

***Iliad* Book 3 Character Descriptions**

I. Descriptions of characters' appearances in Homer in general:

In *Iliad* book 3, Menelaus and Paris agree to fight a 'winner takes all' duel to end the war over Helen. While Priam and Helen sit on top of Troy's walls watching preparations for the duel, Priam asks Helen to identify some Greek commanders (translations by Wilson, E. 2023. *The Iliad*. W. W. Norton & Company):

A) Description of Agamemnon:

"Now who is that /
enormous man down there? Please let me know. /
I have seen other taller, but my eyes /
have never seen a man with such good looks, /
with such authority. Indeed, he seems /
so like a leader". Glorious Helen answered, /
...I can give an answer to your question. /
That man you see down there is Agamemnon, /
the son of Atreus, whose power spreads /
across a wide expanse of land. He is /
a skillful leader and a strong spear fighter, ..." (p. 63, vv. 205 – 221).

B) Descriptions of Odysseus and Menelaus:

The old king Priam saw Odysseus /
and said: "Dear daughter, come now, tell me also /
who that man is — much shorter in his stature /
than Agamemnon, son of Atreus, /
but broader in his shoulders and his chest, /
his weapons have been set down on the earth /
that feeds us all, and he himself is pacing /
among the lines of soldiers, like a ram, /
among a mighty flock of bright white sheep." /
And Helen, child of Zeus, made this reply: /
"That is intelligent Odysseus, /
Laertes' son, brought up in Ithaca, /
a rugged island. He knows every trick and he can always form the wisest plans. /
Then wise old Antenor said to Helen, "Lady /
your words are true. Godlike Odysseus /
came into Troy with warlike Menelaus /
a while ago, upon an embassy /
to try to get you back.... /
I got to know their looks / and how they think..... /
and when they were both standing, Menelaus /
was more imposing, with his massive shoulders. /
But when they sat, Odysseus had more /
authority.... /
Menelaus could speak fluently, /

few words but clear ones, brief and to the point. /
 But when the brilliantly intelligent /
 Odysseus leapt up, he kept his eyes /
 fixed on the ground and did not move his staff /
 forward or back, but kept it still — as if /
 entirely ignorant of its proper use. /
 You might think he was angry, or a fool. /
 But when he did release his mighty voice /
 from deep inside his chest, he poured forth words /
 like winter snowflakes. No one then could match /
 Odysseus and we no longer thought /
 to notice his appearance.” (pp. 64-5, vv. 237-277).

C) Descriptions of Ajax and Idomeneus:

“...Then old Priam saw a third fighter, Ajax, and he asked, /
 “Who is this other big, strong Greek, who stands /
 taller by head and shoulders than the rest?” /
 Majestic Helen in her long fine dress /
 replied, “That giant warrior is Ajax, /
 the Greek defender. On his other side, /
 the godlike Idomeneus is standing /
 among the Cretans,...”. (p. 65, vv. 277-285).

These descriptions focus on *qualities* (a good leader or spear-fighter, a clear speaker, etc.), not physical features. Any physical characteristics are described ‘comparatively’: a man is shorter, taller, broader than others.

II. Our sole direct description of Helen (*Iliad* 3.154-60)

Given Helen’s legendary beauty, modern readers might be surprised at how little we know about her appearance. Instead of recording physical details, ‘Homer’ has us *infer* her preternatural beauty via its destructive power. For example, in *Iliad* 3.154-60 (our sole, direct description of Helen), when Helen first joins the Trojan elders on the wall to watch the duel between Paris and Menelaus, they respond to her beauty as follows (translation by L. Himmelhoch):

οἱ δ' ὥς οὖν εἶδονθ' Ἑλένην ἐπὶ πύργον ἰοῦσαν,
 ἦκα πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἔπεια πτερόεντ' ἀγόρευον:
 ‘οὐ νέμεσις Τρῶας καὶ ἐϋκνήμιδας Ἀχαιοὺς
 τοιῇδ' ἀμφὶ γυναικὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἄλγεα πάσχειν:
 αἰνῶς ἀθανάτησι Θεῇς εἰς ὧπα ἔοικεν:
 ἀλλὰ καὶ ὧς τοίη περ ἐοῦσ' ἐν νηυσὶ νεέσθω,
 μηδ' ἡμῖν τεκέεσσι τ' ὀπίσσω πῆμα λίποιτο.

And when they [the Trojan elders] saw Helen arrive at the tower,
 quietly to one another, they spoke winged words:
 ‘That the Trojans and well-greaved Achaeans should endure painful
 suffering for so long, for a woman like this, cannot be faulted/blamed.
 In her appearance, she is terribly/eerily like the immortal goddesses.
 But even so, as beautiful as she is, let her sail home in a ship.
 And for us and our future children, may she not leave disaster in her wake.