



"I Am not Homer's Helen" Myths Retold in Amanda Elyot's *The Memoirs of Helen of Troy*

"Ben Homeros'un Helen'i Değilim"
Amanda Elyot'un Truvalı *Helen'in Anılarında*
Yeniden Anlatılan Mit

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Abstract

The present article examines the representation of female characters in classical Greek myths and the rewriting of the latter from a feminist and feminine perspective. In Homer's *Iliad*, female characters are either reduced to an object, blamed for being the cause of a devastating war, or not given freedom over their life and destiny. From a feminist mythanalytical perspective, Homer's *Iliad* participates in the subjugation of women in classical literature. In this androcentric epic, female

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characters are depicted as passive and submissive creatures. However, some contemporary women writers have sought to deconstruct myth narratives that give power and voice to men at the expense of women. With her novel *The Memoirs of Helen of Troy* (2005), Amanda Elyot retells Homer's epic from a female character perspective. Accordingly, the article examines how the character of Helen disavows the classical tale about her and other women. Elyot's female character provides her own version of the famous epic and its tragic story. Based on the works of feminist literary and social critics, the article argues that Elyot's Helen is thus no longer Homer's Helen. On the contrary, she is a new empowered character who evolves in a fictional narrative that gives voice and agency to subjugated women within a text that was initially male-centred.

Keywords: *female-centred narrative, Helen of Troy, myth, retelling, women's writing*

Öz

Bu makale, klasik Yunan mitlerinde kadın karakterlerin temsilini ve bunların yeniden yazılmasını feminist ve kadınsı bir bakış açısıyla incelemektedir. Homeros'un İlyada'sında kadın karakterler ya bir nesneye indirgenir ya da yıkıcı bir savaşın nedeni olmakla suçlanır ya da yaşamları ve kaderleri üzerinde özgürlük verilmez. Feminist bir mitanalitik perspektiften, Homeros'un İlyada'sı klasik edebiyatta kadınların boyun eğdirilmesine katılır. Bu erkek merkezli destanda, Helen ve Clytemnestra gibi Yunanlı ya da Briseis, Chryseis ve Andromache gibi Truvalı kadın karakterler, pasif ve itaatkâr yaratıklar olarak betimlenir. Homerik anlatı, bu kadınların yaşamlarının gidişatını, onlara özerklik veya faillik için herhangi bir alan sağlamayan erkek egemen bir masal olarak tasvir eder. Bununla birlikte, bazı çağdaş kadın yazarlar, kadınlar pahasına erkeklere güç ve ses veren mit anlatılarını yapıbozuma uğratmaya çalıştılar. Amanda Elyot (Leslie Carroll'ın takma adı), *The Memoirs of Helen of Troy* (2005) adlı romanıyla Homer'ın destanını kadın karakter perspektifinden yeniden anlatmayı seçiyor. Bu doğrultuda makale Helen karakterinin kendisi ve diğer kadınlar hakkındaki klasik hikâyeyi nasıl inkâr ettiğini incelemektedir. Elyot'un kadın karakteri, ünlü destanın ve trajik hikâyesinin kendi versiyonunu sunuyor. Bunu, kızı Hermione'ye hitaben yazdığı anıları aracılığıyla yapar. Feminist edebi ve sosyal eleştirmenlerin eserlerine dayanan makale, Elyot'un Helen'inin artık Homer'ın Helen'i olmadığını savunuyor. Aksine, bu yaratım, başlangıçta erkek merkezli bir metin içinde boyun eğdirilen kadınlara ses ve faillik veren kurgusal bir anlatıda gelişen yeni, güçlendirilmiş bir karakterdir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *kadın merkezli anlatı, Truvalı Helen, mit, yeniden anlatım, kadın yazımı*

Introduction

[T]he act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction-is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive

to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (Rich, 1972: 18)

Contemporary literary studies have shown great interest in the interpretation by women writers of epics from classical mythology. These women writers have emerged on the literary scene “to reclaim a distinctive ‘women’s classical tradition’” (Doherty, 2003: 12) through the retelling of classical myths from a female character’s perspective. In Greek mythology, apart from some exceptions such as the Amazons whom Homer views as “men’s peers in war,” (2005: 63) society is often portrayed as a patriarchal microcosm where women behave according to its norms and where they evolve and are identified from an androcentric perspective (Winmayil, 2020: 233-38). Accordingly, the rewriting of Greek myths are effective strategies adopted by contemporary women writers who endeavour to “communicate truths” that were not expressed in what is viewed as a male-centred discourse. In that sense, women writers display criticism towards the values and conventions of their patriarchal society through the characters they have created in their literary works (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: 75, 77).

Present-day women writers have composed several literary works with which they have engaged in the retelling of classical mythology and they have conceived new worlds for their female characters. Being interested by what they view as the (mis)representation of Helen, the main female character of *The Iliad*, many contemporary women writers have produced novels which provide alternative story versions for the character. Esther Friesner’s *Nobody’s Princess* (2007), Margaret Atwood’s Helen in *The Penelopiad* (2006), Bettany Hughes’s *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* (2006), Margaret George’s *Helen of Troy* (2006), and Amanda Elyot’s *The Memoirs of Helen of Troy* (2005) are the best examples. Most of these contemporary retellings attempt to uncover who Helen is and how she perceives the turmoil that precedes and accompanies the Trojan War. The present article emphasizes Elyot’s work for the genre and subgenres the writer has adopted in her rewriting of *The Iliad*.

Amanda Elyot (the pen name of Leslie Carroll) is among a new wave of contemporary women writers who try to deconstruct the androcentric myth of *The Iliad* and to reconstruct an alternative version of the epic for women through her female-centred text. By drawing upon *The Iliad* as a prior text, Elyot establishes an intertextual connection that enables her to shed light on women’s experience and dependence upon men as they are presented in Homer’s narrative. She produces a new text through which she can free those women characters from the confines imposed upon them by their patriarchal society. Thus, the major concern of this paper is to examine the intertextual dimensions of the mythological Trojan War in contemporary literature as evoked in Amanda Elyot’s novel *The Memoirs of Helen of Troy* (henceforth *MHT*) and more precisely, as perceived by Helen. These intertextual dimensions are foregrounded through the analysis of females’ representation in the Greek epic of *The Iliad* and the way Elyot’s narrative responds to such representation.

In Homer’s *Iliad*, female characters are omnipresent; but they are reduced either to an object or a gift, they are blamed for being the cause of destruction, or they are not given freedom over their lives and destiny. On her account, Elyot deconstructs this narrative that

gives agency and unchallenged voice to men at the expense of women. *MHT* gives voice to her female character Helen to retell Homer's classical myth. Elyot's Helen is thus no longer Homer's Helen. Elyot's character provides her own version of the famous epic and its story. She does so through her memoirs addressed to her daughter Hermione.

Feminist mythocriticism and rewriting

It is far from easy to provide an exhaustive definition a feminist literary criticism as the latter has witnessed constant developments since its emergence in the 1960s (Tyson, 2015: 81-88). Since then, many approaches have subsequently come to the fore. The result has been the development of waves of contemporary feminist criticism that do not follow a unified method. The feminist movement of the 1970s-1980s was defined by a tendency toward the rejection of stereotypical images about women such as those portrayed in classical literature and mythology. That wave of feminism sought to subvert those images that portray women as silent and subdued by giving them voice and more assertive representation (Dorschel, 2011: 5, 7-8). Such a wave provided the opportunity to get access to "the real powers of actual women emerging from male fear and envy" and to recover their repressed voices (Fowler, 2006: 384).

In their interpretation and retelling of myths, feminist critics and writers call attention to the "androcentric nature" of texts in which the narrative is presented from a man's point of view. With the emergence of feminist movements, myths started to be revisited and reinterpreted from a new standpoint. Nowadays, more and more mythical epics and poems characterized by male-dominated texts are examined, and the marginalized and silenced characters are given agency (Dorschel, 2011: 97). Thus, feminist approaches to myths have managed to create "a new world" for formerly neglected women characters; a world where new narratives challenge the classical ones and in which women are liberated from the constraints that have been imposed upon them by some kind of patriarchal culture such as the one of ancient Greece (Staley, 2006: 216).

Speaking about the nature of patriarchal societies and the position of women in such societies, Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are not defined as autonomous and active entities. Rather, they are regarded as passive beings and characters relative to men. While male-produced narratives picture men as the centre of their universe and as holders of absolute power, they construct and portray women as prizes and slaves (1956: 15, 19). In the history of Antiquity, of many ancient cultures and beliefs, and in this case, ancient Greek mythology, women belong thus to patriarchal societies and are sometimes reduced to the status of spoils of war whenever their peoples are conquered and subdued. Such act of enslavement was regarded as a sign of honour and power for the male conqueror (Lerner, 1986: 213).

De Beauvoir adds that the portrayal of women as dependent on men makes it clear that none of the sexes "shared the world in equality" (1956: 15,19). Such inequality is for example reflected in the domestic works that women are reduced to. They are confined in maternity duties which are continuously repeated until they become something perpetual. Women's duties become routine that does not bring anything new to their lives. Additionally, the

repetition of their domestic works is interpreted as something which women are “biologically destined to” do (1956: 88, 90). For their part, Gilbert and Gubar argue that women have always been buried in their patriarchal society, one that limits their lives to mere “traditional female activities - cooking, nursing, needling” (2000: 294). In fact, man’s subjugation of woman exceeds those domestic works to the level in which he even determines her future and fate. In order to maintain their authority and control over women, men set the norms and the values that help them attain their objectives. They stand in opposition to women’s status as a free and responsible beings. In contrast, women are not allowed to set female any values that may stand in opposition to those set by males (2000: 88, 90). In fact, in such kind of society whatever power women enjoy, it is subordinated to those of men. Women are regarded as an inessential element in their society. Being regarded as inferior to men, women have neither direct nor independent relationship with men (Beauvoir, 1956: 96). They are for example not given the freedom over the choice of their marriage partner. Concurring de Beauvoir, Levi-Strauss argues that “the relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasion of this relationship” (1969: 117). Hence, the woman seems to be nothing but an entity exchanged between her father or brother and her husband. For her, no change occurs in her life except the one of shifting from the authority and control of her male-dominated family to that of her male spouse, and she cannot protest at any decision taken over her life.

Women are not only imprisoned by the norms of their patriarchal society, but also by the male-centred texts which reflect that society. In male-produced and male-centred texts, women are “reduced to mere ... characters and images.” Although female characters are given life, they are denied “power of independent speech.” From a mythanalytical perspective, Homer’s *Iliad* participates in this subjugation of women. Moreover, since women are viewed as passive creatures, the course of their life does not provide any room for autonomy (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: 13-14).

While women in patriarchal societies remain closed upon themselves, men monopolize and extend their existence and power through wars, hunting and the conquest of other realms and peoples (Beauvoir, 1956: 99). Lerner uses a drama-based analogy when she speaks about men and women’s roles in patriarchal societies. She argues that men and women are performers on a peculiar stage: Society. The latter is constructed and defined by men. Being the writers and the performers of a play, men assign to themselves “the most interesting, the most heroic parts, giving women the supporting roles” (1986: 12). Men justify the subjugation of women in male-dominated societies by pointing out their alleged weakness and inferior nature (Beauvoir, 1956: 102). The prevailing belief that men are physically stronger than women and that they are capable to go to war implies that they are to be valued and honoured more than women (Lerner, 1986: 17). However, the real reason behind women’s exclusion by men may be found somewhere else: their way of thinking and working which is different and which prevents man from acknowledging woman as “a being like himself” (Beauvoir, 1956: 102). A similar idea is raised by Luce Irigaray (1985) when she contends that male produced discourses display the same stereotypes and describe women as being women because of

“certain lacks of characteristics.” (112) In her reinterpretation of classical texts, Irigaray notes that male narratives constitute an “exercise in patriarchal metaphysics” that “provides the conceptual moves for Greek devaluation of women.” To her, these narratives construct women as men’s inferior “own mirror image.” (Frazer, 1989: 2-3). Cixous asserts that what is biological in women and part of their nature should not be confused with those stereotypes that are associated to them and which are cultural constructions. Worse than those stereotypes that have been created to justify men’s domination over women, it is their ability to make a woman hate herself and direct her strength against herself (1976: 875-93).

Speaking about women’s subjugation in their patriarchal society, Vanda (2007) purports that Greek myths have internalized such oppression and have reflected this idea of gender differences. As a reaction, contemporary women writers have engaged in the rewriting of Greek myths in an attempt to challenge those established differences between men and women. Vanda asserts that

For feminists, the rewriting of myths denotes participation in these historical processes and the struggle to alter gender asymmetries agreed upon for centuries by myth’s disseminators. When feminists envisage that struggle, they often think of the rewriting or reinterpretation of individual stories: for example, by changing the focus of the narrative from a male character to female character or by shifting the terms of the myth so that what was a ‘negative’ female role- model becomes a positive one. (2007: 396-97)

Contemporary women writers and feminist literary critics thus engage in a literary struggle against what they view as male-dominated texts and myths in order to alter perceived gender differences established and eternalized by those texts that are essentially men’s constructions.

Feminist orientation toward the rewriting of male dominated texts also indicates the desire of contemporary women writers to rectify thoughts through a thorough restructuring of those texts. For those women writers, the fact of looking at things from men’s point of view suggests the reliance on some “androcentric fallacy;” an idea that they fully reject (Lerner, 1986: 220-21). In return, female character-dominated texts produced by contemporary women writers tend to be volcanic and subversive in the sense that they seek to create a radical change in the classical and prevailing discourse initially produced and controlled by men (Cixous, 1976: 888). Such radical change would pave the way for women to undertake their own journey toward self-discovery and awareness (Staley, 2006: 219-20). Thus, by providing an alternative story to male character-dominated narratives, contemporary women writers seek to liberate “the New woman from the Old,” one who will be able to tell her story in her own terms and to write her own “self” into history. This can be accomplished through a female narrator who would seize the narrative and “make it hers” (Cixous, 1976: 888) as is the case in Elyot’s *Memoirs of Helen of Troy*. In such way, the once marginalized character will be able to free herself from the restrictive boundaries of male-dominated discourse.

The objectified women of Homer's epic

As a long epic poem that recounts a ten-years war of bloodshed from a male point of view, *The Iliad* tends to shed light on men and their heroic deeds. Women, for their part, are living on the margins of that world and tale. The way Homer portrays the female characters of his epic suggests some sexism and male supremacism (Farron, 1979: 15). *The Iliad* opens with a scene which introduces the reader to the downgraded situation of women in this man-dominated society; a scene where women are objectified and viewed as spoils of war.

To de Beauvoir women existing in male-dominated societies are not defined as autonomous entities. Rather, they are regarded as evolving at the periphery of men. While men are regarded as the centre of the universe and possessing absolute power, women are subject to sexual objectification. They are portrayed as bounties, divine gifts or slaves (1956:15, 19). These acts of enslavement and of taking a woman as a captive were regarded as a sign of honour and power for male conquerors. An illustration of this portrayal in *The Iliad* is the female character of Chryseis who was taken as a captive once her tribe was conquered by Achilles and the Achaean King Agamemnon. Though her father brings a ransom and begs the Greek conquerors to free her, they refuse to give him a woman whom they consider as an enjoyable gift. Agamemnon expels the old man and threatens him. He warns him not to return looking for his daughter:

Old man,

Don't let me catch you by our hollow ships,
sneaking back here today or later on.

Who cares about Apollo's scarf and staff?

I'll not release the girl to you, no, not before

She's grown old with me in Argos, [...]

Working the loom, sharing my bed. Go away. (Homer, 2005: 9).

Agamemnon refuses to give Chryseis back to her father because he views her as a source of sexual pleasure. He also sees her as a servant who will accompany him in wars and will do domestic duties.

When the plague spreads among the Greek army, Achilles tries to convince Agamemnon to give back Chryseis to her people, but the king refuses, even though material gifts are offered to him in exchange of the girl. Rather, he claims prizes that shall be as enjoyable as Chryseis, otherwise he shall not accept the bargain. Achilles realizes that Achaeans are entering a war against the Trojans for the sake of Agamemnon's fame and honour, not for any other reason (Homer, 2005: 11).

In the midst of their quarrel over captive women obtained from their conquests of neighbouring cities and peoples of Troy, Agamemnon threatens to seize Achilles' prize. The Greek king is fascinated by Briseis, Achilles' beautiful young captive. Agamemnon refers to her as "fair-cheeked Briseis" and he threatens to "fetch her in person." By taking what he views as a prize away from Achilles, Agamemnon seeks to humiliate and subdue the Myrmidon. Indeed, spoils of war make warriors, and in this case Achilles, the best men in the eyes of

their people according to the norms of their patriarchal society (Homer, 2005: 14-15). In fact, the decision of both not to renounce the young women they have won is a confrontation for manhood, an attempt to display force and masculinity, a duel to prove who the strongest man of their clan is, the invincible Myrmidon warrior Achilles or King Agamemnon. To them, any abandonment of the female bounty implies cowardice and weakness.

While men in patriarchal societies quarrel over women, the latter are doomed to remain silent. This is the case with Chryseis and Briseis. Women are not strong enough to react to their owner's decisions. They cannot even utter a word. This may imply that they accept their situation and fate, one that is natural in ancient Achaean society and Greek mythology. Throughout Book One of *The Iliad*, both female characters remain unspeaking. Homer gives them neither freedom nor voice. The Greek poet gives primacy to the male characters.

Another instance where the narrator in this male-centred text portrays women as docile creatures in their patriarchal society is when Achilles makes a contest among Achaeans devoting prizes for winners and losers. The prize for the winner is a precious huge tripod while the prize of the loser is a woman who is skilful in all works. In this contest, all contestants fight eagerly to win the tripod (Homer, 2005: 528). Such scene implies that Homer's women are viewed of less value than any other material commodity. They are even not worth fighting for.

Patriarchal societies care about man's honour and glory. In this kind of society, when a man is at war, the woman stays home. In case her spouse dies, she is to be taken as a slave by the victor of the war. This is the case with Hector's wife Andromache. She implores him not to go to war out of her fear of becoming a widow and then a slave. Despite her pleadings, Hector favours war as he does not want to be called a coward or to face disgrace. Andromache fears that one day she will be taken as a slave to be exploited in looming and fetching water for other women (Homer, 2005: 138-140). Indeed, when Hector dies by Achilles' sword, Andromache prepares herself for her dim future status of female slave. Mourning her dead spouse and foreseeing her and other widows' looming situation, she laments

Now, soon enough, they'll all be carried off
in hollow ships. I'll be there among them.

[...]

to some place where you'll be put to work
at menial tasks, slaving for a cruel master (Homer, 2005: 563).

Another instance of women's subjugation is reflected through the character of Helen who has been accused for being the cause of the Trojan war. The first time the reader is introduced to this female character is at the beginning of Book Two where she is not given a name and in which her identity remains concealed. The only thing the reader gets from the opening scene is that a war is to be fought between Achaeans and Trojans because of this beautiful woman (Homer, 2005: 57). In this scene, Homer's Helen reaches Troy with Paris, the enemy of her people. The Trojan prince explains to his brother that she is among the five gifts that have been given to him and he cannot reject. If he is to enter a war against Menelaus, the winner will deserve her as a spouse:

He and war-loving Menelaus here
Will fight it out alone between the armies
For Helen and for all her property.
Whichever one comes out victorious,
The stronger man, let him seize all the goods,
And take the woman as his wife back home (Homer, 2005: 59-60).

Hence, in the Homeric narrative, men subjugate and own women so as to attain what they view as higher aims: fame and honour. Helen is an example of the silent and submissive woman who is put in the midst of men's struggle for power and glory. One that is afterwards claimed as the victor's wife.

The women depicted in Homer's epic are the ones Simone De Beauvoir refers to when she contends that patriarchal societies are characterized by men and women who do not share "the world in equality." To her, this imbalance in status and representation makes women dependent on men. Such inequality is reflected in the domestic works that women are limited to (1956: 88, 90). In *The Iliad*, this inequality between men and women is reflected through the female character of Helen. While men are fighting a war for who is going to win her as a bounty, Helen remains passive and silenced in a separate room, and she even shows absolute acquiescence. Homer depicts her as a compliant creature who is "weaving a large cloth, a double purple cloak/ creating pictures of the many battle scenes/ between horse-taming Trojans and bronze-clad Achaeans" (Homer, 2005: 61). Helen's only mode of expression about what is happening around her is then her painting that depicts the courage and glories of men at war.

No detail is mentioned by the male narrator about whether Helen has escaped with Paris or if she has been taken as a captive; nonetheless she is blamed for being the cause of war and destruction. Many events are missing and the only provided detail is the scene where Helen is with Paris. Once she is informed that her husband and other Achaeans are outside fighting because of her, Helen longs for her children, family, and city, and she goes out to see them (Homer, 2005: 61). Again, Helen is not given voice to defend herself or to stand against her accusers.

Helen remains an unvoiced character at the beginning of the epic until the narrator gives her a voice to blame herself for what is happening. Though King Priam claims that she is not the cause of the war, Helen is overrun with an intense feeling of guilt:

how I wish I'd chosen evil death
when I came here with your son, leaving behind
my married home, companions, darling child,
and friends my age. But things didn't work that way.
So I weep all the time [...]
if that life was ever real. I'm such a whore. (Homer, 2005: 62)

Helen feels what is going around her is like a dream she wants to awaken from. She calls herself a whore out of the weakness and inability to vindicate herself of the reproaches directed toward her.

Goddesses seem to be endowed with power and are not like any other mortal female characters. However, their power is meant to serve males, be they mortals or gods, in their society. This is the case with Aphrodite, goddess of beauty and love, who uses her power to save Paris. It is the same for two other goddesses, Hera and Athena, who assist Menelaus. However, this power is limited in the sense that they cannot act independently for their own needs (Homer, 2005: 73). They are thus dependent on male gods, just like other women. In one battle scene between Achaeans and Trojans, an Achaean warrior mocks Aphrodite, and even tries to kill her. He is deeply convinced that she is not powerful enough to control men or to do great things in the war. Indeed, he manages to chase her and to wound her with his sharp spear. The goddess who is supposed to be powerful enough to endure the wound and the brutality of war, gets affected by the man's words and leaves the battlefield in agony. Looking at her escape, the Achaean warrior addresses her with sarcasm:

Daughter of Zeus,
leave war and fights alone. Isn't it enough
for you to fool around with feeble women?
If you start loitering on the battlefield,
I think the war will make you shake with terror,
even though you learn about it from a distance. (Homer, 2005: 140)

In this androcentric epic, not only mortal female characters are silenced or assigned evil roles, goddesses also seem to be granted with a power that exclusively serves men. They are portrayed as creatures who are not equal to other male gods and who are under their domination. The warrior orders the goddess to leave the war; he does not draw any distinction between females, be they mortals or immortals.

It seems that though goddesses are given voice to speak just like other gods and human males, they are still subordinate to them and are not given equal power or status like them. This is the case with the goddess Hera who is stopped by Zeus when she tries to question what is going on between him and Thetis. Zeus replies that she never should meddle in his business or even ask for details. He reminds her to just follow his orders and to do what he says without uttering a word (Homer, 2005: 27).

Elyot's Helen: Feminine voice and agency in a personal myth narrative

Amanda Elyot borrows a subdued female character from a male-centred text (*The Iliad*). By giving Helen an assertive presence and space to tell her own version of the story, Elyot takes the opportunity to come up with a new narrative. *MHT* gives marginalized female characters voice as well as active representations. Through this literary work, Elyot rewrites Homer's *Iliad* but she adapts the genre of the epic into a memoir narrated by her rehabilitated female character Helen. In this female-centred text, Helen is the spokeswoman for other female characters who are downgraded in Homer's narrative.

Gilbert and Gubar argue that in male-centred texts, women are “reduced to mere ... characters and images” that fit the writer’s design and objectives. Although female characters in those texts are given full life, they are denied the “power of independent speech” (2000: 13-14). This is the case with Homer’s Helen and other female characters that are portrayed in the Greek epic. Homer depicts them as creatures living on the margin of their patriarchal society and following its norms; creatures who are denied the power to express themselves or who are given voice to comply and acquiesce. However, these misrepresentations of female characters are challenged by Elyot’s work. In this latter, she recreates Helen and she gives her full agency. Elyot’s Helen is a strong female character who is able to make her voice heard and who succeeds in breaking the silence which has predominated her and other female characters’ lives.

In her self-life writing, Elyot’s Helen starts by addressing and preparing her daughter Hermione (and the reader) for what she is going to narrate. Through the pages of her memoirs, Helen unveils her true life story, the one she has lived, and not the one that has been constructed by others, and among them Homer:

You are far from the only one to hold me solely accountable for years of bloodshed and heartache. But I can no longer abide fabricated versions of my own life handed down as fact or truth by others who were not there or who have their own ends to achieve by painting me in unflattering colors. You have heard many tales from others, Hermione, but have never received them from me. It is finally time to clear my besmirched name to learn the real story of my life. (Elyot, 2005: 1-2)

Helen provides thus the reader of her memoirs with her version of how she endured so many hardships, how she lived her relationship with her late mother, with her sister, and with her stepfather. Helen endeavours to refute those former texts that have painted her picture in a way that would serve their authors own needs. She claims it is time to reveal the truth and to correct those stereotypes which have been associated to her.

Helen starts her duty of revealing her truth by uncovering the way she was deprived of her real affiliation - and thus identity - in *The Iliad*. In his epics, Homer identifies her as Helen of Troy. This name implies the idea that she is connected to Troy and thus to the war that ravaged that city. Elyot’s Helen contests the accusation of being responsible for the Trojan War. Through her memoirs she tries to correct Homer’s identification and she refutes being associated to Troy’s fate. “I am - I was - Helen of Sparta” insists Helen (Elyot, 2005: 2).

In *MHT*, Helen unveils her story to another woman, her daughter Hermione. The mother seeks to provide the daughter with her true story so that she can finally “clear [her]besmirched name” and so “understand” and “love” her (Elyot, 2005: 2).

Helen devotes much space for her childhood memories in Tyndareus’ palace. These events are not mentioned in *The Iliad*. By shedding light on her infancy, a part of her life neglected by Homer, she seeks to demonstrate that her character should not be confined to the period depicted in Homer’s epic, a period that highlights only her beauty and her sad connection to war and destruction. In her memoirs, she can give voice to other women such

as her mother Leda who is also silenced and ignored in *The Iliad*. By allowing her mother to narrate her own story too, Helen manages to shed light on the way women in mythological universes are not given freedom over the choice of their marriage partners. This is the case with Leda, the Queen of Sparta, who was forced to marry a man she did not want, a marriage arranged only because her people wanted to appease a goddess's anger (Elyot, 2005: 15). This was also the case with her, who was married off to Menelaus, a man she disdained (Elyot, 2005: 160, 164).

Helen reveals her mother's unhappy marriage to Tyndareus. Helen recalls how Tyndareus expressed his hatred towards her mother, and how he often accused her of infidelity, of being a "faithless whore." Helen relates how the sad story of her mother demonstrates that women of that time, even queens, are humiliated and objectified by males, be they mortals or gods. Leda was subdued between two males' desires, one mortal, her spouse Tyndareus, and one god, her one-time lover Zeus (Elyot, 2005: 23-24).

In order to cast doubt over men's authority, Helen sheds light on one of the customs followed by kings in their patriarchal society. When a king invades another land, he had to marry the priestess of the goddess in this land in order to secure his reign. This was the case with Tyndareus and her mother Leda. Although he chose her as a source of protection for his authority, he did not accept any kind of challenge to his authority from her part. Although such custom makes a man in need of his wife's power, Tyndareus pretends to be a strong man who cannot be controlled by his wife. As Helen has grown older, she has realized how men had always sought to tame women and keep them under their domination: "men would seek to tame a woman's body and spirit to their needs as they would look to control the earth, sea, and sky. I eventually came to mistrust both the old and the new ways" (Elyot, 2005: 27).

Throughout her shift from innocent childhood to womanhood, Helen acquired power that enabled her to confront any man, and even Tyndareus whom she used to fear. In one instance, Tyndareus catches Helen trying on the garments of her dead mother Leda where he shouts at her with bad words ordering her to take off the dress. The once silenced Helen is able to challenge him. She reacts to his orders and tries to defend herself and her dead mother: "The Goddess was here before you were... the Great Mother was the creator and the sustainer of all" (Elyot, 2005: 39-40).

To give space and voice to those female characters that have been marginalized in *The Iliad*, Helen recalls also the story of her sister's marriage whose details are not mentioned in the classical epic. In Homer's narrative, the reader is introduced to the character of Clytemnestra as already married to King Agamemnon. However, Helen's memoirs relate that Helen's sister was to marry another man, Tantalus, King of Pisa. The memoirs relate how Helen and Clytemnestra were not given freedom over the choice of their marriage partners. Rather, it is the king who is supposed to choose and in the case of Helen and her sister; it is Tyndareus who forced them to marry men of his own choice (Elyot, 2005: 49).

Before Clytemnestra's wedding, Helen tells her sister that her husband will tame her like their brother Castor tames animals. Helen also reminds her sister how they used to

watch Tyndareus bad treatment of their mother. She also explains to Clytemnestra that “the word wife is damar – the tamed one” and that Tantalus will tame her “just as Castor [their brother] breaks wild horses!” (Elyot, 2005: 41). Indeed, a few months after her marriage, Clytemnestra visits the palace and she is in a miserable situation. Her body which was once lovely has become thin and pale and her eyes are sunken. She is in deep sadness and in a hysterical mood (Elyot, 2005: 60).

The scene of women being reduced to a gift in *The Iliad* is mentioned again in Helen’s memoirs. Helen’s sister returns to the palace with Agamemnon who claims her as his wife simply because she is one of the spoils that he has obtained after his conquests. The Mycenaean king has asked Tyndareus’ approval of the union and the latter approves it. Tyndareus becomes privileged by the political alliance he makes with Agamemnon through this marriage at the expense of his daughter’s happiness. Being forced to get married to a murderer, Helen’s sister views her marriage as a funeral. “[A]nd now I bathed, oiled, and perfumed a woman who was but a shadow of the other bride” narrates Helen (Elyot, 2005: 62-64).

To uncover what she views as fallacies against her life and behaviour depicted in the *Iliad*, Helen is a meticulous narrator who tries to restructure Homer’s narrative in order to rectify the erroneous beliefs it recounts. As a matter of fact, in Homer’s tale, the reader is immediately introduced to the Achaeans preparing for a war against the Trojans because of Helen. However, in her memoirs, Elyot’s Helen uncovers another cause behind that war. She asserts that the conflict erupted over trade and the quarrel over a vital strait (Elyot, 2005: 217). Additionally, the Paris of *The Iliad* is accused of coming to Sparta for the beautiful Helen; however, in Elyot’s counternarrative, Paris emphasizes an alternative reason behind his visit. In Helen’s memoirs, Paris explains that he came to Sparta asking for help to attack Salamis and to liberate his father’s sister who had been taken as a captive (Elyot, 2005: 259).

Helen also exposes the way men are skilful in manipulating the minds of their people in order to attain their pragmatic ends. She recalls the way Menelaus used her as a scapegoat in order to invade and loot Troy for its treasures. Menelaus convinced his people for the need to go to war to restore an offended marital honour. To Helen, her spouse’s claim was just a stratagem to hide his real intention as it was already known in their patriarchal society that “men do not go to war over a woman” (Elyot, 2005: 318). Helen recalls how the ships of the Achaeans were full of precious treasures, women and slaves who were taken from other peoples during the invasions. To Helen, this confirms that the war was not waged for her. Rather, it was waged to please men’s thirst for fame and power. Helen did not have the chance to present her reality in Homer’s version, for “no one would listen to [her] voice of reason” (Elyot, 2005: 332-33); however, her memoirs give her that opportunity, that voice to vindicate and purify herself from those stereotypes associated with her.

Throughout her memoirs, Helen singles out Homer and she seeks to demystify what she claims as lies about her and other women in *The Iliad*. She aims at opening her daughter’s eyes toward what she considers as truth. She draws Hermione’s attention to how those male-dominated narratives have forged history to serve the writer’s ends, how they have always portrayed women as sinners and traitors to their presumed pure and heroic husbands:

It is frightening how history can be distorted by the poets. The tongue of man is a twisty thing indeed. Hermione, if you have heard that your mother was married to Achilles, read my words and learn the truth ... how well I knew that the world castigated women for what it was quick to excuse in men, thinking then even mightier and grander for the women they bedded and the children they sired out of wedlock. (Elyot, 2005: 424-25, 515-16)

Helen thus warns Hermione of the hypocrisy of their male-dominated society, a society which puts blame on women for sins while it turns a blind eye on men's.

Conclusion

As a male-centred text, *The Iliad* does not give much space and importance to female characters. Their portrayal as peripheral characters is somehow explicable as many mythological narratives and the cultures they reflect give primacy to patriarchy and its many constituting norms of behaviours such as honour and glory. Men hence occupy the centre of these narratives. Women are silenced. They revolve around more major male characters, they are ultimately reduced to gifts or spoil of war, and they are exchanged among men and warriors. Some are also often blamed for being the cause of war and destruction as this is the case with Homer's Helen, or they are reduced and limited to domestic duties as is the case with Homer's Andromache.

Through fictional self-life writing, Elyot's narrative gives voice to a new Helen, a female character that challenges the misrepresentations and stereotypes. Elyot's Helen manages to break the silence that have surrounded the life of women in their mythological society. This female character explains who she really is, and she narrates her own version of an immemorial story, one that has come down through centuries without being questioned. Through such version, Helen's character becomes the centre of the narrative. The Trojan War is pushed to the background and its supposed valiant and heroic men are relegated to secondary characters evolving around the female narrator. Elyot's Helen attempts to overcome subjugation and she seeks to correct what she views as distorted images associated to women in ancient cultures and societies.

Through her rewriting of the epic, Elyot not only creates a new world for her female characters, but she also questions a classical mythological narrative, exposes its androcentrism, and places female characters at the centre of narratives that have been historically dominated by men's outlook and worldview.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement: This is a research article, containing original data, and it has not been previously published or submitted to any other outlet for publication. The author followed ethical principles and rules during the research process. In the study, informed consent was obtained from the volunteer participants and the privacy of the participants was protected.

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