

Helen Versus Achilles: Illusions, Individuals and Ideals in *Alki Zei's Achilles' Fiancée*

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de la représentation de l'individu en relation avec ses appartenances sociales, idéologiques et familiales dans le roman d' Alki Zei *La Fiancée d' Achille* (1987). Ce roman constitue une étape importante de la littérature politique grecque de l'après-guerre car il met l'accent sur le récit de lutte de l'individu pour la définition de soi, malgré la pression environnante conduisant à sa soumission complète à la cause commune. Cette nouvelle perspective implique également une réception intéressante du mythe d'Achille, que l'auteur déconstruit et reconstruit dans un dialogue tacite avec *l'Iliade* et ses modèles héroïques. Le protagoniste, l'épouse d'Achille, une femme d'âge moyen racontant sa vie à partir de la Seconde Guerre mondiale jusqu'aux années du régime des «colonels», concentre sur son dramatis persona les catégories de sexe, d'âge et de classe, créant ainsi une matrice de nouveaux critères dans l'analyse de la littérature politique.

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the representation of the individual in connection to its social, ideological and family allegiances in Alki Zei's 1987 *Achilles' Fiancée*. This novel constitutes a milestone in postwar Greek political literature as it shifts the narrative focus on the individual's struggle for self definition despite the surrounding pressure to completely surrender one's personhood to the common cause. This new perspective also involves an interesting reception of the myth of Achilles, which the author deconstructs and reconstructs in a tacit dialogue with the Iliad and its heroic models. The protagonist, Achilles' wife, a middle-aged woman recounting her life from WWII to the years of the regime of the 'Colonels', concentrates on her dramatis persona the categories of gender, age and class, thus creating a matrix of new criteria in the analysis of political literature.¹

Reading through *Achilles' Fiancée* one may think that the novel has nothing to do with the reception of Homer.² Although we see several direct references

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to the Classics in places crucial for the development of the plot,³ it is the name Achilles that invites the comparison with the ancient heroic tradition.⁴ The name also carries the weight of the symbolism on which the protagonist's rhetoric is primarily based: Achilles' fiancée suffers because of her association with the perfect warrior and views the life of the quintessential ideologue from a completely new perspective. As in a ring composition, the novel begins and ends with the fact that Eleni has been branded "Achilles' fiancée", a title that controls her life and misplaces her true identity (13, 348).⁵ This is also the thread that runs through the narrative with the constant repetition of the phrase "Achilles' fiancée" evoking the conflict between her two identities.⁶

Names and double identities play an important role in the dialogue between the private and the public in *Achilles' Fiancée*. Early on in the narrative we hear of the need for a pseudonym as part of resistance routines:

I like him. His real name is certainly not Achilles, but it suits him. I will never call him by any other name. If it didn't go against the rules of secrecy, I would have filled up my exercise book margins with: ACHILLES ACHILLES. Next to the algebra equations. If only I could tell him that my real name was Daphne! Again, it's Panos' fault. "You have to choose a pseudonym for security reasons" he told me as soon as he enrolled me in the organization. "Great, I'll pick Alcestis." He laughed that little laugh of his which sounded out of tune. "Sure, why don't you pick Medea?" "Eleni, a common name!" Eleni! And I wore it all my life. Except for a very short time. In Rome. (16)⁷

Although the reader is warned that Achilles is not the character's real name, Achilles is not referred to by any other name in the novel. In her narrative Eleni never discloses her husband's real name and we are left to believe that the question never came up in their life as a couple. Thus Achilles is not revealed in his private identity to his wife or the reader but remains the admired revolutionary in all compartments of his life. The connotations the word Achilles has in the novel refer us directly to the established image of the hero in the literary tradition starting with Homer; we have every reason to believe that this is why Eleni finds the name Achilles perfectly suitable for her brave fiancée. Achilles embodies the ideal hero-warrior in ancient Greek thought, a representation that has not changed since antiquity.⁸ The author, however, inverts the marked symbolism of the name Achilles in order to cast doubt and uncertainty at the seemingly unshakeable model of heroism embodied by her character.⁹

Eleni's fiancé is an exemplary resistance warrior, Communist Party youth leader and guerilla fighter who effortlessly puts the cause above himself (17,

23). He never doubts or criticizes the decisions of those higher than him in the party hierarchy and constructs his private self in a way that fits the profile of the perfect party member he wishes to be. In his relationship with his fiancée, to whom he appears to be faithful and devoted, Achilles acts with the best interests of the party in mind:¹⁰

"This is my fiancée." That's how he introduced me to someone we met on the street. Perhaps he did it for reasons of secrecy, to avoid mentioning my name. Achilles would have never said "my girlfriend." Until that day, he had never said anything to me. "Don't look at me in that strange way!" was the most tender thing he had ever said to me. This is Great Love. My love. (16)

His connection to her is part of their resistance activities and as such it has to inspire and set an example (26). Thus, his body language and expressions of affection towards Eleni are governed by the guidelines of integrity and self-restraint that the model young communist must possess (17). Eleni's adoration for Achilles, albeit passionate and overwhelming, fails to mask the disconnect that creeps between them after the pre-marital consummation of their love:

The first time! In some basement that we used as illegal printing press. "It wasn't right", he said afterwards. "It's our workplace." (17) [...] I had imagined it differently the first time. (17) [...] Achilles leaves immediately afterwards. Where he is going, he can't afford to be late, even a second. It could mean death. (18)

Soon she begins to articulate the generalizing dichotomy between her public and private persona:

The girls are jealous of me. The fiancée of Achilles, who is not afraid in battle! He is only afraid to take me at night and go to the small room next door, where the guns and bullets are kept. He is not afraid of guns, of course. He is afraid of the others, what they will say, he sets the example. If they want to do the same... (26)

She also, quite prophetically, conceptualizes her social profile as Achilles' fiancée, not wife:

Sometimes I feel that I will remain the eternal fiancée and that throughout my life I will sleep with Achilles in a hurry in the time between two of his political meetings or other jobs. And always in somebody else's bed. (26)

Their wedding takes place under circumstances of extreme haste and danger, leaving Eleni even more unfulfilled and lonesome:

I got married! A girl gets married in a skirt and sweater. Without sugared almonds and flowers. Without guests and a bridal bed. Achilles leaves the same day. A guerilla, somewhere in the mountains. A guerilla! Even though the war and the Occupation are over. A guerilla! When in all countries a new life is beginning. (25)

Three years later, when they meet again in Tashkent, they resume the game of haste and evasion:

-My Eleni! He hugs me hard. He doesn't say anything else. Achilles never says tender words when others are present. (161-2)

The consummation of their marriage, delayed by three years, doesn't bring them any closer to each other:

Now I must go to bed and sleep, smelling of rose water, with a strange man. I wonder, does he feel I am a stranger? I take as long as I can. -Come on, at last! I lie next to him and turn off the light. Our ... wedding night! The first entire night that we will spend together. Achilles is in a hurry to take me. I am trying to chase away my memories and forget the endless steppe that stretches between us. (170).

Eleni finds in Tashkent the same Achilles, morally upright, hard working and full of revolutionary spirit. Living in complete denial of their marital problems and the lost hope of a triumphant repatriation, Achilles prefers to maintain a static view of the world (189, 285). His rigidity manifests itself even more deeply in their private life, where he rejects every offer of Eleni's to start a dialogue about the past and especially the years they spent apart (177, 200):

I don't say anything more. I will never say anything more. Achilles wants the Eleni to whom he bid farewell to in a street corner before leaving for the mountains and he clings to that picture. There is no room for discussion. As for Daphne, I must make her die. Lying on a table and covered in hyacinths. Eleni has won. (200)

Thus, shortly after their reunion in Tashkent, Eleni realizes that all channels of communication between them are closed:

I get ready to say something, that it seems to me out of place for anyone to wear a uniform like this unless he is going to be the protagonist in a war movie. But he is not going to make a movie, he is going obediently wherever they have sent him, and so my words will sound out of place. Anything I say, from the moment I arrived here, sounds out of place.

Therefore, I will keep quiet. I must remain speechless. For how long? For ever, for a lifetime. (181).

Besides all matters personal, Achilles refrains from engaging into honest dialogue with his fiancée and later wife Eleni concerning politics, the Communist Party, and anything remotely related to political ideology (197, 217, 236). Upholding his dogmatic respect for party hierarchy (202), he refuses to join in the evolution of political affairs even within the Soviet Union, namely the de-stalinization process initiated by Nikita Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 (256). This inflexible attitude ends up estranging him irreparably from Eleni (276-77), who seeks comfort and emotional support with her new friends Andreas, Serioja and Nadia and her teacher Mikhael Gregorievitch (257-58, 278). As Achilles and Eleni end up having in common only the Communist Party and their daughter, born in their first year together in Tashkent (243, 301), Eleni acknowledges that Achilles is "her greatest concern" (243). Moreover, Achilles' blind devotion to the Communist Party robs him of any tolerance in his interaction with others (244, 300-04). Thus he fiercely resents any opinions of Eleni's about the Soviet Communist regime and the Greek Communist Party line and cannot tolerate even her most innocent criticism of aspects of daily life in the Soviet Union (171, 199, 239, 260); the recipient of a state scholarship himself, he doesn't allow her to seek her own scholarship for higher education out of fear that they might be misconstrued to abuse the generosity of their host country (269).

It can therefore be said that Achilles' public persona marginalizes his private self, often creating a negative image of his positive character traits such as honesty, hard work, self-restraint, and selflessness. His characterization in the novel is adversely affected by the rigidity of his personal ethics despite the fact that he constitutes the epitome of uprightness and is a paragon of virtue even in the traditional sense. Nevertheless, Achilles is the kind of person who has a clearly defined ascending scale of affection, on which he places ideals and individuals in fixed positions and always according to his better judgment. Moreover, his judgment is primarily derived from his strict adherence to a set system of values based on honor and communist ideology. His perception of both this system of values and his ascending scale of affection remains unchanged throughout the novel, in spite of the multitude of setbacks he suffers during his years as guerilla war fighter, exile and political refugee. Finally, as we are only given a transient glimpse of the events surrounding his stealthy return to Greece, we can only imagine the pain of betrayal and

disenchantment that welcomed him home after a twenty-year long absence. Still, we are impressed by his perseverance, loyalty and sense of duty in spite of any adversity.

Inevitably, several questions arise: who is Achilles? is he a frustrated leader with the mindset of a delusional autocrat or an idealist who has a hard time parting with the past (167)? Is his formidable integrity of character an inherent trait or the acquired product of a conscious imaging effort aimed at promoting the character-building aspects of Communism (26, 30, 193-94)? Is his brave conduct during the Greek Resistance and the Civil War the only criterion by which his heroism should be evaluated (169, 236)? Can Achilles be blamed for all the pain and distress he leaves behind when he flees on the other side of the Iron Curtain (47, 58, 167, 175)? And finally, how heroic is Achilles and what's his connection with his Homeric prototype?

Perhaps Eleni's mini-epic of Achilles' ignominious *nostos* (homecoming) provides us with the most insightful look into his heroic profile:

A man with white-yellow eyebrows that meet in the middle, grey hair and a furrowed face walked swiftly through the streets of Athens. He was looking for a street that no longer existed, a friend, a comrade with whom he had fought at the frontline of so many battles. The Occupation, the December fighting... The friend was still there, he found him. They sent Achilles and he, always obedient to orders, without asking too many questions, not even one, went to the friend, who handed him straight over to the Security. Achilles is a brave man (palikari). Yes, she will tell Daphnoula that. As long as she doesn't start asking too many questions. (64)

Eleni presents the reader with a compressed yet comprehensive overview of Achilles' own epic; she does it for the sake of their daughter Daphnoula, to whom she feels that she owes an explanation about her absent father (135, 137).¹¹ Nevertheless, she reaches into layers of memory that Daphnoula is unable to recall and cannot relate with, given the young girl's admiration for her father and his predicament (146-47). Eleni focuses on Achilles' *nostos* (homecoming), which, ironically, takes place after twenty years of absence, just like Odysseus'.¹² Yet Zei crafts Achilles' *nostos* in totally anti-Odyssean terms, with the protagonist returning to Athens during the junta, while his wife and daughter have already left for Paris. Although his return is a clandestine act, Achilles uses secrecy as a means of accomplishing his mission and not, like Odysseus, of protecting himself. In addition to that, he has no hope of resuming his status as husband and head of household, as Eleni has been

emotionally divorced from him long ago and is ready to make her feelings official (267-68, 278, 333). Deprived of family and friends to welcome him (64, 150-1, 302), Achilles defies the point of his own *nostos*, by returning to Greece on a secret mission and not as a result of overwhelming nostalgia.¹³ His emotional connection with the homeland is filtered through the Party, as was the case with his relationship with Eleni and his entire entourage. Now in prison, Achilles is a silent character, reconstructed in the political rhetoric of two opposing factions, the junta establishment and the Greek political exiles in Paris. For the former, he is a traitor, a spy and a criminal (50, 64); for the latter, a victim, a leader and a hero (279-83). His trial mobilizes his old comrades and especially the successful Paris lawyer Kostas Kassimis, formerly known under the pseudonym Nikitas, who generously arranges for his defense (279-83, 302).

As expected of her, Eleni deploys her full loyalty to her husband and quietly caters to the romantic portrayal of their relationship put forth by the defense lawyer Genevieve, who suggests that Eleni have her life made into a movie. Eleni's rejection of the movie offer touches upon the multitude of issues faced by the idealized couple but falls short of revealing the truth (281-82). Similar was her response to stereotypes about the captain's fiancée thirteen years earlier, when Marie-Thérèse, her hostess in Paris, invited her to speak to a political gathering for women:

*At the gathering where she spoke about the women political prisoners, they treated her like a very important person. The fiancée of the captain (capetanios) with the ancient Greek name! (62).*¹⁴

In this case, Zei also allows a fleeting dialogue between Eleni's husband and the ancient Achilles, as the French audience seems to experience a double excitement thanks to the combination of two versions of Greek fighting spirit in one name. The stereotypical necessity of presenting modern Greece to the West in some sort of ancient packaging is also hinted at by Panos:

*For the foreigners, to understand you, you have to put into your conversation a bit of a Parthenon column. (63)*¹⁵

Coming full circle near the end of the novel, Eleni describes her own *nostos* in Odyssean terms with special emphasis on the sea as the key element of the Greek landscape:

We are flying over Athens. Scenes of homecoming, I knew them from books. Odysseus, twenty years, the day of homecoming (nostimon emar) ...

just a little longer and I would have caught up with him. All-white Athens is shining, not because of the snow. THE SEA, the sea which doesn't look like the steppe at all! (333).

The whiteness of the Athenian landscape dominates Eleni's visual recollection of her return home. Diving into the bright light of Attica, she defines the source of brightness first in negative terms, as if to dispel any misconceptions regarding the light's origin. Her attitude is clearly defensive, aiming at responding to the aesthetics of the snow-covered landscape that she was forced to get acclimated to in the Soviet Union (271, 346). She is also denouncing her previous false impression that Tashkent was near the sea, surrounded by a steppe like the sea (95, 159). Eleni's initial perception of Tashkent has connotations of sea and travel; she refers to it as a strange city somewhere in the Soviet Union, spelled with a letter that resembles Poseidon's trident without the handle and can relate to it geographically through its proximity to Samarqand in Uzbekistan, built on the site of Maracanda, the city destroyed by Alexander the Great in 329 BCE (14, 71, 95). To construct her persona of expatriate, Eleni borrows elements from Odysseus' myth, his wanderings at sea and his antagonism with Poseidon, as well as from the historical account of Alexander the Great. Both sources provide her with a Helleno-centric view of liminal spatiality, based on ancient Greek concepts of the hero who travels to the end of the earth in a journey of self-discovery and returns home to be reintegrated into his community after a series of challenging trials.¹⁶ Her wanderings make her a hero in her own right, a long-suffering traveler yearning to experience the visceral sense of spatial belonging even during her search for a new homeland chosen strictly by political ideology.¹⁷ Eleni's Odyssey takes her on a journey in "Steppeland" (161), where the heroine leaves behind a part of herself forever (266). Her *nostos*, however, reclaims her intellectual and emotional totality by putting to rest her fears that she would never see her mother or the sea again (203-04). Whereas Eleni likens the whiteness of snow to a winding-sheet, she conceptualizes her return to the glistening Aegean and the reunion with her family as a rebirth:¹⁸

Today I am born. I have an entire life ahead of me (335).

At the same time, her prolonged absence and *nostos* help her articulate her own sense of Hellenicity by means of her love for the landscape, the language and her family in Greece (336-38).¹⁹ Eleni, however, is not the average immigrant returning to Greece after years abroad: her brief and precarious reattachment to the native soil is violently terminated, causing her *nostos* to

enter a state of indefinite suspension due to the unpredictability of the Greek political landscape. It should be noted that Eleni, unlike her husband, returns to Greece as a pilgrim, without any expectation of validation or vindication (337); her homecoming fits the description of a warrior's *nostos* who has accomplished his mission elsewhere and returns home to a new life of peace and forgiveness.²⁰

Achilles in Homer is defined as the hero warrior who has several characteristics at an absolute level, carries out an antagonism with a power higher than him and is destined to die young.²¹ The characteristics that homeric Achilles is endowed with paint his heroic portrait with decisive brushstrokes: he is absolutely brave, honest and unrelenting in his pursuit of glory.²² He is faced with an unfairly powerful opponent, the god Apollo, and he goes to Troy with full foreknowledge of death.²³ As a matter of fact, Achilles is the only Greek in Troy who knows that he will never come back. During Odysseus' descent to the underworld in the *Odyssey*, we see him lament his lost *nostos* (homecoming) and declare that death is the most undesirable state of being.²⁴ Yet he never regrets his death at Troy, which came as a result of his decision to exact revenge for Patroclus' death by killing Hector. Like Achilles in our novel, the homeric Achilles has a clearly defined ascending scale of affection, on which he prioritizes ideals and individuals through a process based on honor, loyalty and affection. Homeric Achilles subscribes to a system of values based on honor and *charis* (gratitude/reciprocal favor) and does not hesitate to sacrifice himself out of obedience to his ascending scale of affection. Scholars have argued for millennia whether his act is a foolish, egotistical and futile expression of individuality or the honorable, uncompromising and selfless fulfillment of his pursuit for glory.²⁵

We may well assume that for Alki Zei's Achilles common cause and personal fulfillment is one and the same; from this point of view, his tendency to unquestionably defend every decision of the (Greek or Soviet) Communist Party is a manifestation of his natural propensity towards self-fulfillment rather than a token of continuous defiance at the ominous state of affairs he is confronted with. The question, however, remains: what kind of a hero is this modern Achilles? He may be interpreted as a plain, straightforward and easy to read dramatis persona or a complex character combining victim, oppressor and idealist. Like everybody else in his immediate circle of expatriates, the former guerilla fighter has to cope not only with the aftermath of their humiliating defeat in the Greek Civil War but also with the very real possibility that he may never return home. While he seems to deal successfully with the

former (167, 169), he fails to acknowledge the latter. For Achilles the road to victory is only temporarily closed, and his current hardship a trial of endurance and self-sacrifice required of all those who subscribe to the uncompromising pursuit of freedom (285). His instinctive opposition to every threat against his system of values permeates his attitude in every domain of life, rendering him inflexible and unapproachable. Engrossed in his efforts to undo the defeat his cause has suffered, he fails to see the dynamic changes that take place in the minds and hearts of his near-an-dear and especially Eleni, who comes to discover the atrocious disparity between risks and benefits in the life of "Achilles' fiancée."²⁶

Like the homeric Achilles, the captain in our novel is a source of pain for his people. It has been suggested that the etymology of the name Achilles encapsulates the hero's role as agent of grief (*ákhos*) for his people and army (*laós*).²⁷ In *Achilles' fiancée*, any association with Achilles carries the penalty of political persecution in its most cruel and unrelenting forms (30-31, 58, 167, 175). As Eleni suffers increasingly at the hands of her oppressors, she quickly realizes that she is ruthlessly persecuted only because of her relationship with Achilles and not on account of any crime she herself committed (40, 46). I believe that during the year she spends as an outlaw in post-civil war Athens, Eleni undergoes a surreptitious change of heart. While she remains devoted to communism and offers herself to torture and imprisonment for the sake of the cause, she feels lost in the midst of such suffering and alienation (29, 31). Furthermore, she begins to lament her non-existent relationship with Achilles, their seemingly endless separation and all the opportunities for happiness they were denied. What seems to pain her more than anything is the fact that she has to maintain two identities that are totally incompatible: the character of the lucky bride, the captain's fiancée, enveloped in the epic aura of Achilles' heroic profile, and her actual self of social outcast who endures excruciating loneliness and isolation as a result of her association with Achilles (46, 58). In a role reversal, Zei's Eleni suffers for the sake of Achilles, as Achilles complains in the *Iliad* that he suffers because of Helen, "fair-haired and abhorred."²⁸

We should also examine the role the names Daphne and Eleni play in the novel. Daphne, Eleni's real (and only) name before she joins the resistance, has romantic connotations of Classical Greece and overtones of sadness;²⁹ like Apollo's beloved nymph who, fleeing from the god's passion (and sexual aggression), was transformed into a laurel tree, young Daphne suffers a sudden and forceful transformation into Eleni as soon as she is touched by Achilles' affection.³⁰ Eleni takes over Daphne's public persona because of the latter's

association with Achilles and his notoriety (200).³¹ The protagonist, feeling seriously deprived of her true identity, makes a gift of her real name to her daughter (211), who is referred to as Daphnoura (little Daphne) throughout the novel.³² In her narrative, Eleni bemoans the fact that there are very few witnesses of Daphne's existence (289); they are, however, her dearest friends: Andreas, Serioja, Mikhael Gregorievitch and Jean-Paul.

Eleni's relationship with Jean-Paul, which lasts for almost a year, while she is waiting in Rome for a visa to join Achilles in Tashkent, causes an unbridgeable gap between Daphne and Eleni (109). Simply put, the two names come to symbolize polar opposites like happiness and unhappiness, joy and sorrow, love and loneliness, freedom and bondage, respectively. As Daphne emerges from the innermost recesses of Eleni's heart, the protagonist's potential to experience happiness rises to unprecedented levels. She becomes romantically involved with the Swiss painter she meets on the train to Rome and discovers, to her surprise, that she has never been happier (101). Still, the ghost of Eleni lurks threateningly in the background:

This is the only thing that separates him from me, his painting. What separates me from him is Eleni, Achilles' fiancée. (108)

Eleni appears to be inextricably intertwined with the title "Achilles' fiancée" causing Daphne to slowly suffocate and eventually give in to the enforced metamorphosis (200). Daphne is a much less common name than Eleni and as such it entails a degree of individuality that attracts positive attention, even admiration.³³ Although the name Eleni was suggested as a security pseudonym by Panos on account of the fact that it was a common name (16), we cannot ignore its mythological connection to Achilles.³⁴ Be it Helen of Sparta or Helen of Troy, the name belongs to a powerful mythical figure of legendary beauty and sexuality.³⁵ According to the main version of the myth, Helen is the reason for the death of countless Achaeans, including Achilles, who meets his fate before the fall of Troy, stricken by the arrows of the Trojan prince Paris guided by Apollo. In the story of the Trojan war Helen is the much-desired prize, the award reserved for the winner, either Menelaus or Paris. Yet this is not the aspect of the myth that solidifies the literary bond between the two pairs of Achilles-Eleni. According to Pausanias and Philostratus, Achilles after death has Helen as his wife and they live together in eternal youth and immortality on the White Island in the Black Sea.³⁶ According to another version of the myth found in Ibycus,³⁷ Achilles marries Medea after death and they live in eternal bliss in Elysium, a paradise for virtuous and distinguished mortals; the

name Medea also comes up in the discussion Daphne has with Panos, when they are trying to find a pseudonym for her.³⁸ As we hear in the *Odyssey*, Menelaus is destined to posthumously inhabit the Elysium as well, thanks to his wife and daughter of Zeus, Helen.³⁹ We must finally admit that the joined immortalization of Achilles and Helen is not the most prominent aspect of the myth of the Trojan War, which is usually concluded with the return of Helen to Sparta, where we see her in the *Odyssey*.⁴⁰ Therefore the connection between the two pairs of Achilles-Helen becomes even more intriguing.

The idea of Achilles the guerilla captain named after the great homeric hero accommodates several aspects of the narrative: it generates considerable awe in the novel's internal audience, where Achilles is, irrefutably, a war hero; it allows the narrative voices of the author and Eleni to disassemble Achilles' shiny armor and look inside the empty shell without enlisting any further irony; it plays with the attributes of the homeric prototype, sending messages of deeper criticism or even juxtaposition with "milder" heroic models, like Odysseus; and finally, it creates the perfect entrapment for poor Eleni, who sees herself in life-long virtual custody of the prestigious title "Achilles' fiancée."

In the novel, Achilles embodies for Eleni the ideal lover who remains out of reach (25). While considering divorce, she finds herself unable to decide between a date with Didier, the third director of *The Horror Train*, or Eugenios, her old comrade (148-49, 229-30, 268).⁴¹ The problem, again, is that she cannot shake off the title "Achilles' fiancée" (230); thus she chooses Eugenios because he knows the story of "Achilles' fiancée" (348). In addition to that, Eleni is represented in the novel as attractive and desirable to many men of her immediate environment, who view her connection with Achilles as irreversibly prohibitive to any potential advances. From age fifteen to forty-two, Helen/Eleni receives a multitude of compliments on her ageless beauty while she is identified as "Achilles' fiancée" (295, 321, 344). Except for the well-kept secrets of her romance with Jean-Paul, her Roman Paris, so to speak, and her brief affair with Dino in Athens (341-44), Helen/Eleni remains "Achilles' fiancée" for thirty years by both choice and necessity (25, 344).⁴² In Paris, Achilles' invisible ownership of her, though outdated, reverberates though the Greek expatriates and forces her to offer herself a willing victim to further artificial imaging and emotional silencing.

No matter how hard Eleni tries to reconcile the polarities of her two lives, her predicament remains abysmal because she has no real connection to Achilles. I argue that this very fact, namely Eleni's realization that she is trapped in her marriage with Achilles for political reasons even though their

relationship has failed, constitutes the crux of Zei's innovative point of view. By political reasons I mean the compilation of causalities that makes her an indispensable accessory to Achilles' image and, in turn, controls her own identity: the fact that Achilles and Eleni froze in time as the perfect young communist couple, the dilemma of openly denouncing him versus being endlessly persecuted, the necessity to move on with her life as well as the moral and social obligation to stand by him (50).

The omniscient narrator who takes us through Eleni's life in Paris in the sixties and her own narrative voice reminiscing of the events from thirty years earlier are joined in an account that designates the collective history as background to the personal (213). Thus Eleni says little or nothing of major historical events unless they serve as stage for the drama of human relationships.⁴³ Their romance and marriage, which take place under extraordinary circumstances leaving little or no space for true bonding and personal enjoyment, the hurried consummation of their love and the emotional gap it created, and, most of all, Achilles' near narcissistic concern with standards of personal ethics suitable for a leader of his caliber dictate the narrative tone and claim center stage. As part of the autobiographical focus of her historical account, Eleni re-stages scenes of her life with striking accuracy and from her own angle of the set (213).

As I mentioned above, Eleni is defined as a *dramatis persona* by the criteria of gender, age and class;⁴⁴ we could attempt to describe Eleni as a middle or working class forty-one year old female who grew up in Athens and lives in Paris. Yet the character slips through our fingers with this description, as so much is left out: she is surprisingly young-looking, barely touched by time in twenty years; she is a bourgeois intellectual of the Left in exile; her class identity, although shaped by her communist ideology, encompasses a view of the world that does not preclude comfort and elegance.⁴⁵ Furthermore, she is sophisticated and well-dressed, warm and affectionate, sensitive and capable of relating to people. Eleni, is above all a woman and not afraid of it. Her attitude towards history is emotional and personal, enriched by colorful elements of material culture that add splendor to her set with the precision of an obsessive director and the non-canonical approach of oral history.⁴⁶

Eleni dwells on details of no interest whatsoever to history books: the burgundy shoes and matching hat and gloves Lisa is wearing when she visits her in prison (46), the outfits of her fellow inmates who are taken for execution (50, 52), the new fashions she sees on the street the day she is released from prison (69). Clothes and fashion function as a token of individuality and

provide a medium of aesthetic connection with the social landscape. Eleni allows her penetrating gaze to wonder over people's attire in an effortless assessment of their prosperity, refinement and sense of beauty. Thus, she doesn't appear to be very impressed with the out-of-fashion outfits in a magazine at the Soviet Embassy in Rome (94), the equally outdated clothes of the women in Tashkent and the dull merchandize in Tashkent's stores (176). This last realization comes as a disappointment, given the fact that Eleni was hoping to purchase an entire new wardrobe in Tashkent so that she might not be reminded of Daphne from Rome (160-61, 176). All sorts of fashion details find their way in the narrative with special emphasis on the concepts of renewal and change; fashions come and go, just as people and ideologies change.

Zei artfully enables the female voice to translate emotions into objects, especially clothes, which she uses to connect scenes and maximize the theatrical potential of Eleni's reminiscences. Thus, the most beautiful and welcome gifts Eleni receives come from Serioja, whom she considers "the dearest friend of her heart" (154).⁴⁷ The elegant leather jacket Serioja gives her for her birthday in Athens, the waterproof burgundy boots he sends her with Nadia and the heavy fur coat that his wife kindly passes on to her are potent signifiers of their reciprocal affection and loyalty (86-87, 238, 273). The presents also indicate, especially as they reach Eleni in times of hardship and despair, that Serioja is always there for her, a miraculous source of inexhaustible generosity and love. Her mother, Lisa, also holds a special place in Eleni's recollection of personal items thanks to her motherly concern for her daughter's appearance combined with a unique talent in couture and style. Although Eleni is genuinely fond of her mother, she is often overshadowed by Lisa's charm (12, 87-88); Lisa chooses Eleni's clothes (69, 71) and encourages Eleni's political activities with impunity (12, 46-47, 57, 81, 241), while Eleni ends up suffering severe consequences (30-31, 37, 46, 53, 69, 83). The female narrative voice revisits the roles of mother and daughter in everyday, familiar scenes revolving around inner landscapes of comfort and beauty and their opposites: for example, the poorly-fitting grey lace evening gown that Eleni borrows from her mother for her first secret mission after she is released from prison becomes a metaphor for her now ill-fitting role of underground contact. In a similar metaphor, Lisa's old coat proves completely inadequate in the cold Moscow winter (269-73) but eventually Lisa redeems herself by sending Eleni a fabulous, "Capitalist made" fur coat that surpasses even the one Serioja gives her (298, 303-04). Thus their relationship fluctuates between remoteness and proximity, as Lisa fails her daughter by exposing her to

preventable risks but eventually redeems herself by coming to her rescue.⁴⁸

The character who seems to coexist in perfect aesthetic (and emotional) harmony with Eleni is Jean-Paul.⁴⁹ With him she can be herself, use her real name, act her age and enjoy life's every pleasure without any need for apologies (92, 102, 104). Throughout her narrative, Eleni inserts several flashbacks from her days with Jean-Paul (170-71, 267); they all speak of happy times with a man she felt close to, as opposed to Achilles, and they include detailed descriptions of apparel. Jean-Paul shares her ephemeral happiness of buying a pair of cheap orange shoes (105), compliments her on the blue dress with the straw fringe at the hem (174-75) and loves her simple style (172). Achilles, however, looks at her in the blue dress as if she is wearing a carnival costume (175) and finds her clothes flashy (172). The antithesis between the two relationships is visualized by means of the blue dress, which juxtaposes two different places, two different men and a girl with two different names, Daphne in Rome's Ponte Sant' Angelo and Eleni in Tashkent:

I am the same person in the same dress who posed on the bridge with the angels. Now Achilles takes my picture in the boat that he rented for us to go on a ride in the artificial lake of the great park (177).

Eleni's romance with Jean-Paul does not bear the marks of her ideological affiliation; to the contrary, their compatibility derives from Eleni's bravery to put away the mask of Achilles' fiancée and its attendant circumstances. Until then, thanks to Panos and then Achilles, her initiation to love had been a call to political activism.⁵⁰

As the novel progresses, it becomes evident that the intrusion of ideology into Eleni's personal life has dire consequences for her emotional well-being. Moreover, the rivalry between ideology and identity incorporates the comparison of failed sexuality to failed revolution. Eleni's struggle and subsequent failure to establish an emotional/sexual connection with her perfect husband corresponds to the political failure of their generation of communists. The two waves of sorrow, one personal, the other collective, reside in Eleni's thoughts and torment her ruthlessly but cannot drown her voice, the voice of a forty-one year old woman awaiting history's permission to piece her life back together. In this process, Eleni's memory replicates scene by scene the filming of the movie in which she is a protagonist, employing dramatic devices that enable her to travel through time and space and look at the events of her life from the perspective of thirty years later. Through this intense yet unintentional revisionism (221), the dialectic of exemplary heroism

and beauty is well served by the pair of protagonists Achilles-Eleni, who fulfill and fail their assignment, while *The Horror Train* moves slowly to its destination.⁵¹

NOTES

1. On the literary and historical context of *Achilles' Fiancée* see Beaton 287, Clogg 121-65, Koliopoulos-Veremis 68-98, Tziouvas 2003: 215-47, 274.
2. Cf. the analysis of the reception of ancient Greek myth in modern Greek fiction in Lambropoulos, *passim*. Zei's literary use of the myth of Achilles is perhaps not as direct as in the examples discussed in Lambropoulos' article but remains as important in the sense that it processes antiquity for narrative purposes.
3. 62-64, 333; cf. also Leontis 45-52 and Yalouri 77-82.
4. For a thorough discussion of the name of Achilles see Nagy 69-83.
5. All page references and quotations are from the 29th edition of the novel; see also cited references below.
6. The fact that Eleni, in her narrative, uses the phrase with remarkable frequency projects, I argue, a deliberately ironic view of her own notoriety.
7. All translations are my own.
8. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v.
9. Achilles is referred to by former comrades with the flattering terms *leventis* and *palikari*, both meaning "brave (young) man" (194, 321).
10. Years later, at their reunion in Tashkent, Achilles underlines his claim to marital loyalty, but not fidelity, by emphasizing that, during their years apart, he may have had sex with other women to satisfy his needs as a man but never put anyone in Eleni's place (200). Eleni, reversing the theme, views herself as the woman Achilles occasionally has sex with (276). On the disparity of Achilles' standards for male and female reproductive behavior see Tziouvas 2003:245.
11. This mini-epic encapsulates Eleni's portrayal of Achilles as her daughter's father, in other words, it contains the characteristics that she considers appropriate for the family's oral history. She cannot, however, avoid a certain uneasiness with her role of record keeper on account of her ambivalent feelings towards her husband; hence her wish that their daughter would not ask any further questions. Eleni may be seen here as the Muse assisting the epic poet to recall his material and then proceed with the performance of his song; she may also be seen as the epic poet himself, albeit an unconventional one, given the personal perspective of her narrative about Achilles (213). On time in *Achilles' Fiancée*

- and on Eleni's unconventional way of registering time see Tziouvas 2003: 240-41, 242 respectively.
12. Despite his imperishable glory (*kleos aphthiton*) Achilles has no *nostos* in the epic tradition, a fact he bemoans in *Od.*467-540. Odysseus' *nostos* constitutes a source of *kleos* (glory) in Homer; for both Achilles and Eleni in our novel *nostos* is a temporary and unfinished affair, coveted but interrupted and, eventually, canceled.
 13. Yalouri (1-2, 176-7) discusses the concept of whiteness as characteristic of stereotypical perceptions of the landscape of Athens and its antiquities. Cf. also Koufou 299.
 14. Cf. Tziouvas 2003:228; Eleni's carefree and youthful appearance becomes an issue as it clashes with Marie-Thérèse's preconceptions of how Achilles' fiancée should look (124-25).
 15. On the use of Classical antiquity as a means of modern Greek self-definition, see Koliopoulos 242-48, 263-75, Tziouvas 2008 *passim*.
 16. On the *Odyssey* as an epic of return and self-discovery incorporating the themes of death and rebirth see Segal 12-25.
 17. On notions of Hellenicity and the Greek Left see Koufou *passim*.
 18. The term *savano* (winding-sheet) appears also in the scene with Didier (149), as Eleni mishears Didier describing a rare French wine. In the same scene, a propos Didier's depiction of her as incurably homesick, Eleni compares silently the nostalgia she experienced as an exile in Soviet Union and in France.
 19. Waiting at the Aliens Bureau in Athens to ask for an extension of her and her daughter's residence permit, Eleni is confronted with the establishment's view of her as a gangster's wife (336).
 20. Cf. Nagy 35-38, Segal 187-92, Dova 63-64.
 21. Nagy 26-7, 61-63, 177, Zanker 8, 77-79, 81ff., 96-113.
 22. *Il.*1. 412, *Od.*11.467-70.
 23. *Il.*9.413.
 24. *Od.*11.467-540; on the dynamics of the encounter between the two heroes in Hades see Nagy 35-38, 166-67, Dova 57-58, Segal 37-45.
 25. Michelakis 16-8, 186f., Whitman 1958: 181-220, 1982: 25-28, 86-93.
 26. Cf. Tziouvas 2003: 244. The process of Achilles' de-mythologization takes place in Eleni's mind gradually as their relationship fails, but is never completed. Her change of heart coincides with her coming of age as she begins to establish her own system of values.
 27. The name of Achilles is directly related to his role in the *Iliad*; see also n. 4.

28. *Il.* 9.339, 19.325.
29. Oxford Classical Dictionary, s.v.; see also Ovid's powerful account (*Metamorphoses* 1.452ff.) of Daphne's myth.
30. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v.
31. We should also remember that in the myth of Daphne and Apollo the nymph is transformed into a tree so that she may evade the god's sexual violence.
32. Daphne herself is addressed with the same form of endearment by her aunts during her summer vacation on the island (103).
33. Her near-and-dear who witness her existence as opposed to Eleni (289) react enthusiastically to the name Daphne (289); Didier thinks of the romantic novel *The Pastoral Story of Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus (2nd-3rd cent. CE) when Eleni mentions to him her daughter's name (150).
34. It should be noted that according to the mythical tradition Achilles and Helen share no romantic involvement while alive; see also discussion on p.11.
35. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v.
36. Pausanias' account (*Description of Greece* 3.19.11-13) includes the information that Achilles and Helen live on the White Island with Patroclus, Antilochus, Ajax, son of Telamon and Ajax, son of Oileus. Flavius Philostratus (*Heroikos* 54.2-13) describes the creation of the White Island (*Leuke*) in the Euxine by Poseidon at Thetis' request; the island was meant to provide an idyllic home for Achilles and Helen to celebrate their love as immortals after death and a place for sailors to stay and set anchor. Interestingly, despite its limited attestation, this version of the myth is echoed also in the poem *Achilles after death* by Yiannis Ritsos (*Petres*, 68-9), where Achilles, presumably immortal after death, spends endless days waiting for Helen on the White Island.
37. Apollodorus, *Epitome*, v.5 changes the location to the Islands of the Blessed. Ibycus' version reappears in Simonides but is unknown to Homer, where Achilles complains about his predicament of being a shade in the underworld to Odysseus; see also p.9.
38. Cf. p.2; I don't know the extent of the author's familiarity with the different versions of the myth of Achilles but I would like to distinguish a network of allusions to various elements of this mythical tradition. It is of course likely that the alternative pseudonym Medea is suggested by Panos as an ironic response to Daphne's initial choice of the name Alcestis.
39. *Od.*4.563-69; association with Helen proves to be an invaluable asset for Menelaus, who will not die in Argos but will be sent by the immortals to the Elysian Fields, a place of pleasant weather and comfortable life.
40. In *Od.*4 Helen is the honored queen of Sparta and dutiful wife of Menelaus

sharing with her guests stories from the Trojan War.

41. The adjective used to illustrate her state of mind is *aneleutheros*, unable to be free, lacking in freedom of spirit and independence (230); her state of painful indecision regarding Saturday's date and the possibility of a relationship presupposes a certain bondage that Eleni herself does not seem to deny.
42. I would argue that Eleni's fatalistic view of her unfulfilled sexuality, synonymous with her romantic perception of Achilles as handsome and heroic, indicates her desire to transition from fiancée to wife, which never happens (25).
43. See also n.11.
44. See p.1. Although I consider all three criteria fundamental in Alki Zei's innovative technique, I find that gender overrides age and class from many points of view. Ultimately the novel is, I believe, a discussion of femininity as defined by a woman within a male-generated historical discourse.
45. On the modern Greek middle class see Koliopoulos-Veremis 194-99.
46. Instead of a dialogue between male and female worldviews, Achilles and Eleni may be perceived to represent two separate monologues, insular and deaf to each other's argument.
47. See also n.49 below.
48. Cf. Douka 115, 123-3, 172, 174-5; Myrsini, the protagonist of Maro Douka's *Fool's Gold*, seems to also have a difficult relationship with her mother. Moreover, she shares several characteristics with Eleni of *Achilles' Fiancée*: both women experience a violent intrusion of their ideology into their personal lives, suffer from the trauma of failed revolutionary and see themselves as disenfranchised or disoriented communists. They both join the cause as a result of romantic involvement with men who fail them emotionally but expect of them to meet the requirements of the traditional role of fiancée. In many ways both Myrsini and Eleni find their affiliation with the Left to act as a deterrent in their pursuit of personal fulfillment. On a parallel reading of the two novels see Tziouvas 2003: 215-47.
49. Although her friendship with Serioja is exceptionally deep, Eleni experiences an inexplicable disappointment at the realization that he has a family (273-74). Their love for each other, however, transcends sexuality (155); see also Tziouvas 2003: 245.
50. Panos is responsible for recruiting Eleni to the Communist Party and for introducing her to Achilles. When, one morning, during the German occupation of Greece, he asks her to meet him in the terrace of their apartment building, Daphne interprets (and accepts) his invitation as a secret rendez-vous (He wants to kiss me, thought Eleni to herself and went out of curiosity to see how it was because she hadn't yet been kissed by any boy. 11). Instead, Panos

suggests that she join the organization and that they go out together to write resistance slogans on walls. Cf. Tziovas 2003: 243.

51. If Achilles' assignment is to be brave and Eleni's to be beautiful, they succeed; if, however, their assignment is to be a couple, they fail. Their synergy, primarily motivated by external pressures, remains limited and fails to renew itself from within.

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