

METra 2

Epica e tragedia greca: una mappatura

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Θεοί νύ μοι αἴτιοί εἰσιν

Helen's Agency and the Gods in Homer and Euripides

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Abstract This article explores Homeric and tragic perspectives on the origins of the Trojan War, and specifically on the respective roles of Helen and the gods. Focusing on key passages from the *Iliad* and Euripides' *Trojan Women*, it investigates how these works depict the relationship between Helen's and the gods' agency and responsibility in bringing about the war. In doing so, it offers new perspectives on the broader issue of the interaction of divine and human agency in early Greek thought, arguing that this question remained a topic of instability and uncertainty rather than being resolved (as modern scholars often assume) into a single, widely applicable principle. In a related sense, the article also foregrounds divine agency, taking it seriously as something which, for the ancient Greeks, was very real and mattered profoundly – in contrast to the (often implicit) tendency of modern scholarship to dismiss appeals to divine intervention in ancient Greek sources as a matter of rhetoric rather than belief. Using the example of Helen, I argue that they can be both at the same time.

Keywords Helen. Gods. Agency. Homer. Euripides.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Iliadic Helen. – 3 Euripidean Helen: *Trojan Women*. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

The interaction of divine and human agency and responsibility is one of the great questions of ancient Greek thought. Partly because of its entanglement in subsequent philosophical and theological debates, it is a topic that has received an unusual amount of attention



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Lexis Supplementi | Supplements 14

e-ISSN 2724-0142 | ISSN 2724-377X

ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-738-8 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-759-3

Peer review | Open access

Submitted 2023-07-04 | Accepted 2023-08-12 | Published 2023-12-21

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DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-738-8/004

in classical scholarship.¹ What happens when a divinity intervenes to cause, or part-cause, an action or event? Take, for example, *Iliad* 16.844-50, where the dying Patroclus claims that his death will have been caused by multiple agents, both human (Hector, Euphorbus) and divine (Zeus, Apollo, Moira). Is there, in this case, one true agent, who can be said to bear primary responsibility for what happens? How does divine involvement affect the human agents' sense that they own, or control, their decisions and actions? Does it matter that the attribution of divine intervention is here made by the dying Patroclus himself, and addressed to Hector, the man who has just struck him? Did any of these questions about agency and responsibility matter to ancient audiences?

Scholars, philosophers and theologians from antiquity onwards have deployed great energy and ingenuity in their attempts to answer these questions.² Nowadays, classicists usually resort to two main concepts to deal with the problem, both of which have their roots in mid-twentieth-century scholarship: 'double motivation' and 'over-determination' (or variants of the two). The first was developed by A. Lesky, in response to claims by B. Snell and others that humans in Homer's world lacked consciousness of themselves as autonomous, responsible agents.³ According to these readings, the process of decision-making in Homer ultimately emanated from forces and impulses that were external to humans, most notably the gods. Against this Lesky argued that when the gods intervened in Homer, divine and human agency merged (forming 'two sides of the same coin') without affecting humans' freedom and responsibility for their actions. The second concept, 'over-determination', comes from Freudian psychoanalysis. It was first applied to archaic and classical Greek thought by E.R. Dodds, who believed that supernatural agents were projections of the mind, 'primitive' mental habits that stopped humans from fully embracing their freedom, but did not relieve them of their responsibility for their actions (Dodds 1951). Although the two concepts differ in important ways, they overlap in one crucial sense: both allow human agency and responsibility to remain untouched by divine influence. Thus, even if a mortal is (or feels, in Dodds's reading) forced to do something by a god, s/he retains agency and can be held accountable for this action.

I am grateful to Andrea Rodighiero for his kind invitation to speak at Verona in June 2022, to the other participants at the conference and to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

1 See now Johnston, Van Hove (forthcoming) for a comprehensive treatment of the topic.

2 See now Ellis, Johnston (forthcoming) on this intellectual genealogy.

3 Lesky 1961, responding primarily to Snell 1928, 1946.

Using Helen of Troy as a case study, this article contributes to the ongoing project of re-examining these widely used models.⁴ More specifically, it aims to challenge one widespread assumption they have helped to create: the idea that there exists, in ancient Greek thought, a single, clear, universally applicable conception of the relationship between human and divine agency; a general principle according to which divine intervention does not affect the agency of humans and their responsibility for their actions. In a related sense, the article also seeks to foreground divine agency, taking it seriously as something which, for the ancient Greeks, was very real and mattered profoundly – in contrast to the (often implicit) tendency of modern scholarship to dismiss appeals to divine intervention in ancient Greek sources as a matter of rhetoric rather than belief. I hope to show that they can be both at the same time. In order to achieve these aims, I propose to examine a number of passages individually, paying close attention to the specific context, speakers and the precise arrangement and interaction of causal layers, both human and divine. I will then offer some thoughts on the implications of this analysis for the distribution of agency and responsibility, and for the moral evaluation of an action or event by characters and audiences.

Helen constitutes a unique case study in this regard, because she is in a sense archetypal – given her and the gods' role in the origins of the Trojan war, an event that has huge repercussions across Greek culture – but also highly unusual – as a goddess, or at least someone who is closer to the divine than most. Through her many appearances in ancient Greek and subsequent literature and thought, Helen has come in a way to crystallise the question in which I am interested: if a god makes someone do something, does that person remain responsible for her action, and how is our evaluation of that person affected? In antiquity as in modernity, people have engaged in continuous debate concerning the implications of this question for Helen; and answers have varied widely depending on time and place, the particular author, text or genre examined and the critical frameworks adopted. The relationship between Helen's agency and the divine is explored with particular depth and frequency in epic and tragedy. Different poets, works and passages offer a variety of perspectives on the topic. Characters in epic and tragedy respond to Helen's role in the Trojan war in radically different ways, on a spectrum ranging from straightforward blame to full-blown apology. Recent analyses of Helen in epic and tragedy have often had recourse to concepts such as

⁴ For attempts to refine these models, in addition to Johnston, Van Hove (forthcoming), see the (widely differing) readings of Schmitt 1990; Harrison 2000, 223-42; Cairns 2001, 12-24 and 2013, 136-7; Dorati 2015; Battezzato 2019a; 2019b, 37-40, 45-54; Brouillet, Buccheri 2019.

double motivation to argue that attempts to emphasise divine agency in Helen's fate, by Helen herself and by others, do not reduce or cancel out her responsibility for the Trojan war and the blame attached to it.⁵ My article aims to re-examine this claim by looking in detail at key passages from the *Iliad* and Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Locating each passage in its specific context, it will ask how it depicts the interaction of divine and human agency. I shall also attempt to draw out some of the similarities and differences between Homer's and Euripides' treatments of Helen and the gods.

2 Iliadic Helen

From her very birth, Helen is inextricably linked with the gods and their plans for humankind. According to several versions of the story, the sole purpose of her existence is to act as an instrument of some kind of divine plan. In the *Cypria* (*Arg.* 1-2; fr. 1; fr. 10-11), Helen is one of two agents – the other being Achilles – created by Zeus to destroy many humans through war, and thus to relieve the Earth of excess population. Similarly, the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* (fr. 204W) presents Helen's marriage to Menelaus as a key turning-point in the sequence of events leading to the destruction of heroes, accomplished through wars in Thebes and then in Troy, for Helen's sake ('Ελένης ἔνεκ', *Op.* 165). In these narratives, reflected for instance in some passages of Euripides (*Hel.* 36-41; *Or.* 1639-42, etc.), Helen functions – to quote K. Ormand – as a kind of “next generation Pandora”;⁶ she is defined entirely by a purpose that lies outside her control. A divine plan is also at the heart of Helen's life in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* – although it is perhaps less clear what the exact parameters and ultimate aims of that plan are, beyond the fact that various gods, for various reasons, desire the destruction of many Trojans and Greeks.⁷ Unlike our surviving fragments of the *Cypria* or Hesiod, however, the two poems develop Helen's character – she becomes not simply a cipher, a means-to-an-end in the grand plan of the gods, but a complex, fully fleshed-out human being, forced retrospectively to come to terms with her own and others' actions as part of the fate that has been handed to her by the gods.

Helen makes her first appearance in Book 3 of the *Iliad*. Paris has just fled before Menelaus, and is upbraided by his brother Hector, who

⁵ See for instance Lesky 1961, 34, 39-40; Schmitt 1990, 89; Gaskin 1990, 6, 11-12; Taplin 1992, 96-101; Stoevesandt 2008, 118-19; Krieter-Spiro 2009, 68-9; Blondell 2013, 6-7, 61, 189 and *passim*; Blondell 2018; Pucci 2016, 38.

⁶ Ormand 2013, 214; cf. Mayer 1996, Burian 2007, 193.

⁷ On the plan of Zeus in the *Iliad* see for instance Allan 2008a; Scodel 2017; Pelling 2020; Schein 2022, 12-13, 91.

blames Paris for the war and for taking Helen, who is a ‘great misery’ (μέγα πῆμα, 50; cf. 3.160) for Priam, Troy and all the people (cf. 87: strife has arisen for Paris’ sake, τοῦ εἴνεκα).⁸ Paris accepts some blame, but also claims that he had little choice in the matter, since Helen was given to him by Aphrodite, and mortals cannot spurn divine gifts (63-6). The focus shifts to Helen at 121, after the announcement of Paris’ offer to engage in a duel with Menelaus. She is weaving a purple robe on which she is embroidering battles of Trojans and Greeks, which they had endured ‘for her sake’ (ἔθεν εἴνεκ’, 128, creating a parallel with Paris at 87). The goddess Iris appears and tells her to go to the Scaean gate to see the duel between Paris and Menelaus, arousing in Helen ‘sweet longing’ for Menelaus, Sparta and her family. As she reaches the Scaean gate, the Trojan elders sitting there observe her and mutter (154-76):

οἱ δ’ ὡς οὖν εἶδονθ’ Ἑλένην ἐπὶ πύργον ἰοῦσαν,
 ἦκα πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἔπεα πτερόεντ’ ἀγόρευον·
 ‘οὐ νέμεσις Τρῶας καὶ ἐκνήμιδας Ἀχαιοὺς
 τοιῆδ’ ἀμφὶ γυναικὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἄλγεα πάσχειν·
 αἰνῶς ἀθανάτησι θεῆς εἰς ὧπα ἔοικεν·
 ἀλλὰ καὶ ὧς τοίη περ εἴουσ’ ἐν νηυσὶ νεέσθω,
 μηδ’ ἡμῖν τεκέεσσί τ’ ὀπίσσω πῆμα λίποιτο·
 Ὡς ἄρ’ ἔφαν, Πρίαμος δ’ Ἑλένην ἐκαλέσσατο φωνῆ·
 ‘δεῦρο πάροιθ’ ἔλθοῦσα, φίλον τέκος, ἴζευ ἐμεῖο,
 ὄφρα ἴδης πρότερόν τε πόσιν πηοὺς τε φίλους τε –
 οὐ τί μοι αἰτίη ἐσσί, θεοὶ νύ μοι αἰτιοὶ εἶσιν,
 οἳ μοι ἐφώρμησαν πόλεμον πολὺδακρυν Ἀχαιῶν –
 ὡς μοι καὶ τόνδ’ ἄνδρα πελώριον ἐξονομήνης ...’
 Τὸν δ’ Ἑλένη μῦθοισιν ἀμείβετο, διὰ γυναικῶν·
 ‘αἰδοῖός τέ μοι ἐσσι, φίλε ἔκυρέ, δεινός τε.
 ὡς ὄφελεν θάνατός μοι ἀδεῖν κακὸς ὅππότε δεῦρο
 υἱεὶ σῶ ἐπόμην, θάλαμον γνωτούς τε λιποῦσα
 παῖδά τε τηλυγέτην καὶ ὀμηλικὴν ἐρατεινήν.
 ἀλλὰ τὰ γ’ οὐκ ἐγένοντο· τὸ καὶ κλαίουσα τέτηκα...’

When they saw Helen coming on to the wall, softly they spoke winged words to one another: “Small blame that Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans should for such a woman long suffer woes; she is dreadfully like immortal goddesses to look on. But even so,

⁸ Helen, Paris and Achilles are all at various points described as a πῆμα for the Trojans. The term seems to carry a sense that they are instruments of a divine plan; cf. especially 6.282: Zeus reared Paris to be a great πῆμα for the Trojans; cf. also Euripides fr. 1082, which may belong to the *Alexandros*, discussed at 3 below (Karamanou 2017, 153; Kovacs 2018, 28-9). For πῆμα and divine intervention more generally see 8.176; 15.110; 17.99, 688; 24.547; the term is applied by Hesiod to Nemesis (*Th.* 223).

though she is like them, let her go home on the ships, and not be left here to be a bane to us and to our children after us". So they said, but Priam spoke, and called Helen to him: "Come here, dear child, and sit in front of me, so that you may see your former husband and your kinspeople and those dear to you - you are in no way responsible in my eyes; it is the gods who are responsible, who roused against me the tearful war of the Achaeans - and so that you may tell me who is this huge warrior ..." And Helen, fair among women, answered him, saying: "Respected are you in my eyes, dear father of my husband, and dread. I wish that evil death had been pleasing to me when I followed your son here, and left my bridal chamber and my kinspeople and my daughter, well-beloved, and the lovely companions of my girlhood. But that was not to be; so I pine away with weeping..."⁹

Priam states that in his opinion, Helen is not at all responsible (*aitiē*) for the war; instead, it is the gods who are responsible (*aitioi*).¹⁰ In her response, Helen does not explicitly address Priam's point, but instead emphasises her strong sense of guilt and regret. We might on the surface take her reply as indicating that she rejects Priam's claim that the gods are responsible. Building on this idea, Lesky argued that the dialogue as a whole encapsulates the principle of double motivation, with Priam emphasising one side of the proverbial coin (divine agency) and Helen emphasising the other (human agency) (1961, 39-40). The passage thus neatly expresses a synthesis of divine and human agency (which, according to Lesky's principle, leaves Helen's responsibility untouched). As D. Cairns notes, however, the dialogue does not leave room for such an interpretation. If we are to believe Priam, then we must accept that Helen is *not* responsible, and that the gods *are* responsible; there is no room for any 'doubling' or multiplication of agency and/or responsibility, as for instance in the *Iliad* 16 passage mentioned above, where Euphorbus and Hector are explicitly named among the many agents who caused Patroclus' death.¹¹ It is thus worth looking at the passage in more detail.

⁹ Translation by Murray and Wyatt, modified.

¹⁰ On the term *aitios* in such contexts, see Scodel 2008, 107.

¹¹ Cairns 2001, 16-17. The idea put forward by Priam here, that divine responsibility cancels out human responsibility, occurs frequently; see Ellis, Johnston (forthcoming), Part I for some examples. Particularly close to our passage (and perhaps drawing on it) is Herodotus 1.45, where Croesus exonerates Adrastus from any responsibility in his son's death: εἰς δὲ οὐ σύ μοι τοῦδε τοῦ κακοῦ αἴτιος, εἰ μὴ ὅσον ἀέκων ἐξεργάσασα, ἀλλὰ θεῶν κού τις, ὅς μοι καὶ πάλαι προεσήμεινε τὰ μέλλοντα ἔσσεσθαι, 'It is not you that I consider responsible (*aitios*) for this evil, except insofar as you did it unwillingly; rather, it was one of the gods, the same who communicated to me long ago the things that were to be'.

Priam's statement comes as a parenthesis in a longer speech: he is inviting Helen to come and look at her former husband and kin, and to tell him who the different Greek warriors are. Why does Priam insert his apology of Helen in this particular context? I would suggest that there are two main reasons. First, Priam shifts the blame away from Helen and onto the gods to allow her to 'save face' (to use R. Scodel's term), to minimise the shame she will inevitably experience at the sight of her former husband and kinspeople (whom she left, and who are now suffering for her sake).¹² Second, Priam's ascription of blame to the gods responds to a wider tension that is embodied in the mutterings of the Trojan elders at 154-60: by criticising the fact that Helen is still at Troy and wishing she would leave, they threaten both Helen (whom Priam therefore tries to reassure) and himself, as the king of Troy and Paris' father and thus the implicit target of this criticism. The claim that the gods are the true cause of the war is potentially effective in defusing the tensions pervading the scene, in part because it is – like any human statement about the divine – inherently uncertain and unverifiable.¹³ Priam thus inserts this parenthesis for specific, pragmatic reasons that have to do, in immediate terms, with maintaining harmony within his family and among the wider community. This does not mean, however, that we should dismiss his remark as merely rhetorical, or doubt its sincerity or applicability to the situation: a statement may be both rhetorically expedient and sincere or true. There is no indication that Priam does not actually believe his words about the gods to be true;¹⁴ and there is in fact plenty of evidence elsewhere in the poem to support the view that the gods were heavily involved in bringing war to Troy. The audience know this, and are able to relate Priam's remark to this knowledge with an arguably greater degree of certainty (since they have access to the narrator's better-informed perspective on events). Priam thus indulges in theological speculation concerning the respective roles of Helen and the gods in the origins of the Trojan war. What he does not do, however, is to offer a clear, widely applicable theological principle that can be taken to apply in other, comparable cases.

As I noted above, we might infer from Helen's response that she disagrees with Priam's stated view on the origins of the war. Yet she does not deny that the gods were *aitioi* for the war, or claim that she was responsible; she simply expresses regret that she followed Paris to Troy, and sorrow at the way events turned out. It is certainly

¹² Thus Scodel 2008, 111.

¹³ For a similar point, see Allan 2008b, 11; Scodel 2008, 112.

¹⁴ See Teffeteller 2003, 23 on the possibility that Priam's remark reflects a "sincere belief".

possible to read Helen's regret and sorrow as sincere, and potentially (though not necessarily) as implying a degree of agency: she is miserable because she blames herself for what happened. Yet her reply to Priam can also be read as forming part of a strategy aimed at negotiating her awkward position in the particular setting of the *teichoscopia*, and at Troy more generally. Unlike Paris (who is frequently blamed by others), Helen regularly blames herself, sometimes very harshly. For Scodel and others, this is an effective way for her to retain the sympathy of the Trojans, because it enables them to step in and shift the blame away from her, or console her.¹⁵ As in Priam's case, the pragmatic aims underlying Helen's speech do not necessarily negate its sincerity, and its potential usefulness as an insight into the question of causation. If taken at face value, and on one interpretation, the passage may suggest that Helen feels a degree of responsibility for the war (something which would contradict Priam's statement). Yet one might equally argue that Helen, rather than emphasising her own agency, is merely expressing retrospective sorrow at a sequence of events over which she had no control (and thus that she does not contradict Priam); or indeed, that her speech is purely motivated by pragmatic aims, in which case we should not take it at face value. Whatever the case may be, I would suggest that Helen's speech is (perhaps deliberately) too ambiguous and rhetorically charged to offer clear insights into the question of responsibility.

The poet does, however, offer a measure of theological clarification later in the book. The duel between Paris and Menelaus is interrupted by Aphrodite, who whisks Paris away to his bedchamber, and then appears to Helen on the Scaean gate. In disguise, she tells Helen that Paris is waiting for her in the bedchamber (3.383-94). Helen recognises the goddess and reacts negatively (395-412), emphasising Aphrodite's deceit (399, 405) and her agency in leading Helen to Troy (400-2). Helen refuses to go to avoid shame and blame from the Trojan women. Aphrodite in turn responds with angry threats, frightening Helen into silent submission (413-27). Here we have an example of effective divine intervention, developed in the narrative voice rather than as part of a public exchange by characters in direct speech. Some degree of confidence is thus possible. For all her boldness in initially rebuking Aphrodite, Helen ultimately appears as a helpless victim of the powerful goddess.¹⁶ Further, as commentators have noted, this scene may be understood as a 'reprisal' of the original moment in which Aphrodite gave Helen to Paris, and forced

¹⁵ Scodel 2008, 111. On Helen's self-blame, see further Graver 1995; Worman 2001, 21-30; Bettini, Brillante 2002, 91-8; Roisman 2006, 11-15; Blondell 2010.

¹⁶ Cf. Deichgräber 1952, 118: "ein tief bedrückendes Bild menschlicher Hilflosigkeit". See also Bettini, Brillante 2002, 85-6; Roisman 2006, 5-6, 15-23.

her to follow him to Troy – just as the earlier event led to the start of the war, in this later iteration, Aphrodite’s intervention interrupts the duel and contributes to the resumption of hostilities between Trojans and Greeks.¹⁷ Helen is, once again, a pawn in the plan of the gods. Unlike the dialogue with Priam at 154-76, therefore, this passage does seem to provide a clearer, more trustworthy insight into who is truly *aitios* for the situation at Troy (be it the particular sequence of events in Book 3, or, if we take the view that Aphrodite’s compulsion here re-enacts something that happened at Sparta before the war, the abduction of Helen itself and the war as a whole). With that in mind, perhaps Priam’s unambiguous attribution of responsibility to the gods at 164-5, while necessarily speculative, is not too far off the mark.

Book 6 takes up Helen’s narrative where Book 3 left it. Hector goes to Paris to tell him to return to fight. As in the earlier passage, Hector upbraids Paris, telling him that war is raging ‘on his account’ (σέο δ’ εἶνεκ’, 328). Paris says he will return to the battlefield; his response to Hector is met by silence. Helen then intervenes (6.343-58):

τὸν δ’ Ἑλένη μύθοισι προσηύδα μειλιχίοισι·
ἴδ’ ἄρ’ ἐμεῖο κυνὸς κακομηχάνου ὀκρυοέσσης,
ὥς μ’ ὄφελ’ ἤματι τῷ ὅτε με πρῶτον τέκε μήτηρ
οἴχεσθαι προφέρουσα κακῇ ἀνέμοιο θύελλα
εἰς ὄρος ἢ εἰς κῦμα πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης,
ἔνθα με κῦμ’ ἀπόερσε πάρος τάδε ἔργα γενέσθαι.
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ τάδε γ’ ὦδε θεοὶ κακὰ τεκμήραντο,
ἄνδρὸς ἔπειτ’ ὄφελλον ἀμείνωνος εἶναι ἄκοιτις,
ὃς ἦδη νέμεσίν τε καὶ αἴσχεα πόλλ’ ἀνθρώπων.
τούτω δ’ οὐτ’ ἄρ’ νῦν φρένες ἔμπεδοι οὐτ’ ἄρ’ ὀπίσσω
ἔσσονται· τῷ καὶ μιν ἐπαυρήσεσθαι οἴω.
ἀλλ’ ἄγε νῦν εἴσελθε καὶ ἔξο τῷδ’ ἐπὶ δίφρῳ,
δᾶερ, ἐπεὶ σε μάλιστα πόνος φρένας ἀμφιβέβηκεν
εἶνεκ’ ἐμεῖο κυνὸς καὶ Ἀλεξάνδρου ἔνεκ’ ἄτης,
οἷσιν ἐπὶ Ζεὺς θῆκε κακὸν μόρον, ὥς καὶ ὀπίσσω
ἀνθρώποισι πελώμεθ’ αἰοίδιμοι ἔσσομένοισι’.

But to him spoke Helen with gentle words: ‘O brother of me that am a dog, a contriver of mischief and abhorred by all, I wish that on the day when first my mother gave me birth an evil blast of wind had carried me away to some mountain or to the wave of the loud-resounding sea, where the wave would have swept me away before these things came to pass. But, since the gods so ordained these ills, I wish that I had been wife to a better man, who could

17 Bowie 2019, 13. See also, for example, Bouvier 2017, 197-8; Pucci 2017, 205-6.

feel the indignation of his fellows and their many revilings. But this man's understanding is not now firm, nor ever will be hereafter; of it he will, I think, enjoy also the fruits. But come now, enter in, and sit on this chair, my brother, since above all others has trouble encompassed your mind because of shameless me, and the folly of Alexander; on us Zeus has brought an evil doom, so that even in days to come we may be a song for men that are yet to be'.

Helen speaks harshly of Paris, whilst stressing her own regret and sense of guilt in very strong terms. Here as in Book 3, Helen is actively negotiating her difficult situation at Troy. She does so through a potent and highly ambiguous combination of seduction, self-blame and ascription of blame onto the gods. Just as the earlier exchange with Priam, this passage has been discussed as a prime example of 'double motivation'. Helen claims that her actions were the result of divine intervention, but she also emphasises her own agency, thus - the argument goes - neatly capturing the merging of divine and human causation into a configuration that allows the human agent - Helen - to retain her full responsibility (Lesky 1961, 34, 39-40). Again, however, Helen's speech is too complex and ambiguous to be taken as an illustration of a theological principle. It seems to me rather that Helen's oscillations between blaming herself (which, as we have already seen, can function as an effective strategy to anticipate others' criticism and arouse sympathy) and foregrounding divine intervention have the effect of muddying the waters, of creating ambiguity, as to who is in fact *aitios*. Like the Priam exchange in Book 3, the passage does not offer any clear answers to this question, illustrating instead the flexibility of attributions of agency to the divine. Helen leaves it open to her audience to believe that she does indeed feel regret, and perhaps share responsibility, for what happened (and in doing so, helps her case by arousing sympathy); yet she also notes the fact that the gods are heavily involved in her fate, something which both she and the audience know to be true.¹⁸ Whether or not we see her as sincere in her regret and sorrow, Helen comes across here as a clever, sophisticated operator. She evidently possesses exceptional awareness of the divine plan and of her place within it (as her interaction with Aphrodite in Book 3, and the final lines of this speech, 6.357-8, suggest),¹⁹ but is strategic about what to disclose or emphasise in different contexts, as suits her aims. Thus, while the speech certainly sheds light on Helen's remarkable agency in her interactions with the

18 It is worth noting in this regard that Helen arguably has more access than Priam to the mechanisms of divine intervention, and so might in theory be better informed, even though it is - as we have seen - difficult to assess the extent of her sincerity.

19 For this point see for instance Allan 2008b, 11.

male members of her Trojan household, it is of relatively little help in reconstructing the mechanisms of causation that lie behind the war.²⁰

The picture of divine and human agency that emerges from these passages is obscure and shifting. Far from offering clear answers or fixed theological principles, they show how ascriptions of divine intervention might be manipulated and deployed in a variety of ways, and for a variety of aims, depending on context and speaker. This does not mean that we should not take such claims seriously. There is no sense that Priam's or Helen's appeals to divine intervention are treated merely as specious argumentation. The confrontation between Aphrodite and Helen in 3.383-427 demonstrates that the gods of the *Iliad* can, and do, intervene in ways that drastically reduce the agency of mortals, if they do not cancel it out altogether; it also arguably provides powerful evidence of Aphrodite's responsibility, and of Helen's status as a victim. The episodic nature of these passages, the sophistication and ambiguity of the characters' speeches and the impenetrability of the divine plan all make it difficult to draw any firm conclusions beyond this.

3 Euripidean Helen: Trojan Women

On the surface, the Helen of tragedy appears to be quite different from her Iliadic counterpart. She is generally depicted in a more negative light, although this probably has more to do with tragedy's focus on the aftermath of the Trojan war than with any radical change in her character and its appraisal.²¹ In tragedy, as in Homer and elsewhere, Helen remains a highly complex figure; and at the heart of this complexity we find, once again, the question of divine and human agency. Given the gods' involvement in her fate and in the origins of the war, to what extent is Helen to blame? Various answers

²⁰ The *Odyssey* addresses the question of Helen's and the gods' responsibility in the war in three passages. Two of these deploy strategies comparable to our Iliadic examples, oscillating between blame for the gods and blame for Helen (or regret on her part), and paint a similarly unclear picture of divine intervention and responsibility. At 4.259-64, Helen, speaking publicly and in Menelaus' presence, emphasises Aphrodite's agency: it was the goddess who led her to Troy (μὲν ἠγάγεε, 262) and sent *atē* onto her, but she quickly recovered and took sides with the Greeks. At 23.215-24, Penelope deploys the example of Helen as foil for her caution in recognising Odysseus: she declares that even Helen would not have slept with a foreigner, had she known what would happen as a result; therefore a god must have prompted her to do it, and she only realised her *atē* after the fact. On these passages, see for instance Scodel 2008, 116-17; Cairns 2012, 10-13, 18-19. In the third passage (11.436-9) Odysseus, addressing Agamemnon in the underworld, laments Zeus' persecution of the Atreids 'through the counsels of women' (γυναικείας διὰ βουλᾶς). Odysseus here ambiguously combines blame for Helen (and Clytemnestra) with a sense that they were instruments of some divine plan.

²¹ See Allan 2008b, 16-17 for a similar point.

are offered to this question. On one side of the spectrum, Euripides' *Helen* explores the possibility that Helen might in fact be completely innocent. In the vast majority of tragedies dealing with the Trojan cycle, however, we find oscillations between, on the one hand, unambiguous blame for Helen and, on the other, an emphasis on the role of the gods (and other mortals such as Paris) in causing the war. While claims of Helen's responsibility occur much more frequently, and on the lips of largely sympathetic characters like Hecuba and Andromache, specific dramatic and rhetorical contexts (as in the *Iliad*) often make it risky to generalise, or indeed to say much more than that matters remain complex (and beyond the reach of mortal speculation, particularly for characters on the stage but also, to some extent, for audiences in the theatre).

Euripides' *Trojan Women* is particularly interesting in this respect, because it offers two differing perspectives on Helen: in the first half of the tragedy, the audience see her through the eyes of the Trojan women, who blame her for their immense suffering; yet she is also allowed to speak for herself when she appears on stage in the *agōn* scene towards the end of the play (860-1059). There she is given the opportunity to defend her innocence, responding to the prosecution of Hecuba and the judgement of Menelaus. The content of her defence speech, together with her attitude and appearance, have mostly attracted negative evaluations from scholars, and most have seen her opponent Hecuba, a much more sympathetic character, as the clear winner of the debate.²² Confident, apparently unrepentant and splendidly dressed (in stark contrast to the Trojan women in their rags), Helen is, for N. Austin, the "stock villain of the Trojan war", and her speech "hardly [...] anything more than the cheapest court-room pleading".²³ A large part of Helen's argumentation revolves around shifting blame for the Trojan war onto others, and particularly the gods. Hecuba, by contrast, argues that Helen was solely responsible for her elopement and its consequences. With some important exceptions, scholars have not taken Helen's arguments about divine intervention seriously. Most have interpreted the theology of the debate in one of two ways. The first alternative is to see it as aligned with the 'double motivation' principle, according to which divine involvement does not relieve the human agent of her responsibility: Hecuba implicitly accepts the idea of divine intervention in the events leading to the Trojan war, but argues that this does not exonerate Helen (a view which, so the argument goes, is shared by Euripides and his

²² See the useful discussion of scholarship at Kovacs 2018, 262.

²³ Austin 1994, 138, 139. Compare Blondell 2013, 195: "an intellectually and morally vacuous tissue of sophistries".

audience).²⁴ The second alternative (which sometimes overlaps with the first) is to see the debate, and the play as a whole, as espousing a new, 'enlightened' theology and morality: depending on individual interpretations, the gods (as per Hecuba's apparently new-fangled prayer to Zeus at 884-8 and her reading of Aphrodite as passion at 983-92)²⁵ have either become internalised forces, moralised and/or been stripped of their substance, and can no longer serve to explain or justify human decisions and actions.²⁶ Thus, Hecuba's rationalistic ethics, according to which humans are always responsible for their actions, trumps Helen's 'Homeric' perspective, which is exposed as empty rhetorical ploy or outdated relic.²⁷ Some critics, however, have put forward more sympathetic readings of Helen and her theology. M. Lloyd, in particular, has shown that the intellectual stakes of the debate are more complex and obscure than appearances suggest; whilst D. Kovacs has recently argued that Helen's attempt to shift the blame onto the gods is ultimately vindicated by the tragedy's (largely traditional) theology.²⁸ In what follows, I build on their readings to re-examine Helen's divine defence.

Although the gods remain largely distant and elusive throughout *Trojan Women*, the tragedy has a marked divine background that is partly illuminated by its wider trilogy.²⁹ In the prologue, Poseidon and Athena make it clear that the war and suffering that have ravaged Troy were willed by the gods, who are now equally involved in organising the symmetrical destruction that is to be wrought onto the Greeks (*Tro.* 1-97). At various points, Hecuba or the Chorus explicitly take up the idea that the gods caused the Trojans' sufferings (612-13, 696, 1240-5), or lament the fact that the gods have betrayed

24 Thus for instance Blondell 2013, 188-90 and 2018, 123-5.

25 On the prayer to Zeus, see for example Scodel 1980, 93-5; Lefkowitz 2016, 34-6; Kovacs 2018, 270-2.

26 Bettini, Brillante 2002, 118-23, especially 122 (which I paraphrase here): "La difesa di Elena [...] non offre una spiegazione in verità alternativa [...]. Essa non fa che appellarsi alla naturale 'debolezza' della donna e alla religiosità tradizionale, elementi che figuravano entrambi nell'antica versione che fa da cornice al dramma, ma che non sono più in grado di offrire una spiegazione persuasiva". For comparable interpretations, see for instance Lesky 1960, 129-34; Pucci 2016, 32-49. Scodel 1980, 93-100 combines aspects of both views, arguing that both Helen's and Hecuba's arguments fail in some way.

27 For the latter reading, see in particular Lesky 1960, 133: "Wir sehen die alte Bipolarität der Motivation aus göttlichem und menschlichem Bereiche dadurch aufgehoben, dass der eine Pol zum Verschwinden gebracht wurde. Wohl wird noch davon gesprochen, dass hinter dem Tun der Menschen Götter als bewirkende Mächte stehen, aber das ist nicht mehr echter Glaube, sondern ein Spiel mit der Tradition, nur dazu da, um in seiner Sinnlosigkeit entlarvt und blossgestellt zu werden".

28 Lloyd 1984; Kovacs 2018.

29 On the gods in the play as a whole, see for instance Kovacs 1997, 2018; Mastroiarde 2010, 77-8, 179-80, 220-2; Lefkowitz 2016, 9-19; Rodighiero 2016.

and abandoned them (469, 858-9, 1060-80, 1280-1, 1288-93). Most interestingly for my purposes, Andromache at 597-8 accuses the gods of contriving to save Paris from death in order for him to marry Helen and cause the destruction of Troy. Here Andromache alludes to events that were developed in the first play of the trilogy, the fragmentary but relatively well preserved *Alexandros*.³⁰ In that tragedy, Hecuba dreamed that Paris was destined to cause the destruction of Troy and thus decided to expose him; yet baby Paris was saved and then survived two further assassination attempts before being recognised and sailing off to Sparta to fulfil his destiny. Among other indications of a divine plan in *Alexandros*, we can mention a prophecy by Cassandra that the Judgement of Paris would cause the destruction of Troy by bringing Helen, a Fury-like figure, to the city.³¹ In this and other ways, *Alexandros* contributes additional theological framing to the trilogy, supplying information about past events and broader divine involvement that can help spectators to evaluate the characters' statements, fill the gaps in their accounts and detect dramatic irony. Thus, when the Trojan women in *Tro.* argue that Helen was solely responsible for their woes (as they repeatedly do, for instance at 134-7, 372-3, 766-73, 967-8, 1055-7), the audience are in a strong position to assess these claims critically. Given the play's emphasis on the Trojan women, their sufferings and the compassion they generate, spectators will surely have been sympathetic to such claims, which have powerful emotional appeal; yet Euripides also gives them the tools (partly already supplied by the broader mythical tradition) to reject or qualify them. The audience are aware not only that the gods brought about Troy's destruction with Helen as their instrument, but also that the Trojans themselves, particularly Hecuba and Paris, had a central role in that process.

Our scene begins at 860, when Menelaus enters and declares his intention to take Helen back to Greece and kill her there. Hecuba eggs him on and warns him against Helen's powers of seduction. Helen then enters and pleads with Menelaus for a chance to defend herself, which is granted, with Hecuba forming the prosecution. She begins (919-37) by shifting the blame onto others: Hecuba, who gave birth to the 'origin of [their] troubles' (ἀρχὴ κακῶν), and the 'old man' who failed to kill Paris (either Priam or the old man who failed to expose the baby).³² She moves on to the Judgement of Paris, arguing that the Trojan war was the least bad outcome for the Greeks (so

³⁰ On *Alexandros* see for example Karamanou 2017; also Scodel 1980 and Kovacs 2018, 27-44, 47-8 (who focuses on its relationship with *Tro.*).

³¹ See Karamanou 2017, 33-4, 262-7; Kovacs 2018, 32, 47.

³² On the salience of these arguments (given the context offered by *Alexandros*), see for instance Allan 2008b, 16; Lefkowitz 2016, 15-16.

they should in fact thank Helen for it). She then turns to the crucial matter of her abduction at Sparta and the gods' role in it (938-50):

οὐπω με φήσεις αὐτὰ τὰν ποσὶν λέγειν,
ὅπως ἀφώρησ' ἐκ δόμων τῶν σῶν λάθρα.
ἦλθ' οὐχὶ μικρὰν θεὸν ἔχων αὐτοῦ μέτα
ὁ τῆσδ' ἀλάστωρ, εἴτ' Ἀλέξανδρον θέλεις
ὄνοματι προσφωνεῖν νιν εἴτε καὶ Πάριν·
ὄν, ὦ κάκιστε, σοῖσιν ἐν δόμοις λιπῶν
Σπάρτης ἀπῆρας νηὶ Κρησίαν χθόνα. εἶέν.
οὐ σ', ἀλλ' ἑμαυτὴν τοῦπὶ τῶδ' ἐρήσομαι·
τί δὴ φρονουῖσά γ' ἐκ δόμων ἄμ' ἐσπόμην
ξένῳ, προδοῦσα πατρίδα καὶ δόμους ἑμούς;
τὴν θεὸν κόλαζε καὶ Διὸς κρείσσων γενοῦ,
ὃς τῶν μὲν ἄλλων δαιμόνων ἔχει κράτος,
κείνης δὲ δοῦλός ἐστι· συγγνώμη δ' ἑμοί.

You will claim that I am not yet talking about the obvious point, how I slipped secretly from your house. He came with no small goddess at his side to help him, that spirit sent to ruin this woman, call him Paris or Alexandros as you like. This man, you worthless creature, you left in your house and took ship from Sparta to Crete! Well then, in what follows I will question myself and not you. What was I thinking of that I left the house in company with a stranger, abandoning my country and my home? Discipline the goddess and be stronger than Zeus! Zeus holds sway over all the other divinities but is a slave to her. So it is pardonable in me.³³

She returns to this point at the end of her speech (964-5) and after Hecuba's response (1042-5):

εἰ δὲ τῶν θεῶν κρατεῖν
βούλη, τὸ χρεῖζεν ἀμαθές ἐστὶ σου τόδε.

If you wish to defeat the gods, your desire is a foolish one.

μή, πρὸς σε γονάτων, τὴν νόσον τὴν τῶν θεῶν
προσθεῖς ἑμοὶ κτάνης με, συγγίγνωσκε δέ.

I beg you by your knees, do not attribute to me the malady sent by the gods and put me to death! Rather, forgive me!³⁴

33 Translation by Kovacs.

34 Translation by Kovacs.

As I have noted, scholars have with some exceptions rarely taken this defence seriously, and often assume that ancient audiences would not have done so either. This is mainly because of two, potentially overlapping notions: first, Helen is not a sympathetic character, so one is not inclined to agree with her, and second, her arguments themselves are spurious. To put it in pragmatic terms, we might say that this Helen is less shrewd than her Homeric counterpart in negotiating her awkward social position. Yet the circumstances are different, with Helen now a prisoner at risk of execution, and one might argue that she simply adopts a different strategy. It is important to note, too, that she does ask for forgiveness at 1043 (cf. 950), implying that she is willing to assume some degree of agency and/or responsibility (whether real or purely rhetorical). Yet the fact that Helen fails to evince sympathy should not lead us to assume that what she says about the gods is wrong or pure bluster. As in the *Iliad* passages, we are not told exactly how her claims relate to the reality of the situation as envisaged in Euripides' trilogy (the role of Aphrodite, in particular, is hard to ascertain, although the context as described in 940-2 aligns well with the narrative of Helen's confrontation with the goddess in *Iliad* 3.383-427, a passage which may re-enact the original abduction scene). Yet the audience knows that the Judgement of Paris happened and that the gods wanted to destroy Troy, and what Helen says here tallies with this, and with her role as an agent in the divine plan.³⁵ With that in mind, it does seem fair to agree with Helen that her marriage was θεοπόνητος (953). Although we do not know whether we can fully trust her account of the process of causation leading to the Trojan War, the audience have evidence to support at least the main thrust of her argument.

Hecuba responds with her own theological interpretation of events (969-90):

ταῖς θεαῖσι πρῶτα σύμμαχος γενήσομαι
καὶ τήνδε δεῖξω μὴ λέγουσαν ἔνδικα.
ἐγὼ γὰρ Ἴηραν παρθένον τε Παλλάδα
οὐκ ἐς τοσοῦτον ἀμαθίας ἐλθεῖν δοκῶ,
ὥσθ' ἢ μὲν Ἄργος βαρβάροις ἀπημπόλα,
Παλλὰς δ' Ἀθήνας Φρυξὶ δουλεύειν ποτέ·
οὐ παιδιαῖσι καὶ χλιδῇ μορφῆς πέρι
ἦλθον πρὸς Ἴδην. τοῦ γὰρ οὔνεκ' ἂν θεὰ
Ἴηρα τοσοῦτον ἔσχ' ἔρωτα καλλονῆς;
πότερον ἀμείνον' ὡς λάβη Διὸς πόσιν;
ἢ γάμον Ἀθηνᾶ θεῶν τινος θηρωμένη,
ἢ παρθενίαν πατρὸς ἐξητήσατο

³⁵ For this point see Kovacs 2018, 55-6, 262-5.

φεύγουσα λέκτρα; μὴ ἀμαθεῖς ποίει θεὰς
τὸ σὸν κακὸν κοσμοῦσα, μὴ <οὐ> πείσης σοφούς.
Κύπριν δ' ἔλεξας (ταῦτα γὰρ γέλωσ πολύς)
ἔλθειν ἐμῷ ξὺν παιδὶ Μενέλεω δόμους.
οὐκ ἂν μένουσ' ἂν ἥσυχός σ' ἐν οὐρανῷ
αὐταῖς Ἀμύκλαις ἤγαγεν πρὸς Ἴλιον;
ἦν οὐμὸς υἱὸς κάλλος ἐκπρεπέστατος,
ὁ σὸς δ' ἰδὼν νιν νοῦς ἐποιήθη Κύπριν·
τὰ μῶρα γὰρ πάντ' ἐστὶν Ἀφροδίτη βροτοῖς,
καὶ τοῦνομ' ὀρθῶς ἀφροσύνης ἄρχει θεᾶς.

First of all, I will become an ally of the goddesses and show that this woman's plea is unjust. I do not think that Hera or the virgin Pallas would be so foolish that the former would ever sell Argos to the barbarians and Pallas give Athens to the Phrygians as their subject. They did not go to Ida to engage in the frivolous extravagance of a beauty contest. Why should the goddess Hera conceive such a great desire to be beautiful? So that she could get a better husband than Zeus? Or was Athena looking for marriage with one of the gods, she who begged from her father the gift of maidenhood and fled from marriage? Do not make the gods foolish in an attempt to gloss over your own evil nature: you will not persuade the wise. You claim that Cypris (the idea is hilarious) went with my son to the house of Menelaus. Could she not have stayed quietly in heaven and brought you to Ilium—and the whole city of Amyclae with you? My son was very handsome, and when you saw him your mind was turned into Cypris. For mortals call all acts of foolishness Aphrodite, and it is proper that the goddess' name begins with the word for folly.³⁶

Hecuba puts forward a view of the gods which, as M. Lloyd notes, is both idealistic (the gods do not indulge in frivolity and vanity) and reductive (the gods are natural principles rather than fully anthropomorphised beings) (Lloyd 1984, 312). She uses this to rebut Helen's narrative of the Judgement of Paris, and with it, her arguments that Aphrodite forced her to follow Paris to Troy. The theology she propounds certainly makes sense in principle, and may well have been shared in some respects by some contemporary audience members. Her account of Aphrodite, in particular, seems just about plausible: the debate's audiences (both internal and external) have no way of knowing for certain whether Aphrodite came to Sparta and intervened directly, or whether Helen simply fell passionately in love with Paris (although spectators in the theatre may supplement the two

36 Translation by Kovacs.

women's accounts with other narratives, such as *Iliad* 3). Yet Hecuba is demonstrably wrong about the Judgement of Paris and its consequences: the spectators know from both *Alexandros* and the wider tradition that the Judgement took place, and that it directly led to Helen's abduction and the war. Thus, while Hecuba may conceivably be right to question Helen's account of Aphrodite's specific, practical role in the elopement itself, there is no doubt that the goddess, along with Hera and Athena, was involved in the plan to bring war and destruction to Troy. Hecuba's attempt to moralise the three goddesses thus fails, suggesting that the gods of the trilogy are in fact closer to those evoked by Helen in her speech.

It is striking that Hecuba does not address the central theological point underlying Helen's argumentation; namely, that if it was the gods' plan for Helen to elope to Troy, she could not have done otherwise, and her responsibility for the war would thus be reduced, if not cancelled out completely. Hecuba sidesteps the issue by arguing that the gods are not as Helen describes them; yet implicit in her speech is an acceptance that if the gods were in fact as Helen says they are, then their intervention would restrict her agency and relieve her of at least part of her responsibility. Viewed within the broader context of the mythical tradition, the trilogy and the play itself, Hecuba's response may thus provide implicit, ironic support for the partial or total exoneration of Helen. By moralising the divine, Hecuba wished to become Aphrodite's 'ally' (σύμμαχος, 969); but she herself knows well that for ordinary mortals, the gods are fickle, deceitful allies (κακοὺς [...] συμμαχοῦς, 469),³⁷ who have abandoned the pitiful Trojans to their immense suffering while Helen, the instrument of their plan, will escape unharmed.

4 Conclusion

This study of Helen provides support for the idea that archaic and classical Greek ideas concerning the interaction of divine and human agency and responsibility are more flexible, complex and unstable than relatively rigid models such as double motivation allow. Claims that the gods played a central role in Helen's fate, and were responsible (or partially responsible) for the destruction and suffering wrought by the Trojan War, should not all be treated in the same way, according to a single, widely applicable principle. If we delve into individual passages, it becomes clear that there is a good deal of variation and ambiguity in ascriptions of divine agency, and that they are very much open to rhetorical manipulation. Context is key;

³⁷ For the gods as deceitful σύμμαχοι, see Soph. *Ai.* 90, 117; *OT* 245.

and it is not simply the case, as some scholars claim, that attempts to shift blame away from Helen onto the gods are never, or not usually, taken seriously. This is certainly a possible response to such claims; but it is by no means the only one. In archaic and classical Greece, the relationship between divine and human agency and responsibility is a site of uncertainty and negotiation rather than a simple, settled question, however much theologians, philosophers and classicists over the centuries have wished to solve it. This uncertainty is a function of the fundamental unknowability of the divine, but it also arises from the individual form and function of our texts, where discussion of divine intervention occurs in very specific, constantly shifting rhetorical and ethical contexts.

This does not mean that we cannot learn anything from ascriptions of divine agency and responsibility, or that we should treat them as simply a matter of rhetoric and/or politeness. In both epic and tragedy, characters' assertions concerning the gods can be illuminated by broader contexts that provide some degree of confirmation or nuance, or go against a particular claim. This is arguably easier to perceive in Homer, where the inspired narrator provides relatively clear, trustworthy insights into the plans and motivations of the gods; whereas in tragedy the broader, underlying logic of events tends to emerge in patchier, more ambiguous ways. In the case of Helen, too, the difficulty of reaching a clear picture of divine intervention is partly alleviated by her exceptional status: we may suspect that she has a unique insight into her fate and the divine plan, and that her assertions about both are based on information that is more secure than that possessed by ordinary humans. Thus, although she is, in both Homer and Euripides, profoundly biased and strategic about what she says to whom, she may in fact be a more authoritative theologian than (say) Hecuba.

This takes us back to the point about dismissing all divine blame-shifting as purely rhetorical. Such arguments make instinctive sense if one does not believe that the gods really existed. Yet for the vast majority of archaic and classical Greeks, the gods did exist. They were everywhere, lurking in the background, ready to influence every mortal thought, decision and action. If we take them seriously – as I believe we should – then the question of what happens when they intervene becomes a properly theological one; and there is no reason why we should treat this theological dimension as trivial or secondary to other concerns. This recognition can challenge the ways in which we evaluate a character such as Helen in her various incarnations. Scholars have long argued that the Iliadic Helen is a highly complex and sympathetic (if ambiguous) figure, and that the gods are an integral part of this characterisation. The Helen of *Trojan Women*, on the other hand, has usually been dismissed as arrogant, selfish and plainly wrong. If we take the gods seriously as powerful agents

that intervene effectively in the world, as the play certainly allows us to do, then it becomes possible to accept Helen's main argument (whether or not we sympathise with her, or agree with her in every respect); and we are forced to confront the fact that justice, and the gods, are more likely to be on her side. However admirable and pitiful Hecuba and the Trojan women may be, they – like the Greeks after them – will be crushed, while Helen will remain unharmed.

The investigation undertaken here, although limited in scope, does not, in my view, reveal a fundamental theological gap between the *Iliad* and Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Both works presuppose the fact that the gods were, and remain, instrumental in shaping Helen's fate from the very beginning. They also leave plenty of room for uncertainty and debate regarding the gods' exact plans, the means they use to achieve them and the implications of all of this for Helen's character. This uncertainty is inherent to the narrative form and religious and philosophical texture of the works themselves. Characters operating within the narrative frame make judgements on Helen based on context, on their knowledge and on their own ethical frameworks, but these judgements are always partial and liable to be fragmented or invalidated, particularly from the better-informed perspective of the poet and, to some extent, the audience. The fragile nature of epic and tragic discourse arguably reflects shared epistemological concerns about humans' ability to understand reality and their vulnerability to illusion and deception.

I would, however, see two important differences in the treatment of Helen and the gods in the *Iliad* and *Trojan Women*. The first is that Euripides is much more explicit than the Homeric poet in framing the Helen issue as a question of theology. Whereas in the *Iliad*, characters mention divine intervention in Helen's life almost casually, as part of a longer speech or dialogue, Euripides' trial scene seems at least partly designed as a confrontation between rival theologians.³⁸ Helen and Hecuba offer alternative religious frameworks and explanations for the Trojan war, and debate the merits of their respective interpretations, in a way that seems slightly contrived and self-conscious. It is as though the spectators were offered a performance of a theological debate. This difference is difficult to interpret, particularly since several passages in Homeric epic offer broadly comparable debates or disquisitions on theological topics (one may for instance compare Zeus' speech at the start of the *Odyssey*). We might conceivably attribute it to considerations of genre and narrative economy, or to the specific fifth-century context, and the interests of Euripides and his audiences. The second difference goes back

38 See Kovacs 2018, 55, 263, arguing that the point of the debate is to emphasise the religious background of the play.

to the unknowability of the divine. As we have seen, the Homeric poet and Euripides both create worlds where powerful gods exist, intervene in mortal affairs and are, for the majority of humans, essentially unknowable. Yet the gods of *Trojan Women* seem even more obscure and distant. After their brief appearance in the prologue, Poseidon and Athena disappear completely. The audience may know (or suspect) that they are still there, and it is possible to piece together certain aspects of their purpose. Yet they never manifest themselves to the characters on stage, who are left to deal, alone, with the catastrophic consequences of Zeus' plan.

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