

Put on Misdirection, & 2 More

by [Jack D. Harvey](#) (May 2024)



Helen on the Ramparts of Troy –Gustave Moreau,
1880

Put on Misdirection, and a Woman's Name

"Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore..."

"Nicean barks"
pulled out of Poe's ass
to the bewilderment
of readers and scholars
through the ages
no explanation, no conjecture
too far-fetched, too eccentric,
from Poe's misspelling of Nike
to obscure citation to Catullus;
why not casual and obvious Wortklang?
Like and Nicean, i and i-ee
and that's it. Poe grabbed it.

But why compare Helen's beauty,
the cupped breasts that astonished
Menelaus, the rest of that divine form
to bygone Bithynian boats?

Yet it works to a fare-thee-well.

The beauty and power
of sounds, yoked to the allure
of far-off fuzzy associations
seduce the reader.
We don't look too closely,
sinking
in the poet's sea of sound
and fancy reference;
we don't know or see
how exotic goes to profound

but there it is.

Socrates' Eyeballs on Athens

Let's face it,
not for love of wisdom
and the Athenians alone
was he a dedicated pain in the ass.

A man, after all,
like the rest of us,
subject to the same
fits and starts,
chinks in the armor,
blowing his own horn
just a little, snub-nosed
gadfly to the masses
and sub rosa
enjoying it.

Gold-plated from his
gorbellied amplitude
to his crocodilian eyeballs,
his camus nose,
the accretions built by hearsay
and the passage of time,
there he stands in history.

A good soldier
on and off the battlefield
tossed off the hemlock
and ended his stay,
so they tell us,
with a snappy one-liner

directed to a healing god.

What was there
except a staged death
to put paid to his discourse?

His hairy and smooth
hangers-on, camping
around him, rich young
playboys, smart-ass
statesmen in the making
amateur playwrights,
future historians, philosophers
taking time, so they thought,
listen and listen
and go out and do
what they were bound to do,
every day all day
swimming in troubled waters,
untouched by the heart
of his casual demotic eloquence.

But none of my factitious recitations
make a bit of difference
in the long run;
however we build a sacred cow
it's still sacred.

He'll last forever,
his words and deeds
written down second-hand
and passed along,
old and fragile witnesses
to his place in ancient Athens;
a miraculous rescue
from the shipwreck
of time, *edax rerum*,

always on the job
and yet, sometimes evaded,
outfoxed.

In the kingdom of Hades
preserved the memory,
exempt and passed on to us,
Socrates paused
in his apokatastasis
for a brief farewell
to the legions of silent dead,
the unmemorable burnt-out clinkers
sad to see, impossible to reach,
whom he regretfully, respectfully
reviewed, numb to their eternal plight
and unspeakable obscurity,
gathered his ragged cloak
and went on his way.

Fato Profugus

Wherever, whoever,
truth be told
Fate really doesn't care.

With the easy legerdemain
of a magician
takes you for a ride,
bumpy or smooth
makes no difference to her.

Fato profugus, booted out by fate;
a fallacy of human sentiment.

Fate and Fortune, goddesses

conglomerated and refined
by the Greeks and Romans,
pared and redefined
to a fare-thee-well
in the Renaissance
and down the line
transmuted out of existence
by Wittgenstein
and the Wiener Kreis.

So it goes.
Through the ages,
philosophers and other kooks
considering the quirks
of chance and inevitability,
what's left in our hands
and what isn't,
come to no certain conclusion;
all the balls still in the air.

Anyway, in the standard model
Fate sets fixed and narrow courses,
her final picks beyond human ken;
flighty Fortune
has no skin in that game,
going her own willful
and equivocal way.

Who rules the roost?
One or both? Doubtless
you already know,
but let's open the locks
and further muddy the waters.

Take a look
at Hokusai's Great Wave
off Kanagawa;

overseen by remote Fujiyama
three boats laboring
in a monstrous sea;
at the oars
sailors lined up in rows;
in this welter of water
their lives
hanging in the balance
and they know it.

Dextrous Fortune
unconcerned, uncaring
deals out what she will
in the blink of an eye
or over decades
slipping in the knife
or the kingship;
gifting us or cursing us
with stove boats
or marble palaces.

There's no justice or order
no rhyme or reason
in her gifts or banes;
the same uncertainty
and self-besottment
at the root
of her roster of tricks.

Get used to it.

At ease in Zion,
toiling or spinning,
grabbing for the brass ring
these pursuits don't last long,
at the mercy
of that thin air above,

where Fate
pulls the strings
of uncertain souls below,
skating on thin ice
or straining at the oars
in heavy weather.

You want to get off here, stranger?
Someplace safe and sure?

Tell her that.
Tell Hokusai's sailors
and the rest of the earthlings
and find out
that this world
circling the sun,
its creatures of purpose,
lucky or undone,
deluded by seeming possibilities,
prospects, nevertheless
pass through her keyhole
to their preordained fate;
a great wave
favoring or dooming,
hanging dynamic and imminent
over their heads,
reaching and clawing
like Hokusai's Great Wave
off Kanagawa,
even now
thundering down
on Hokusai's stoic sailors,
steady at the oars

pale dots

abiding their fate.

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