Preface

The study of the Homeric epithets for Helen undertaken in this monograph is a first stage in a larger study of her characterization in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the course of my research on these epithets it soon became clear that they could not be understood apart from her appellatives, her periphrastic denominations, such as “sister-in-law of warriors,” and her terms of self-reproach. These kinds of reference to Helen come from characters in the epics. Almost the only epithet used of her by them is “Argive” (10/13x). Her other epithets come from the narrator. The name Helen without an epithet (23x) is never neutral but always reflects either a character’s particular point of view (13/23x) or the narrator’s (10/23x). The study of Helen’s epithets is preceded by chapters on these other ways of referring to Helen, including on the epithet “Argive.”

The question guiding my research on the epithets was whether or not they had contextual meaning. In conclusion it seems that Bryan Hainsworth’s dictum holds: “relevance and redundancy [of formulas] are the ends of a spectrum” (Hainsworth 1993: 21) but in most instances these epithets, with the exception of καλλιπάρῃος (*Od.* 15.123), lie in the range of relevance. None can be described simply as a “generic epithet of women.” This conclusion is another reply, preceded by many others, to Milman Parry’s notion of the semantic emptiness of the epithet, which, he said, becomes merged with its noun “in the expression of a single idea” (Parry 1971[1928]: 154).

Parry’s work led to another kind of research on the epithet, which should be mentioned here in order to make clear the present study’s more limited ambition. Dissatisfaction with Parry led ultimately to new general definitions of the formula (e.g., Hainsworth 1968; Nagler 1974; Visser 1987; Bakker 1997). This monograph, concentrating on the contextual meaning of the epithets of Helen, is not concerned with such definitions.

The central conclusion that Parry drew from his work on the noun-epithet formula, which was that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed orally, was to have profound consequences. The field of Homeric studies is now divided on the question of composition, adhering to one or the other of two principal models. Perhaps the most favored is a poet or two poets who composed these epics at the end of the eighth or beginning of the seventh century B.C.E. and either dictated them or wrote them down. If it was a single poet, he is anonymous; he was not called Homer (Graziosi 2002: 21–50; West 2011b[1999]: 413–21). (In this monograph the name Homer has sometimes been used as a metonym for the corpus consisting of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.*) Gregory Nagy long ago proposed an alternative, evolutionary model. He distinguished five stages of a progressively less
fluid oral text, culminating in the completely fixed text of Aristarchus (Nagy 1992, rev. in Nagy 1996a; Nagy 1996b: ch. 5; defended in Nagy 2014). This model has been accepted and rethought in the Prolegomena volume of the English translation of the Basel Commentary (Bierl 2015: 21–31).

The results of this study of Helen’s epithets could be explained on either of these models but are not applied to an argument for one or the other. As for a pre-history of oral composition and performance, few would now deny that there was one. This pre-history is often referred to as a “tradition,” which is taken as the basis of diachronic interpretation (on “tradition” see the Introduction). This monograph seeks a synchronic, contextual interpretation of Helen’s epithets and concludes that their traditional or inherited connotations, which can sometimes be shown, not only fail to add connotative depth but are false leads. (The term “connotations” is taken from the application of the concept of traditional referentiality by Kelly 2007: 9–14.)

The quotations of the Iliad come from the text of T.W. Allen, of the Odyssey from the text of Peter von der Muehll, with indication of divergences. Most Greek proper names and adjectives are given in Latin or Latinized transliteration.

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