

*Dive into the world of the Trojan War as lived by Helen. Paris, and Menelaus; Polyxena and Achilles; Ktimene (Odysseus' sister) and Eumaeus the swineherd. What should they do? Do they have a choice?*

## **Trojan Tales**

By Richard Seltzer

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# TROJAN TALES

RELIVE CLASSIC TALES,  
IMMERSED IN THE IMMEDIACY OF THE MOMENT.



RICHARD SELTZER

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## **Books by Richard Seltzer**

### *Fiction*

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We All Are Shakespeare, Booklocker, 2023

To Gether Tales, All Things That Matter Press, 2022

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Shakespeare's Twin Sister, All Things That Matter Press, 2021

Breeze, All Things That Matter Press, 2021

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The Lizard of Oz and Other Stories, Booklocker, 2023

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*Essays*

Why Knot? Booklocker, 2023

*Jokes*

Grandad Jokes, 2022

*Translation (from Russian)*

Ethiopia Through Russian Eyes, Red Sea Press, 2000

*Internet Business*

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Shop Online the Lazy Way, Macmillan, 1999

The AltaVista Search Revolution, Osborne/McGraw-Hill, first edition 1997, second 1998

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The Social Web, ebook, 1998

The Way of the Web, ebook, 1995

*Digital Equipment Corp.*

Snapshots of DEC, ebook, 2018

MGMT MEMO: Management Lessons from DEC, ebook, 2018

*Coming soon*

The Bulatovich Saga: The Name of Hero (rewritten), The Name of Man, The Name of God

# Helen

*an excerpt from my novel **Let the Women Have Their Say***

## Leda

In Sparta, the speaker's staff passes to someone in the back of the megaron, who shouts so the king can hear. "This has gone on too long, my lord. Five years and no child. You must put this woman aside and marry another who can give us an heir."

Queen Leda coughs, then coughs again, then coughs hysterically.

King Tyndareus welcomes the distraction. He turns his full attention to her and calls, "Bring the physician. Immediately!"

Her eyes meet his. She nods to him, then collapses on the banquet table, knocking over goblets. Blood-red wine stains her tunic and cloak. She coughs more urgently and makes her body convulse as if in excruciating pain.

The king, restraining a smile of appreciation for her performance, quickly adds, "Have him bring emetics and antidotes. Someone may have poisoned the queen."

When the physician arrives, she continues to convulse. She looks scared.

Realizing she may not be faking, the king freezes, and silence spreads through the megaron. The only noise is the queen's coughing and her twitching on the table.

"Restrain her. Hold her still," the physician orders. With one hand he holds her mouth open, and with the other he pours a concoction down her throat.

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The queen gags. She can't breathe. She loses consciousness. No, she changes consciousness.

She sees herself from on high, and not in the megaron. She's on the bank of a pond near the palace. The sunset reflecting off lily pads sprinkles her arms and legs with green. She feels at one with the pond, the grass, with all of nature.

She has never seen such color. If she were an artist, she would feel compelled to mimic it with paint on cloth or on walls, again and again.

A swan dives and lands without a splash, as if the water expects it and embraces it. Then it swims to her, unafraid, as if she were a goddess beckoning it.

She welcomes the swan, like the water welcomed it. It enters her, man-like, forceful and unstoppable, like she had hoped and imagined her husband would. She convulses in pleasure, relaxes, then finds herself once again on the banquet table.

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The physician wedges her mouth open, looks down her throat, reaches in, and pulls out a feather.

With a look of shock, he displays it to the king, then turns so the crowd can see it as well.

"What is it?" asks the king.

"The feather of a swan, I believe, my lord."

"What, in the name of Zeus...?"

Half-conscious, Leda clears her throat, then says softly, "Yes, Zeus, in the guise of a swan."

Inspired by that cue, the king improvises. "Zeus, yes, Zeus. He has taken the form of birds before. He was an eagle when he plucked Ganymede from the palace at Troy and took him to Olympus to be cupbearer of the gods. Zeus, yes, Zeus in the guise of a swan."

She answers, "I tried to fight him off, but what could I do against Zeus himself?"

"Hallelujah!" he exclaims, delighted that she took his cue. "Queen Leda has been blessed by the King of the Gods. We needed an heir and now we'll have one — offspring of both me and Zeus. If it's a girl, she'll become the most beautiful woman in the world, and the greatest and wealthiest rulers in Greece will contend for her hand and for the crown of Sparta. All hail to Zeus, co-father of your queen to be."

He leans down to kiss Leda on her cheek and whispers, "Brilliant! You're a genius."

\*\*\*\*\*



She keeps up the act, leaning on his shoulder as they navigate the corridors from the megaron to their bedchamber. Dare she confess to him what really happened? Does she know?

He's ready now as she has rarely seen him before. He enters her and fills her quickly.

If a god didn't make her pregnant, this will.

She wonders, can a single child have two fathers, one human and one divine? How often do the acts of gods and humans echo one another, both causing the same outcome?

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Nine months later, she has twin daughters, Helen and Clytemnestra. Helen is, by a few minutes, the king's eldest daughter. That means that, by Spartan rules of succession, whoever marries her will become king, even though her father is still alive.

Then, a year after that, Leda has twin sons, Pollux and Castor.

She wonders, could Tyndareus suddenly be that potent? Or did the second pregnancy come from the same coupling as the first? If a god can take the form of a swan and impregnate a woman, perhaps she got pregnant twice from a single event.

In any case, childbirth is risky. Women often die of it. And, as she learned from her midwife, having twins doubles the risk.

Enough is enough. Every night, she puts sleeping potion in Tyndareus' wine, and in the morning she praises him for his virility and acts

surprised that he doesn't remember the pleasure they had together. That's her last pregnancy.

## **Double Wedding**

"Is Menelaus the best choice?" asks Leda.

"I'm sure of it," Tyndareus replies, "Red Beard has a way about him, no-nonsense, strict. She needs someone who can control her, get her to forget her fantasies."

"Are you sure? You aren't always right, you know. Getting people to believe she's a daughter of Zeus led to that ugly business with Theseus and his friend. That abduction and rape never would have happened if they hadn't thought she's the most beautiful woman in the world."

"You must admit she's lovely. Takes after you, my love."

"But *the most beautiful*? What does that even mean?"

"It means whatever people want it to mean. And people calling her that is certainly to our advantage."

"But Zeus? Was that necessary?"

"That was your inspiration, my love. Brilliant."

"All I did was swallow a swan feather as a distraction. I explained that to you. It must have stuck to my robe when I went for a walk. When that man in the back starting saying nasty things, I put it in my mouth to make me cough."

"Such a performance. Couldn't have worked out better."

"But Zeus? And gilding the feather, putting it on display time and again?"

"People love that story. It got her dozens of wealthy and powerful suitors. With the gifts and the bride price, we'll have an amazing retirement. We'll be able to travel anywhere and do anything, without the hassles and responsibilities of kingship. All thanks to you."

"And Helen."

"Yes. She's pretty enough and smart enough to play the role of *the most beautiful*. But she has a wild streak and a penchant for fantasy. I suspect the abduction affected her mind. Unlike any other woman, she insisted that she, not I, choose the man she'd marry. She believed in *true love*, whatever that is.

"Until she was ready for marriage, I indulged her fantasy and held receptions in the megaron, to put her on display. Then, when suitors swarmed, I locked her up and didn't let them see her or talk to her. Telling them I was afraid of another abduction reinforced the Zeus swan story and made them even keener to win her."

"But Red Beard? Why did you choose him? Why not his brother Agamemnon?"

"I considered Agamemnon. But he's severe, emotionless. Helen would never take to him, but she might learn to care for Red Beard."

"Yes. He's certainly better than his distant, boring brother. But yet you're giving Cly to him."

"It made sense to have the brothers draw lots, and let the gods or fate decide the winner. That way jealousy won't come between them. And, of course, I rigged it."

"You care that much more for Helen?"

"Cly can take care of herself. She's lied to us so many times and so well. I'm sure she started when she was a toddler stealing sweets. She won't let a boring husband get in her way. She'll do what she wants, when she wants, with whomever she wants, and he'll be none the wiser."

"What an awful thing to say about your daughter."

"I'm proud of her for that. Our preferential treatment of her twin didn't make her envious and mean-spirited. We had to focus on one twin as a daughter of Zeus. Only one could be *the most beautiful*. Helen has a winning look. Even as an infant, when both of them cried, we picked Helen up first. Cly didn't resent that. Since no one noticed her, she could do whatever she wanted. She's a perfect match for haughty Agamemnon. He'll have no idea what she's up to."

"You're so devious, my love."

He kisses Leda and replies, "From you, I take that as a high compliment."

She continues, "But the brothers' bids weren't that much higher than those of others. And there were handsomer, better mannered, more clever and interesting men among the suitors."

"Who would you have chosen, if you were the bride-to-be and it was up to you?"

"Odysseus. He's young, but clever and witty. The stories he made up to entertain us! He had me half believing all those adventures."

"Yes, he's a spinner of tales, a master of fantasy. But that's the last thing Helen needs. Best she be with a man's man, no nonsense, someone who will break her and control her. Besides, Odysseus doesn't want Helen. He's obsessed with my niece, Penelope. He came here to ask my help in getting her. And now, I'll certainly oblige him. He's the one who suggested the suitors swear to support Helen's husband if she's ever abducted again; otherwise, they'd have been at one another's throats. He deserves a reward for that. I'll send word to Icarus, asking him to give Penelope to Odysseus and for a bargain price. My brother can afford that. He won't be retiring. In Acarnania, you rule until you die. Such a barbaric tradition."

## **Arrival in Sparta**

Helen misses the arrival of two young princes from Troy. She's in the garden, hiding from her three-year-old daughter, Hermione. It isn't a game, though Helen pretends it is. She doesn't want to see the child, wishes she hadn't had this child and doesn't want any more.

During the long labor, her mother, at a loss for what to say but obliged to stay at her daughter's side, mentioned that the risks of childbirth double when carrying twins, and that the likelihood of having twins

goes up if they run in the family. Helen is a twin, and she has a set of twin brothers and her father forced her to marry the son of a twin. She has no death wish. She finds ways to avoid pregnancy.

When people say that Hermione is delightful, bright and beautiful, that she takes after her mother, Helen smiles politely. But she never willingly spends time with her daughter. At birth, she didn't let the baby touch her breasts, quickly handing her to a wet nurse. Now, a toddler, the child follows her mother everywhere. When Helen hides, Hermione thinks she's playing hide-and-seek and tracks her down, relentlessly, finding her in the most unlikely places. Everyone thinks Helen is a wonderful mother for playing with her daughter so much.

Helen has heard that the Trojan visitors are brothers, traveling the world in search of love-brides. She orders a handmaid to escort them to the garden and to call out when they arrive. She'll be hiding in the hedge-maze to avoid Hermione. Since Hermione, like a hunting dog, navigates by smell, not sight, Helen rubs her arms and legs with rose petals, to mask her scent,

Only one prince shows up. He avoids looking at her and seems impatient to leave. She has always been the center of attention. She doesn't know what to make of this Trojan.

"Where's your brother?" she asks.

"Please excuse him. He doesn't mean to be rude. He's a rustic and doesn't understand what's expected of him. It's no fault of his own. A dream of our mother's was misinterpreted as a prophecy, and he was abandoned to die as an infant. He was saved and raised by a shepherd, and up until a few months ago, he had no idea that he's a son of the

King of Troy. His manners are rough. He speaks little Greek. He doesn't know how to conduct himself in polite company. But he's good-hearted and unselfish."

"I hear the two of you are looking for brides. But no one from Troy has ever visited here, and Sparta is far from the coast, and we have no marriageable royal women. So what really brings you here?"

"I'm embarrassed to say."

She takes his chin in her hand and turns his head so their eyes meet. He looks shocked. She smiles and orders, "Say it!"

When he tries to break away, she holds tighter, touches nose-to-nose.

"You'll never believe it," he insists.

"That's for me to decide. Tell me!"

"Paris says that when he was a shepherd, three goddesses asked him to judge who is the most beautiful among them."

"Goddesses? Which goddesses?"

"Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite."

"And why him? Why was he qualified to make such a judgment?"

"He doesn't know. But it was more a matter of bribes than of judgment. Hera offered him power, Athena wisdom, and Aphrodite the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Which did he choose?"

"The woman."

Helen laughs. "Well if Aphrodite gave him such a woman, why is he traveling the world, looking for a bride?"

"She told him that you, Helen, queen of Sparta, are the most beautiful woman in the world."

Helen blushes and smiles, raises her hands high and laughs out loud.

"Yes. You," he continues. "And he believed that dream of his as if it were divine truth. He was convinced that that was his fate."

"But didn't he know I'm married, married to a king? How could he imagine that I would be his?"

"Absurd as it sounds, that was his obsession."

She laughs again. "How flattering." She walks away a few steps, picks a rose, then turns back to ask, "*Was?* You said *was?*"

"Until we got to Salamis."

"What happened in Salamis?"

"Before we got there, he had his doubts about the goddess, but still wanted to meet you, in case the promise was real and you were the one. But he's immature. His emotions can change at the bat of an eyelash."



"Whose eyelash?"

"A young woman he saw on the dock as our ship was leaving Salamis. Their eyes met. That was all it took. We had already sent word ahead to Sparta, so we had to continue. But he wants to return to Salamis as soon as we're finished here."

"How odd," she mutters, and closes her eyes. "You're telling me that Paris thought that all he had to do was show up at my palace, and I would fall in love with him? He doesn't even know Greek, but he made a hazardous sea crossing to meet me. And he does all this because he thinks a goddess promised me to him? But she didn't say anything to me. And he had no plan for what to do about my husband. He presumed that I would give up my life as a queen, abandon my daughter, and elope with a stranger? And on his way here he made eye contact with another woman, whose name he doesn't know, and now he thinks he's in love with her?"

"I shouldn't have told you that."

"This is hilarious. I'll tell our bard. He may turn it into song."

She starts to walk away, then stops, turns back, and says, "Send Paris to me here. I'd like to talk to him."

## **Tamer of Horses**

Paris gets lost in the hedge-maze. Helenus gave him clear directions. He doesn't want to shout like a country bumpkin or a fool. When he sees her, he'll stand tall, with a haughty look; polite but distant; respectful, like a diplomat; not awkward and over-anxious, like a suitor.

He remembers his mother's words before he left Troy. "No one is making you do this. If you saw Aphrodite, she didn't give you an order. She offered you an opportunity. You can take it or leave it. Is beauty all there is to Helen? Or do you feel a deeper attraction? If it's beauty alone, what's that worth? What price beauty?"

He's cured of his obsession. Hecuba will be glad to hear that. But, of course, he's curious. He'd rather reject this woman, than be rejected by her.

After an embarrassingly long time, he spots her, sitting on a bench plucking petals from a rose bush and crushing them with her feet. She looks annoyed, impatient. She doesn't notice him, and he doesn't call attention to himself.

He thinks, this couldn't be the Helen Aphrodite promised. She looks ordinary; pleasing, but not special. For this, I came so far? For this, I left behind the Fair Maid of Salamis, with her sparkling eyes and her magical connection with me? Rumor doesn't a beauty make.

She spots him, then says something he doesn't understand. He's not as good at languages as he had hoped. He settles awkwardly on a bench facing hers and answers haltingly, in Greek, "Please speak slowly. I begin to learn Greek."

"I'm speaking your language, not mine."

"What?"

"Of course I speak Luwian. What would you expect of a queen?"

"And what did you ask?"

"Did Aphrodite tell you I would be yours?"

"So I thought," he admits, avoiding eye contact. "She said *Helen*, but didn't say *Helen of Sparta*. Just *Helen*. When I heard of your reputation, I presumed you must be the one. I made a mistake. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't long for another man's wife."

"Do you long for me?"

"No. Not now. But I did. One day I was a shepherd, and the next I was the son of the king. I thought I'd keep being lucky, like a gambler who wins once and thinks he'll keep winning. I apologize to you for my arrogance, expecting you to fall in love with me and run off with me, a total stranger."

"And now you no longer believe in your goddess and her promise?"

"That was a dream. My sister Cassandra believes she was raped by Apollo and that he gave her the gift of knowing the future. Madness may run in my family. Now I suspect there was no goddess, no beauty contest. Maybe there are no gods at all."

"Am I such a disappointment?"

He looks at her directly and hesitates. Most men would take that question as a cue and compliment her. Paris stares awkwardly. He's unimpressed by her and can't think of anything to say.

Finally, she breaks the silence, "Maybe there are gods, and there is a goddess of love, and maybe you saw her. Maybe she promised you *Helen*; but meant someone else with that name. Maybe that's the name of the girl you saw on the dock at Salamis."

"My brother told you?"

"Yes. You should go back and find her. Maybe the promise of a goddess is a half-way thing. You're given a chance, but you have to grab it. You have to take risks to prove you're worthy of the gift. There you were — a shepherd turned prince, travelling the world in search of your true love. But when you found her, you did nothing to win her. You should have insisted the captain turn the ship around. Or you should have jumped into the sea and swum to her. That's what I would have done."

"Can you swim?"

"No. But that wouldn't stop me. Nothing would stop me if I thought I was in love. Where's your gumption? Where's your sense of romance? Where's your daring?"

"If I had my horse here, I'd show you daring."

"You race chariots?"

"No. I ride horses."

"Horses aren't for riding. There's no way to control a horse. You might stay mounted for a while, but at the first stumble or the first fright, the horse would throw you."

"It's not easy, but it can be done. It takes skill to sit astride the bare back of a galloping horse, to balance, to become one with the horse, moving with it as it moves."

"And you can do that?"

"Agelaus, the shepherd who raised me, is a Scythian. He has deep knowledge of horses. He can ride bareback, with his hands free so he can hold and shoot a bow at full gallop."

"Impossible."

Paris laughs. "I, too, can do that."

"Show me," she insists.

"My horse, Boreas — swift as the north wind — is home at Troy."

"I've heard that Trojans are *tamers of horses*, but I've never heard that they could do tricks like that. In Sparta, horses pull wagons and chariots and ploughs. If you can ride a horse astride, sitting upright, not just tied to the horse's back, show me. And if you need to train a horse first, then do that. Please."

"That would take time."

"How much time would it take for a *tamer of horses* to do that?"

"To just ride, not to do tricks like shooting arrows or leaning over the side of a galloping horse to touch my hands to the ground?"

"How long?"

"A week, maybe two."

"Then do it. I dare you."

"My brother and I aren't planning to stay here that long."

"Menelaus will be leaving soon for Crete. He has business there that can't wait. He plans to hold a banquet in your honor on his return. It would be a breach of courtesy for you to leave before that. Talk to his charioteer and pick a horse that's quick to learn. I want to see you ride a horse. Better still, I want you to teach me to ride as well."

Paris laughs.

She continues, "So it's a joke? You were teasing me? People can't ride horses like that, just as there's no such thing as a centaur."

He laughs still louder.

"Are you telling me that centaurs are real?" she asks. "Have you seen one? Have you ridden one?"

"No. That's not what's funny."

"Then what is?"

"The image of you on horseback."

"You don't think I'm capable of that? You think women can't do what men can?"

"No. It's a matter that isn't to be discussed in polite company, or so I've been told these last few months."

"And what's that?"

"Women aren't meant to sit astride horses, with their nether parts pressing against the horse's back."

"You mean it isn't proper, isn't ladylike for a woman to be seen doing that? Propriety be damned. I'm a queen. I do what I want. Besides, no one need know. I dare you to teach me."

"Your passion for knowledge and your daring are admirable. But the issue is a physical matter, the consequences of the friction, the rubbing of your tender parts and the rhythmic motion of the horse."

"You mean I could be injured, that there would be pain? I would put padding between myself and the horse. Surely if Scythian men ride horses, Scythian women must too, or this whole tale of yours is a myth."

"It's not a myth. Men can ride, and women can as well; but not ladies."

"Because we're dainty and afraid of discomfort or pain?"

"Pain isn't the issue. It's pleasure."

"Pleasure?"

"Indeed. That's the joke. Among my people, the people of the mountain where I was raised, randy young men try to get women to ride horseback, because of the effect the rubbing has on them."

"Effect?"

"Putting them in the mood."

"The mood?"

He laughs again. "Warming them up, getting them ready so we can have our way with them."

"You seduce women by getting them to ride horseback?"

"Of course."

"And you've done that? You've bedded women that way? And not just slaves you could order? Respectable innocent women? What kind of man are you? How many women have you had on your Mount Ida?"

"One. Oenone's her name. We had much fun together before I was found and became a prince. That started with me teaching her to ride Boreas."

"So you're a master of rowdy stories, and you lie with great aplomb."

"I would never lie to you, my lady." He bows to her with an exaggerated sweep of his hand.

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Helen hesitates. She isn't sure she heard that right. Did he say "lie to" or "lie with" or did he say the one and mean the other? "Then do it," she says, with more enthusiasm than she deems appropriate. "Pick one of our chariot horses. Train it to be ridden. Then teach me to ride!"



"As you wish." Paris smiles provocatively.

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Hermione suddenly appears, races to her mother, and wraps her arms around her mother's legs. "Got you! But that was too easy. You talked, Mommy. I could hear you from far off.

"And who are you, sir? Can you really ride on a horse's back? Teach me, too. I like riding dogs, big dogs. But horses must be even better — the speed, the wind.

"Zeus turned himself into a bull and a swan, never a horse. If I were Zeus, I'd make myself into a horse. But I'm me. I just want to ride a horse, the fastest in the world.

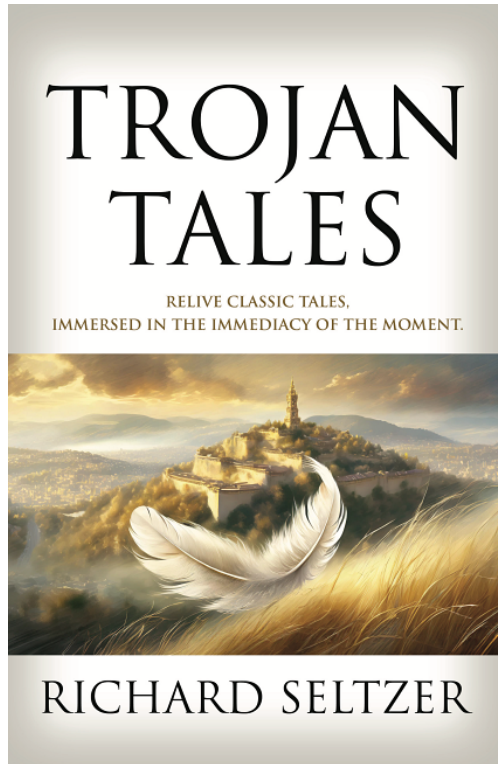
"Zeus is Mommy's daddy, her real daddy. Everybody says so. But she never asks him to do things for me.

"Mommy, please tell this man to teach me to ride a horse."

"Only if you're good."

"But I am good. Everybody says so."

"You have to be even better for such a treat. Paris here needs to train a horse and teach me to ride. Then he can teach you. But Daddy might not want us to do that. So keep this a secret. That's a new game for you — knowing things without telling anybody. Start now. Repeat after me: *people can't ride horses.*"



*Dive into the world of the Trojan War as lived by Helen. Paris, and Menelaus; Polyxena and Achilles; Ktimene (Odysseus' sister) and Eumaeus the swineherd. What should they do? Do they have a choice?*

## **Trojan Tales**

By Richard Seltzer

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