus, however, provides an explanation as to why Odysseus, of all men, should be invulnerable. We might assume that it is the μῶλυ given by Hermes which does the trick, but, if we do so, we must inquire *how*. Odysseus tells the Phaeacians (10. 302–06):

ὡς ἄρα φωνήσας πόρε φάρμακον ἀργεῖφόντης
ἐκ γαίης ἐρύσας, καὶ μοι φύσιν αὐτοῦ ἔδειξε.
ρίζη μὲν μέλαν ἔσκε, γάλακτι δὲ εἴκελον ἄνθος·
μῶλυ δέ μιν καλέουσι θεοί· χαλεπὸν δέ τ' ὀρύσσειν 305
ἀνδράσι γε θνητοῖσι· θεοὶ δέ τε πάντα δύνανται.

And so, having spoken, Argeiphontes handed over the herb,
having plucked it from the ground, and explained the nature of it to me.
It was black at the root, but its flower was like milk.
The gods call it *molu* and it's difficult for mortal men
to grub up—but then the gods have power to do everything.

Unfortunately, although Hermes explains the nature of μῶλυ to Odysseus, neither Odysseus nor the poet explains that nature to us, and, as Odysseus never seems to make use of it, it disappears from the story right here, almost at the point where it enters. Why are we not told more?

Clearly, μῶλυ was meant to be understood as a counter-charm to Circe's magic. Because we are not told that it is consumed or smeared on his skin by Odysseus, we might imagine it to be something like an amulet, to be carried or worn on the body, and an audience which may have worn

⁸ A staff appears to be a common tool in Homeric shape-changing. See Poseidon's employment of it to put new courage into the two Ajaxes (in effect, "making new men of them" [*Il.* 13. 59–60]), as well as Athena's, when she changes Odysseus into an old man (*Od.* 13. 429–33).

such charms itself would have been expected to take its use (and its powers) as a given without further mention.⁹

It is also possible, as Rhys Carpenter once suggested, that the story as we now have it in our *Odyssey* is a blurry version of a much older folktale, half-forgotten—or misunderstood—by a Homer “who displays the classic Greek’s characteristic failure to comprehend faerie.”¹⁰ Although I believe that Carpenter is substantially correct in positing that another tale, although not necessarily an older one, underlies our text, I would suggest that there is a stronger reason than later Greek forgetfulness which allows the μῶλυ to fade out of our narrative. To understand this reason, we must now return to Menelaus’ anecdote about Helen’s behavior as she stands outside the wooden horse (4. 277–89). As Menelaus tells Telemachus:

τρίς δὲ περίστειξας κοῖλον λόχον ἀμφαφάωσα,
 ἐκ δ’ ὀνομακλήδην Δαναῶν ὀνόμαζες ἀρίστους,
 πάντων Ἀργείων φωνὴν ἴσκουσ’ ἀλόχοισιν.
 αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ καὶ Τυδείδης καὶ δῖος Ὀδυσσεὺς
 ἤμενοι ἐν μέσσοισιν ἀκούσαμεν ὡς ἐβόησας. 280
 νῶϊ μὲν ἀμφοτέρω μενεήγαμεν ὀρμηθέντε
 ἢ ἐξελθέμεναι, ἢ ἔνδοθεν αἰψ’ ὑπακοῦσαι·
 ἀλλ’ Ὀδυσσεὺς κατέρυκε καὶ ἔσχεθεν ἰεμένω περ.
 ἔνθ’ ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες ἀκὴν ἔσαν υἱες Ἀχαιῶν, 285
 Ἄντικλος δὲ σέ γ’ οἶος ἀμείψασθαι ἐπέεσσιν
 ἤθελεν· ἀλλ’ Ὀδυσσεὺς ἐπὶ μάστακα χερσὶ πίεζε
 νωλεμέως κρατερῆσι, σάωσε δὲ πάντας Ἀχαιούς,
 τόφρα δ’ ἔχ’ ὄφρα σε νόσφιν ἀπήγαγε Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.

And three times you paced around, having stroked the hollow ambush,
 and by name you summoned the best of the Danaans,
 having mimicked the voices of the wives of all the Argives.
 And both I and the son of Tydeus and godlike Odysseus
 sitting in the midst, heard you as you cried.
 Stirred up, we both were eager
 either to go out or at once to answer from within.
 But Odysseus stopped us and held us, though we two wanted to.
 Then all the other sons of the Achaeans were in silence,
 but Antiklos alone wished to reply to you in speech,
 but Odysseus relentlessly pressed shut his jaw
 with powerful hands and saved all of the Achaeans
 until Pallas Athena led you away from us.

⁹ For more on amulets in the ancient world, see C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (Ann Arbor 1969). On μῶλυ and divine knowledge, see J. S. Clay, “The *Planktai* and *Molte* Divine Naming and Knowing in Homer,” *Hermes* 100 (1972) 127–31.

¹⁰ R. Carpenter, *Folk Tale, Fiction, and Saga in the Homeric Epics* (Berkeley 1946) 20. I do not believe that Carpenter’s statement about Homer’s “failure to comprehend faerie” is strictly accurate, but the important part of his statement for my purposes is the idea that another story lies beneath that which survives in our text of the *Odyssey*.

Even if we construe this as a story about Helen's treachery, it displays strangely over-elaborate behavior on her part. If Helen suspects that the Achaeans are in the horse, why not simply say so to the Trojans who dragged it within the walls? The Troy tale tradition as a whole allows us to believe that there was a good deal of initial doubt about the supposed gift. In Proclus' summary of the *Iliou Persis*, we are told that some Trojans believed that the horse should be burned or thrown down a cliff (*Chrestomathy* 2) and, according to Apollodorus, Cassandra spoke up against it, as did Laocoon, to his grief (*Epitome* 5. 15–19). But Helen makes no open denunciation. Instead, Menelaus (addressing Helen) says, τρίς δὲ περιστείξας κοῖλον λόχον ἀμφαφώωσα ("and three times you paced around, having stroked the hollow ambush" [4. 277]).

In *Aeneid* 2. 50–53, Laocoon makes the rash gesture of throwing a spear against the horse. In contrast, we might wonder whether Helen, more cannily, is beginning *her* assault with a reconnaissance, until we notice that she moves not once or twice, but three times around the horse. Three is a potent number for the beginning of spells in classical texts of all periods.¹¹ Remembering this, might we imagine that Helen's next action, that of stroking the horse, is not an idle caress, but suggests an anointing for magical purposes?¹²

Such an anointing will appear again later in the *Odyssey*, in the next section of Odysseus' story of his struggle with Circe. Having bent her to his terms as far as his own safety goes, he then insists that she disenchant his men, which she does in the following lines (10. 391–96):

οἱ μὲν ἔπειτ' ἔστησαν ἐναντίοι, ἡ δὲ δι' αὐτῶν
 ἐρχομένη προσάλειφεν ἐκάστῳ φάρμακον ἄλλο.
 τῶν δ' ἐκ μὲν μελέων τρίχες ἔρρεον, ἄς πρὶν ἔφυσε
 φάρμακον οὐλόμενον, τό σφιν πόρε πόντια Κίρκη·
 ἄνδρες δ' ἄψ ἐγένοντο νεώτεροι ἢ πάρος ἦσαν
 καὶ πολὺ καλλίονες καὶ μείζονες εἰσοράασθαι. 395

Then they stood facing her and she, walking among them,

¹¹ Among a large number of examples of the power of the number three, see, for example, Medea's behavior when she sets out to destroy Talos, the guardian of Crete. While making an incantation, she kneels and repeats her words three times in a chant, three times in a prayer (Apollonius, *Argonautica* 4. 1668–69). See also Cato, *De Agri Cultura* 70, where a preventive for oxen taking sick requires a series of ingredients in threes, and Varro, *Res Rusticae* 1. 2. 27, for a cure for foot problems which includes a spell which must be chanted *ter noviens*. See, as well, the anecdote of the old woman and Encolpius in Petronius' *Satyricon* 131. Encolpius is suffering from temporary impotence and, among other things, the old woman tells him to spit three times and to drop enchanted pebbles three times into his clothing.

¹² Although the horse is not changed physically, the reaction of the warriors inside makes it clear that they had been somehow changed, since they have become so vulnerable to the wiles of Helen. For references to what is possibly a related tradition, that of anointing holy objects, see C. A. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York 1992) 5–7.

Another perspective on this is the possible link between female speech and enchantment; see A. L. T. Bergren, "Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought," *Arethusa* 16 (1993) 69–95; I. E. Holmberg, "The *Odyssey* and Female Subjectivity," *Helios* 22 (1995) 103–22.

rubbed another drug on each.

And the bristles streamed from their limbs, which
the accursed drug which the lady Circe had handed them had caused to
grow there before.

And, going back, they became younger men than they were before
and very much more handsome and better to be looked at.

If our literary evidence is to be credited, the use of anointing was customarily believed to be an important element in certain spells designed to change the body in some way. *Pythian* 4. 221–22 and 233, as well as *Argonautica* 3. 1042–43, 1049–51, for example, refer to the ointment which Jason rubs on himself to become invulnerable for a day. In Apuleius' *Metamorphosis* 3. 21, the lady Pamphile strips and anoints herself with an ointment which, along with a whispered spell, turns her into an owl.¹³ In Menelaus' story, Helen's stroking is not the prelude to a change in the shape of her—or the horse's—*body*, but it seems to be the prelude to a change in her *voice*, as well as to a change in the behavior of the Achaeans within the horse (4. 278–79):

ἐκ δ' ὄνομακλήδην Δαναῶν ὀνόμαζες ἀρίστους,
πάντων Ἀργείων φωνὴν ἴσκουσ' ἀλόχοισιν.

And by name you summoned the best of the Danaans,
having mimicked the voices of the wives of all the Argives.

No surviving tradition tells us that the wives of the Achaeans were anywhere except at home on the other side of the Aegean at this time. Thus, it would seem doubly odd that, even being at Troy, they would be inside a city which their warrior-husbands had been unable to enter for ten years. Helen's behavior, too, seems very strange—Why should the Achaeans believe her trick?—until Menelaus describes their reaction (4. 280–83):

αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ καὶ Τυδείδης καὶ δῖος Ὀδυσσεὺς
ἤμενοι ἐν μέσσοισιν ἀκούσαμεν ὡς ἐβόησας.
νῶϊ μὲν ἀμφοτέρω μενεΐναμεν ὀρηθέντε
ἢ ἐξελθέμεναι, ἢ ἔνδοθεν αἰψ' ὑπακούσαι·

And both I and the son of Tydeus and godlike Odysseus
sitting in the midst, heard you as you cried.
Stirred up, we both were eager
either to go out or at once to answer from within.

That the Achaeans would fall for this is astonishing, but only if we ignore Helen's triple circumambulation and rubbing of the horse. Like Odysseus' men in the clutches of Circe, the men in the horse are falling under a spell. And, just as Odysseus can resist Circe, so he can resist Helen—this time.

¹³ The recited spell is also clearly a crucial part of the magic here. When Lucius, the hero, attempts the same shape-changing, he employs the ointment—but without the spell—and is turned, not into an owl, but into an ass (3. 24).

A spell, however, is not always cast just by movement and anointing. There may also be another element, that of summoning the one to be charmed by name, as we can see in texts like Theocritus' second *Idyl* and its descendant, Vergil's eighth *Eclogue*.¹⁴ We see as well, I believe, an earlier use of this practice in Circe's attempt to enchant Odysseus (10. 316–19), where Odysseus tells his audience that not only did she use a drug, but “she struck me with a staff and spoke a spell and summoned me” (ῥάβδῳ πεπληγυῖα ἔπος τ' ἔφατ' ἔκ τ' ὀνόμαζεν, 10. 319).

Here, Circe goes beyond the potion and the staff which she used on Odysseus' men, saying a charm of some sort (ἔπος) and then attempting to call Odysseus by name (ἔκ τ' ὀνόμαζεν).¹⁵ In the story as we have it in our *Odyssey*, Odysseus has not yet given Circe a name, but, considering the seeming muddle in the story here (as Carpenter has pointed out), and considering Odysseus' encounters elsewhere, I would posit that an alternate version of this story, no longer available, included a scene in which Odysseus does what he does so often when he is entertained in the *Odyssey*, introducing himself under a false name and autobiography. A clue in our surviving text may lie in line 316: τεῦχε δέ μοι κυκεῶ χρυσεῶ δέπα, ὄφρα πίοιμι, “she made for me the brew in a golden cup so that I would drink it.”

When Circe had enchanted Odysseus' men, she presumably made them the same brew she now tries to administer to Odysseus, but the poet at that point in the story says nothing of any cup at all. Now Odysseus tells the Phaeacians that the brew was not only given to him in a cup, but in a *golden* cup. Without stepping any farther into the dubious realm of reconstruction, one might at least theorize the following:

1. that there were once at least two versions of the story of Circe's attempted enchantment;
2. that, in one, the divine μῶλυ somehow protected Odysseus,
3. but that, in another, Odysseus tells Circe one of his lies, providing a false name,
4. which Circe then uses—to no effect;
5. that there may be some evidence of this second story in two details in our current text:
 - a. Circe serves Odysseus the brew in an upper-class cup of gold rather than in a common clay or wooden one, implying that she believes him to deserve such tableware (and why should she think this unless Odysseus himself has suggested it?);¹⁶

¹⁴ The title of Theocritus' poem, *Pharmaceutriae*, “The Users of Charms/Drugs,” and the subtitle of Vergil's poem, *Pharmaceutria*, glossed as “Sorceress,” but more specifically “She Who Employs Drugs,” clearly underline only one part of spell-casting.

¹⁵ For a view of ὀνόμαζεν in formulae which suggests a link to physical contact (specifically touch), see R. P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes* (Ithaca 1989) 19–20.

¹⁶ When Telemachus serves his father before the suitors in their house on Ithaca, he pours wine for his father in a golden cup (*Od.* 20. 257–61). Of all the people there, only Telemachus

b. that, seemingly without the μῶλυ, Circe's spell has no effect—which leads Circe to exclaim (10. 329): “Yours in your breast is some uncallable spirit” (σοὶ δέ τις ἐν στήθεσσιν ἀκήλητος νόος ἐστίν).

“Uncallable,” as I have translated the word ἀκήλητος, offers one literal reason for Odysseus' ability to withstand charms.¹⁷ Throughout the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is constantly vigilant against revealing his true identity. This would be natural for him to do on Ithaca, where the many suitors could easily overwhelm him until he had made his plans and recruited allies, but what are we to make of those other times when, pressed for the truth or no, Odysseus presents an alternate personality?

It is a concept well known from folklore and anthropology that, in certain cultures, one's name has such power that it is to be kept concealed at all costs, for fear that, in the hands of another, it may be used as a weapon.¹⁸ This is certainly true of later Greek belief. One has only to examine curses, both those with the name of the target already filled in and those which are the magical equivalents of bureaucratic forms, with blanks carefully saved for entering the name of the victim, to understand this.¹⁹ In the case of such belief in the earlier heroic world, Calvin Brown points to another of Odysseus' adventures, that of the escape from Polyphemus, as a clear illustration both of Odysseus' usual cautious practice and of the consequences of dropping that practice.²⁰

When first asked about his identity by the Cyclops, Odysseus is very vague. He says that he and his men are followers of Agamemnon, and leaves it at that—as does Polyphemus (9. 259–64). When Polyphemus asks again, and promises a guest-gift, Odysseus gives his famous “Nobody” reply (9. 364–67). It is only when he and his surviving crewmen are aboard ship once more that Odysseus finally reveals his true identity, an action which Aristotle believed Odysseus had taken to vent his anger (*Rhetoric* B 3. 16). Carolyn Higbie, in her 1995 book, *Heroes' Names, Homeric Identities*, amplifies this quite correctly, I believe, in adding:

knows who the old beggar to whom he is attending really is. Does this suggest that he is giving the suitors a mocking hint? If so, they fail to recognize it.

¹⁷ Ἀκήλητος is formed on κηλέω (“to enchant”), which may well be related to καλέω (“to call, summon”), though the connection between the two forms is not evident on the morphological level. See Chantraine, s.v. κηλέω and καλέω. On the semantic level, as I argue through my interpretation of the archaic contexts of this word, a connection is indeed evident. I am grateful to Gregory Nagy for assisting me in understanding the etymological difficulties of this word.

¹⁸ The fairy tale, “Rumpelstiltskin,” easily illustrates this belief.

¹⁹ For the use in later Greco-Egyptian practice of specific names as the focus of spells, see the many examples in H. D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago 1986).

²⁰ C. S. Brown, “Odysseus and Polyphemus: The Name and the Curse,” *Comparative Literature* 18 (1966) 193–202.

ἀμφὶ δὲ εἴματα ἕσσα καὶ ὤμοσα καρτερόν ὄρκον
 μὴ μὲν πρὶν Ὀδυσῆα μετὰ Τρώεσσ' ἀναφῆναι,
 πρὶν γε τὸν ἐς νῆας τε θεῶς κλισίας τ' ἀφικέσθαι,
 καὶ τότε δὴ μοι πάντα νόον κατέλεξεν Ἀχαιῶν.

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But I alone recognized him, even being in such form,
 and questioned him. And he, in his cunning, was elusive.
 But, when I was bathing him and anointed him with oil,
 and I put clothes about him and swore a great oath
 not to betray Odysseus among the Trojans afterwards,
 before he returned to the swift ships and lean-tos,
 then he explained to me all the thinking of the Achaeans.

It is evident from *Iliad* 3. 191–202, in which she identifies him even from a distance, that Helen had long known Odysseus' face and name.²³ Thus, he is already potentially naked in identity. He is obviously also physically naked when she bathes him and anoints him.²⁴ As in his struggle with Circe, however, Odysseus protects himself by forcing Helen to take an oath, thus rendering himself, although here actually *after* the fact, ἀκήλητος.²⁵

This condition might pertain when, later in Menelaus' story of Helen and the wooden horse, Odysseus alone appears to be able to resist Helen's attempt to lure the Achaeans in the horse into betraying themselves. Still ἀκήλητος because of Helen's oath, he prevents the others from rash behavior, even by force, when necessary.²⁶

In describing Odysseus' behavior to Telemachus, Menelaus has spoken admiringly of Odysseus' ability to resist this attempted seduction by Helen, although he offers no explanation of Odysseus' strength more complicated than that (4. 269–73):

ἀλλ' οὐ πω τοιοῦτον ἐγὼν ἴδον ὀφθαλμοῖσιν
 οἷον Ὀδυσσεύος ταλασίφρονος ἕσκε φίλον κῆρ.
 οἷον καὶ τόδ' ἔρεξε καὶ ἔτλη καρτερός ἀνὴρ
 ἵππῳ ἔνι ξεστῷ, ἴν' ἐνήμεθα πάντες ἄριστοι
 Ἄργείων Τρώεσσι φόνον καὶ κῆρα φέροντες.

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²³ In the Troy tradition, Odysseus is even named as one of Helen's original suitors; see Hesiod, *Eoiae* fr. 198 M–W, Apollodorus 3. 10. 8, and Hyginus, *Fabulae* 81.

²⁴ Odysseus, according to Helen's account, has so distorted himself, even to the point of self-mutilation, as to render himself unrecognizable. In short, he has performed a kind of shape-changing. Can we see in this bathing and anointing an echo of Circe's anointing Odysseus' men to reverse *their* shape-change from pigs back into humans?

²⁵ We might also see a miniature version of the bathing/identifying scene in *Od.* 19. 386–94, 467–502, where, by persuasion and threats, Odysseus preserves his "uncallable" status on Ithaca when recognized by Eurycleia.

²⁶ I wonder whether we might link this scene with that in 12. 158–200, when the Sirens summon Odysseus by name, tempting him to wreck his ship and destroy his companions on their rocks, a temptation which he also resists. Mihoko Suzuki links the Sirens with Helen, Circe, and Calypso: "for all these women tempt Odysseus to turn aside from the mindfulness of the present to seek oblivion in the past or in timeless immortality" (*Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic* [Ithaca 1989] 70).

But never yet have I seen with my own eyes such a spirit
 as that which was resolute Odysseus'.
 Such did he do and endure, the powerful man,
 in the wooden horse, where all the best of the Achaeans
 sat, bringing killing and death to the Trojans!

When he resisted Circe, Odysseus had had the advantages of divine aid from Hermes and perhaps an anonymity which had prevented him from being "summoned." Facing Helen for the first time and being recognized, Odysseus forced her to protect him with an oath. I have suggested that, the second time, Odysseus may have been assumed to be under the protection of Helen's earlier oath. In both stories, however, when it comes to power, it is clear that Helen is the mightier of the two, even as Odysseus is praised for his cunning and his spirit. In Helen's tale, after all, nothing Odysseus has done to himself can blur her ability to identify him and it is only her oath (and perhaps her change of heart towards the Achaeans) which keeps Odysseus from the hands of vengeful Trojans. In Menelaus' story, Odysseus may be able to keep the Achaeans from calling out, but it requires the aid of Athena herself to save those beleaguered in the horse by removing Helen. Why is Helen the more powerful and how might these two stories, with their struggles between Odysseus and Helen, be about that power?

So far, we have seen Helen as a being like Circe, able to possess the power to summon (in the magical sense of the word), as well as to use drugs²⁷ and perhaps even to change shapes.²⁸ Circe is perhaps a minor deity. She comes from a powerful family, her father said to be Helios, her mother Perse, daughter of Ocean. Her brother is Aietes, the father of another sorceress, Medea (*Od.* 10. 135–39). Helen is probably to be thought of as a demigoddess. Whether her mother is Leda or Nemesis, Helen's father is Zeus,²⁹ and post-heroic tradition appears to have elevated Helen to the position of a deity in her own right, worshipped at Sparta and

²⁷ L. L. Clader suggests that Helen's ability to use drugs hints at "witch-like powers," but goes no farther with this suggestion (*Helen: The Evolution from Divine to Heroic in Greek Epic Tradition* [Leiden 1976] 32–33).

²⁸ Does an ability to appear in different forms, along with her famous beauty, underlie a number of stories about shape-changing which seem to surround Helen? See Apollodorus 3. 10. 7, in which one of her potential mothers, Nemesis, changes shape to avoid the attentions of Zeus (she turns into a goose; in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 8. 334, a fish); Herodotus 6. 61 (also Pausanias 3. 7. 7) in which Helen changes the mother of Damaratus from a plain girl to a beauty; and even Stesichorus fr. 192, in which it is an εἶδωλον of Helen which goes to Troy. Even those who come to see her may come in other shapes—Odysseus, after all, arrives at her house in Troy disguised as a beaten beggar, and, when Iris summons her to the wall of Troy to see the combat of Menelaus and Paris in *Iliad* 3, Iris appears not as herself, but as Laodice, Helen's sister-in-law, daughter of Priam (3. 121–24). Ironically, in Euripides' *Helen*, it is Menelaus who has seemingly changed shape, as Helen does not recognize him at their first meeting (541–66).

²⁹ See Apollodorus 3. 10. 6–7 for both possibilities. Zeus, of course, was thought to change shape often when courting mortals, but it is interesting to note that, according to Apollodorus (3. 10. 7), Nemesis herself practiced shape-changing in order to attempt to avoid the attentions of Zeus. For a variant, see Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 8. 334.

at Rhodes.³⁰ Her power, however, would appear to come not from her divine father, but from Aphrodite, as the goddess makes clear in *Iliad* 3. 414–17, when she threatens to withdraw her favor:

μή μ' ἔρεθε, σχετλίη, μή χωσαμένη σε μεθείω,
 τὼς δέ σ' ἀπεχθήρω ὡς νῦν ἔκπαγλα φίλησα,
 μέσσω δ' ἀμφοτέρων μητίσομαι ἔχθεα λυγρά,
 Τρώων καὶ Δαναῶν, σὺ δέ κεν κακὸν οἶτον ὄλῃαι.

Don't provoke me, you stubborn thing, lest, being angry, I abandon you,
 and I hate you as much as now I have loved you,
 and I will plan painful, hateful things in the midst of both
 the Trojans and the Danaans, and you may suffer an evil fate.³¹

If Helen's power derives from Aphrodite, her behavior, both with Odysseus and at the horse, seems much more logical. First, there appears to be a potential link between *xenia* and seduction, the tool of Aphrodite: Odysseus must sleep with Circe in order to keep power over her (*Od.* 10. 297–98). Might there then be the hint of sex in Odysseus' confrontation with Helen? Unlike Helen, Nausicaa does not bathe Odysseus, nor does Circe (although one might expect her to) in other scenes of *xenia* in the *Odyssey*. Both times, the act is performed by servants.³² Yet Helen tells us that she herself not only bathed but anointed and dressed Odysseus—and there is no mention of servants at all.³³ Our text does not tell us if Odysseus

³⁰ For her worship at Sparta, see Pausanias 3. 15. 3. For her worship at Rhodes, see 3. 19. 10, where Helen appears to be linked to a sacrificial cult like that of Atys. For more on Helen's divinity, see Clader (above, note 27) and J. Lindsay, *Helen of Troy, Woman and Goddess* (London 1974). The idea of Helen as goddess must not have been current everywhere, or at least not in 5th-century B.C. Athens. A number of red-figure pots from 480 to perhaps the end of the century and beyond illustrating that moment at the fall of Troy when Menelaus comes to claim Helen show a panicked Helen and, sometimes, a protective Aphrodite. Helen's behavior there is hardly that of a goddess protected by her immortality from mortal harm. See, for example, the illustrations by the Syriskos Painter (c. 480) and the Altamura Painter (c. 475–450) in S. Woodford, *The Trojan War in Ancient Art* (Ithaca 1993) 112, nos. 106 and 107, and a particularly elaborate depiction by a painter connected with the Heimarmene Painter (end of the 5th century?) in J. Boardman, *Athenian Red Figure Vases: The Classical Period* (London 1989) 162, no. 309. As well, in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.), Lampito jokes that Helen saved herself by exposing her naked breasts to Menelaus (155–56).

³¹ See also Penelope's explanation of Helen's troubles, that a god had driven her to behave as she did (23. 217–24). Might the use of "god" by Penelope, and Menelaus' earlier "daimon," be euphemistic? If Aphrodite can cause such troubles, would anyone—especially a victim like Menelaus—want to risk summoning her by using her name?

³² Among the Phaeacians 8. 449–57; with Circe 10. 357–67.

³³ Is there a possibility of magic garments being mixed in with *xenia* here? Although the pattern seems fairly standardized: After bathing, Odysseus is clothed by Helen (4. 252–53), Phaeacian servants (8. 454–55), and Circe's servant (10. 364–65), yet, in two out of the three cases, women with powers of enchantment are involved. If magic is a possibility, then I would suggest a possible association of this act of clothing with the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra, Helen's half-sister, as described in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Like Odysseus, Agamemnon is given a bath, then clothed, the difference being that, at the end of his bath, Agamemnon is wrapped in a garment which is used to kill him (1382–83), rather than prepared for a sexual situation. With the magical in mind, one might then also see an incantational significance in Clytemnestra's insistence that she killed her tangled husband with three blows

then slept with Helen,³⁴ but she does seduce him at least into admitting his identity and his plans, even while he protects himself as he did with Circe, by making her swear the great oath.

Second, although Menelaus suggests that "a daimon was intending to direct you, who wished to hold out honor for the Trojans," we know from countless other incidents in the Troy tale that it is not unnamed *daimones* who direct humans, but very specific gods with very specific ends. Although no one earlier than the third- or fourth-century A.D. poet Triphiodorus, in his *Iliou Persis*, appears specifically to identify Aphrodite as the power prompting Helen to the Trojan horse,³⁵ the fact that Helen again is seen using seductive, sexual powers through the voices of the Achaeans' wives would seem to confirm Aphrodite's role in her action.

From the moment in *Iliad* 4. 7–12, when Zeus taunts Hera and Athena about Aphrodite's rescue of Paris from Menelaus, we see Athena and Aphrodite at odds. In *Iliad* 5. 131–32, Athena prompts Diomedes to single out Aphrodite for attack. And, in *Iliad* 5. 330–43, as Aphrodite attempts to extricate her son, Aeneas, from death at his hands, Diomedes actually stabs her. Such is Athena's obvious animosity that Dione, when her daughter comes to her for comfort, knows immediately that Athena is behind Diomedes' temerity (*Il.* 5. 405–06). With this animosity understood between the two goddesses, we have only to remember that Athena is Odysseus' patron to imagine another reason why he might be immune to Helen's power as he crouches inside Athena's own inspiration, the wooden horse.

Although Apollodorus states that the Trojan horse was under the protection of Apollo (*Epitome* 5. 18), there is much more evidence to suggest that there was a stronger tradition in which Athena watched over it.³⁶ From 4. 289 in particular ("until Pallas Athena led you away from us"), we might conclude that, at least in our current text of the *Odyssey*, the latter deity is watching over the Achaeans' strategy.³⁷

(1384–86). See also perhaps the poisoned garments used by Medea to kill the princess of Corinth in Euripides' *Medea* and the tradition of the poisoned tunic which the dying Nessus tricks Deianira into putting on Heracles (Apollodorus 2. 7. 7).

³⁴ Considering that she is telling this tale in front of her husband, as well as Odysseus' son, Telemachus, this would hardly seem likely behavior. See, however, Bergren (above, note 4) 208–09, for the idea that Helen may be demonstrating her seductive powers to gain κλέος.

³⁵ Triphiodorus, *Iliou Persis* 454–56. It is curious here that Aphrodite appears as an old woman, especially in the light of her line, "For I give you to Menelaus, who has endured much" (462), which would seem to uncover her disguise immediately, anonymous old women not being much given to control over kings. Is Triphiodorus simply repeating an older tradition, one which has not come down to us?

³⁶ See Vergil, *Aeneid* 2. 225–27, where the two serpents, having destroyed Laocoon and his two sons, escape to hide at the base of the statue of Athena in the citadel of Troy.

³⁷ As Proclus tells us in his summary of the *Little Iliad* that Athena had inspired Epeius to construct the horse (*Chrestomathy* 2), her protection of the finished product would seem natural.

Seen this way, Helen's temptations and Odysseus' reactions might appear, like so many other moments in the Troy tale, to be divine struggles worked out through human agents. And, should they be so, they prove the power of the deities behind the mortals, even while they allow those mortals a certain almost-divine power. If we consider Helen's tale of her behavior towards the disguised Odysseus in *Odyssey* 4 in this light, we see a mortal, or semi-divine figure, triumphing, through the power of her patron goddess, Aphrodite, over a mortal, Odysseus, with an underlying text in which Aphrodite scores off Odysseus' patron, Athena, if only in that Helen teases Odysseus' real identity out of him. The contrary would then be true in Menelaus' tale in *Odyssey* 4, where Helen, for all the magical powers given her by Aphrodite, can seduce the rest of those in the horse, but not Odysseus, because he is under the protection of Athena. And, in this tale, Athena is the winner.

Such stories match very nicely with the *Iliad's* picture of indirect combat between Athena and Aphrodite and with the larger Homeric picture of the gods constantly at war with each other through their human surrogates. Helen and Odysseus, at this level, and in these two stories, may resemble Diomedes, an agent of divine will. In Odysseus' case, this is expressed as much by the appearance of the divinity who backs him as by his personal abilities. In the case of Helen, we see only her own power, which displays itself most clearly in her gift for persuasion and in her perception, her ability to recognize what is truly there, even when cleverly disguised. She knows the beggar-spy Odysseus when she sees him. She perceives that the wooden horse is a ruse and recognizes those within so well that she can choose which wives to imitate.³⁸

When we consider the scene of the telling of stories about Odysseus to Telemachus, then, we might begin with the levels already discussed in other interpretations, but we might add to these levels that of indirect combat between two rival goddesses, not only in terms of Odysseus and Helen, but also in terms of Helen and Menelaus. When we think of Helen and Odysseus as actors within those stories, we can add to our interpretation the idea of Odysseus as "uncallable" and Helen as one who, time and again in the story of Troy, practices arts shared with Circe and Medea, these arts linking her with Circe to make a greater resonance in the narrative.

And Helen's powers certainly extend beyond her actions in Troy. By his words, Menelaus is a great admirer and long-time friend of Odysseus, and yet he has, at first, no idea that his friend's son is standing before him (*Od.* 4. 60–64). Helen matches father and son at once (4. 138–46). This ability to perceive the hidden is displayed one final time at Telemachus' departure, when an omen appears above Menelaus' courtyard. A wild eagle seizes a domestic goose (15. 160–65). Menelaus, requested to interpret the

³⁸ Perhaps even the *teichoscopia*, with its emphasis upon identification, is an echo of this power.

vision, stumbles—no more powerful than when he was trapped in the horse by Helen's seductive voice. Helen then steps forward and, in her last appearance in the *Odyssey*, correctly recognizes the sign sent by Zeus as a warning that Odysseus will now appear and take revenge (15. 169–78). Telemachus, impressed with her quick understanding, unconsciously reminds us of Helen's earlier underlining of her power and her relationship to the divine by saying (15. 180–81):

οὐτῶ νῦν Ζεὺς θεΐη, ἐρίγδουπος πόσις Ἥρης·
τῷ κέν τοι καὶ κείθι θεῶ ὣς εὐχετοώμην.

Thus may Zeus, the thundering husband of Hera, make it happen.
Then, even at home, I would pray to you as I would to a god.

And, with these words, Telemachus drives off and Helen disappears from the *Odyssey*, having sent the son homeward to join the father she had tried to seduce and name within the walls of Troy.

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