

## Helen and the Last Song for Hector

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**SUMMARY:** This article examines the order of the three laments in *Iliad* 24 and especially the significance of Helen's prominent position as the last mourner of Hector. The article suggests that Helen's position in the trio of mourning women is dictated not by ritual form or by her relation to Hector but by virtue of her particular understanding of the importance of heroic *kleos* and poetry as the means for conferring it.

AT THE END OF THE *Iliad* the Trojans gather at the house of Priam for Hector's funeral. The lamentation begins with the *thrênos* (24.720–21) performed by professional singers, followed by the *gooi*, the dirges of Hector's kinswomen.<sup>1</sup> Andromache, Hecabe, and Helen perform individual laments mourning Hector's death and the devastating consequences of his loss for the city and its people. Their songs are answered antiphonally by a refrain of wails and cries from a chorus of Trojan women. The overall description of the scene is consistent with the principles of funerary ceremonies and formal lamentation well-known to us and extensively documented in ancient iconography and literature from Homer until the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

Within the last few decades, the genre of lament has attracted the attention of cultural anthropologists and literary critics.<sup>3</sup> From the literary perspective, Margaret Alexiou's 1974 study of Greek ritual lament remains the most extensive diachronic treatment of the genre, while Gail Holst's more

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the various types of laments and the difference between *thrênos* and *goos* see Alexiou, Derderian, Petersmann 3–16, Reiner, and Vermeule.

<sup>2</sup> For iconographic evidence of funeral rituals see Ahlberg, Boardman, Havelock, Garland, Kurtz 1985, Kurtz and J. Boardman, Shapiro, and Vermeule.

<sup>3</sup> For the anthropological perspective see Caraveli-Chaves, Humphreys, Seremetakis, and Danforth.

recent study focuses on mourning as an expression of the female voice and its potential impact on social order. Richard Martin<sup>4</sup> and Greg Nagy<sup>5</sup> have discussed extensively the language and performance aspects of ritual laments and their role in epic narrative. The war context of the *Iliad* offers several significant instances of lamentation, such as Achilles' and Briseis' laments for Patroclus (19.287–302 and 315–37),<sup>6</sup> Thetis' lament for Achilles' imminent death (18.51–64), and, most importantly, the description of Hector's funeral rites.

Studies on the style and occasion of these scenes have greatly enhanced our understanding of ancient mourning rituals. In the case of Hector's funeral, however, one additional topic must be considered, namely, the order of the laments performed by Andromache, Hecabe, and Helen.<sup>7</sup> Considering that mourning of the dead has traditionally been the duty of women, especially the duty of the closest female relatives,<sup>8</sup> it is no surprise that Andromache and Hecabe, Hector's wife and mother respectively, are shown leading the lamentation. Helen's presence and prominent position as the last speaker in this trio of mourners, however, is problematic. Homer's audience may wonder why Helen, the ostensible cause of Hector's death, is even included in the funeral ritual. Her participation, it could be argued, is hardly appropriate in the presence of Hector's mother and wife, and is puzzling in light of the animosity that, according to Helen's own words (24.768–70), the Trojan women have displayed toward her. Furthermore, her position as the last speaker is inconsistent with what appears to be an epic convention of ranking affinities as shown by J. Kakridis in his 1949 study entitled *Homeric Researches*.<sup>9</sup>

Kakridis has demonstrated that the Homeric poems employ an "ascending scale of affection," that is, a structuring device that involves a "fixed gradation of friends and relatives," with the closest person, typically the wife, named last.<sup>10</sup> Kakridis notices this pattern in the story of Meleager, narrated by Phoenix (9.529–99), where Meleager's wife, Cleopatra, is the last person, in a series of relatives and friends, to entreat and finally convince the hero to rejoin the fighting. Similarly, it is Patroclus, Achilles' closest friend,<sup>11</sup> who persuades him to set aside his anger and help the Greeks—after Agamemnon's

<sup>4</sup> Martin.

<sup>5</sup> Nagy 1974 and 1979.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the laments of Briseis and Achilles see Pucci.

<sup>7</sup> Alexiou 132–34 and *passim*, Derderian 34 and n. 75, Holst-Warhaft 111–14, Shapiro esp. 634 and 636, Martin 86–88.

<sup>8</sup> Alexiou 10.

<sup>9</sup> Kakridis 19–20.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 20.

<sup>11</sup> Patroclus is called *philtatos* several times in the *Iliad*, e.g., 17.411 and 655, 19.315. For a discussion of the use of *philos* and *philotês* in the *Iliad*, see Nagy 1979: 104–9.

three envoys have failed. An even more relevant example is seen in the sequence of Hector's meetings with acquaintances and relatives during his last visit to Troy. First he meets the Trojan women (6.238), then his mother (6.251–85), then his brother Paris and Helen (6.321–68), and, finally, Andromache and Astyanax (6.394–502). The last and most memorable encounter is reserved for his wife and son. These scenes illustrate a pattern of progression whereby the last speaker, in any given scene, is the dearest to the hero. Admittedly, Kakridis focuses on cases where emotional attachment is used as the means for persuasion. Nevertheless, his examples clearly indicate a general epic tendency for climactic progression.

In accordance with this pattern, Hector's death in *Iliad* 22 is witnessed and lamented first by his mother and father, then by the people of Troy, and finally by his wife, Andromache, who is then appropriately given the last place in the sequence of mourning (22.477–514). By a curious asymmetry, the order of speakers is changed in *Iliad* 24. Helen is not only allowed to join Hector's lamentation, but is also given the third and most prominent place in the sequence of speakers. This essay considers Helen's position by examining the three laments in the context of the *Iliad* and suggests that Helen's role as the final mourner is dictated not by gender or kinship but by her unique understanding of the importance of *kleos* and of poetry as a means of conferring *kleos*.

Death and mourning in Homer are unavoidably connected to the concept of heroic *kleos*, i.e., the glory that epic poetry grants to its greatest heroes. In the context of the *Iliad*, where premature death is viewed as an inevitable reality, glory functions as compensation for early death and as the means of attaining a different kind of immortality—immortality through memory—that is predicated upon the survival of epic. Gregory Nagy has shown how the three concepts of *kleos*, *akhos*, and *penthos* are linguistically interwoven into the epic text.<sup>12</sup> Heroic death brings *kleos* to the hero and *akhos* (“grief”) to his loved ones, and both are enacted with *penthos*, that is, public ritual mourning. Laments provide an outlet for grief for the mourner but also an opportunity for the community to reminisce collectively about the great deeds of the dead hero and to seek consolation in the hope of his immortal *kleos*.<sup>13</sup> The laments themselves, as songs embedded in the epic narrative, contribute to the primary function of epic poetry, which is to preserve the memory of the hero beyond the limitations of his society.

The mourning for Hector essentially begins in *Iliad* 22. The poet records the reactions of Priam, Hecabe, and Andromache with speeches that antici-

<sup>12</sup> Nagy 1979: chap. 6 and Nagy 1974: 255–61.

<sup>13</sup> The therapeutic power of song is shown in Achilles' singing of the *klea andrôn* at *Il.* 9.189.

pate the more formal *gooi* performed at Hector's funeral in book 24.<sup>14</sup> Both sets of laments include the characteristic themes and conventions of ritual lament outlined in Margaret Alexiou's comprehensive study of the genre.<sup>15</sup> The preliminary laments of book 22 vary in length and structure and appear to be spontaneous and personal expressions of pain and grief. The *gooi* of book 24 are similar to one another in length and built on a tripartite structure—a preliminary address to the dead, a narrative section with references to the past or future, and a final address and lament for Hector<sup>16</sup>—that reinforces the formal and controlled tone of the scene. Both sets of laments, however, aim at praising Hector and establishing him as the protector of family and city life, a man dear to the people and the gods.

Andromache is the last mourner in book 22 and the first one in book 24. Both of her laments are based on the themes and concerns that shaped Hector's speech during their farewell (6.448–65): her plight as his widow (22.482–84; cf. 24.725–26), the inevitable fall of the city (24.728–29), her enslavement (22.731–32), Astyanax's future as an orphan, (22.490–505) and even his death (24.734–39). Unable to imagine a life without her husband, Andromache expresses her grief as self-pity and blames Hector for having died so young (24.725). Her laments concern the impact that Hector's absence will have on his loved ones.<sup>17</sup> They reflect the pain and sorrow of loss from a purely human viewpoint. Overwhelmed by grief and fear, Andromache has no words of praise for Hector; she can only weep for her fate and the future that awaits her now that he is gone.

Andromache's status in the lamentation is emphasized each time by the length of her speeches. Her first lament (22.477–514) is by far the longest of the sequence, as is her second one at the end of the poem (24.725–45). As Hector's wife, Andromache is entitled to the highest position in Kakridis' "ascending scale of affection." But, unlike Cleopatra and Patroclus, who urge their loved one to fight and seek heroic *kleos*, Andromache would rather keep Hector away from the battlefield for fear of becoming a widow. In begging him to stay inside the city and away from the fighting, Andromache essentially asks him to forgo his glory (6.430–34).<sup>18</sup> Her perspective, which is private and lim-

<sup>14</sup> *Il.* 22.416–28 (Priam), 431–36 (Hecabe), and 477–514 (Andromache).

<sup>15</sup> Alexiou 102–3 and 132–33. See also 60, 65–68, and 70 (praise of the beauty of the dead hero); 43, 46, 170–71 (reproach of the dead); 165–77 (contrast of the past and present and emphasis on the mourner's future predicament as a result of the loss of her loved one).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 132–33.

<sup>17</sup> Kakridis 60: "the egotism of love."

<sup>18</sup> Hecabe and Helen also try to delay Hector (*Il.* 6.258–60 and 6.354) but they do not ask him to leave the fighting. Hector, anxious to return to fighting, refuses both requests.

ited to her love for her husband and family, makes her a less-than-suitable speaker for the epic finale. Andromache understands neither Hector's desire to win heroic *kleos* nor the power of song to confer it. In the context of book 22, which is purely a family affair, Andromache is indeed given the most prominent place in the mourning. Her status as the hero's wife is further emphasized in book 24 when she is shown as the chief mourner, the one who holds Hector's head in the *prothesis* and the one who begins the lamentation (24.723–24).<sup>19</sup> With Hector's death, however, the emphasis of the poem shifts from the human and personal to the universal and transcendent. The Trojans come together to grieve for the death of their leader and celebrate his glory with songs that will keep his memory and name alive. I suggest that, at this moment, Helen is the most appropriate final speaker because she is the one character in the *Iliad* consistently represented as understanding the social significance of epic poetry.

Helen's awareness of the unique quality of song to preserve heroic *kleos* has been explored since 1974, following Linda Clader's study of Helen's character in Greek epic.<sup>20</sup> Clader pointed out that all of Helen's appearances in the *Iliad* are associated with poetry. In her first appearance (3.121–28) Helen is shown weaving the struggles of the heroes for her sake, reproducing thus at her loom a visual representation of history very similar to Homer's poetry.<sup>21</sup> Later, in the *Teichoskopia* (3.146–244), Helen becomes the "author" of a catalog when she describes for Priam the qualities of the most important Greek warriors. But the most explicit statement of Helen's poetic awareness comes in *Iliad* 6, when Hector visits her and Paris in their house (6.318–68). Accepting all blame for the suffering she has caused, Helen tries to comfort Hector by reminding him that epic characters receive their reward in the songs of future generations (6.357–58). In the same spirit, her lament at the close of the poem stresses Hector's qualities, his gentle nature and unfailing courtesy towards her (24.772). It does not center on the future of the mourner, as Andromache's lament does, but rather on the past and the character of the dead warrior, the man, who despite his personal loss and the suffering his family and city had to endure, was still able to treat her with kindness and generosity (24.771–72). Helen's lament is not about what Hector can no longer do for Troy, but about the greatness of a human being who deserves to be

<sup>19</sup> For the gesture of cradling the dead man's head, see Neumann 89 and 196 n. 369.

<sup>20</sup> Clader 8.

<sup>21</sup> For Helen's weaving, especially as an activity similar to poetic composition, see Clader 8, Bergren 1979 and 1983, Kennedy, Atchity, Snyder, Murnaghan 152 (Helen and Achilles), and Austin chap. 1.

remembered. The universalizing character of her speech is indicated by the impact it has on the people of Troy. Priam's speech appropriately moves the citizens (22.429), Andromache's lament moves the women (24.746), but Helen's touches everyone (24.776).

Helen understands the predestined futility of Hector's struggle. In *Iliad* 6 she speaks about a different kind of glory, one that does not depend upon the survival of a man or a city, but upon the continuity of mankind (6.357–58). Hector's name may survive as long as there are men to sing. In *Iliad* 24 the condition of Helen's prediction is realized. The cycle of life, death, and glory comes to fulfillment for Hector with real songs, laments performed by Andromache, Hecabe, and Helen. At the end of the poem, Helen is not only a mourner but also a composer, a real contributor to the creation of epic poetry.<sup>22</sup> Her weaving in *Iliad* 3 tells *her* story within the larger frame of Homer's story. Her lament sings the glory of Hector within the larger frame of Homer's song.<sup>23</sup> In this instance, Helen employs the only recognized form of public speech available to women, to make sure that the memory of Hector will not die with him. Hector is buried surrounded by singers, and Helen fulfills her own prediction by performing the last, or perhaps the "first" song in his honor.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Holst-Warhaft 97: "laments are conscious artistic narratives created and performed by women."

<sup>23</sup> Suzuki 53 suggests that the *Iliad* is a funeral, "an elegy to the civilization that was destroyed . . . as well as to the heroic men and women who were caught in the process."

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