

2 Story

"The Judging of the Goddesses"

a burlesque by Lucian, freely paraphrased and edited from M. D. MacLeod's translation¹.

- Zeus *I refuse to judge. I love you all. Equally. How could I say one of you is more beautiful? No. Paris shall judge. A mortal, yes, but good-looking, passionate. Mmm. As you'd expect of Ganymede's cousin. Delicious. So he's perfectly qualified. A cowboy too. Hermes, take the apple and the competitors to Paris on Mt Ida. Tell him to decide which of these three gorgeous goddesses wins the Golden Apple of Eris. Tell him from me, "Paris, yokel that you are, look on divinity, and make the most of it."*
- Aphrodite *Darling Zeus, I don't mind who's judge. My beauty is clear to all - even a nobody. But I don't know how these two feel...*
- Hera *Your fancy-boy Ares can do the judging for all I care, Aphrodite. Paris? Whoever.*
- Zeus *What about you Athena? Blushing? Well, that's natural - the last living virgin on Olympus. Ha, ha. But you agree? Good. Then go now with Hermes, and no bribing or intimidating the judge. And no tantrums.*
- Hermes *Excellent plan Zeus. Let's move along now. No dawdling. Follow me. I know Paris. Good looking young man - passionate - ideally suited to the job. He'll give a good verdict.*
- Aphrodite *I'm sure he will. So, Hermes, is he single, this Paris?*
- Hermes *Not entirely.*
- Aphrodite *How do you mean?*
- Hermes *There's a woman - Oenone - living with him. She's ...um... rustic. He doesn't pay a lot of attention to her.*
- Athena *Picking up tips, Aphrodite? She trying to bribe you, Hermes?*
- Hera *Seduce him, more likely.*

¹ from M D Macleod, "Lucian: A Selection", Aris & Phillips Ltd., Warminster, Wiltshire, UK, 1991.

Hermes She just asked if Paris is single.

Athena Why is she interested in that?

Hermes Who knows?

Athena Well, *is* he?

Hermes Apparently not.

Athena And how is he in combat? Is he eager for glory? Or is he one hundred percent farmboy?

Hermes I can't say. He's young. I imagine he has ambitions, would like to distinguish himself.

Aphrodite Hermes, see how *I* don't criticise you or accuse *you* for having a private conversation with *her*. That's so petty!

Hermes We're almost there.

Hera Aphrodite should lead the way. She was here for dirty weekends with Anchises.

Hermes *I* // lead the way! I know the area too. I was here with Zeus when he was stalking *Ganymede*.

Hera Disgusting.

Hermes Well, here he is.
Good day herdsman.

Paris And to you, stranger. And...whoa! Who are *these*?

Hermes Hera, Athena, Aphrodite. And I am Hermes sent by Zeus.
Oh, stop, stop that. Get up. Calm down. That's right. Stop fidgeting. It's very straightforward. Zeus wants you to judge their beauty. "Since you," he says, "are yourself beautiful and passionate, I entrust you with the decision. You'll know the prize for the competition after you've read the apple."

Paris The apple? This? "FOR THE FAIREST". What?
How can I judge a sight like this? I'm a simple mortal. Yet these women - goddesses - are beyond anything I've ever seen. I can hardly tear my eyes from one to look at another. They're stunning, enchanting, overwhelming. You know all the words. And another

thing. This one turns out to be Zeus's sister and wife, and these two his daughters. Doesn't that make choosing a bit risky?

Hermes Perhaps, but it's impossible for you to refuse. The orders come from Zeus.

Paris Hermes, you've got to persuade the two losers not to be angry with me.

Hermes They'll promise that.

Paris Well... But tell me something first. Should I judge them as they are, or should I see them naked?

Hermes That's up to you. You're the judge. You tell them what you want.

Paris I want to see them naked!

Hermes You heard him ladies. You inspect them Paris. I will be averting my eyes.

Aphrodite Well done, Paris! I'll undress first. For you.

Athena Make sure Aphrodite takes off her magic belt. She'll use it to bewitch you.

Hera You ought to make her take off her make-up too. It's a tart's trick, painting over the warts.

Paris They're right about the belt Aphrodite.

Aphrodite Why don't you lose the helmet Athena? Covering up your face and hair like that. Afraid he'll see the colour of your eyes? Or are you just trying to frighten him?

Athena Look - no helmet.

Aphrodite And there's my belt. And my robe...

(They undress)

Paris I...I need to inspect you one by one. I can't concentrate with you all at once. I don't know what to look at. Hera, stay. You two go away.

Paris	Helen...
Aphrodite	But wait, Paris. Don't fall in love before you're sure Helen will fall for you. For the apple, I'll give you Helen.
Paris	Will you swear to that?
Aphrodite	Of course! She'll become your wife and follow you to Troy. I'll be there to arrange everything.
Paris	Then you win. The Golden Apple to the goddess of love, the most beautiful goddess of all.

Paris's judgment and his subsequent elopement with Helen was the cause of the Trojan war, the richest story source for Greek mythology, poetry and drama. So it is not surprising that versions of the Judgment of Paris appear in Sophocles, Euripedes, Ovid and Lucian, and that references and allusions abound throughout classical literature. The earliest of these appears to be near the beginning of Book 24 of the Iliad:

[Hera and Athena] hated sacred Ilium and Priam and his people just as much now as when the trouble first began and Paris fell into the fatal error of humiliating the two goddesses at their audience in his shepherd's hut by his preference for the third, who offered him the pleasures and the penalties of love.²

The Iliad never tells the full story of Paris' judgment, but Homer seems to assume his hearers know it. Whether the traditional story at that stage included attempts at bribery by Hera and Athena is unclear, but Aphrodite's bargain is neatly summarized: "the pleasures and penalties of love". The Iliad contains glimpses of both consequences. In book 3, just after the duel where Aphrodite rescues Paris from certain defeat by his rival Menelaus:

Helen...began scolding her lover: 'So you are back from the battlefield - and I was hoping you had fallen there to the great soldier who was once my husband! You used to boast that you were a better man than the mighty Menelaus, a finer spearman, stronger in the arm. Then why not go at once and challenge him again? Or should I warn you to think twice before you offer single combat to the red-haired Menelaus? Do nothing rash - or you may end by falling to his spear!'
Paris had his answer ready. 'My dear,' he said, 'do not try to put me on my mettle by abusing me. Menelaus has just beaten me with

² The Iliad, tr. E V Rieu, Penguin, 1950, p 437.

Athene's help. But I too have gods to help me, and next time I shall win. Come, let us go to bed together and be happy in our love. Never has such desire overwhelmed me, not even in the beginning, when I carried you off from lovely Lacedaemon in my seagoing ships and we spent the night on the isle of Cranae in each other's arms - never till now have I been so much in love with you or felt such sweet desire.'

As he spoke, he made a move towards the bed, leading her to it. His wife followed him; and the two lay down together on the well-made wooden bed.³

This glimpse of the real culprits of the Trojan war is remarkable, though not unusual. Homer is consistent in representing characters, so the temperamental Helen and the complacent Paris we see here are just as we would expect from their other appearances in the poem. Yet even this snippet is enough for us to know exactly the kind of couple they are - dysfunctional and codependent.

Evidence from Greek vases, such as that shown here, confirms the story's early importance and autonomy. Vase paintings bridge the gap of several centuries between Homer and the Greek tragedians. They often make explicit linkage between the judging story and the abduction of Helen, illustrating them on opposite sides of the vase.



Vase painting of about 530BC by the painter of Antimenes.

³ The Iliad, tr. E V Rieu, Penguin, 1950, p 75.

Sophocles wrote two plays dealing with the Judgment of Paris (both are now lost) and Euripedes makes repeated reference to the story in five of his extant plays. For example, in *The Trojan Women*, Helen explains the promises or bribes of the three goddesses, noting, with some vanity, that Aphrodite won because she "pictured my loveliness". It is later writers, however, who give the fullest versions of the story. In compiling his complete edition of the *Greek Myths*⁴, Robert Graves used three main sources for the Judgment of Paris: Ovid (first century BC), Hyginus (first century AD) and Lucian (second century AD). Each of these must have written (as did the earlier dramatists) against a background of traditional oral tellings, and each intended that their version would contrast with that background.

Ovid recounted his story in *The Heroides*, a collection of supposed letters between mythical characters. The 16th letter is from Paris to Helen. I quote the relevant passage in full below. (Note that Ovid uses Roman names for his characters.)

There is a place in the woody vales of midmost Ida, far from trodden paths and covered over with pine and ilex, where never grazes the placid sheep, nor the she-goat that loves the cliff, nor the wide-mouthed, slowly-moving kine. From here, reclining against a tree, I was looking forth upon the walls and lofty roofs of the Dardanian city, and upon the sea, when lo! it seemed to me that the earth trembled beneath the tread of feet - I shall speak true words, though they will scarce have credit for truth - and there appeared and stood before my eyes, propelled on pinions swift, the grandchild of mighty Atlas and Pleione - it was allowed me to see, and may it be allowed to speak of what I saw! - and in the fingers of the god was a golden wand. And at the self-same time, three goddesses - Venus, and Pallas, and with her Juno - set tender feet upon the sward. I was mute, and chill tremors had raised my hair on end, when "Lay aside thy fear!" the winged herald said to me; "thou art the arbiter of beauty; put an end to the strivings of the goddesses; pronounce which one deserves for her beauty to vanquish the other two!" And, lest I should refuse, he laid command on me in the name of Jove, and forthwith through the paths of ether betook him toward the stars.

My heart was reassured, and on a sudden I was bold, nor feared to turn my face and observe them each. Of winning all were worthy, and I who was to judge lamented that not all could win. But, none the less, already then one of them pleased me more, and you might know it was she by whom love is inspired. Great is their desire to win; they burn to sway my verdict with wondrous gifts. Jove's

⁴ Robert Graves, "The Greek Myths", Penguin, 1955, p 638.

consort loudly offers thrones, his daughter, might in war; I myself waver, and can make no choice between power and the valorous heart. Sweetly Venus smiled: "Paris, let not these gifts move thee, both of them full of anxious fear!" she says; "my gift shall be of love, and beautiful Leda's daughter, more beautiful than her mother, shall come to thy embrace." She said, and with her gift and beauty equally approved, retraced her way victorious to the skies."⁵

This is a dispassionate storytelling. Ovid is more interesting when his writer has a damaged heart. The fifth letter is from Oenone (his "rustic" first wife) to Paris, after his desertion to Helen:

That day spoke doom for wretched me, on that day did the awful storm of changed love begin, when Venus and Juno, and unadorned Minerva, more comely had she borne her arms, appeared before you be to judged. My bosom leaped with amaze as you told me of it, and a chill tremor rushed through my hard bones.⁶

Often, Ovid is better writing the woman's part than the man's. Even in book 17, where Helen subjects Paris to alternate bursts of nagging and vanity, she has a liveliness that exceeds his, and perhaps even makes us understand why he finds her so fascinating.

You say Venus gave her word for this: and that in the vales of Ida three goddesses presented themselves unclad before you; and that when one of them would give you a throne, and the second glory in war, the third said: "The daughter of Hyndareus shall be your bride!" I can scarce believe that heavenly beings submitted their beauty to you as arbiter: and, grant that this is true, surely the other part of your tale is fiction, in which I am said to have been given you as reward for your verdict. I am not so assured of my charms as to think myself the greatest gift in the divine esteem. My beauty is content to be approved in the eyes of men; the praise of Venus would bring envy on me. Yet I attempt no denial; I am even pleased with the praises you report - for why should my words deny what I much desire? Nor be offended that I am over slow to believe in you; faith is wont to be slow in matters of great moment. My first pleasure, then, is to have found favour in the eyes of Venus; the next, that I seemed the greatest prize to you, and that you placed first the honours neither of Pallas nor of Juno when had heard of Helen's parts. So, then, I mean valour to you, I mean a far-famed throne! I should be or iron, did I not love such a heart. Of iron, believe me, I am not; but I fight against my love for one who I think can hardly become my own. Why should I essay with curved

⁵ Ovid, *Heroides*, book 16, 53-88 tr Grant Showerman, Harvard University Press, 1947, pp 202-203

⁶ Ovid, *Heroides*, book 5, 33-38 tr Grant Showerman, Harvard University Press, 1947, p 61

plough to furrow the watery shore, and to follow a hope which the place itself denies? I am not practised in the theft of love, and never yet - the gods are my witnesses - have I artfully made sport of my lord. Even now, as I entrust my words to the voiceless page, my letter performs an office all unwonted. Happy they who are no novices! I, ignorant of the world, dream that the path of guilt is hard.⁷

The latter part of this quote illustrates the confusion that Ovid writes into Helen, following Homer and Euripedes, and perhaps reflects conflicting traditions about how enthusiastic Helen was about going off with Paris. Was it elopement or abduction, seduction or rape?

Ovid's device of using letters between mythical characters was probably not original. But it provided a framework in which he could write of love. While the *Heroides* are not masterpieces, they deal with a subject of universal interest, with some originality. They also give a sympathetic voice to the guilty as well as to the victims.

The most entertaining telling of the Paris story from antiquity comes from Lucian's *Dialogues of the Gods*, a collection of frivolous, blasphemous comedy sketches. At the beginning of this section I included my free paraphrase of his *Judging of the Goddesses*, made, unfortunately, from an English translation.

Lucian's writing is characterized by satire, variety and liveliness. In *The Judging of the Goddesses* he gives the gods and goddesses human vanities, ridiculing their individual characteristics, and excising any trace of nobility or moral from the story. In poking fun at divinity he had been anticipated by Aristophanes (e.g. in *The Frogs* where Dionysus is an ignorant coward), and even Homer (in the raunchy song that the minstrel Demodocus sang to Odysseus at Alcinous' house, telling of Aphrodite's adultery with Ares⁸). But Lucian sustains his mockery throughout the *Dialogues of the Gods*. Zeus and Hera come out particularly badly, mainly because of his woman chasing (and Ganymede chasing). Meanwhile Apollo cannot get the rhythm right in his oracles and officious Hermes grumbles of overwork. In the *Judging of the Goddesses*, everyone is sneaky, unsympathetic and vain. This is in marked contrast to some of the later, sanitized, versions of the legend, including those with which the painters of the renaissance were familiar. In particular, the treatment of Aphrodite/Venus, who, from classical times through to Lucian, was represented as wantonly sexual, became, perhaps through the exaltation of courtly love, reverently portrayed, accepting the golden apple with a gesture of grace and modesty.

The stories told by Ovid and Lucian agree in many respects. But their versions are different from those of earlier generations. Greek vase paintings consistently show the goddesses clothed, even when Paris is in the act of judgment, but Ovid and Lucian have them naked. This feature of the story is very important, as we now turn to representations of the judgment in visual art. The opportunity to render three nudes, each embodying the ideal of female beauty, may explain why this story has been so popular with painters.

⁷ *ibid*, pp 233-234.

⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book VIII, tr. E. V. Rieu, Penguin, 1946, pp 129-132.