

From Bane Helen to Plain Helen: The Role of Helen's name in *Theriaka* 309-19

Since her appearance in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, no other female character in Greek literature has elicited as much debate as Helen of Troy (Austin 1994; Blondell 2013). For authors like Alcaeus and Aeschylus, Helen's sexuality was responsible for countless deaths during the war waged over her. Indeed, at *Agamemnon* 689-90, the chorus, playing on the meaning of ἑλ- as "destroying," dubs Helen ἐλένας ἑλανδροῦς ἐλέπτολις ("destroyer of the ships, men, and the city"). Yet the mythical tradition surrounding the figure of Helen was by no means uniform, as authors construed in various ways her blameworthiness for the war, her motivations for absconding with Paris, and even her presence in Troy. Among these authors was the second century BCE poet Nicander, who includes a story featuring Helen in his *Theriaka*, a poem in dactylic hexameter that catalogues dangerous creatures, their bites, and the appropriate remedies (Overduin 2014). At *Theriaka* 309-19, Nicander describes how Helen, during her time in Egypt on her return from Troy, crushes the spine of the *haemorrhoids* snake to cause its crooked movement. In this paper, I will demonstrate that Nicander's treatment of Helen in the story recalls and interrogates the multi-faceted tradition concerning her, in particular the issue of her name.

My paper will consist of a close reading of the story, along with comparisons with other texts and other sections in the *Theriaka*. Since Nicander initially refers to Helen as Αἰνελήνη ("Bane Helen," 310), I will contend that, Nicander, by beginning the story with the conditional phrase εἰ ἔτυμον ("if it is true," 309), makes this name subject to questioning. He achieves this interrogation by constructing a comparison between Helen and deadly snakes. While such a comparison should suggest Helen's deadliness, Nicander attributes human and sexual attributes to the snake in the story, in the process divesting Helen of her blameworthy qualities. The Helen

of the *Theriaka* thus appears as relatively harmless, as she in fact avenges a sexually charged crime, in the same way that Artemis (*Ther.* 13-16) produces the scorpion to kill Orion for his attempted rape. Thus, through the language and details of the passage, Nicander reveals that his Helen does not live up to her dire name.

In employing this mythological story that problematizes the idea that Helen's name reflects her character, Nicander, I will argue, points to a deficiency in the practice of etymology. Since etymology assumes a correlation between name and thing, it becomes difficult for a single name to represent a "thing" as variegated as Helen. As a result, names can be arbitrary, and I will connect this arbitrariness of naming to Nicander's subject matter of deadly creatures and remedies. For these objects of inquiry, names do not matter as much as their varying effects on human beings. The Helen myth thus explains not only the reason for the *haemorrhoids*' crooked movement, but also the inability of names to capture completely the differences in human experiences.

Bibliography

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