Blaming Helen in Twenty-First Century Myth Writing: A Response to Lena Linne

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Abstract

This response to the article "Meta-Epic Reflection in Twenty-First-Century Rewritings of Homer, or: The Meta-Epic Novel" takes as its starting point the author's metageneric interpretation of twenty-first century myth writing, and her use of Fielding in exploring the tragic and heroic motifs in the texts. It goes on to focus primarily on Linne's interpretation of Haynes's *A Thousand Ships*. I gesture towards another route research in this field may take: the adaptation of ancient tragedy, and analysis of multiple feminist responses to a single mythical figure. This response summarises some of the issues that arise in adapting Helen. Helen's contentious blame and divisive agency have been inextricable parts of her myth since its conception, and it is within this tradition that contemporary adaptations of Helen necessarily operate.

The timeliness of the article "Meta-Epic Reflection in the Twenty-First-Century Rewritings of Homer, or: The Meta-Epic Novel" can hardly be overstated. The literary vogue for women writers adapting Greek myth with overtly feminist aims within the past two decades is evidenced by texts such as Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* (2007), up to the proliferation of more recent novels including Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018), as well as Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and its recent sequel *The Women of Troy* (2021). This response will provide a brief commentary on the article

overall, before paying particular attention to the author's analysis of Helen in Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* (2019).

Linne's article is written in the knowledge of the current momentum for revisionist mythmaking, though its scope is not limited to women's writing: apart from Atwood and Haynes, the article discusses Daniel Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son, and an Epic* (2017). Linne analyses the given texts as meta-genre, that is "a passage or an entire text which, either implicitly or explicitly, comments on the genre of another text" (58). Linne's definition of the term is accessible and inviting, but it also considers the term in relation to the current theoretical favour afforded to neologisms with the "meta"-prefix. The article's thesis is that the meta-genre of the texts allows them to be both self-reflexive, as well as other-reflexive in their commentary on Homeric epics. The article proposes Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey* as an intergenerational *bildungsroman*: the affective nature of the text creates a "meta-epic [that] conveys Mendelsohn's enthusiasm for the classical languages and their literature in general" (62). Linne then goes on to interpret the dramatic irony and mockery in Atwood's *The Penelopiad* as a burlesque commentary on the oral tradition of Homeric epic, with a particular focus on undermining the male heroes that are foregrounded in those epics.[1]

Perhaps the most original contribution to knowledge provided by Linne in the article is the use of Henry Fielding to explore the relationship between these modern novelistic interventions in the epic tradition and ancient epic and tragedy. This theoretical intervention allows for the interpretation of Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* as a "tragic epic poem in prose" (66). While Fielding was concerned with the difference between "tragic" and "comic," Calliope (the implicit narrator of Haynes's polyphonic novel) is more interested in the distinction between "tragic" and "heroic." Men's deaths are epic (heroic and worth narrating in epic), while women's deaths are tragic (lamentable and stageable in a tragedy; see 71-72). The article expertly discusses the complexities and apparent contradictions in Calliope's stance: women are worthy of being considered epic and heroic (since they, too, are brave and fearless); the male model of heroism (of the sorts advanced by Achilles and Menelaus) is only admirable within a framework

of violence and anxious masculinity; and the epic as a form should be afforded to women, reformed, and/or altogether abandoned. As Linne succinctly puts it, "*A Thousand Ships* tells the stories of the female characters affected by the war in Troy. What is more, it comments on how these stories have been narrated (or: not narrated) in the epic tradition" (77). The article ultimately concludes that all three novels are "prose epics" for the twenty-first century, at once engaging in a tradition that can be traced from antiquity to the eighteenth (and nineteenth and twentieth) centuries, as well as meta-genre texts that comment upon themselves as a novelistic phenomenon and upon the epic tradition, especially the Homeric epic tradition.

Linne notes that Haynes draws on different ancient texts to construct her retelling due to the paucity of women's experiences in Homer: "A substantial number of her chapters are based on Attic tragedy, in which female characters feature more prominently" (74). This shift from heroic epic to tragic drama implies "a change from the battlefields to the domestic realm, from the male to the female sphere" (74), which fulfils the intradiegetic narrator's desire to depart from rehashing the male heroic narrative in favour of depicting the suffering and heroism of women's deeds and behaviours. Linne discusses the apparent conflict surrounding Helen in *A Thousand Ships*, since the title is named after her legend, and no "panoramic portrayal of the Trojan War" (75) could be complete without Helen, the ostensible cause of the war; yet the Muse makes clear her disdain for Helen: "I'm offering him the story of all the women in the war. Well, most of them (I haven't decided about Helen yet. She gets on my nerves)" (*A Thousand Ships* 41). Helen is also not afforded a chapter of her own. Instead, she features in the *Trojan Women* chapters, which aligns with her presence in Euripides's *Trojan Women*. Though Linne's focus is on Homeric adaptation, she does specify that Euripides's *Trojan Women* is a crucial source for Haynes, and Helen's defence of her actions and more equitable allotment of blame in *A Thousand Ships* is drawn from the Euripidean drama. I would add that Euripides alone offers multiple interpretations of Helen. In *The Trojan Women*, Helen launches a full-scale legal defence of herself, representing herself in a trial for her life, while Hecuba unequivocally blames her for the fall of her city and the suffering of her people. In *Helen*, she is completely relieved of blame, sequestered, as she is, in Egypt; meanwhile,

in Troy the men are fighting for the prize of an eidolon in the shape of Helen. In *Orestes*, Helen is arguably a figure at once shamefaced and vapid, with Haynes going so far as to call her a "bimbo" in her radio programme *Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics*, for her reluctance to cut her hair in mourning. Hence, in Euripidean drama alone, we find multiple, contradictory iterations of Helen.

Haynes's choice to deny Helen a chapter of her own appears at first to be illogical given Helen's significance not only to the Homeric epic, but also to the title of the novel. While Linne opines that Haynes remedies this by affording Helen a chapter in her nonfiction text *Pandora's Jar*, it is also worth noting the long tradition of struggling to contend with Helen in literature. Hughes and Maguire agree that writing Helen is a complicated matter, due in part to the centuries of debate surrounding her agency. Put simply, either Helen is an evil seductress entirely to blame for the thousands of deaths in a decade-long war, or she completely lacks agency because she was stolen and then used as an excuse for a war about trade.[2] Her story is therefore either one of elopement or abduction, so Helen is either a guilty adulteress, almost entirely to blame for the Trojan War, or she is an innocent victim, unable to be held accountable for any of her actions (Maguire 109). Hughes agrees in *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* (2009) that "[f]or two and half millennia [...] tradition recognised a feistier heroine. Not just a woman of straw, but a dynamic protagonist, a rich queen. A political player who [...] controlled the men around her" (140), though in relatively recent history she has morphed into a vacuous, submissive, passive prize, as exemplified by Diane Kruger's Helen in *Troy*. This "feistier" Helen does not necessarily engender respect—once Helen is the active agent of her fate, rather than the passive partner, men rush to label her a whore. Hughes credits this sex-based discreditation to the increasingly Christianised world from the second century AD onward, where "Helen has become just another nail in the coffin of womankind" as the Church used Helen as part of their systematic "demonising [of] women and their sexual power" (144). When considering Helen's agency, it is important that it is not equated to liberation, because "Helen, as an active partner in her own abduction, is not Helen the empowered woman but Helen the dangerous slut" (144). Maguire agrees that "[a] tactic used in

both defences and accusations of Helen is the granting of sexual agency"
(124)—Helen's consent rescues her from victimhood, but it does not neces-
sarily rescue her from blame. Maguire traces literary instances where (1)
Helen is an active participant in her own abduction, such as in Aeschylus's
Agamemnon, Euripides's *Women of Troy*, and the anonymous *Excidium
Troiae*; (2) Helen is defended by blaming someone else, such as in the cases
of Hesiod's *Cypria* that blames Aphrodite, or Quintus of Smyrna's *War at
Troy* that blames Paris, or the *Ars Amatoria* in which Ovid mockingly
blames Menelaus for being too dull, thus encouraging his wife's adultery;
(3) there is joint culpability—Helen sometimes shares the blame with Aph-
rodite, and in later writers such as Euripides, Herodotus, and Isocrates,
there is a *felix culpa,* as they admit that Helen's adultery had military and
trade benefits (110-12). There is another tradition that places the blame with
Aphrodite. Although depictions of Helen as a rape victim or a scheming
seductress have become the more favoured interpretations for writers and
artists, there is also the literary tradition that begins with Sappho, which
renders Helen a woman helpless against the powers of Aphrodite, whose
divine will is abetted by Paris (Hughes 139). For O'Gorman, Helen's myth
is an obvious choice when considering the women's history in warfare,
since women's position as the implicit cause of wars ("this is all for you")
is explicit in the case of Helen: she is at once the reviled cause of war and
the sanctified object of military protection (196; 208). More directly relevant
to Linne's article is Helen's morality in Homer, which is presented ambig-
uously: no one is a harsher critic than herself, yet "Paris says he 'carried
[her] away' (3.444) and Hector accuses him of taking Menelaus's wife (3.53)
(both of which could imply abduction)" (Maguire 114). Homer is less inter-
ested in blame than in emotional crises, and his Helen "is willing and pas-
sive, to blame and not to blame" (Maguire 115). Helen's contentious blame
has been an inextricable part of her myth since its conception, and it is
within this tradition that contemporary adaptations of Helen necessarily
operate.

Overall, Linne's article is a vital critical investigation of selected texts
within this genre. Her particular focus on the metageneric qualities within
these texts and the adaptation of, and creative responses to, Homeric epic
lays bare some of the most significant aspects of this literary phenomenon.

In my own response, I have gestured towards another route research may take: the adaptation of ancient tragedy, and analysis of multiple feminist responses to a single mythical figure. I wish to end this response with a comment regarding the study of the ongoing genre of contemporary novelistic adaptations of Greek myth. Lena Linne's postdoctoral research into twenty-first century responses to Homer (Ruhr-Universität Bochum) operates in conversation with my own doctoral thesis, *Contemporary Feminist Adaptations of Greek Myth* (University of Glasgow), as well as Harriet Mac-Millan's 2020 doctoral project (University of Edinburgh) on feminist rewritings in the Canongate Myth Series (in which *The Penelopiad* was the inaugural publication). Studies of the current literary climate need to include this popular and proliferating genre which is rapidly changing the shape of both the contemporary novel and classical reception. Additionally, this genre is emblematic of current literary marketing, since these books are foregrounded in online social spaces such as Bookstagram and BookTok, and their online presence is supplemented by the social media, blogs, and podcasts that the authors run or participate in. I would invite academics interested in adaptation, gender studies, classical reception, radical translation praxes, and digital humanities to continue research in this area.

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NOTES

[1]Of course, parodying ancient epic is as established as the epic itself as a form—Homer himself was originally attributed with writing the *Batrachomyomachia*, or "The Battle of the Frogs and Mice," a parody of the *Iliad* and the Trojan War. Though the mock-epic may have been written instead by Pigres, it can still be categorised as Homeric by the era in which it was written and its form as an epic poem (see Rose). Atwood's novella thus becomes as much a part of the epic tradition as the Homeric epics.

[2]In the chapter on "Blame" in *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood* (2009), Maguire expounds that Helen is always either held accountable for the Trojan War, or her accountability is reduced at the cost of her agency.

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