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DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

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# Fantastic antiquities and where to find them: ancient worlds in (post-)modern novels

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# Going Home Again to Troy and Ithaca

**Abstract** As the author of three novels inspired by the Homeric epics, I reflect on the challenge of writing such books. Reception novels can make familiar stories new and engaging by presenting characters in the immediacy of decisive moments and looking at familiar situations from different perspectives. I also examine the fictive as opposed to the historical location of Troy, how Troy and Ithaca became my imaginative home, and my process for writing such books. It concludes with an excerpt that illustrates the points made. The novels discussed are: *Breeze* (2021), *We First Met in Ithaca or Was It Eden?* (2023), and Let the Women Have Their Say (2024). Another book, *Trojan Tales* (2024), consists of excerpts from these three.

**Keywords** Homeric epic, Homeric reception, Trojan War, recursion, perspective





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## BRIDGES VS. RECEPTION

When I first ventured into the narrative world of *The Iliad,* I assumed that I needed a bridge to introduce readers to that other world, so they could empathize with the characters and understand their aspirations and motivations. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be transported from here-and-now to there-and-then, like in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court,* to be limited by the physical and social structures of that time but with knowledge and memories from the present.

The device I used in my novel *Breeze* was "soul transference." This is not reincarnation – rebirth after death. Rather, the consciousness of an individual moves from one body into another in a different place and time.

The novel consists of three parts. In part one, a college-age woman goes into a coma, unexpectedly and without known cause. Her boyfriend scrambles to get her medical care and to cope with her absence. In part two, this woman, Breeze, finds herself on the shores of Troy, in the body of Achilles' Briseis. She has to quickly figure out what is going on and learn to speak and act so as not to reveal the strangeness of what has happened to her, for fear others would think she was mad or possessed. As she adjusts to her new circumstances, the reader learns as well, gradually coming to understand the challenges and risks of that world, like Claire Fraser in *Outlander* adjusting to 18th century Scotland, and Sam Beckett in *Quantum Leap.* There is no language barrier. Breeze as Briseis can understand and be understood as if she wee hearing and speaking English. She figures out that she is not in historical Troy, but rather the fictive version of it. Since she knows what must happen next in the Homeric story, she also knows where she has the freedom to improvise. What actually happens need not be the same as the accepted story, so long as that story is still believed to be true. In part three, she finds herself at Delphi in 350 AD, the time of Julian the Apostate. Once again she needs to adjust, but this time she learns to control the soul transfer mechanism, so she can swap bodies at will with other people in the same time and place.

An additional challenge was for me to write from the perspective of a woman. Much of the pleasure of writing and reading comes from viewing the world from inside the skin of characters very different from ourselves.

When writing my next Homeric-themed novel, *We Met in Ithaca or Was It Eden?,* I still felt the need for a bridge, but I used a different mechanism. Two strangers meet and fall in love. Both are obsessed with Ancient Greece, and they flirt by making up stories which are variants of Homeric tales. Without understanding why, they begin to experience those invented stories, first as witnesses,

then as participants. They begin to lose control over the stories as they recount them. They wonder if they have met before in previous lives, as Odysseus and Penelope, or as Eumaeus and Ktimene (Odysseus' sister).

Writing my third Trojan novel, *Let the Women Have Their Say,* I realized that, for many readers, the popularity of recent reception novels based on Homer's works means that a bridge is no longer necessary. Nearly a dozen novels with such a setting have become best sellers over the last decade. Many fans of those books are familiar with the stories despite never having read *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey.* Today, stories are available in many different forms – not just in traditional printed books, but also in ebooks, comic books, graphic novels, movies, TV series, and videogames. A popular story spawns sequels and becomes a franchise. Fans immerse themselves in the same fictive world in multiple ways. They vicariously enjoy taking on the roles of characters from Star Wars, Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Avengers, and Jane Austen in newly imagined adventures. The recent popularity of Trojan War novels is part of that phenomenon.

My ideal readers already know what is going to happen, at least in broad outline. They have preconceptions about the personalities and motivations of the main characters. That enables me to surprise and delight them with new variants while remaining true to the traditional tales.

## Playing in the Narrative Space of Greek Legend and Myth

Historical and myth- or legend-based novels invite readers to vicariously experience live through not just the stories told, but, by extension, the era in which they occur. They present events in the making, when multiple possibilities loom large, not filtered through the hindsight of history, with its focus on actual outcomes. Moreover, an event as experienced from inside differs from that same event seen from afar. The actors believe that many outcomes are possible and that they are somewhat responsible for what happens. Living in the immediate moment is fraught with risk and drama, with a sense of one's agency and accountability.

The event as lived depends on human choice and ignorance, competence and incompetence. It is subjective, dependent on your unique perspective in the moment. You need to understand, decide, and act on the fly. The event seen from afar is determined, predictable, and ordinary. It is over and done with.

Both views are valid. Free will and determinism are both true at once.

Narrative ranges from the subjectivity of *Tristram Shandy* to the objective chronicling of facts. Subjective novels invite the reader to explore the reality of others, at moments that are rich in possibilities. Characters who "come alive" in that way give readers opportunities to experience and understand the events of the story as if they were actors and eyewitnesses. Novels of reception can play subjectively within the objective framework of previously written stories and/or history. Innovation and creativity can take place in what the original left unsaid. I strive to give the reader a subjective experience through the consciousness of the characters. The elements of the traditional story which are inviolable (without outraging the audience) serve as "fate."

Reception novels can also take advantage of multiple perspectives. The same events seen in different ways, perhaps from the viewpoint of a minor character in the original, can generate a very different story, while remaining faithful to the original framework. Because the audience is already familiar with the framework, the author is freed from the burden of lengthy exposition and can focus on developing the characters and making the events flow naturally from one to the next.

## Where Was Troy?

As I imagined the story of the Trojan War for *Let the Women Have Their Say* from the perspectives of the participants, I soon realized that the generally accepted location of Troy needed to be corrected for my retelling to make sense. This was not a question of archaeology and history, but rather narrative integrity. There may have been an historical city named Troy at the site now known as Hisarlik. But the fictional story of *The Iliad* has a setting very different from that. The location matters because of its connection with the perspectives, motivations, and strategies of the parties and the individual characters. Picking a location that does not correspond well with the dynamics of the original story can muddy our understanding and appreciation of the text and lead to the creation of reception fiction that does not ring true.

As I explain in the Preface to that novel, since the days of the flamboyant amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann 150 years ago, experts have located Homer's Troy at Hisarlik in the northwest corner of what is now Turkey, in the Troad region, near the beginning of the Dardanelles (Hellespont), the waterway leading from the Aegean to the Black Sea. Based on that location, historians and

novelists have presumed that the war was fought for control of that strategic sea passage.

But in *The Iliad,* Troy has no port – just a beach – and has no fleet, no ships at all, not even fishing boats. When Paris wants to sail to Sparta seeking Helen, ships need to be built for the occasion, and not by a shipwright, but by a carpenter (*tektonos,* smith, maker, builder, Book V, 59–63). Troy's has nothing to do with the sea. Its trade and its allies are land-based.

In addition, in *The Iliad,* the city of Troy, also called Ilion, was founded in the recent past by Ilus, son of Tros and grandfather of Priam, who was the king during the Trojan War. In contrast, the archaeological site at Hisarlik had already been occupied for hundreds of years, one city built on the ruins of another. The level identified as Homer's Troy was sandwiched in the middle (layer 6A).

Those anomalies lead me to believe that the city of Troy portrayed in *The Iliad* was on the south rather than the west coast of the Troad, in a location without strategic significance, where it could thrive as the hub of land-based trade and alliances. I imagine it 20–30 miles from Hisarlik, on the Edremit Gulf, across from the island of Lesbos and near Mount Ida.

Perhaps the ruins at Hisarlik belong to another city, such as Dardania, an ally of Troy, whose inhabitants were members of the same Trojan tribe. Perhaps Dardania, too, was destroyed during the Trojan War.

With that adjustment of perspective, I was able to reimagine the Trojan War and the hopes, fears, and motivations of the people involved.

## Switching Perspective and Giving Minor Characters Stories of Their Own

In *Breeze* the traditional story of the Trojan War functions as fate. It cannot be changed, no matter what anyone might do. But people are free to act in the gaps of the story. So long as the general public inside the story believes that events unfold as in the traditional framework, anything can happen.

For example, to save Iphigenia, Achilles surreptitiously deflowers her the night before she is scheduled for sacrifice. In principle, if she isn't a virgin she won't be an acceptable victim. But that makes no difference to Agamemnon and Calchas. The ceremony goes ahead as planned.

Also, Achilles' death is staged with another body in his armor. Everyone believes he died, but in fact, at the end of the novel, he rides off to the land of the

Amazons with Briseis/Breeze, who becomes an Amazon warrior. He will be her house-husband.

My favorites among the many stories told in *We First Met in Ithaca or Was It Eden?* deal with Polyphemus, Calypso, Eumaeus, and Ktimene.

Polyphemus, the Cyclops blinded by Odysseus, hooks up with Enyo, with one of the Gracae, the three sisters who share a single eye. She steals the eye from her sisters and shares it with the Polyphemus. They live happily ever after.

Calypso loves Odysseus, but they can't truly connect because one is mortal, the other divine. She pleads with Zeus to make him immortal, but, instead, Zeus makes her mortal. Odysseus doesn't believe her story. Since she no longer has divine powers, she can't keep stopping him from leaving. She pines for him and dies.

Eumaeus and Ktimene (the sister of Odysseus) were childhood friends, until her parents married her to someone from the nearby island of Same. In *The Odyssey,* XV. 361–79, Eumaeus claims they were raised together and mentions the enormity of her bride price. In my version, Odysseus needs that wealth so he could afford to buy the hand of Penelope, and Ktimene's husband is Eurylochus, who accompanies Odysseus to Troy, leaving Ktimene behind. When she believes that her husband died on the return trip, she flees from her in-laws, fearing they will marry her off to someone else. Arriving in Ithaca in disguise, afraid to reveal herself to her parents who would send her back to Same, she becomes the friend and assistant of Eumaeus, now the royal swineherd. Their delicate, unexpressed love for one another grows for years, until Odysseus returns, sees they are a perfect match, and has them marry, without knowing who she is.

> "As a wedding gift, Odysseus gives them ownership of their farm, and they continue to live there, despite an invitation to move to the castle. But they visit the castle often because Eumaeus loves an audience, and now he can tell tales about the adventures of Odysseus and his reunion with Penelope, including a first-hand account of the battle with the suitors. Traveling bards go out of their way to hear his version, which he elaborates with each telling. They use his scenes and descriptions in the versions they sing. In gratitude to him, in their performances, they address him and only him directly, like an old friend – 'You, Eumaeus, loyal swineherd.' A year later Ktimene and Eumaeus have a son. They name him *Homer.* When he grows up he becomes a bard and tells that tale better than anyone else." (p. 183)

In *Let the Women Have Their Say,* I reimagine major characters of the Trojan War story, such as Helen, Polyxena, Cassandra, Andromache, Paris, and Achilles,

telling how and why the events unfold as they do, with them growing and learning and one episode flowing naturally into the next.

For example, the goddess Thetis hid her son Achilles on the island of Scyros and had him dress as a woman and live with women to prevent him from going to war and dying on the battlefield, as foretold. At Troy, he enjoys dressing as a woman and at sometimes performs as a drag queen for the entertainment of the troops.

The Trojans arrange for Achilles to meet with Polyxena, in hopes that to win her he will make a separate peace and withdraw from the war. He wants to see her as she is, without pretense and ceremony. So he disguises himself as a woman, who is seeking a job as her handmaid. She has been tipped off to expect that, but doesn't know that this *woman* is he.

Also, Iphigenia is only three years old when she is to be betrothed to Achilles. (Clytemnestra and Helen are twins, and Helen is too young to have an adult daughter at the time of her elopement). Agamemnon loves Iphigenia. He doesn't intend to sacrifice her. The ceremony is staged to impress the troops, to show them his total commitment to the cause. He would go through the motions, only to be stopped at the last moment, like Abraham with Isaac. Iffie knows that a deer will be sacrificed. She asks to hold the knife and is told that it was so sharp that it won't hurt the deer and that dying is just changing one body for another, like changing clothes. She playfully slits her own throat.

## Rereading Classic Texts as a Form of Recursion

Recursion involves the repeated application of a process, where the result of each iteration is used as input for the next. Seriously reading a great work of literature changes you, giving you complex and rich new paths of association, and you change as well from your life experiences and everything else you have read and learned. Each time you return to the work, you experience it differently because your knowledge of it is different, and also because you are a different person.

As an amateur, not a scholar, with only rudimentary acquaintance with ancient Greek, I have depended on translations. I first read *The Iliad* in Pope's translation, with heroic couplets, when I was in the fifth grade. Later I read it in the prose translations of Butler, Lattimore, Fitzgerald, and Fagles. Not just the recursive effects, but also the major differences among the translations made each reading a new experience.

For example, Lattimore religiously keeps the lines of his translation parallel with the line numbers of the original, but in so doing he often distorts the meaning, settling for awkward and sometimes inaccurate phraseology. His use of non-traditional spellings of personal names is also jarring. Fagles is very readable, but he sometimes uses creative turns of phrase that are vivid but stray from the original, and his lines numbers don't match, which is problematic for finding referenced passages.

Recursion was also a structural element in *We First Met in Ithaca or Was it Eden?* As the two narrators tell stories to one another, they start to experience those stories as if they were participants in them. The stories they tell change them and change their relationship with one another. Perhaps they have lived before and met before and fallen in love before. And the book as a whole ends with a fresh beginning for all mankind, with this couple having become a Adam and Eve in a new Eden – history repeating itself, but recursively rather than circularly, with new awareness that could lead to new outcomes.

*The Odyssey* can be viewed as a metaphor for recursion. Odysseus returns home as a different person and, once there, goes through life-changing events, with the expectation that he will leave again, change again, and return again.

Also, writing my first reception novel made me aware of the challenges and the possible tactics, which changed my approach to the second, which in turn changed my approach to the third. And the writing of this paper is making me more conscious of my process, which will, no doubt, change it yet again.

## How Troy and Ithaca Became My Home

In *We First Met in Ithaca,* the narrators are Oz (short from Oswald), a classics professor, and Elle whose personal imaginative landscape was shaped by the Homeric epics since early childhood.

> "Oz asked, "How do you know so much about *The Odyssey*? I studied it and taught it for decades, but you talk about it as if you inhabited that world."
>
> "That story was my childhood obsession," she explained. "My parents named me *Penelope,* so I asked them repeatedly, and also read widely, eager to know who Penelope was and where and when she lived. Ithaca became my make-believe home. Sometimes I was Penelope, sometimes Odysseus, sometimes Calypso or another character, seeing the story from different angles."

> "It's as if you and I met in Ithaca," Oz concluded.
> "Yes. We both have that world in our minds." (p. 48)

Like her, Greek mythology and legend resonated in my imagination as a child. I discovered the Trojan War in the fifth grade in the pages of Olivia Coolidge's book of that title, which extends beyond *The Iliad* to tell the related stories in chronological sequence. That same year I saw the movie *Helen of Troy* and read the related comic book. The characters soon populated my personal imaginative world. Like my classmates, I used to play with plastic cowboy and Indian figures, reimagining clashes in the Wild West. Now, I started reenacting the Trojan War with bottle caps, each cap representing a warrior. With the cork side up, they were alive. Flipped over they were dead. Beer caps with aluminum on top of the cork were Trojans. Soda bottle caps with just the cork were Greeks. Ginger Ale with shiny white on top of cork were captains of the Greeks. Caps with the cork removed were major characters. I glued a small strip of paper with the name of each of those to the bare metal. Sometimes I controlled the action, deciding which to flip and when. Sometimes I shook the rug underneath them and removed the *dead* from the battlefield. Troy was my imaginative home. I was an only child. This was a personal game that I played alone.

In the fifth and sixth grades I put together Trojan War costumes for Halloween with the help of my father, who made the sword, shield and helmet. I was Achilles. My friends had no idea who Achilles was, aside from what I told them.

Back then, my parents belonged to the Book of the Month Club and the Heritage Book Club, and curiosity prompted me to check out their selections. *The Gold of Troy* by Robert Payne recounted the adventures of Heinrich Schliemann, the brilliant amateur who, with *Iliad* in hand, found the site of ancient Troy. When *The Odyssey a Modern Sequel* by Kazantzakis arrived, I couldn't make sense of it, but I was intrigued by it, which prompted me to want to read Homer. Fortuitously, *The Iliad,* translated by Alexander Pope, was soon a Heritage selection. Despite the rhyming couplets, I read it with pleasure and was soon writing a sequel, also rhymed – doggerel that's painful and embarrassing to read today.

For an independent project in the seventh grade, I wrote an essay about how world history would have been changed if the Trojans had won the war. (Aeneas would never have fled to Italy, and Rome wouldn't have been founded by his descendants).

My senior year at Yale I wrote a play called *Amythos or Without a Myth,* in which mythical characters are forced to live a story not of their choosing, or to

be suspended alone in nowhere, conscious but unable to do anything. Their story was their fate.

In graduate school (Yale, Comparative Literature), I wrote a paper exploring a recurrent theme in Greek mythology. In the legends of Mycenae, Thebes, and Sparta, there is an alternating pattern of succession. If the king inherits from his father, whoever marries the king's eldest daughter succeeds, immediately, not having to wait for the king to die. Then in the next generation, a king who secured the throne by marriage is succeeded on his death by his oldest son. This alternating pattern leads to dramatic situations in which a young woman plays a key role as symbol of the right to rule.

For instance, Menelaus becomes king as soon as he marries Helen, the eldest daughter of the king of Sparta. Then his right to rule is thrown into question when she goes off with Paris.

Iphigenia, the eldest daughter of Agamemnon, is expected to marry Achilles, but if she were to do so, by this pattern of succession, the right to rule in Mycenae would pass to him. Sacrificing her or having becoming a priestess with a vow of virginity, eliminates that possibility and thereby solidifies Agamemnon's right to rule.

Oedipus has a double right to rule Thebes, both as the son of the father he kills and as the husband of his mother. That throws the succession pattern into disarray. Who should rule in the next generation? When the sons of Oedipus and Jocasta die fighting one another. Jocasta's brother, Creon, fills the gap, without the sanction of tradition. Whoever marries Antigone, Oedipus' eldest daughter would normally rule, and Creon's son Haemon wants to marry her. But Creon doesn't want her to marry anyone. He exiles his son which leads to his son's death. Antigone stays unmarried, and Creon keeps the crown.

After grad school, I got married, had four children, and worked as an employee communications editor and then as an Internet evangelist for Digital Equipment, the minicomputer company. After that, I was an independent Internet marketing consultant and a publisher of public domain books on CDs, DVDs, and through online ebook stores. For forty years of my life, time was tight and my writing was on the back burner.

My wife died ten years ago. My kids are off on their own. At 78, I now have no responsibilities other than reading and writing and engaging in creative dialogue with my partner, Nancy Felson, a renowned Homeric scholar.

I finished *Breeze* two years ago. Then I wrote and rewrote *We First Met in Ithaca* over the course of a year, and Let the Women Have Their Say in six months. I was dealing with familiar characters and situations. I was returning to

my imaginative home and seeing it with new eyes, enjoying the many different ways the familiar elements could fit together.

*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are now part of who I am and how I think. Characters and scenes come alive in my sleep. I often wake up in the middle of the night and write notes for chapters as if I were listening to characters speaking to one another and I was taking dictation. I am often surprised and delighted when I'm suddenly able to see scenes from the perspectives of my characters and hear dialogue among them.

In *Let the Women Have Their Say,* much of the story is revealed through dialogue. What matters is not just what happens, but what the characters think about it and how that affects their hopes and fears. Readers witness as characters make discoveries about themselves and others, as the drama unfolds.

Often what characters know and don't know in a particular scene influences their perception of what is going on and hence affects their motivation. I learned this recursive technique in reading *The Odyssey.* Rather than recount Odysseus' adventures in chronological order, Homer has Odysseus tell the stories of the fall of Troy and the voyage home to a royal audience in Phaeacia. He encourages the reader to consider this speech in a dramatic context, an element moving the present narrative forward. And at the same time this account is a revelation of how well Odysseus can spin stories – both true and false.

The events that Odysseus is talking about changed him. He was a different person before they happened than after. And the act of retelling them from the perspective of the new person he has become, changes him yet again.

Homer reveals Odysseus' past as part of the dramatic present. And in the subsequent events – the return to Ithaca and the slaughter of the suitors – we witness yet another transformation of Odysseus. In this way, Homer compactly displays many recursive versions of Odysseus – the many-sided, many-faced hero.

A devious man, who excels at disguise and at inventing false backstories for himself, finally tells the truth. Or is it the truth? Truth is, at best, relative. But having a problematic relationship with truth is part of Odysseus' identity, so even when he lies, he partially reveals his character to the literary audience who knows more about him than the audience inside the story, and has learned not to take him at his word. And what the audience knows affects their experience of what they hear or read. So each time we return to this multi-layered work, it is different to us. Both the book and its hero are recursive.

To show this process at work, I'm closing this paper with an excerpt consisting of chapters in which Helen and Paris, despite their differences, fall in love in

unexpected ways and run off together, but not to Troy. This is in keeping with the variant that inspired Euripides' *Helen,* but for different reasons. In my version, they finally get to Troy in the ninth year of the war, shortly before the opening scene of *The Iliad,* reconciling the variant with the main storyline. These chapters are plucked from their context in the novel and joined together here as a continuous story.

## HELEN

### Leda

In Sparta, the speaker's staff passes to someone in the back of the megaron, who shouts so the king can hear. "This has gone on too long, my lord. Five years and no child. You must put this woman aside and marry another who can give us an heir."

Queen Leda coughs, then coughs again, then coughs hysterically.

King Tyndareus welcomes the distraction. He turns his full attention to her and calls, "Bring the physician. Immediately!"

Her eyes meet his. She nods to him, then collapses on the banquet table, knocking over goblets. Blood-red wine stains her tunic and cloak. She coughs more urgently and makes her body convulse as if in excruciating pain.

The king, restraining a smile of appreciation at her performance, quickly adds, "Have him bring emetics and antidotes. Someone may have poisoned the queen."

When the physician arrives, she continues to convulse. She looks scared.

Realizing she may not be faking, the king freezes, and silence spreads through the megaron. The only noise is the queen's coughing and her twitching on the table.

"Restrain her. Hold her still," the physician orders. With one hand he holds her mouth open, and with the other he pours a concoction down her throat.

*****

The queen gags. She can't breathe. She loses consciousness. No, she changes consciousness.

She sees herself from on high, and not in the megaron. She's on the bank of a pond near the palace. The sunset reflecting off lily pads sprinkles her arms and legs with green. She feels at one with the pond, the grass, with all of the nature.

She has never seen such color. If she were an artist, she would feel compelled to mimic it with painton cloth or on walls, again and again.

A swan dives and lands without a splash, as if the water expects it and embraces it. Then it swims to her, unafraid, as if she were a goddess beckoning it.

She welcomes the swan, like the water welcomed it. It enters her, man-like, forceful and unstoppable, like she had hoped and imagined her husband would. She convulses in pleasure, relaxes, then finds herself once again on the banquet table.

*****

The physician pulls her mouth, looks down her throat, reaches in, and pulls out a feather.

With a look of shock, he displays it to the king, then turns so the crowd can see it as well.

"What is it?" asks the king.

"The feather of a swan, I believe, my lord."

"What, in the name of Zeus…?"

Half-conscious, Leda clears her throat, then says softly, "Yes, Zeus, in the guise of a swan."

Inspired by that cue, the king improvises. "Zeus, yes, Zeus. He has taken the form of birds before. He was an eagle when he plucked Ganymede from the palace at Troy and took him to Olympus to be cupbearer of the gods. Zeus, yes, Zeus in the guise of a swan."

She answers, "I tried to fight him off, but what could I do against Zeus himself."

"Hallelujah!" he exclaims, delighted that she took his cue. "Queen Leda has been blessed by the King of the Gods. We needed an heir and now we'll have one – offspring of both me and Zeus. If it's a girl, she'll become the most beautiful woman in the world, and the greatest and wealthiest rulers in Greece will contend for her hand and for the crown of Sparta. All hail to Zeus, co-father of your queen to be."

He leans down to kiss Leda on her cheek and whispers, "Brilliant! You're a genius."

*****

She keeps up the act, leaning on his shoulder as they navigate the corridors from the megaron to their bedchamber. Dare she confess to him what really happened? Does she know?

He's ready now as she has rarely seen him before. He enters her and fills her quickly.

If a god didn't make her pregnant, this will.

She wonders, can a single child have two fathers, one human and one divine? How often do the acts of gods and humans echo one another, both causing the same outcome?

*****

Nine months later, she has twin daughters, Helen and Clytemnestra. Helen is, by a few minutes, the king's eldest daughter. That means that, by Spartan rules of succession, whoever marries her will become king, even though her father is still alive.

Then, a year after that, Leda has twin sons, Pollux and Castor.

She wonders, could Tyndareus suddenly be that potent? Or did the second pregnancy come from the same coupling as the first? If a god can take the form of a swan and impregnate a woman, perhaps she got pregnant twice from a single event.

In any case, childbirth is risky. Women often die of it. And, as she learned from her midwife, having twins doubles the risk.

Enough is enough. Every night, she puts sleeping potion in Tyndareus' wine, and in the morning she praises him for his virility and acts surprised that he doesn't remember the pleasure they had together. That's her last pregnancy.

## Double Wedding

"Is Menelaus the best choice?" asks Leda.

"I'm sure of it," Tyndareus replies, "Red Beard has a way about him, no-nonsense, strict. She needs someone who can control her, get her to forget her fantasies."

"Are you sure? You aren't always right, you know. Getting people to believe

she's a daughter of Zeus led to that ugly business with Theseus and his friend. That abduction and rape never would have happened if they hadn't thought she's the most beautiful woman in the world."

"You must admit she's lovely. Takes after you, my love."

"But *the most beautiful*? What does that even mean?"

"It means whatever people want it to mean. And people calling her that is certainly to our advantage."

"But Zeus? Was that necessary?"

"That was your inspiration, my love. Brilliant."

"All I did was swallow a swan feather as a distraction. I explained that to you. It must have stuck to my robe when I went for a walk. When that man in the back starting saying nasty things, I put it in my mouth to make me cough."

"Such a performance. Couldn't have worked out better."

"But Zeus? And gilding the feather, putting it on display time and again?"

"People love that story. It got her dozens of wealthy and powerful suitors. With the gifts and the bride price, we'll have an amazing retirement. We'll be able to travel anywhere and do anything, without the hassles and responsibilities of kingship. All thanks to you."

"And Helen."

"Yes. She's pretty enough and smart enough to play the role of *the most beautiful.* But she has a wild streak and a penchant for fantasy. I suspect the abduction affected her mind. Unlike any other woman, she insisted that she, not I, choose the man she'd marry. She believed in *true love,* whatever that is.

"Until she was ready for marriage, I indulged her fantasy and held receptions in the megaron, to put her on display. Then, when suitors swarmed, I locked her up and didn't let them see her or talk to her. Telling them I was afraid of another abduction reinforced the Zeus swan story and made them even keener to win her."

"But Red Beard? Why did you choose him? Why not his brother Agamemnon?"

"I considered Agamemnon. But he's severe, emotionless. Helen would never take to him, but she might learn to care for Red Beard."

"Yes. He's certainly better than his distant, boring brother. But yet you're giving Cly to him."

"It made sense to have the brothers draw lots, and let the gods or fate decide the winner. That way jealousy won't come between them. And, of course, I rigged it."

"You care that much more for Helen?"

"Cly can take care of herself. She's lied to us so many times and so well. I'm sure she started when she was a toddler stealing sweets. She won't let a boring husband get in her way. She'll do what she wants, when she wants, with whomever she wants, and he'll be none the wiser."

"What an awful thing to say about your daughter."

"I'm proud of her for that. Our preferential treatment of her twin didn't make her envious and mean-spirited. We had to focus on one twin as a daughter of Zeus. Only one could be *the most beautiful.* Helen has a winning look. Even as an infant, when both of them cried, we picked Helen up first. Cly didn't resent that. Since no one noticed her, she could do whatever she wanted. She's a perfect match for haughty Agamemnon. He'll have no idea what she's up to."

"You are so devious, my love."

He kisses Leda and replies, "From you, I take that as a high compliment."

She continues, "But the brothers' bids weren't that much higher than those of others. And there were handsomer, better mannered, more clever and interesting men among the suitors."

"Who would you have chosen, if you were the bride-to-be and it was up to you?"

"Odysseus. He's young, but clever and witty. The stories he made up to entertain us! He had me half believing all those adventures."

"Yes, he's a spinner of tales, a master of fantasy. But that's the last thing Helen needs. Best she be with a man's man, no nonsense, someone who will break her and control her. Besides, Odysseus doesn't want Helen. He's obsessed with my niece, Penelope. He came here to ask my help in getting her. And now, I'll certainly oblige him. He's the one who suggested the suitors swear to support Helen's husband if she's ever abducted again; otherwise, they'd have been at one another's throats. He deserves a reward for that. I'll send word to Icarius, asking him to give Penelope to Odysseus and for a bargain price. My brother can afford that. He won't be retiring. In Acarnania, you rule until you die. Such a barbaric tradition."

## Arrival in Sparta

Helen misses the arrival of two young princes from Troy. She's in the garden, hiding from her three-year-old daughter, Hermione. It isn't a game, though Helen pretends it is. She doesn't want to see the child, wishes she hadn't had this child and doesn't want any more.

During the long labor, her mother, at a loss for what to say but obliged to stay at her daughter's side, mentioned that the risks of childbirth double when carrying twins, and that the likelihood of having twins goes up if they run in the family. Helen is a twin, and she has a set of twin brothers and her father forced her to marry the son of a twin. She has no death wish. She finds ways to avoid pregnancy.

When people say that Hermione is delightful, bright and beautiful, that she takes after her mother, Helen smiles politely. But she never willingly spends time with her daughter. At birth, she didn't let the baby touch her breasts, quickly handing her to a wet nurse. Now, a toddler, the child follows her mother everywhere. When Helen hides, Hermione thinks she's playing hide-and-seek and tracks her down, relentlessly, finding her in the most unlikely places. Everyone thinks Helen is a wonderful mother for playing with her daughter so much.

Helen has heard that the Trojan visitors are brothers, traveling the world in search of love-brides. She orders a handmaid to escort them to the garden and to call out when they arrive. She'll be hiding in the hedge-maze to avoid Hermione. Since Hermione, like a hunting dog, navigates by smell, not sight, Helen rubs her arms and legs with rose petals, to mask her scent,

Only one prince shows up. He avoids looking at her and seems impatient to leave. She has always been the center of attention. She doesn't know what to make of this Trojan.

"Where's your brother?" she asks.

"Please excuse him. He doesn't mean to be rude. He's a rustic and doesn't understand what's expected of him. It's no fault of his own. A dream of our mother's was misinterpreted as a prophecy, and he was abandoned to die as an infant. He was saved and raised by a shepherd, and up until a few months ago, he had no idea that he's a son of the King of Troy. His manners are rough. He speaks little Greek. He doesn't know how to conduct himself in polite company. But he's good-hearted and unselfish."

"I hear the two of you are looking for brides. But no one from Troy has ever visited here, and Sparta is far from the coast, and we have no marriageable royal women. So what really brings you here?"

"I'm embarrassed to say."

She takes his chin in her hand and turns his head so their eyes meet. He looks shocked. She smiles and orders, "Say it!"

When he tries to break away, she holds tighter, touches nose-to-nose.

"You'll never believe it," he insists.

"That's for me to decide. Tell me!"

"Paris says that when he was a shepherd, three goddesses asked him to judge who is the most beautiful among them."

"Goddesses? Which goddesses?"

"Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite."

"And why him? Why was he qualified to make such a judgment?"

"He doesn't know. But it was more a matter of bribes than of judgment. Hera offered him power, Athena wisdom, and Aphrodite the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Which did he choose?"

"The woman."

Helen laughs. "Well if Aphrodite gave him such a woman, why is he traveling the world, looking for a bride?"

"She told him that you, Helen, queen of Sparta, are the most beautiful woman in the world."

Helen blushes and smiles, raises her hands high and laughs out loud.

"Yes. You," he continues. "And he believed that dream of his as if it were divine truth. He was convinced that that was his fate."

"But didn't he know I'm married, married to a king? How could he imagine that I would be his?"

"Absurd as it sounds, that was his obsession."

She laughs again. "How flattering." She walks away a few steps, picks a rose, then turns back to ask, "Was? You said *was*?"

"Until we got to Salamis."

"What happened in Salamis?"

"Before we got there, he had his doubts about the goddess, but still wanted to meet you, in case the promise was real and you were the one. But he's immature. His emotions can change at the bat of an eyelash."

"Whose eyelash?"

"A young woman he saw on the dock as our ship was leaving Salamis. Their eyes met. That was all it took. We had already sent word ahead to Sparta, so we had to continue. But he wants to return to Salamis as soon as we're finished here."

"How odd," she mutters, and closes her eyes. "You're telling me that Paris thought that all he had to do was show up at my palace, and I would fall in love with him? He doesn't even know Greek, but he made a hazardous sea crossing to meet me. And he does all this because he thinks a goddess promised me to him? But she didn't say anything to me. And he had no plan for what to do about my husband. He presumed that I would give up my life as a queen, aban-

don my daughter, and elope with a stranger? And on his way here he made eye contact with another woman, whose name he doesn't know, and now he thinks he's in love with her?"

"I shouldn't have told you that."

"This is hilarious. I'll tell our bard. He may turn it into song."

She starts to walk away, then stops, turns back, and says, "Send Paris to me here. I'd like to talk to him."

## Tamer of Horses

Paris gets lost in the hedge-maze. Helenus gave him clear directions. He doesn't want to shout like a country bumpkin or a fool. When he sees her, he'll stand tall, with a haughty look; polite but distant; respectful, like a diplomat; not awkward and over-anxious, like a suitor.

He remembers his mother's words before he left Troy. "No one is making you do this. If you saw Aphrodite, she didn't give you an order. She offered you an opportunity. You can take it or leave it. Is beauty all there is to Helen? Or do you feel a deeper attraction? If it's beauty alone, what's that worth? What price beauty?"

He's cured of his obsession. Hecuba will be glad to hear that. But, of course, he's curious. He'd rather reject this woman, than be rejected by her.

After an embarrassingly long time, he spots her, sitting on a bench plucking petals from a rose bush and crushing them with her feet. She looks annoyed, impatient. She doesn't notice him, and he doesn't call attention to himself.

He thinks, this couldn't be the Helen Aphrodite promised. She looks ordinary; pleasing, but not special. For this, I came so far? For this, I left behind the Fair Maid of Salamis, with her sparkling eyes and her magical connection with me? Rumor doesn't a beauty make.

She spots him, then says something he doesn't understand. He's not as good at languages as he had hoped. He settles awkwardly on a bench facing hers and answers haltingly, in Greek, "Please speak slowly. I begin to learn Greek."

"I'm speaking your language, not mine."

"What?"

"Of course I speak Luwian. What would you expect of a queen?"

"And what did you ask?"

"Did Aphrodite tell you I would be yours?"

"So I thought," he admits, avoiding eye contact. "She said *Helen,* but didn't say *Helen of Sparta.* Just *Helen.* When I heard of your reputation, I presumed you must be the one. I made a mistake. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't long for another man's wife."

"Do you long for me?"

"No. Not now. But I did. One day I was a shepherd, and the next I was the son of the king. I thought I'd keep being lucky, like a gambler who wins once and thinks he'll keep winning. I apologize to you for my arrogance, expecting you to fall in love with me and run off with me, a total stranger."

"And now you no longer believe in your goddess and her promise?"

"That was a dream. My sister Cassandra believes she was raped by Apollo and that he gave her the gift of knowing the future. Madness may run in my family. Now I suspect there was no goddess, no beauty contest. Maybe there are no gods at all."

"Am I such a disappointment?"

He looks at her directly and hesitates. Most men would take that question as a cue and compliment her. Paris stares awkwardly. He's unimpressed by her and can't think of anything to say.

Finally, she breaks the silence, "Maybe there are gods, and there is a goddess of love, and maybe you saw her. Maybe she promised you *Helen*; but meant someone else with that name. Maybe that's the name of the girl you saw on the dock at Salamis."

"My brother told you?"

"Yes. You should go back and find her. Maybe the promise of a goddess is a half-way thing. You're given a chance, but you have to grab it. You have to take risks to prove you're worthy of the gift. There you were – a shepherd turned prince, travelling the world in search of your true love. But when you found her, you did nothing to win her. You should have insisted the captain turn the ship around. Or you should have jumped into the sea and swum to her. That's what I would have done.''

"Can you swim?"

"No. But that wouldn't stop me. Nothing would stop me if I thought I was in love. Where's your gumption? Where's your sense of romance? Where's your daring?"

"If I had my horse here, I'd show you daring."

"You race chariots?"

"No. I ride horses."

"Horses aren't for riding. There's no way to control a horse. You might stay

mounted for a while, but at the first stumble or the first fright, the horse would throw you."

"It's not easy, but it can be done. It takes skill to sit astride the bare back of a galloping horse, to balance, to become one with the horse, moving with it as it moves."

"And you can do that?"

"Agelaus, the shepherd who raised me, is a Scythian. He has deep knowledge of horses. He can ride bareback, with his hands free so he can hold and shoot a bow at full gallop."

"Impossible."

Paris laughs. "I, too, can do that."

"Show me," she insists.

"My horse, Boreas – swift as the north wind – is home at Troy."

"I've heard that Trojans are *tamers of horses,* but I've never heard that they could do tricks like that. In Sparta, horses pull wagons and chariots and ploughs. If you can ride a horse astride, sitting upright, not just tied to the horse's back, show me. And if you need to train a horse first, then do that. Please."

"That would take time."

"How much time would it take for a *tamer of horses* to do that?"

"To just ride, not to do tricks like shooting arrows or leaning over the side of a galloping horse to touch my hands to the ground?"

"How long?"

"A week, maybe two."

"Then do it. I dare you."

"My brother and I aren't planning to stay here that long."

"Menelaus will be leaving soon for Crete. He has business there that can't wait. He plans to hold a banquet in your honor on his return. It would be a breach of courtesy for you to leave before that. Talk to his charioteer and pick a horse that's quick to learn. I want to see you ride a horse. Better still, I want you to teach me to ride as well."

Paris laughs.

She continues, "So it's a joke? You were teasing me? People can't ride horses like that, just as there's no such thing as a centaur."

He laughs still louder.

"Are you telling me that centaurs are real?" she asks. "Have you seen one? Have you ridden one?"

"No. That's not what's funny."

"Then what is?"

"The image of you on horseback."

"You don't think I'm capable of that? You think women can't do what men can?"

"No. It's a matter that isn't to be discussed in polite company, or so I've been told these last few months."

"And what's that?"

"Women aren't meant to sit astride horses, with their nether parts pressing against the horse's back."

"You mean it isn't proper, isn't ladylike for a woman to be seen doing that? Propriety be damned. I'm a queen. I do what I want. Besides, no one need know. I dare you to teach me."

"Your passion for knowledge and your daring are admirable. But the issue is a physical matter, the consequences of the friction, the rubbing of your tender parts and the rhythmic motion of the horse."

"You mean I could be injured, that there would be pain? I would put padding between myself and the horse. Surely if Scythian men ride horses, Scythian women must too, or this whole tale of yours is a myth."

"It's not a myth. Men can ride, and women can as well; but not ladies."

"Because we're dainty and afraid of discomfort or pain?"

"Pain isn't the issue. It's pleasure."

"Pleasure?"

"Indeed. That's the joke. Among my people, the people of the mountain where I was raised, randy young men try to get women to ride horseback, because of the effect the rubbing has on them."

"Effect?"

"Putting them in the mood."

"The mood?

He laughs again. "Warming them up, getting them ready so we can have our way with them."

"You seduce women by getting them to ride horseback?"

"Of course."

"And you've done that? You've bedded women that way? And not just slaves you could order? Respectable innocent women? What kind of man are you? How many women have you had on your Mount Ida?"

"One. Oenone's her name. We had much fun together before I was found and became a prince. That started with me teaching her to ride Boreas."

"So you're a master of rowdy stories, and you lie with great aplomb."

"I would never lie to you, my lady." He bows to her with an exaggerated sweep of his hand.

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Helen hesitates. She isn't sure she heard that right. Did he say "lie to" or "lie with" or did he say the one and mean the other? "Then do it," she says, with more enthusiasm than she deems appropriate. "Pick one of our chariot horses. Train it to be ridden. Then teach me to ride!"

"As you wish." Paris smiles provocatively.

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Hermione suddenly appears, races to her mother, and wraps her arms around her mother's legs. "Got you! But that was too easy. You talked, Mommy. I could hear you from far off.

"And who are you, sir? Can you really ride on a horse's back? Teach me, too. I like riding dogs, big dogs. But horses must be even better – the speed, the wind.

"Zeus turned himself into a bull and a swan, never a horse. If I were Zeus, I'd make myself into a horse. But I'm me. I just want to ride a horse, the fastest in the world.

"Zeus is Mommy's daddy, her real daddy. Everybody says so. But she never asks him to do things for me.

"Mommy, please tell this man to teach me to ride a horse."

"Only if you're good."

"But I am good. Everybody says so."

"You have to be even better for such a treat. Paris here needs to train a horse and teach me to ride. Then he can teach you. But Daddy might not want us to do that. So keep this a secret. That's a new game for you – knowing things without telling anybody. Start now. Repeat after me: *people can't ride horses.*"

## The Right Touch

Paris asks a stableboy for help in picking a chariot horse that's smart and obedient. He harnesses it to a chariot, brushes its back, speaks to it softly, and feeds it apples and sweets. Then he improvises. He has never trained a domesticated horse, only wild ones.

He ties sacks of grain, about his own weight, to the horse's back and leads it to the race track, where he has it go around several times, gradually increasing

speed, so it can adjust its stride to the extra weight. Then he detaches the horse from the chariot, but keeps the harness and yoke in place. It's familiar with those and associates them with humans and obedience.

The next morning, Paris removes the weights and, from a fishing net, fashions a rope contraption which he wraps around the horse's midsection and attaches to the harness. This gives him footing for mounting and dismounting and will enable him to lean over the side for gymnastic tricks. Finally, he rides the horse, advancing from walk to trot to canter to gallop, signaling the pace with legs and hands and words, and rewarding the horse with treats for getting it right. This horse learns far faster than he expected.

Then he rides the horse to the palace garden, where he sees Helen resting, alone.

She's shocked. "How did you train it so fast?"

"Magic, my lady," he replies.

"Wait here," she orders. A few minutes later she returns with her hips wrapped in thick layers of cloth padding. "Teach me. Teach me now," she insists.

First he has her talk to the horse and brush its back. Then he loads it with sacks of grain and mounts it himself, so it gets used to carrying a double load. Finally, he removes the weights, helps Helen to mount, and mounts behind her.

She talks softly to the horse, holds tightly to the harness and net, and with her free hand pats it gently on the neck. When both she and the horse seem comfortable, Paris urges the horse forward at a slow walk, then gradually speeds it up. After a few circuits of the garden, Helen asks to stop. Paris helps her down. She removes her padding. He helps her up again and mounts again.

With her groin pressed against the horse's neck, and Paris pressed against her backside, she feels sensations she never experienced before. As the horse increases its pace, the pressure becomes rhythmic and pleasurable.

"Faster," she whispers.

"As you wish."

He wraps his arms around her waist as he urges the horse with his heels.

When they dismount, back at the garden, she admits, "I'm panting, but not from exertion. I feel like a different self."

Paris explains, "It's the pressure, the rubbing between the legs, the rhythmic contact down there, like when you touch yourself. The friction."

"What do you mean? Why would I touch myself?"

"Surely you know. Your mother must have told you. Or you should have learned on your own. You're no virgin. You've had a child. You've been married for four years. Surely your husband showed you."

"We've never talked of such matters. Why should we? Sex is for men, not women. It's something a woman endures, forced on her by men. That's the way it was when I was raped as a child. And it wasn't much different with my husband."

"Wasn't?

"It's complicated."

"Tell me," he urges her, rubbing her back with one hand and her feet with the other.

Enjoying the contact, she tries to explain. "Of course, I had no choice of mate; that was my father's business. Then I was my husband's property to do with as he pleased, which he did all too often. I was soon with child. My labor was difficult and dangerous. The baby was in the wrong position. Mother brought in one midwife after another until the last was able, with pushing and massaging, to turn the baby around. I felt trapped. I wasn't ready to be a mother. This wasn't the life I had dreamed of as a child. I didn't want to be a mother. I passed the baby to a wet nurse. I saw her only when I couldn't avoid her. Now she's a toddler and she's after me all the time.

"During the ordeal of childbirth, Mother tried to distract me with tales of her own labors. She had had two sets of twins – me and Cly, then Castor and Pollux. Having twins is rare and dangerous. For her to have had two sets and to have survived was extraordinary. That alone could have led to speculation that the father was no mere mortal.

"Mother said she regretted that she didn't plead with Father to find a different match for me. Since I am a twin and Mother had two sets of twins and Menelaus is the son of a twin, the odds were great that I would have twins. Then the labor would be far more painful, and I would probably die. She warned me not to have more children with Menelaus.

"I asked her how I could avoid that. I'm subject to the will of my husband. And there's no sure way to prevent pregnancy. If the priests are right, even a goddess can't do that, even the goddess of love.

"She told me to put sleeping potion in Menelaus' wine when he comes to bed, and, in the morning, praise him for his virility and act surprised that he doesn't remember. That's what she did with Father, after her second set of twins. I have another method that's more reliable."

"And what is that?"

"I richly reward his concubines when they lure him to their beds instead of mine. And when he's in the mood for me, rather than them, in the dark, I have my handmaid take my place and satisfy him. When he's finished his business, I climb back into bed and my handmaid goes away."

Paris chuckles. "And you've been doing that for years? And he's never suspected?"

"He's so used to doing it with her that if he did it with me, he'd think I was an impostor."

That night, Menelaus chooses to bed one of his concubines, so Helen and her handmaid have the room to themselves, and Helen indulges her curiosity. She experiments, stroking herself with fingers, with cloth, and with objects. That feels good. But the more she touches, the more she needs to – harder and faster. She feels tense with expectation, needing something more to trigger a release, and not able to bring it on.

She asks her handmaid to join her under the covers. "Do you touch yourself in your private places, for the pleasure of it?" she dares to ask.

"Of course. Doesn't everyone? It's not something you talk about. You just do it. It's no one else's business, but it's natural; it's necessary."

"Touch me that way."

"What?"

"That's an order."

Soon she's shaking and quivering, with a loss of control and a release of tension. It feels good, very good. Then she helps her handmaid arrive at that same peak of pleasure.

She learns two lessons that night: sex can be pleasurable for a woman, and a woman doesn't need to depend on a man for that – she can do it for herself or with another woman, if she likes.

## A Time to Remember

The next morning Paris and Helen go riding again. Then lying side-by-side in a meadow, Helen tells him about her experiments with herself and with her handmaid, and she asks him if he, too, can give himself pleasure.

"Yes," he replies with aplomb, delighted that she's willing to talk to him of such matters.

"You mean sex is that simple?" she asks. "You don't need a woman? You don't need to enter a woman, and risk giving her a child?"

"Yes. But it's far better when it's not your own hand doing it. The element of surprise. And I imagine it would be still better if you cared for the person you did it with."

"You've never experienced that?"

"Nor have you, from what you've said."

"But my sister, Cly, has."

"The one who married Menelaus' brother? Did she win the marriage lottery and wed a man she loves?"

"She found her true love and sleeps with him every night. But he isn't her husband."

"Then who is he?"

"Her handmaid."

"A woman?"

"Her husband thinks so. They met on her wedding day, which was my wedding day, too. He was disguised as a handmaid and was planning to kill both Agamemnon and Menelaus. His name is Aegisthus. He's the rightful king of Mycenae. He wanted revenge for the deaths of his father and brothers. Instead, she convinced him to go to Mycenae with her, disguised as her handmaid. He shares her sleeping chamber. She follows our mother's advice and uses a potion to avoid her husband's attentions. She and her lover make love whenever they want, and the children she bears are his."

"Whether that's true or not, it's an amazing story," says Paris. "You have spirit and imagination."

"What?"

"You dare do what you want to do and say what you think."

"It's extraordinary that you say that of me. Men always compliment my looks. No one says anything about my mind, about how I think or speak. I'm just an object to look at – a living statue, but a statue nonetheless – to be admired for my face and body. Would you like me to recite my poetry? To sing my songs?"

"You compose poetry and songs?"

"Not yet," she laughs. "But you make me think I can and should. I've had such ideas waking in the middle of the night. But it's hard to remember anything long and complex. I can't imagine how bards memorize long poems for performance – not just how they create them, but how they can tell the same story many times. Often I can't even remember what I want to buy at the market."

"My sister Cassandra – the one with the gift of seeing the future – her problem is the opposite. She can't forget. The vision she once had from Apollo won't go away."

"Well, maybe that's what bards have, or the best of them. Gods or muses give them visions that they can't forget. But remembering words shouldn't depend on divine intervention. I've seen Phoenician merchants make marks on wood or

wax to keep track of inventory, transactions, even thoughts. And other people can understand those marks, like hearing unspoken thoughts, or hearing today what was said yesterday. They call the making of such marks *writing* and the understanding of them *reading*."

"Well, why don't you learn writing from them?" suggests Paris. "Surely you could pay Phoenicians to teach you."

"I know the sounds those marks stand for, but not the Phoenician words. It would take years for me to learn Phoenician. But maybe I could use those marks to make Greek words."

"Show me."

She picks up a stick and makes scratches on the ground, two lines of marks.

She explains, "The first line stands for sounds of Greek and the second for sounds of Luwian. And they both mean the same thing."

"And what is that?"

"I love you." She hesitates for a moment, then adds. "And I do. I love that mind of yours and what it does to mine."

He pauses, self-conscious, not knowing what she expects of him. He's flattered and doesn't want to undo her opinion of him. Should he say he loves her too, even though he doesn't? He couldn't – not so fast. But the young woman in Salamis caught his attention immediately. How could he have been so young and naive just a few days ago? What should a man say to a woman when she says she loves him? Saying nothing at all would be an insult, but echoing her words would sound false. He knows he's taking too long to reply.

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Helen sees his confusion. She's pleased that he doesn't feel compelled to say he loves her, without meaning it.

She says, "This is a life-changing moment."

Once again, he's speechless.

She adds, "We should run off together."

He flinches, as if she slapped him in the face.

She smiles at his reaction, that he doesn't know how to mask his thoughts and feelings.

Finally, he asks, "To Troy?"

"No," she replies. "To Phoenicia."

## Not So Happy Returns

"That?" exclaims Menelaus. "You tell me that that is Helen? You can't believe that I'm that gullible. You went to great lengths to prove to me that she's dead. You swore she died ten years ago. And now she shows up? What an insult to my intelligence. What a whiplash to my emotions.

"I'm grieving about her death, knowing that I'll never see her again, that we'll never be able to share, regret, and undo our wrongs to one another. And now you tell me she's alive? And worse than that, you point at that creature standing in the corner and claim that she's Helen? She's more male than female. She looks nothing like Helen, has none of her storied beauty, her glow, her aura. Maybe she's a peasant. Maybe you chose her at random, as a sacrifice to end the war. To have picked her as your Helen pretender is an insult to my intelligence."

Priam admits, "I've never seen Helen before, and this woman certainly doesn't match the image of her I had from her legend. But my son Paris says that's she. Talk to this woman yourself, and look at her more closely. Surely, you should know Helen if anyone does. Remember it's been ten years since last you saw her. With all she's been through, it's possible she's changed. Also, your image of her may have grown in her absence. Imagination magnifies memories. You and so many others have risked so much for her that you think she's godlike and find it hard to recognize her in this frail and flawed human."

"She was like a goddess. The real Helen was the daughter of Zeus himself. She would never show herself in public like this, with close-cropped hair and a jagged scar on her cheek. You should have decked her in queen's clothes, used cosmetics, given her false hair since she has so little of her own. Why do you bring this woman before me like this?"

"I sent word to you immediately. I wanted you to see her as I did. Unadorned. Authentic."

"Authentic? Nonsense. If you want to fool me, do me the courtesy of making a better try at it. As she is, she's an insult to me and an insult to the memory of my wife."

"I understand your skepticism. I too doubted their story when I first heard it. In those ten years they've been missing, they sailed to the ends of the Earth and saw all there is to see. They were beyond the Pillars of Heracles, at the outer Ocean itself when they first heard that we are locked in war and that they are the cause of it. They want to atone for the harm they've done. They know their lives are forfeit for their crime. They don't expect forgiveness. They are surrendering themselves to you for punishment. They ask only that you end this war

and go home, that innocent people be allowed to go on with their lives, in peace. Talk to them. Please. Hear their story and judge for yourself. I wouldn't bring them to you if I myself were not convinced of the truth of what they say."

Paris explains, "Our ship was made with green wood, an amateur's mistake. Cracks opened up and expanded. We hopped from one island to the next, filling the cracks with pine tar. We went to Sidon. We didn't dare go to Troy. Father would have sent us back to you under guard, with all we had taken and compensation besides. That's the kind of man he is. Of course we fled. We had no alternative.

"In Sidon, we released our crew and captain and paid them handsomely. None of them returned to Troy. Instead, they settled there and found work and built new lives, rather than risk the long voyage home and punishment for helping us.

"Helen and I bought a seaworthy ship made with wood that was properly aged. We also bought fine cloth that we could trade in other ports. We became merchants. Rather than spend our stolen wealth, we would increase it by trade. There might be no limit to how long and how far we could travel. But it wasn't as easy as we thought. Pirates were everywhere. That's how Helen got the scar you see."

"Enough, Paris, if you are Paris. Tell me no yarns of your travels. I want to hear from your lady. Tell me, woman; say something to convince me that you're Helen. Or, better still, like a goddess, cast off this human form and show yourself once again in the body I knew and loved – the stuff of legend."

"But I can't do that, Red Beard. I am as you see me – a mere mortal."

"Red Beard? You call me Red Beard? Paris must have told you that. He probably rehearsed you for this performance. Speak. And don't tell me well-known facts. Say things that only Helen and I would know."

"You didn't know me very well. You never tried to know me. Nor did I know you."

"I was your husband. We shared a bed. What could be more intimate than that?"

"After the birth of Hermione, you never had me."

"What nonsense is that?"

"When you wanted me instead of one of your concubines, in the dark my handmaid took my place. It was her you groped and entered, not me. You got used to her ways. You enjoyed her mightily, or so you told me in the morning, after she had gone. You were so proud of yourself. But I was never yours, never willingly.

"If you still want me back, knowing that, knowing that I loathe you, then I'm yours. But your crudeness, your insensitivity and my escape from that false union should be a private matter, not cause for war. Torture me, kill me if you wish. But end the war. Our private tragedy is no reason for the misery and death of others."

"No!" Paris speaks up. "I challenge you, Menelaus, to meet me one-on-one, in single combat. If I win, if I compel you to submit, you leave with all the Greeks and renounce your claim to Helen. If you win, kill me and take Helen; but the war ends then too."

"A fight to the death for Helen and for an end to the war? A fight of me against you? You, of all people, will be the champion of Troy? Have you ever held a sword, much less used one in combat? Fight me and I'll cut you slowly and painfully, lopping off this and that piece of you. Surrender without a fight, and I'll give you a quick and painless death."

"And Helen?"

"I'll do with her as I please."

"Being dead, I'll have no way to contest that. What of Troy? What becomes of Troy?"

"Troy is ours. But we'll spare your people. Leave the city to us, intact – no burning, no destruction. And in return, we'll let your people go into exile, wherever they wish, with safe passage, taking with them all they can carry."

"Better that than endless war. So combat it is. But beware. You don't know what you're up against."

"You mean the goddess of love? I've heard that tale of yours. You're expecting Aphrodite herself to fight at your side and save you. Believe that if you wish. And I'll believe in the sharp edge of my sword. I'll meet you at dawn tomorrow by your Scaean Gate. To the death!"

## Falling in Love Again

Helen doesn't dare watch from the ramparts with the mob of spectators. The mood is celebratory. This is a way out of the war.

All presume that Paris will lose and die – just punishment for his crimes. And if they see her now, they might tear her to pieces for her share of the guilt.

They're probably talking about what to take with them and how to pack it and how to carry it – by wagon, on donkey back, on their backs, on their heads,

stuffed in their clothing, and where to go for their exile. Many will choose Lycia, which, unlike nearby towns and cities, is still untouched by Greek raids.

How could I have fallen for such a fool? wonders Helen in their chamber. How can he believe Aphrodite will save him. He's mad, totally mad, like his sister Cassandra.

She grabs a wineskin, holds it high above her head, and squeezes, sending a red stream straight into her mouth. Soon she's coughing and spitting it out. Her body has limits. Oblivion isn't easy to reach.

There's no sword in their chamber. The best she can find is the iron knife that Paris uses to shave his beard. He sharpened it on a stone for hours, as a way to cope with the dread of impending death – a sign that he doesn't believe in Aphrodite. It's sharp enough for Helen to slit her wrists with the lightest of strokes.

She lies down on the bed with the knife in hand.

She will count to a hundred and then do it – first the left wrist and then the right.

But before she counts to fifty, she falls asleep in a drunken stupor.

Then Paris is beside her, holding her, kissing her, sobbing.

In her dream – it must be a dream – he mistakes the wine stains for blood. He thinks she bled to death. He prays to Aphrodite to bring her back. If not, he'll kill himself and meet her in Hades.

Through delirious, half-closed eyes, she sees sunlight reflecting off the blade as he takes it from her hand. She opens her eyes wide. He shouts with glee.

Their lips touch and then their tongues. He licks the scar on her cheek and calls her, "My pirate queen."

She isn't dreaming.

"You won?" she asks. "The goddess did that for you?"

She hugs him tight, in relief and joy.

"Not exactly," he says.

"It was win or lose," she replies. "Clearly, you didn't lose. So you must have won."

"Not exactly. There was a mist, then a fog, a thick fog."

"Is Menelaus still alive?"

"I think so. I didn't see. One moment we were facing one another – shield in one hand, spear in the other, ten feet apart. Then a fog descended from Mount Ida, covering the plain, covering the city, covering us. I ran."

"You ran?"

"What else could I do? I couldn't see him. I couldn't see my own feet. I ran to-

ward where the gate should be, then to the palace and here. I don't know how I found my way. The goddess must have guided me."

"Take me," she replies. "Take me now. Enter me."

"But you've always been afraid. The risks of childbirth."

"Damn the risk, Paris. I love you. I want your seed. I want to bear your child."

He starts to protest. She covers his mouth with one hand, and, with the other, she guides him where he has never been before.

Helen and Menelaus

Helen retreats to the chamber she shares with Deiphobus and crawls into bed with him, and makes love with him – not from passion, but with empathy, knowing that at long last the end of the war is near, and the two of them will be dead by morning.

She wakes – how was she able to sleep? – to shouts and screams, the clatter of weapons, the crackling of fire, the collapse of buildings. Smoke streams through the window.

Deiphobus, in full armor, stands at the ready, guarding the door.

Helen sits on a stool by the bed, numb, emotionless, certain she's about to die. She won't struggle. That would only prolong the agony.

The door crashes in, knocking Deiphobus to the ground.

He scrambles to his feet and once again assumes the ready position. Then he quickly, smoothly switches sword and shield so the sword is in his left hand.

He had shown Helen that trick. He's proud of it. On the battlefield, it served him well, catching his opponents off-guard.

Menelaus faces him without helmet, without shield, both hands on the hilt of his sword.

With a piercing war cry, Deiphobus strides forward.

Menelaus, with a single stroke, severs his head.

Helen shuts her eyes.

She expects to see a rush of images like what Cassandra saw in her vision, but instead of the future, her past – childhood, rape, marriage, childbirth, Paris.

Instead, her mind goes blank.

Darkness. Silence.

The wait is interminable.

Is she dead already?

Then she hears a thump.

In her panic, has time slowed down for her. Or has it taken that long for Deiphobus' head to hit the ground?

Another delay, then she hears the crash of a body toppling over.

Warm liquid hits her arm.

She keeps her eyes shut. She doesn't want to see the blood. She doesn't want to watch as Menelaus swings his sword at her.

She hears heavy breathing. She smells sweat.

Why doesn't Menelaus get it over with?

Is he savoring his revenge?

She wakes again, with a shiver. Was she dreaming? Did none of this happen? Or is it about to happen? Or will it happen over and over again, forever? Is that her punishment in Hades?

A short while before, she and Deiphobus had gripped each other in despair and tried to blank out the sounds of death, rape, and destruction in the streets below. Before that, during their brief marriage, Deiphobus and she had been polite strangers. She made no effort to know him. He couldn't replace Paris. That was unfair of her. She should have given him a chance. People change. He could have. She could have. Now neither of them could.

When Menelaus kills her, she will forgive him and wish him well. She deserves her punishment. She will be at peace with herself and with him.

She opens her eyes.

He's standing next to the bed, sword held with both hands.

How long has he been there?

Their eyes meet. She expects anger and hatred.

Instead she sees tears and regret.

There's a touch of gray in his red beard. There's a weariness about him. He looks pensive, rather than angry. War has changed him, and age as well.

If they first met now, what would she as she is now think of him as he is now?

That's impossible to imagine. They wouldn't be who they are now, if they hadn't gone through their failed marriage, her elopement with Paris, and the ten years of war their breakup triggered.

She says, "I wonder what it would have been like if you and I had gotten to know one another. Could we have been friends? Might we have become lovers? We'd never seen one another when Father decided we would marry. Then you took me roughly as if I were a new-bought slave. I had no choice. I was yours to use as you pleased, a thing, not a person. I doubt you got much pleasure from it. I know I didn't.

"Then, after the birth of Hermione, I became aware of the risk, not just of childbirth but of the birth of twins. I had my handmaid take my place in bed with you, and you didn't even notice. I left you, truly left you, long before Paris.

"We were strangers then. And we're even more strangers ten years later. What

would you think of me if first you saw me now, not a child bride, not a legendary beauty, but a mature woman with a jagged scar on her cheek?

"Go ahead. Do what you have to do. I'm ready for it. Kill me. Pretend that you're still enraged over what I did so long ago. Or would you prefer to wait until you have an audience so you can prove your manhood in front of them? Or perhaps you'd like to slit my throat in a temple at an altar, as a sacrifice to the gods, thanking them for your glorious victory."

"No," he says softly, taking her hand in his and kissing the cheek with the scar.

The next day, they set sail on a single ship. The rest of the Spartans head straight home.

They journey southward – world-weary strangers, who on a whim decided to run off together, shedding all responsibility, not caring where they go or what becomes of them.

When he makes the first clumsy gestures toward physical intimacy, she doesn't object. Gradually, they teach one another what they want of one another, and respond in kind.

In Sidon, they trade their war ship for a merchant ship, hire a Phoenician crew, and barter for merchandise that they can sell for a profit elsewhere, as Helen and Paris had done years before. They sail to Cyrus, Egypt, Libya, Carthage. Sometimes they talk of having another child or even twins, but that never happens.

When they reach the Pillars of Heracles, they're tempted to sail north to the island rich in tin, or south along the coast of Africa, or west across the Ocean, perhaps to the Islands of the Blest. But instead, they return to Sparta, where their daughter Hermione is old enough to have children of her own.

Helen in Arcadia

When Menelaus dies, Helen retires to Arcadia. There she composes a lengthy poem about her life and the war it caused. She writes it down, using Phoenician characters to represent Greek sounds. Only she knows how to read it.

Traveling bards visit her in Arcadia, learn the story by heart, and repeat it often, all over Greece. They add battle scenes and bloodshed – always crowd pleasers.

She remembers fondly the visit of Telemachus in search of his father and the look on Menelaus' face when she recounted that she walked three times around the hollow horse and knocked on its flanks and called out the names of the soldiers inside, mimicking the voices of their wives. That was the first time she added that detail.

Menelaus neither confirmed nor denied what she said, but she was sure he wanted to believe it. Her eyes flirted with his, inviting belief, but at the same time laughing at his gullibility.

In her written version, Menelaus tells that anecdote, implying that he's retelling what she told him, challenging the credulity of their guests.

She loves layering her narrative – one perspective on top of another, and none of them privileged and special, all possible at once.

She misses Menelaus. She misses Paris too, but she misses Menelaus more because he was the perfect audience, and a singer of tales needs an audience.

Remembering that scene with Telemachus reminds her of when Paris was his age. Back then, she didn't really know Menelaus and didn't know herself. If what happened after that hadn't happened, they would never have bonded as they finally did, and her life would have been much poorer.

Truth is dull and flat, she thinks, but story is alive, ever growing, ever changing, becoming ever more memorable. Anomalies and inconsistencies throw history into doubt, but they make the story all the stronger. We want to believe all the more when we know that we can never be certain. Our confidence is an act of faith, an act of love.

Menelaus liked it when I told stories that couldn't be corroborated, when I told the same stories with variants, and no one knew which was *true* if any were.

He loved the way I could flirt with truth and flirt with him in doing so. In particular, he liked my telling of the story of the hollow horse.

He believed he remembered the rhythmic knocking. It had to have been deliberate. Someone knew but didn't reveal that the horse was hollow, that there were warriors inside. The revelation could have led to the death of everyone in the horse and the Trojans might have saved their city.

Was that me knocking? He could never know that as a fact, but he believed it, even though he remembered not the sound of the knocking, but my telling of the tale.

His lingering doubt made his belief all the stronger, like belief in a god, like belief in all gods, like belief that life has meaning and that there is love and that my love for him was a strong as his for me.

*****

When bards visit and ask Helen to tell them her tale, she never shows them her written version. She doesn't try to teach any of them how to read it. Rather she forces them to rely on their memories, knowing that variations due to lapses of

memory and creative twists added by retellers will make the story all the more memorable, through the narrative power of doubt.

Once a year, Helen visits Andromache and Helenus in Epirus. By chance, Cassandra's prophecy for them has turned out to be true. And perhaps many years hence there will be a namesake of Paris, a great Alexander who will conquer the world. So much that is impossible has happened already, why not that as well?

But she doesn't envy them their role in history. She will live in story, which lasts much longer than history and is far more fun to tell.

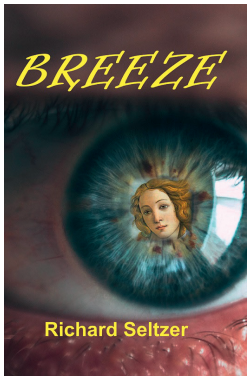


**Figure 1** Cover of Breeze

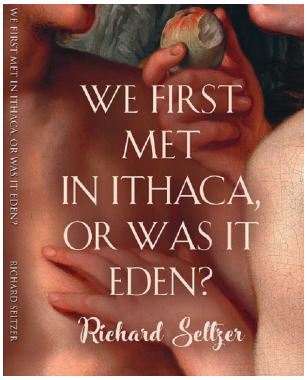


**Figure 2** Cover of We First Met in Ithaca, or What It Eden?

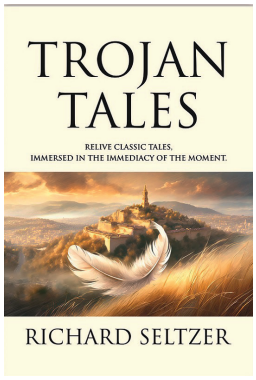


**Figure 3** Cover of Trojan Tales

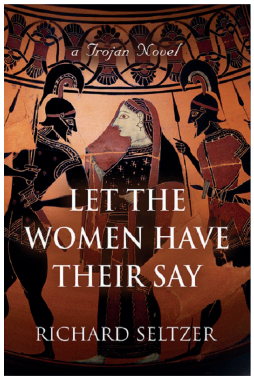


**Figure 4** Cover of Let the Women Have Their Say

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