

Homeric Shenanigans: A Discussion of Helen and *Pharmaka* in *Odyssey* 4

Much of the discussion concerning Homer's use of magic is centered around Circe and Calypso, both of whom are sorceresses who use magic in order to negatively influence the protagonists in the epics. Less studied, perhaps for obvious reasons, is Homer's portrayal of men who use magic in the epics- mostly doctors who are performing first aid on the battlefield. This depiction of men as benevolent users of magic is especially telling when read alongside Homer's portrayal of Helen in *Odyssey* 4.

Perhaps the most memorable depiction of Helen in Homeric poetry is the Helen of the *Iliad*- a character struggling with her own guilt, to the extent that she disparages herself as κυνώπης, the condemnation of those around her, and the added burden of Aphrodite's intervention.¹ In the *Odyssey*, however, a strikingly different Helen is portrayed. This Helen, who by this point in the narrative is back in Sparta with Menelaus, is much more assured and hospitable, primarily concerned with the welfare of her guests, Telemachus and Peisistratus. Her concern with their happiness manifests itself most overtly when she puts a *pharmakon* into the bowl of wine from which they are all drinking so as to banish any feelings of pain or unhappiness. This depiction of Helen is at odds not only with the Helen portrayed in the *Iliad*, but with other Homeric women who dabble in the dark arts.

Ancient and modern commentators alike seem to ignore the stark differences between the two Helens portrayed in his epics. The primary focus of this episode in *Odyssey* 4 is how Helen would have procured the drugs that were intended to soothe Telemachus and Peisistratus rather than why Helen is the only woman in the Homeric epics that uses drugs in a positive manner.

This paper intends to explore Helen's portrayal in *Odyssey* 4, both alongside other users of magic

¹ *Il.*3.180. Helen also calls herself κυνώπης in the *Od.*4.145, recalling her guilt in the Trojan War, but she is not as critical of herself as she is in the *Iliad*.

in Homer as well as sorceresses in tragedy, who are portrayed in an overwhelmingly negative manner by the ancient playwrights. In stark contrast to nearly all of the women in ancient epic and tragedy, Helen is using drugs in a manner which benefits civilization and is intended to preserve order.

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