

ELEGY AND EPIC AND THE RECOGNITION OF PARIS: OVID *HEROIDES* 16*

ELIZABETH FORBIS MAZUREK

Paris' epistle to Helen launches Ovid's collection of paired *Heroides* and thus, fittingly enough, focuses our attention on the question of beginnings.¹ The poem depicts Paris' first confession of his passion for Helen and forms a prelude to the couple's elopement and to the Trojan War. It also explores the idea of literary origins, specifically the inauguration of elegy and epic. Students of Roman literature learn, of course, that Latin erotic elegy emerged on the Roman literary scene much later than epic and, as a result, rebelled against the aesthetic and moral values of its time-honored predecessor. This historical perspective encourages us to envision elegy as an unruly youngster trying to compete with an older sibling. Imagine, however, an alternative chronology according to which elegy and epic are fraternal twins—identical in origin but clearly different in appearance. This is the relationship between the two genres theorized by Ovid in *Heroides* 16, as I will argue. Ovid creates this imaginary history through the figure of Paris, whose attempts at self-representation lead to confusion over his identity as a lover

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1 The opinion prevails among scholars that the paired *Heroides* are a separate work within Ovid's elegiac corpus despite the fact that they were joined with the single epistles in the medieval manuscript tradition. See, e.g., Jacobson 1973.ix, Hintermeier 1993.ix–xiii, Bar-chiesi 1999.54–59, and Holzberg 2002.86–87.

or a warrior. The poet humorously exploits Paris' contradictory self-image in order to challenge traditional notions about the status of epic and elegy in the literary hierarchy. Reading in mythological sequence, we are to see Paris as the precursor of both elegiac lovers and epic heroes, the progenitor of both elegy and epic.²

In his letter, Paris undertakes the daunting task of convincing Helen to leave behind her Spartan life and family and sail away with him to a foreign land. The typical elements of the *paraclausithyron* assume new urgency and risk as he writes from within enemy territory, that is, Menelaus's own house, with scant encouragement from Helen.³

Paris is indeed hard pressed to submit a compelling image of himself. As part of his rhetorical strategy, he composes an autobiography that aims to explain his presence in Sparta and justify his presumption in pursuing the wife of his host. I will sketch here the basic elements of Paris' story as he tells it (*Her.* 16.39–144).⁴ First, Paris' mother Hecuba, while pregnant with Paris, dreams of giving birth to a burning torch that prophets interpret as an omen of Paris' role in the destruction of Troy. Paris himself believes that the dream signifies simply his desire for Helen. He thus glosses over the fact that his parents trusted the prophets and exposed their newborn son upon the slopes of Mt. Ida. He also says nothing of his rescue by shepherds or of his early life among them. We learn from Paris only that he is eventually recognized as a Trojan prince and welcomed joyfully back into the royal family. During this period of recognition and reunion—here the timing is deliberately ambiguous—Paris is called upon to judge the fateful beauty contest between Juno, Athena, and Venus on Mt. Ida. Persuaded finally by Venus's promised reward of Helen, Paris decides the competition in favor of the goddess of love. He can now do little other than contemplate the beauty of Helen, whom he has yet to see in person.

2 Cf. Barchiesi 1999.59–62, who discusses *Heroides* 16 as Ovid's argument for the priority of elegy as a prehistory to epic, and Drinkwater 2003.130–83, who reads the poem against an historical backdrop where elegy and epic are established genres that Paris knows and attempts to manipulate. My interpretation affirms Kennedy's approach at 2002.227: "Within this style of reading [forwards towards the present], concerns of literary genealogy and generic affiliation are thematized by the legendary authors of the *Heroides* themselves."

3 To be sure, Paris cannot blame Helen's aloofness on the usual impediments challenging the *exclusus amator*, namely, a guard or a jealous *vir*: Menelaus is, in fact, absent and has entrusted his Trojan houseguest explicitly to the care of his wife.

4 References to *Heroides* 16–17 are based on Kenney's 1996 Cambridge edition. All translations are my own.

His passion inspires him to build a fleet of ships and sail for Sparta, all the while aided by Venus's divine favor.⁵ Here ends the autobiography proper, as the remainder of the letter shifts to Paris' more recent encounters with Helen face to face.

Of course, Paris intends his life story to be an embellished self-portrait that proves his personal destiny is to be with Helen. It leads us to conclude, however, that Paris does not really understand who he is. That is, he sets out to depict himself as Helen's elegiac lover, but the epic elements of his story, which he can neither suppress nor integrate, blur the picture. Paris' autobiography reveals an identity crisis, and so it is telling that scholars dispute the authenticity of this very passage (*Her.* 16.39–144).⁶ Only the Parma edition of 1477 transmits this section of the text, hence the debate. E. J. Kenney (1979, 1996.20–27, 1999), however, convincingly defends it as integral to the narrative of both Paris' and Helen's epistles. I, too, believe that *Heroides* 16.39–144 is a crucial piece of the original poem because it focuses our attention precisely on those questions of appearance and identity by which so much of the relationship of elegy to epic is explored and articulated throughout Paris' and Helen's epistles.

The unflattering portrait that emerges from Paris' autobiography would indicate that elegy and epic, in this instance at least, do not coexist harmoniously.⁷ Resolution must come through a separation of the two and a decision by Paris to reject one and follow the other. In other words, what is required of Paris is a *recusatio* of the kind made by the elegiac lover-poet who curbs his grandiose ambitions in order to remain a devoted elegist (e.g., Propertius 3.3, Ovid *Amores* 3.1). The person who can guide him to such a *recusatio* is Helen, whose legendary beauty firmly identifies her as an elegiac *puella*. She tries to clarify Paris' muddle similarly by using his handsome face to remind him of his true elegiac self (*Her.* 17.251–54). The question remains, however, as to whether Paris can tear his eyes from Helen and examine himself.

5 See Kenney 1995.188–89 for discussion of Ovid's main sources for the prewar myths of Paris: the *Cypria*, Euripides' *Troades* and *Alexandros* (only fragments of which survive), and Ennius's *Alexander* (also fragmentary).

6 See for example, Fischer 1969, Reeve 1973, and, most recently, Courtney 1998.

7 See also Drinkwater 2003.134, who observes Paris' failure to depict himself convincingly as an elegiac-epic hybrid. Cf. Cucchiarelli 1995.137–38, who identifies Paris as a traditional elegiac figure in *Heroides* 16, and Lindheim 2000, who links Paris to elegy and discusses its incompatibility with pastoral as represented by Oenone in *Heroides* 5.

We may gain better insight into the way Ovid portrays Paris' identity crisis by applying a concept from Paul de Man's influential essay, "Autobiography as De-Facement" (1979). De Man argues that the autobiographer is forever fictionalized or masked in writing by the tropes of figurative language; that is, the project of *prosopopoeia*—de Man's term for self-impersonation that literally means "face-making"⁸—imprisons the autobiographical subject in a linguistic hall of mirrors that "deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores" (1979.930). Following de Man's thinking, we must reject the traditional view of autobiography as a historically reliable genre of non-fiction. Rather, we ought to classify autobiography as simply another genre of fiction alongside myth and fantasy.⁹ As far as Paris' autobiography is concerned, de Man's term de-facement resonates particularly well with both its context and its content; that is, Paris attempts to produce a self-portrait—a story involving recognition and judgment of faces—in order to seduce the woman with the most beautiful face in the world. In the process, however, he primarily de-faces himself in two ways. First, Paris relies heavily on metaphors of fire, which he consistently misconstrues. From his perspective, these are solely a trope for erotic desire; he cannot recognize himself as the bringer of real destructive fire to the city of Troy. Secondly, although governed by subjective desire, Paris is careless of his subjectivity and the crucial role it plays both in his life and in his telling of it. In other words, the text of Paris' autobiography obscures him by not always acknowledging his narration as subjective interpretation.

Now let us turn to the details of the autobiography itself. Paris introduces it as a teleological narrative explaining to Helen all the events in his life thus far as preparation for their fated union: "sic placuit fatis: quae ne convellere temptes, / accipe cum vera dicta relata fide" ("Thus was it pleasing to the Fates, and lest you try to overthrow them, believe the words that I tell you with utter sincerity," *Her.* 16.39–42). Kenney observes (1996.88) that this "pompous exordium" underscores the irony of what Paris does not know about the Fates' true intentions in bringing the two lovers together. Ovid pokes fun at Paris' ignorance especially with the phrase "cum vera dicta relata fide." The words *dicta* and *relata* in particular, whose agent is

8 Compare the scholarly tradition of reading the *Heroides* as rhetorical exercises in *prosopopoeia* or *ethopoeia* (character-drawing), a method of analysis critiqued by Kenney 1996.2 and Knox 2002.124.

9 See Anderson 2001.12–16 for the influence of de Man's revolutionary theory upon the study of autobiography generally.

never specified, beg the question of what Paris' source(s) of information might have been, especially for those events that he himself could not have witnessed. He begins his story, for example, concealed inside his mother's womb: "matris adhuc utero partu remorante tenebar; / iam gravidus iusto pondere venter erat" ("I was held still in my mother's womb since the birth was late; her belly was already heavy with a full-term weight," *Her.* 16.43–44). Paris must have learned of this moment and of Hecuba's dream (*Her.* 16.45–49) from others well after the fact. Thus we may understand *cum vera fide* as the manner in which he believes the events were told him initially, as well as the sincerity with which he now tells them to Helen.¹⁰

And yet the assertion *cum vera fide* ought to put us and Helen on guard. A sincere narration does not by itself verify the content of one's story. A progression of narrations, for example, each one susceptible to distortion, forms the plot of Hecuba's dream. According to Paris, a giant burning torch first appears to Hecuba when she sees herself giving birth to it in a dark and shadowy (*noctis opacae*) dream setting. Adding to the murkiness of Hecuba's memory of the dream is her fear (*territa*) as she unburdens herself to Priam (*Her.* 16.45–48). By the time Priam relates the dream to the seers, it would appear to be a less than reliable secondhand version. The interpretation by the *vates* that the torch foretells Troy's destruction by fire, Paris implies, is the result of overreaction and misrepresentation: "arsurum Paridis vates canit Ilion igni: / pectoris, ut nunc est, fax fuit illa mei" ("The seer predicts, 'Troy will burn because of Paris' fire': as is now clear, that torch was the fire in my own heart," *Her.* 16.49–50). Paris would have Helen believe that his own explanation of the torch, by comparison, is much more reasonable and, therefore, credible. In this first chapter of his autobiography, Paris hopes to convince her that his information, compared to that of others, is accurate and that he is a reliably objective narrator.

In her reply, however, Helen refers to the seers' interpretation of Hecuba's dream as if she has gathered the information from sources other than Paris' letter: "et vatum timeo monitus, quos igne Pelasgo / Ilium arsurum praemonuisse ferunt" ("And I fear the prophets' counsels, which they say had warned that Troy would burn with Greek fire," *Her.* 17.239–40). These verses, the verb *ferunt* in particular, have been cited by M. D. Reeve (1973.334–36) as evidence against the authenticity of *Heroides* 16.39–144,

10 The ablative of manner *cum vera fide* may also simultaneously modify the imperative *accipe*, so that Paris is urging Helen to put as much faith in his words as he himself does.

since they suggest that Helen has not been privy to Paris' description of the dream episode. That is, if she had read *Heroides* 16.39–144 as a genuine part of Paris' original letter, then why does she not say, "I fear the prophets' counsels, which *you say* had warned that Troy would burn with Greek fire"?

Alessandro Barchiesi (1995.326) argues, however, that Helen's use of *ferunt* to frame her account could just as well point to her knowledge of a "richer poetic tradition," one more inclusive of "Ennian gloom," which she cites deliberately in order to challenge Paris' credibility.¹¹ Compare, for example, *Paridis igni* (*Her.* 16.49) with Helen's *igne Pelasgo* (*Her.* 17.239). The adjective *Pelasgo*—used here to signify the allied Greek forces—demonstrates Helen's ability to see beyond Paris to the wider political ramifications of his behavior. Far from being ignorant of Paris' version, Helen is more likely provoked by its pretentious claim to truth and, thus, decides to point, albeit subtly, to the fallibility of his narcissistic point of view.¹²

Significantly, it is not Paris' account of the details of Hecuba's dream—none of which he keeps from Helen—that is unreliable, but rather his interpretation of them. Paris does not aim, therefore, at deception. Rather, he is deceived himself by the ambiguities of language.¹³ Recalling de Man's theory of de-facement, we can observe it operating on two different levels in this first section of Paris' autobiography. On one level, Paris is effaced when replaced by a torch in his mother's dream, and Hecuba's prolonged pregnancy serves to conceal his identity. On another level, Paris de-faces

11 Some examples of Helen's Ennian alterations cited by Barchiesi 1995.326 include: her description of the torch in Hecuba's dream as *cruentam* ("bloody," *Her.* 17.237; cf. Ennius *Alexander* 41: "fax obvoluta sanguine atque incendio," "a torch consumed by blood and fire," and Jocelyn 1967.214); her extraordinary syntax: *se peperisse . . . est visa* ("[Hecuba] dreamed that she had given birth," *Her.* 17.237–38), which echoes the same syntax in Ennius: *parere se . . . visa est* ("She dreamed that she was giving birth," *scen.* 35–36 V). Jacobson 1968.300–302 explains that after the passive *visa est*, "dreamed" (literally "appeared"), one would not normally expect an accusative subject of the infinitive *parere*—in this case, *se*, referring to Hecuba. Barchiesi 1995.326 comments that Helen demonstrates a close acquaintance with the facts of the story by quoting the syntax of the Ennian source more faithfully than Paris, who uses the standard dative *sibi* after *visa est* (*Her.* 16.45).

12 Paris' narcissism is, in fact, evocative of Narcissus himself. Like Narcissus, Paris is a handsome youth whose self-absorption deprives him of the hermeneutic tools for fully understanding himself and his context.

13 See also Holzberg 2002.87, who argues that Paris is self-deceived and views Helen rather as "the one who relies on deception," since she attempts to hide her true feelings for Paris behind a mask of false modesty.

himself by misapprehending the fire imagery of the dream as a simple trope for erotic passion.¹⁴

A similar moment of de-facement occurs toward the end of the autobiographical section when Paris quotes the warning of his sister Cassandra (*Her.* 16.123–26):

‘quo ruis?’ exclamat; ‘referes incendia tecum:
 quanta per has nescis flamma petatur aquas.’
 vera fuit vates: dictos invenimus ignes,
 et ferus in molli pectore flagrat amor.

“Where are you rushing?” she cried, “You will carry
 back with you conflagration:
 you do not know what kind of flame you are seeking
 over these waters.”
 That seer was accurate: we have found the fires she
 described, and
 a raging desire burns in my impressionable heart.

Paris is again so focused on the fire vocabulary as a metaphor for erotic desire that he is blind to its literal meaning. In the prophecies of Cassandra and the *vates* that frame Paris’ autobiography, Ovid applies layered meanings of *ignis* in order to link erotic cause with epic effect. Both prophets use phrases—*Paridis igni* (*Her.* 16.49) and *quanta nescis flamma petatur* (*Her.* 16.124)—that point to a future of war while acknowledging Paris’ passion. Paris’ response, on the other hand, illustrates his inability to comprehend the complexity of their prophetic language. That is, he does not consider the possibility of an epic future and then reject it. Rather, his limited focus—his total investment in this language as metaphor—can view the prophecies only one-dimensionally.

14 Paris’ perspective *in utero* provides rich material for psychological theories of mother-child separation. I will simply cite here Krier 2001, who draws on the work of Klein, Winnicott, and Irigaray to articulate an alternative and complementary model of celebration and gratitude to the dominant model of Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva that speaks of loss and mourning in the aftermath of birth. I suggest that the seers’ gloomy interpretation of the dream omen could represent the Freudian model of grief accompanying separation at birth, which is answered by Paris’ happier interpretation that could be a figure of “parturition”—an inter-subjective space between mother and child in which both have the freedom to know and appreciate self and other (Krier 2001.11–12).

Not only does Paris' limited focus inhibit his understanding of those events he describes, it also influences him to omit certain episodes altogether. Ovid's audience knew from the literary tradition that Hecuba's dream of the torch led to Paris' exposure on Mt. Ida, where he was rescued and raised by local shepherds. Paris chooses, however, merely to allude to these events in a single couplet: "forma vigorque animi, quamvis de plebe videbar, / indicium tectae nobilitatis erat," "Although I appeared to be a commoner, my beauty and keen intelligence were a sign of my secret nobility" (*Her.* 16.51–52). The abrupt transition from verse 50 to 51 leads Kenney (1996.90–91) to believe that several lines in between have been lost that sketched Paris' former life as a herdsman. But Paris has his own rhetorical motives for finessing this material. Remembering his ultimate goal of seducing Helen, we should not be at all surprised that he prefers to elide this rustic chapter of his life (see also Drinkwater 2003.142 n. 35). Helen, so Paris believes, is not about to elope with a former shepherd. What is noteworthy about Paris' omission is that it admits to an ambiguity in his identity—he is both shepherd and prince.¹⁵ But this is as close as Paris ever comes to acknowledging his complicated past. The puzzle of who he really is—shepherd or prince, lover or warrior—remains unsolved as the autobiography continues through the climactic events of his young adulthood.

The first of these events is the fatal Judgment (*Her.* 16.53–88). Paris' reasons for placing the Judgment episode before his Recognition are worth considering. In his discussion of Ovid's sources for *Heroides* 16, Kenney points out that Ovid was apparently the first to combine "three originally separate legends"—the Recognition, the Judgment, and the story of Oenone—into one continuous narrative (1995.188 n. 4). Kenney also observes a discrepancy between Ovid's narrative sequence of events, which places the Judgment before the Recognition, and their chronological order, which requires that the Recognition precede the Judgment.¹⁶ As Kenney explains (1996.95–96), the word *interea* that introduces the Recognition scene at

15 Stinton 1965.55–60 discusses this discrepancy in Paris' identity as it pertains to Greek literature. It appears that Ovid has combined, perhaps deliberately, two key, yet contradictory components of Paris' mythology: 1) Paris was a mere shepherd before the splendor of the goddesses in the Judgment; 2) Paris' royalty could not be hidden by his shepherd's guise. On the ambiguity of Paris' rustic/royal status, see Cucchiarelli 1995.148–50 and Drinkwater 2003.141–43.

16 Stinton 1965.55–56 identifies this same problem of narrative sequence for the Recognition and Judgment in the plays of Euripides, arguing that the two myths were part of separate traditions and, thus, there was no "orthodox version" whenever they were combined.

verse 89 signifies “meanwhile” in Virgil and Ovid, not “next” or “afterward.” Thus we are to understand from Paris’ phrasing that his Recognition has occurred at some point prior to the Judgment, but the exact interval of time in between is unspecified. Kenney further supports this view by observing that Paris’ preference for Helen before all other maidens seeking his royal hand in marriage (*Her.* 16.99–100) “makes sense, and effective rhetoric, only if the Judgment has taken place since the Recognition” (1995.189). According to Kenney, this murky chronology is meant to deceive Helen regarding Paris’ former relationship with the nymph Oenone, who is casually mentioned among the many *puellae* pursuing him (*Her.* 16.93–98).¹⁷

A further reason for this narrative sequence, I suggest, is Ovid’s wish to underscore Paris’ struggle to articulate his identity. By strategically positioning the Judgment before the Recognition, indicating a cause and effect relationship, Paris demonstrates his belief that the Judgment is the defining moment of his life story. It is meant to reveal the truth of his character and of his passion for Helen and thereby provide the most compelling argument for her to return his love. In the process of telling the story, however, even while focusing our attention on seeing and appearances, Paris loses sight of himself. Any progress he makes toward realizing his identity is undermined by his desire for Helen.

Paris opens the Judgment episode with several significant references to the fact that what he is telling Helen he has actually seen for himself. He would have her believe that, unlike his third-hand knowledge of Hecuba’s dream, his authority as narrator in this instance is indisputable. But the fallacy of his earlier claims to credibility should caution us to be wary here as well. The remote *locus* on Mt. Ida, for example, he describes in explicit detail as only an eyewitness could (*Her.* 16.53–56). In the next two verses, however, he mentions that, at the time, he was gazing upon (*prospiciens*, *Her.* 16.58) the city of Troy in the distance. Ovid prompts us here to question Paris’ reliability about the setting, since his eyes (and mind) were actually focused elsewhere.

In the next verse, Paris says the earth began shaking from a pounding of feet (“*ecce pedum pulsu visa est mihi terra moveri*,” *Her.* 16.59). But the phrase *visa est mihi* and the epic exaggeration of *pedum pulsu*,

17 Helen, not surprisingly, is skeptical of Paris’ version of events (*Her.* 17.195–98). Drinkwater 2003.144–50 points out similar inconsistencies between Paris’ story and that of Oenone in *Heroides* 5.

suggestive of a military invasion,¹⁸ constitute Paris' impression of the moment, not a statement of fact. (We may recall Hecuba's impression [*sibi . . . visa est*, *Her.* 16.45] of the torch and how it was susceptible to distortion, not least by Paris.) As if aware that his credibility is slipping, Paris pauses in the next verse to defend the veracity of his unusual story: "vera loquar, veri vix habitura fidem" ("I will tell the truth, even though it will scarcely inspire credibility," *Her.* 16.60). He also means to prepare us for the sudden appearance of Mercury in the next verse, who stood right before Paris' own eyes (*constitit ante oculos*, *Her.* 16.61). Once again, Paris tries to assure Helen that this is true: "fas vidisse fuit, fas sit mihi visa referre" ("I was allowed to see this, so please allow me to tell what I saw," *Her.* 16.63). His words, however, particularly *visa* juxtaposed with *referre*, point precisely to that gap between seeing events and telling of them that simultaneously empowers and impairs the eyewitness narrator or autobiographer. Not even the most impartial observer can mirror a moment in words as it actually happened; one can never completely circumvent the subtle filters of preference and prejudice.

Helen knows this to be especially true of a man like Paris who is ruled by his passions. Two passages following the Judgment, for example, demonstrate that Paris is utterly incapable of objectivity where Helen is concerned. In the first, Paris confesses that his fantasies of Helen consumed him before he ever laid eyes on her (*Her.* 16.101–04):

te vigilans oculis animi, te nocte videbam
lumina cum placido victa sopore iacent.
quid faceres praesens, quae nondum visa placebas?
ardebam, quamvis hic procul ignis erat.

When awake, I used to see you with my mind's eye,
and at night,
when my eyes lay shut with peaceful sleep.
What could you yourself do, if you were pleasing to me
sight unseen?
I was on fire, although this fire was far away.

18 See Kenney 1996.92, citing *Aen.* 7.722 and 12.445, for *pedum pulsus* in a distinctly martial context.

The concluding fire metaphor reminds us of Paris' one-dimensional view of complex language and the extent to which his perceptions are compromised by it. In the second passage, Paris describes a similar fixation on Helen that precludes his recognition of anything else worth seeing in Sparta (*Her.* 16.131–34):

ille quidem ostendit quicquid Lacedaemone tota
ostendi dignum conspicuumque fuit;
sed mihi laudatam cupienti cernere formam
lumina nil aliud quo caperentur erat.

Indeed that husband of yours showed me anything
notable
and worth seeing all through Lacedaemonia;
but nothing captured my gaze,
since I desired (only) to look upon your famous beauty.

We might apply any number of current idioms to Paris in this condition: “wearing blinders,” “can’t see straight,” “blind in love.” And someone of this description certainly lacks the rationality required to tell objectively the sensational story of the Judgment. Helen’s skeptical reply to Paris’ version of this episode seems perfectly justified: “sic illas vereor, quae, *si tua gloria vera est*, / iudice te causam non tenuere duae” (“I so fear those two goddesses, who, *if your famous report is true*, did not win their case according to your judgment,” *Her.* 17.243–44).

Forewarned by Helen’s skepticism, let us now turn to the Judgment scene as Paris tells it. Curiously enough, Mercury seemed to have made a stronger impression than the goddesses, for Paris devotes four verses to the god’s appearance, detailing the winged sandals and golden wand and his descent from Atlas and Pleione (*Her.* 16.61–64). These lines are heavily reminiscent of Mercury’s appearance before Aeneas at *Aeneid* 4.238–58,¹⁹ thereby introducing the Judgment with a distinctly epic tone. The following couplet, however, reverts abruptly to a world of elegiac refinement as it presents the goddesses by way of their delicate feet (*teneros . . . pedes*) lighting

19 Kenney 1996.93 cites several echoes here of *Aeneid* 4.238–58, and I would add one to these, namely that *Atlantis* at the beginning of *Her.* 16.62 parallels *Atlantis* in the same line position at the beginning of both 4.247 and 4.248 of the *Aeneid*.

upon the grass (16.65–66). Supposedly, these are the same feet that earlier made enough noise to resemble an army on the march. Paris' introduction to the Judgment bears strong witness to his generic confusion.

Note that Paris says nothing about the goddesses' nudity, a fact that we learn only from Helen's reply: "tres tibi se nudas exhibuere deae" ("The three goddesses showed themselves nude before you," *Her.* 17.116).²⁰ Omitting this salient detail in his version, Paris suggests that his role in judging the contest was more sophisticated than simply admiring female nudity. He chooses to emphasize, rather, the import of the scene and the solemnity of Mercury's words (*Her.* 16.67–70). The god abruptly proclaims, *arbiter es formae* (*Her.* 16.69). If translated, "You are a judge of beauty," then the words form a command, investing Paris with legal authority. The noun *formae* recalls Paris' own noble *forma* (*Her.* 16.51) and suggests that he is a qualified judge partly because of his own good looks. An alternative definition of *arbiter* as "eyewitness" or "spectator," however, must also be considered (*OLD* s.v. definition 1). Ovid uses *arbiter* in this sense, for example, in *Metamorphoses* 2 when the goddess Diana expresses delight in finding a bathing spot safe from any curious onlookers: *procul est . . . arbiter omnis* ("Each and every spectator is far away," *Met.* 2.458). The context of this passage and the speaker—a goddess known for jealously guarding her privacy (e.g., the fate of Actaeon)—suggest that an *arbiter* is not always an innocent bystander, but rather someone akin to a peeping Tom. If we also allow *arbiter* this sense at verse 69, then Mercury's words suggest another dimension to Paris' role in the Judgment. That is, he is privileged to witness this unique spectacle, and yet his gaze is suggestive of voyeurism. Mercury has thus given Paris license to arbitrate this unusual contest and simultaneously pointed out his compromised position as a man in the presence of beautiful naked women. It should come as no surprise, therefore, when Paris fails to judge the contest objectively based on the *prima facie* evidence (*Her.* 16.73–76):

mens mea convaluit subitoque audacia venit,
nec timui vultu quamque notare meo.

20 Oenone's letter to Paris also points out the goddesses' nudity: "Venus et Iuno sumptisque decentior armis / venit in arbitrium nuda Minerva tuum" ("Venus and Juno, and Minerva in the nude, although more decent looking when carrying her arms, submitted to your judgment," *Her.* 5.35–36).

vincere erant omnes dignae, iudexque querebar
 non omnes causam posse tenere suam.

I regained my composure, and suddenly my courage
 returned,
 nor was I afraid to look at each goddess directly.
 They all deserved to win, and, as judge, I was
 lamenting
 that not everyone could prevail in her case.

The role of objective *iudex* frustrates Paris, and understandably so. He cannot distinguish one beauty from another without contaminating his judgment with his own desire. This impasse again invites us to consider both meanings of *arbiter* and to grasp the paradox of Paris as both subjective spectator and impartial judge.

Paris' solution to this paradox, as he reveals in the next couplet, is to resort to personal preference, but in terms that obscure his subjectivity: "sed tamen ex illis iam tunc magis una placebat, / hanc esse ut scires unde movetur amor" ("But nevertheless, one of them was more pleasing even then, so that you would know she is the one to inspire love," *Her.* 16.77–78). Paris significantly omits any pronoun after *placebat*, suggesting that Venus appeals to one and all. By eliding his own predilection for the goddess's charms, he presents her allure as a universal phenomenon. If we, and Helen, are persuaded by this rhetorical sleight of hand, we come to equate *amor* with *forma*. If we allow ourselves some distance from the scene, however, we begin to appreciate that the poem presents the naked goddesses as a vivid embodiment of the nature of human desire—its hunger and urgency.²¹ The object of that desire, however, need not be automatically carnal. We can well imagine, for example, that a different type of man than Paris—an Agamemnon or Odysseus—might have singled out Juno or Athena by defining true beauty according to his particular lust for power or skill.

Sensing Paris' inability to decide the contest objectively, the goddesses introduce its second phase, "The Temptation of Paris," appealing to him not as a judge but as a man. Juno and Athena both misread Paris'

21 See also Lindheim 2000.95 on *Heroides* 5: "Three female goddesses appearing naked before a man in a beauty contest indicate that desire is the issue at the heart of Paris' judgment."

character and try to win his favor with *regna* (“regal power”) and *virtus* (“bravery”) respectively (*Her.* 16.81), that is, the values of epic. To Paris, these are nothing but faceless abstractions: “ipse potens dubito fortis an esse velim” (“I’m in doubt whether I prefer to be powerful or brave,” *Her.* 16.82). Trying to maintain his façade of objective narrator, Paris has virtually erased himself from his own story. Thus it stands to reason that he fails to see himself as either *potens* or *fortis*. Rescuing Paris from his dilemma, Venus puts before his mind’s eye the image of Helen (*Her.* 16.83–86):

dulce Venus risit ‘nec te, Pari, munera tangant
utraque suspensi plena timoris’ ait;
‘nos dabimus quod ames, et pulchrae filia Leda
ibit in amplexus pulchrior ipsa tuos.’

Venus laughed sweetly and said, “Paris, do not let
these gifts affect you, both full of danger and fear;
we will give something to love, and the lovelier
daughter
of Leda will enter your embraces.”

Among the goddesses, Venus alone understands that Paris is challenged by metaphor and abstraction. Her warning, for example, that he not allow the other gifts to “touch” (*tangere*) him is ironic because she knows that *regna* and *virtus* as immaterial concepts are well beyond his “grasp.”²² She compensates, therefore, for Paris’ cognitive weakness by making sure to introduce Helen as a tangible form (*quod ames*), something he can literally hold in his arms (*ibit in amplexus . . . tuos*). The appeal of Helen as a material reality is, indeed, what Paris emphasizes in a reprise of the Judgment several verses later (*Her.* 16.163–70).

da modo te, quae sit Paridis constantia nosces:
flamma rogi flammas finiet una meas.
praeponui regnis ego te, quae maxima quondam
pollicita est nobis nupta sororque Iovis,

22 Ovid may have intended the verb *tangant* to echo Propertius 3.3.15–16, Apollo’s rebuke of the poet’s attempt to write epic: “quis te / carminis heroi tangere iussit opus?” (“Who ordered you to lay hand to the work of epic poetry?”).

dumque tuo possem circumdare brachia collo,
contempta est virtus Pallade dante mihi.

Only surrender yourself, and you will know what the
constancy of Paris is;
the flame of my funeral pyre alone will extinguish
my inflamed passions.
I preferred you to kingdoms, the greatest of which
the bride and sister of Jove once promised to us.
And as long as I could put my arms about your neck,
I rejected bravery even though Pallas was offering it.

Paris envisions Helen in verse 163 as a physical object, something to be handed over (*da modo te*), and emphasizes the point by describing himself in contrast as an abstract virtue—*Paridis constantia*. In the following verse, Paris continues to dematerialize into a metaphor (*flammas*), which is itself extinguished by his imagined death. No wonder Paris would rather cling to Helen's neck and spurn the intangible gifts of Juno and Pallas. Without Helen, Paris has almost no self, no form or face for his desire.²³

Paris' *forma*, of which he boasted earlier as the *indiciu[m] tectae nobilitatis* ("sign of my secret nobility," *Her.* 16.52), has been eclipsed by the *forma* of Helen. Thus when Paris continues his story at verse 89 with the Recognition, it is not his person, but rather unidentified tokens—*signa*—that identify him (*Her.* 16.89–90): "interea sero versis ad prospera fatis / regius agnoscor per rata signa puer" ("Meanwhile, my fates had finally taken a turn for the better and, by means of tokens duly ratified, I was recognized as a royal son"). Kenney (1996.96) believes the *rata signa* refer to Paris' baby rattle (*crepundia*), as this was a common device in ancient drama for identifying characters abandoned at birth. If Kenney is right, we must note that this key piece of evidence belongs to Paris' infancy, that is, his life before being exposed on Mt. Ida. The only indication we have of the young Paris between Exposure and Recognition is his own narrative portrait. Thus the baby rattle not only functions as a topos, it also preempts Paris' autobiography as a reliable means of identification. Any doubts Helen may have

23 See also the opening of Paris' letter, *Her.* 16.3–10, where he tropes his passion as fire three times within eight lines: *flammae* (v. 3), *ignem* (v. 7), *uror* (v. 10). From the very beginning of his text, therefore, Paris is already disappearing into metaphor.

at this point about Paris' authenticity are to be satisfied by indiscriminate *signa*, not by his self-description.

Paris is now recognized as a member of Troy's ruling family, but this new self-image he finds confusing as well. Paris' public identity as a Trojan prince ought to alert him to certain political realities, namely that his personal behavior has ramifications for the entire city. He no longer exists in the cocoon of rustic anonymity where his amorous escapades proved harmful only to Oenone and other heartbroken *puellae*. What Paris must realize, in other words, is that his choice of Venus/Helen in the Judgment not only generated the inspiration for elegy, it also spawned the wrath of Juno and Athena that fuels epic narrative. In this new literary/political context, Paris needs to acknowledge the importance of values such as *regna* and *virtus*, even if only to reject them in the end.

On this point, we must first observe that Paris' decision to provide Helen with a first-person synopsis of events explaining his arrival in Sparta follows the examples of two great epic heroes from both the Greek and Latin traditions: Odysseus at the court of the Phaeacians (*Od.* 8–12) and Aeneas among Dido's Carthaginians (Vergil *Aen.* 1–3). Not surprisingly, the parallels serve mainly to highlight the contrasts between these heroic figures and Paris. To begin with, both Odysseus and Aeneas give oral performances of their stories to rapt audiences who wish to be informed, whereas Paris foists a written text upon Helen, who appears less than thrilled to receive it: "nunc oculos tua cum violarit epistula nostros" ("Since, as it is, your letter has assaulted our eyes," *Her.* 17.1).²⁴ Most scholars are rightly skeptical of Helen's professed disgust,²⁵ but that should not distract us from the details of her phrasing. Her words emphasize the fact that Paris' letter, unlike a spoken narrative, has unique power as a physical token to repeatedly call to mind Paris' impertinence.²⁶ A second point of difference concerns content rather than form, namely that Paris, unlike Odysseus and Aeneas, is not concerned to relate only recent adventures of danger and suffering,

24 Helen's dismay may have been caused in part by the length of the letter, which stands at 378 verses, the longest by far of the paired *Heroides*. On the poem's length, see Kenney 1979.416–17.

25 See, e.g., Rand 1925.29–31, Belfiore 1980–81.146, and Holzberg 2002.87. Cf. Hintermeier 1993.41–49, who credits Helen's response with more emotional conflict.

26 On the different cultural values associated with writing and speech relevant to the *Heroides*, see Spentzou 2003.140–51, who makes good use of Plato's *Phaedrus* to highlight the seditious and dangerous potential of the heroes' and heroines' written letters.

but instead rehearses his entire life history, beginning *in utero* even, and shapes his narrative for the most part as a love story.

One notable exception to the elegiac content of Paris' autobiography is the shipbuilding segment preparatory to his voyage to Sparta (*Her.* 16.105–18). This passage is rich in literary precedents, the *Aeneid* among them, since Paris locates the scene of construction on Mt. Ida (*Her.* 16.109–10), the very place where Aeneas and his band of refugees build their fleet (*Aen.* 3.5–6).²⁷ The memory evoked of the wrenching departure of Aeneas's Trojans, who will never again see their homeland, provides a sobering contrast to Paris' romantic round-trip journey. The simultaneous correlation and disparity between Paris' elegiac cruise and Aeneas' epic odyssey are certainly part of Ovid's design in this passage.

I suggest that Ovid also recalls another important model for Paris' shipbuilding, namely *Odyssey* 5.233–62, in which Odysseus constructs his raft to depart Kalypso's island. Although the Homeric passage includes much more technical detail, its basic elements of harvesting tall trees with an ax, constructing the hull of the craft, and putting in place the mast and sails are followed in the same order in Paris' description.²⁸ But surely Ovid was intrigued as much by the emotional context of the *Odyssey* passage as he was by its nautical vocabulary. We recall that shortly before building the raft, Odysseus rejects Kalypso's offer of an immortal life with her on Ogygia in favor of the long and difficult voyage home to Penelope (*Od.* 5.215–24). Paris, too, precedes his shipbuilding narrative with an account of his rejection of the nymph Oenone, but she is just one among many other *puellae* whose hopes of marriage with Troy's most eligible bachelor are disappointed (*Her.* 16.93–100).

27 See, especially, Barchiesi 1999.61 on its thematic and verbal echoes of *Aeneid* 3. See Kenney 1996.98–99 for Ennian and Catullan influences.

28 Compare *Od.* 5.238–44 and *Her.* 16.107–10: a variety of tall trees are felled with an ax; *Od.* 5.247–51 and *Her.* 16.111: the hull of the raft/ship is built; *Od.* 5.252–53 and *Her.* 16.112: the sides, which in both passages are called “ribs”—οἱ σταμίνες and *costae* respectively—are fitted to the hull; *Od.* 5.254, 5.259–60, and *Her.* 16.113: the mast and sail(s) are raised to complete the construction. For discussion of Ovid's description in light of contemporaneous Roman shipbuilding techniques, see Meijer 1990.450–52, but cf. Kenney 1996.99. Drinkwater 2003.151 observes that Paris describes the construction with vocabulary suggestive of military conquest—e.g., the forests of Mt. Ida are stripped, *caeduntur* (*Her.* 16.107) and *spoliantur* (*Her.* 16.109) like fallen soldiers—but points out that the passive verbs undermine the notion of Paris as an heroic agent in the process. Note that Odysseus, by contrast, is the subject of many active verbs in the Homeric passage.

Paris and Odysseus both toil at shipbuilding and risk a sea voyage in order to escape unwanted relationships, but their respective destinations differ remarkably. Odysseus is returning home to a wife whose face he knows well and admits is inferior to that of Kalypso. Much like Penelope's selfish suitors, Paris is leaving home in search of another man's wife, a woman whose face he has never seen, but assumes to be unparalleled (*Her.* 16.101–04). We have here, balancing and opposing each other, the values of a devoted husband underpinning Odysseus's travels and the adulterous yearnings of Paris, all of which illustrate the poignancy of both the connections and dissonances between elegy and epic.

Elsewhere in his letter, Paris cannot resist the urge to prove himself desirable as an heroic figure, anticipating Helen's fear of violent reprisals for their elopement (e.g., *Her.* 16.341–52, *Her.* 17.245–50). Despite his pride in rejecting the *regna* and *virtus* offered by Juno and Pallas, he tries, for example, to entice Helen with fulsome descriptions of his heroic family tree (e.g., 16.175–76, 16.199–204) and his father's rich kingdoms (16.177–88).²⁹ In a sense, Paris presents Helen with a set of choices similar to the ones given him in the Judgment; she can decide to elope with him for his wealth or ancestry, if not his charm.

In the closing section of the letter, Paris allows that an epic outcome to their affair may exist, but only in Helen's imagination: “*finge tamen, si vis, ingens consurgere bellum: / et mihi sunt vires et mea tela nocent*” (“Imagine, however, if you wish, that a mighty war erupts: I, too, have strength, and my weapons can wound,” *Her.* 16.353–54). Instead of refusing to take part in the imaginary conflict, Paris sees himself fighting alongside the other warriors.³⁰ He further supports his claim to skill in epic

29 Paris' strategy at this point departs radically from that of Ovid's ideal elegiac *amator* in *Amores* 1.3.5–10, who attempts to strengthen his suit on the grounds that he has no worldly distractions such as noble ancestry, wealth, or property. Comparisons of Paris' methods of seduction in *Heroides* 16 to the teachings of the *Ars Amatoria* lead some scholars to conclude that Paris is a parody or very poor student of the *Ars*. See, e.g., Hintermeier 1993.14, Kenney 1996.5, and Drinkwater 2003.130–35. Cf. Nesholm 2005, who discusses Paris and Helen as highly sophisticated readers of the *Ars* who match wits over various amatory techniques.

30 See also *Heroides* 16.357–58, Paris' favorable comparison of himself to Menelaus as a warrior, which Kenney 1996.123 notes is “a brilliantly ironical echo” of Helen's rebuke of Paris for boasting of his superiority to Menelaus at *Iliad* 3.340–41. Compare verses 205–06, in which Paris measures himself against Menelaus as both warrior (*armis*) and lover (*forma*). In the later passage, Paris has apparently dropped the elegiac comparison in order to emphasize his epic qualifications.

battle by citing episodes from his youth before the Recognition, when he rescued his flocks from thieves and later won victories at the funeral games held in his honor (*Her.* 16.359–62).

Significantly, Ovid uses this chapter from Paris' myth, which in the tragic tradition led to the Recognition,³¹ to demonstrate instead Paris' lack of circumspection. These adolescent exploits as Paris describes them do not inspire great confidence. Neither does his boast of expertise in archery (*Her.* 16.363–64), which reminds us that he does not typically fight in the front lines.³² And trumping all previous attempts to appear heroic, Paris ironically concludes that he has the powerful Hector as his brother and ally (*Her.* 16.367–68). For those of us who know the Homeric background, this statement only foreshadows Paris' abdication of those dangerous epic responsibilities that Hector will have to fulfill.

The only consistent element in Paris' vision of himself is inconsistency. Instead of painting himself exclusively as the devoted elegiac lover, ready to reject the demands of public life in order to devote himself to private pleasures with Helen, Paris attempts to stake his claim to the heroic domain. He is ignorant of the full extent of his elegiac calling and, thus, allows epic posturing to mar his self-portrait. Paris comprehends neither who he is nor who he wants to be. When he makes the following assertion, therefore, only we can appreciate its ironic humor: "quid valeam nescis, et te mea robora fallunt; / ignoras cui sis nupta futura viro" ("You do not know what I'm capable of, and my strength deceives you; you have no idea to what kind of man you will be married," *Her.* 16.369–70).³³ Indeed, Helen has no clue, or rather, she has too many conflicting clues to Paris' personality.

Helen is not about to be taken in, however, either by Paris' heroic bravado or his erotic tropes. She looks, instead, beyond the perplexing verbiage of Paris' letter to Paris himself, specifically his face. In its beauty, she sees the truth of his erotic essence (*Her.* 17.251–54):³⁴

quod bene te iactes et fortia facta loquaris,
a verbis facies dissidet ista tuis.

31 See Stinton 1965.52–53 for discussion of this theme in the lost plays of Sophocles and Euripides, and Jocelyn 1967.202–09 for Ennius's adaptation.

32 Ovid elsewhere, *Met.* 12.598–611, shames Paris for his cowardice with a bow by claiming that Achilles would rather have died at the hands of an ax-wielding Amazon.

33 See also Drinkwater 2003.181, who sees Paris' comment as "a moment of ironic truth."

34 At *Her.* 17.67–68, Helen similarly remarks that Paris himself—that is, his physical presence rather than his letter—would be more persuasive in convincing her to elope.

apta magis Veneri quam sunt tua corpora Marti:
bella gerant fortes; tu, Pari, semper ama.

Although you promote yourself well and speak of brave
deeds,
that face of yours contradicts your words.
Your physique is more suited for Venus than for Mars:
let the brave wage war; you, Paris, should always love.

The source of Helen's clarity is the unwavering truth of her own beauty. Her face appears to defy metaphor and, therefore, resists de-facement, as Paris exclaims: "et tua materia gloria victa sua est" ("Even your glory has been overpowered by its own source material," *Her.* 16.148). The power of natural female beauty is a significant motif in Ovid's elegiac poetry, and Helen is its ideal embodiment. In the *Ars Amatoria* (3.251–58), for example, the *praeceptor* compares Helen to other *puellae* by pointing out that loveliness such as hers needs no cosmetic/poetic enhancement: *forma sine arte potens* ("beauty that is powerful without artifice," *Ars Am.* 3.258).³⁵ By the same token, however, Helen can fashion herself only as an elegiac mistress; she cannot disguise herself as a loyal *matrona* behind a mask of false modesty (e.g., *Her.* 16.288, *Her.* 17.173–74). As Paris observes, if Helen is to resist his advances, she must first change her face: *aut faciem mutes . . . necesse est* (*Her.* 16.289). Knowing that her identity and fate reside inexorably in her physical appearance, Helen restores Paris' face to him so that he, too, can see his elegiac destiny.

Through the restoration of his face, Helen intends to guide Paris to a *recusatio* of epic. If Paris can stop and inspect himself clearly, it follows that he will appreciate the truth of his subjective *eros*. With greater self-awareness, he will understand that his passion for Helen springs from his elegiac temperament; thus in order to strengthen the ardor of his suit, he ought to renounce his conflicting aspirations toward epic. The Judgment was merely a rehearsal for this, since Paris, we will recall, was less than candid about his personal preference for Venus and Helen. That is, he did not openly and decisively refuse the gifts of Juno and Athena but rather

35 See also *Rem. Am.* 343: "fallit enim multos forma sine arte decens" ("Indeed, beauty that is becoming without artifice deceives many men") and *Ars Am.* 3.133–55, advice to women to groom themselves so as to look completely natural.

emphasized rhetorically the tangible enticements of Venus. And the result is that Paris persists in his heroic posturing after the Judgment, despite the fact that he has aligned himself with Venus's elegiac agenda. What Helen can see, that Paris cannot, is a necessary distinction between elegiac and epic worlds. Especially looking at Paris' ridiculous self-portrait, she can appreciate that ignorance of this distinction renders both worlds superficial. Paris is certainly flippant about any epic aftermath to their elopement, and, consequently, his elegiac persona appears foolish.

What is more, Helen has the foresight to articulate a fundamental relationship between elegy and epic: "nec dubito quin, te si prosequare, arma parentur: / ibit per gladios, ei mihi, noster amor" ("I do not doubt that weapons will be gathered, if I follow you: alas, our love will pass through swords [i.e., violence]," *Her.* 17.245–46). In this respect, Helen is similar to the Trojan prophets and Cassandra who earlier had warned of the epic consequences of Paris' passion. Her phrasing in verse 256 is particularly significant: "militia est operis altera digna tuis" ("There is an alternative type of combat that is worthy of your services"). Here she deliberately uses military vocabulary, namely *militia* and *operis*, to evoke an epic context against which the elegiac concerns of erotic struggle are sharply illustrated. She means to show Paris that the epic and elegiac worlds, although separate, can best define themselves only through close attention to and contrast with one another. Each needs the other to realize its full meaning. To put it another way, only when Paris acknowledges the separate importance of the epic world will Helen begin to take him seriously as a lover.

In closing, let us remember that, according to the mythic chronology, Paris' quest for Helen and his telling of it stand as prototypes for both the elegist's *recusatio* and the epic hero's account of his wanderings. Ovid has cleverly positioned *Heroides* 16 in narrative time prior to the literary traditions from which it draws inspiration. This type of literary inversion allows Ovid the freedom to question the literary assumptions of his day, the most pervasive of which was the chronological and cultural priority of epic in relation to elegy. Ovid's characterization of Paris in *Heroides* 16 directly challenges such literary orthodoxy by making the birth of elegy simultaneous with that of epic. In the Judgment, Paris becomes the forefather of both genres, which, as a result, carry the problem of their similarities and differences in their poetic DNA, so to speak. Certainly we see Paris' legacy—this recurring dialogue between *eros* and *virtus* within each genre—in the narratives of both his epic and elegiac "descendants." Odysseus and Aeneas are distracted by erotic desire—Circe and Dido—in the

midst of their heroic journeys.³⁶ And the elegiac poets are forever describing erotic pursuits in martial terms. Reading creatively, we can imagine that these figures have learned something useful from Paris' negative example, namely the importance of knowing one's generic identity and staying faithful to it by remaining aware of the values of the opposing genre.

In *Heroides* 16, Ovid would have us understand that Paris has engendered a complex and chaotic literary environment that he has not the perspective to comprehend. It is then left to the temptations, wanderings, and sacrifices of "later" love poets and epic heroes to restore order. For Ovid to propose that elegy and epic are both the result of Paris' libido certainly deflates the seriousness of the literary debate concerning the two genres. As we recall the fatal consequences of Paris' behavior, however, the conflation of elegy and epic in *Heroides* 16 suggests that something more is at stake than whether or not Paris gets the girl. Paris' identity crisis may also point to Ovid's anxiety about the fading identity of the elegiac poet as the genre of erotic elegy was in its final act in Augustan Rome.

University of Notre Dame

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36 Ovid makes explicit this point about the erotic nature of the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* at *Tristia* 2.379–80 and 2.535–36 respectively.

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