

Between Power and Powerlessness: Artemis and Helen as Contrasting Symbols of Femininity

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Abstract

This paper explores the contrasting representations of femininity in Ancient Greek mythology through the characters of Artemis in *Hippolytus* by Euripides and Helen in the *Iliad* by Homer. It examines how these figures embody opposing extremes of female identity: Artemis as an idealized, autonomous goddess who enforces justice, and Helen as a mortal woman defined by beauty, male desire, and blame. Through close reading and modern feminist interpretations, the paper argues that these portrayals reflect enduring societal expectations and gender roles in both ancient and contemporary contexts. While Artemis symbolizes independence and female empowerment, Helen illustrates the consequences of objectification and the lack of agency under patriarchy. The comparison reveals how mythology continues to influence perceptions of gender, autonomy, and power.

In ancient Greece, women were often depicted within two extremes: as powerful, independent figures who control their fates or as vulnerable, beautiful objects of male desire and conflict. Artemis, the chaste and untouchable goddess in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, and Helen, the mortal woman whose beauty fuels the Trojan War in the *Iliad*, exemplify these contrasting representations of femininity. While Artemis exerts divine authority and enforces justice, Helen struggles with blame and powerlessness, revealing the significantly different ways female autonomy has been portrayed in mythology. Their portrayals highlight the firm expectations placed on women in ancient Greek society, where female agency was either idealized and untouchable or diminished through male dominance.

To understand how Artemis represents an idealized form of female power, it is essential to examine her role in Greek mythology. As the goddess of the hunt, chastity, and childbirth, Artemis was known for her independence and divine authority, embodying a form of femininity that was untouchable by male influence (Hughes, 1990, p. 192). Furthermore, Artemis' divine authority and commitment to chastity are central to Euripides' *Hippolytus*, where she serves as both unwavering devotion and the enforcement of justice: "Among the gods the custom is this: no god will cross the will of another, but we all stand aside" (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1325-1337). Artemis illustrates the opposition to Aphrodite in the play and ultimately delivers justice after Hippolytus' tragic downfall. As for Helen, she is portrayed as a passive figure and depicted as a pawn of fate in male conflicts. For this reason, Helen expresses regret and self-blame but ultimately has no power to change her situation. Despite the chaos she is perceived to create in the eyes of men, she has little to no explanation for herself besides her physical attributes of beauty.

While both Helen and Artemis navigate their worlds with a sense of purpose, their motivations diverge sharply. Love, beauty, and the resulting consequences largely influence

Helen's choices, whereas Artemis' goals are rooted in justice, protection, and maintaining her freedom. In ancient Greek society, women were expected to be modest and obedient, so Artemis' rejection of male influence made her idealized but, at the same time, unattainable. Like Hippolytus, women who followed Artemis dedicated themselves to purity and avoided romantic relationships, creating an expectation for women in ancient Greece to be more like Artemis's followers before marriage. However, once married, they had to navigate a world shaped by male desire and control, much like Helen had to, whereas Artemis had absolute control over herself. Artemis represented female power that was self-sufficient and independent from men's influence and would punish those who disrespected her or the things she represented. Hughes (1990, p. 193) explains that "anyone who corrupts Artemis' purity is sentenced to death." This highlights how Artemis enforces justice, even in death, by vowing to punish Aphrodite for the suffering of Hippolytus. Specifically, as punishment, Artemis promises to use her arrow to kill Aphrodite's most loved, "even so you will get revenge for the wrath that has fallen against you by [Aphrodite's] design, and this will be the reward of your piety and goodness." (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1415-1420)."

Furthermore, Artemis connects to modern interpretations, symbolizing female empowerment and bodily autonomy. Valerie Andrews (2016) explains that Artemis has become part of a "new feminine psychology" rooted in Jungian archetypes, serving as a model for women who value independence, spiritual strength, and a deep connection to nature. Andrews writes, "the Artemis archetype empowers women to defend their integrity, speak their truth, and walk alone when necessary" (Andrews, 2016, p. 76). This positions Artemis not merely as an ancient myth, but as a living symbol in feminist thought. Rather than being a strict enforcer of chastity, contemporary feminists emphasize Artemis's self-sufficiency, personal freedom, and refusal to conform to male expectations (Andrews, 2016, p. 73). On the other hand, it can be assumed that Helen cannot escape being defined by men's desires, making her a lasting symbol of how beauty can be both a power and a curse in patriarchal societies.

On the other hand, Helen's life is dictated by the desires of men and the will of the gods, leaving her with little control over her fate. Helen illustrates the consequences of breaking these expectations of the modest, ideal Greek woman; her beauty defines her entire role and is essentially being fought over like an object, ultimately leading to war and destruction. In the *Iliad*, Helen becomes the person to blame for the faults of the war (Homer, *Iliad* 3.155). *Book three* touches on the Trojan elders watching Helen approach and comment on her beauty, remarking that it was understandable why men would fight over her. However, they also suggest that she should leave, as keeping her in Troy would only bring them more suffering:

Small blame that Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans should for such a woman long suffer woes; she is dreadfully like immortal goddesses to look on. But even so, though she is like them, let her go home on the ships, and not be left here to be a bane to us and to our children after us (Homer, *Iliad* 3.155-160).

This exchange highlights how men often avoid taking responsibility for conflict, choosing instead to place blame on Helen. As a result of this, Helen expresses regret and self-awareness regarding her role in the Trojan War, stating that she wished that "evil death had been pleasing to [Helen] when she chose to follow [Paris] here" (Homer, *Iliad* 3.173-174). This sentiment

highlights her lack of agency—she recognizes her situation yet remains trapped by forces beyond her control. Unlike Artemis, who punishes those who defy her, Helen internalizes blame for the destruction caused by the war, even as she is objectified by both the Greeks and Trojans. Due to Helen being put forth as the sole person to blame for the war, many modern feminist writers like Ruby Blondell highlight how Helen should be viewed as a victim rather than someone to blame. Blondell's (2010) argument is that Helen's role is more complex than just being the cause of war. Instead, she is a symbol of suffering and misinterpretation. The male characters often treat Helen as an object: "She is not the one who takes—she is the one who is taken" (Blondell, 2010, p. 4). Instead of a long war, Paris and Menelaus will fight over Helen. Whoever wins keeps her and the riches (Homer, *Iliad* 3.250-258), ultimately reinforcing her role as a passive agent rather than an autonomous individual. This portrays Helen as a prize rather than a person.

In contrast, Artemis is never "taken"; she maintains autonomy throughout her appearance in Euripides' *Hippolytus*: "I would never have endured such disgrace as to allow the man I love most among mortals to die" (Euripides' *Hippolytus* 1325-1337). In this scene, Artemis asserts control over the situation following Hippolytus' death, vowing revenge and upholding her divine authority, signalling that her love is not romantic, but protective, sacred, and loyal. She does not fall victim to overwhelming passions like Phaedra in the play, or manipulations like mortal women might. Her love is rational and measured, the opposite of the emotional chaos caused by Aphrodite's influence.

Hanna Roisman's (2006) article examines Helen's evolving role within the male heroic world, from an object of desire and conflict to a more vocal and reflective figure. This shift in Helen's portrayal parallels Artemis' role in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, where she holds divine authority but is largely absent until the end. Both figures reveal the limits of female influence in male-dominated narratives, yet each exerts power differently. As the *Iliad* progresses, Helen begins to speak for herself, showing self-awareness and reflection. Helen critiques herself: She calls Hector her brother, grieving that she is a "contriver of mischief and abhorred by all" (Homer, *Iliad* 6.343-345). This aligns with Roisman's arguments that Helen internalizes blame even though she is not solely responsible for the war (Roisman, 2006, p. 26). Ultimately, Helen's beauty influences her but also makes her a scapegoat for war (Blondell, 2013, p. 146), and this reflects the idea that societal expectations trap Helen; she cannot escape blame, even when others, like King Priam, acknowledge her innocence: "you are in no way to blame in my eyes; it is the gods, surely, who are to blame, who roused against me the tearful war of the Achaeans" (Homer, *Iliad* 3.161-165). Moreover, King Priam sees her as a victim of the gods will, implying that Helen was manipulated, or that the war was inevitable regardless of what she did. This reflects a common Greek idea: mortals are often powerless against fate and the gods. This idea is not only present in ancient Greek society, but it continues in modern societies, where women are frequently blamed for men's actions or seen as the cause of conflict, especially regarding societal expectations and gender dynamics. Neitch's (2020) discussion of Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* highlights how Pizan's argument for women's equality is framed within a context that still reinforces certain gender norms (p. 126). This is similar to the cultural expectations placed on Helen in the *Iliad*, where her actions are overshadowed by male-driven conflict, and

she becomes a symbol, either moral purity or temptation, used to explain and justify men's actions. Consequently, the idea of 'gender essentialism' (Neitch, 2020, p. 127) – the belief that women are defined and judged by perceived moral or virtuous qualities – is evident in Helen's portrayal in the *Iliad* and Pizan's arguments. Neither woman directly challenges male-centred narratives in both cases, reinforcing rather than disrupting traditional gender norms.

That being said, the *Iliad* and Euripides' *Hippolytus* provide valuable insight into ancient Greek conceptions of gender. Still, rather than representing real female experience, they should be read as cultural artifacts that reveal how male authors used female characterization to symbolize and reinforce patriarchal ideals. Helen's and Artemis's characterization tells us more about societal expectations than about actual female autonomy. As Neitch (2020) explains, even early feminist figures such as Christine de Pizan operated within a framework of gender essentialism similar to Helen's depiction in the *Iliad*, where her beauty and self-blame serve to justify male conflicts and honour codes, rather than reflect a fuller inner life. Instead of Pizan rejecting gender norms outright, Pizan defended women by showing that virtuous women were just as moral, wise, or loyal as men. Ultimately, it upholds the idea that a "good woman" is chaste, modest, and obedient.

Roisman (2006) similarly argues that Helen functions more as a possession and scapegoat than a character with actual influence (p. 2). This idea is supported by Blondell (2010) in her explanation of how Helen's internalized guilt protects male egos and preserves her status as a 'worthy woman' (p. 10). Moreover, Blondell acknowledges moments of subtle self-assertion in Helen; ultimately, her actions and portrayal are still framed within the expectations of a male audience. As Rosiman (2006) and Blondell (2010, 2013) argue, Helen's internalized guilt does not give her power but instead reflects the essentialist framework in which she must operate. Like Pizan's virtuous women, Helen preserves her worth in a male-dominated world by embodying traits that are not valued for their autonomy, but instead for how well they support patriarchal ideals. Kerboua and Mechgoug (2023) further this dynamic by illustrating that Greek myth consistently punishes women who fall outside patriarchal expectations, whether by choice or by situational instances. In male-centred narratives like the *Iliad*, a woman who disrupts or complicates the male heroic world becomes a narrative problem, and Helen exemplifies this logic. The moment she no longer fits the ideal of an obedient, modest Greek woman, she becomes the designated cause of the war, taking in the blame that male characters strategically avoid. Furthermore, Homer's narrative portrays women as sources of "destruction" without providing a meaningful reason for this characterization, instead creating a patriarchal framework where female figures are held responsible for consequences they did not choose (Kerboua & Mechgoug, 2023, p. 241).

On the other hand, Artemis in *Hippolytus* offers a rare depiction of female autonomy during this time, embodying the untouchable, independent feminine described by Andrews (2016, p. 73). Yet, as a goddess, Artemis exists outside the human world; her power highlights the limitations imposed on mortal women, such as Helen. These sources highlight that women in Greek literature frequently serve as reflections of male values. This contrast highlights how mythology constructs narratives around female power: one idealized and autonomous, the other passive and moralized. Kerboua and Mechgoug's (2023) argument that Greek narratives punish

women who disrupt patriarchal order helps explain the stark contrast between Helen and Artemis. Artemis's role does not contradict the patriarchal structure; instead, it confirms that true female autonomy could only exist safely when removed from the realm of actual women. The goddess functions as a mythic "loophole," revealing that the only way a woman could be autonomous in ancient Greece was not by being a woman, but by being a goddess. Therefore, Helen exhibits the consequences for real females; Artemis shows the fantasy of female power safely contained in divinity. Artemis is what patriarchy cannot allow in real life, and Helen is what happens when a mortal woman even approaches that level of independence or influence.

Overall, the comparison between Artemis and Helen illustrates two contrasting representations of female power. While Artemis embodies independence and control, Helen is shaped by the desires of men and the expectations of society. Moreover, ancient sources depict Artemis as a force of purity and punishment, while Helen is a passive figure, blamed for war yet powerless to change her circumstances. Modern interpretations, however, reframe both figures: Artemis as a symbol of female empowerment and autonomy and Helen as a victim of patriarchal narratives that reduce her to an object of desire and conflict. These evolving perspectives reveal how mythology shapes our understanding of gender, power, and agency, reflecting the tension between societal ideals and women's lived experiences across historical and contemporary contexts. By examining these ancient characters through a modern lens, we see how enduring these cultural narratives are and how urgently they call for reinterpretation. In recognizing Artemis and Helen not just as mythic figures, but as mirrors of society's expectations, we better understand the cultural forces that have long dictated female roles and the power of reclaiming those stories today. Ultimately, Helen's narrative punishment and Artemis's divine autonomy reveal a patriarchal system in which real women could not freely possess the same power that goddesses were imagined to hold, thus serving as a reminder that it exposes both the rigidity of ancient gender expectations and the narrative strategies used to enforce them.

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