Helen of Troy Reloaded

Helen of Troy, epitome of feminine allure and the devastation it can wreak on society, had a face that launched a thousand ships and nearly as many variations on her life story. Her eerie glamour, her magical birth with its avian overtones and her supernatural charm inspired dozens of ancient authors and storytellers to amplify the mythology of Helen with ever more fantastic tales of her loves, schemes and adventures. [1] A variant of her departure from Sparta with Paris, put forth by Steisichorus and followed by Euripides in his *Helen*, even questions the very reality of her being: was it actually she at Troy, or a mere *eidolon* of her watching from the walls of Troy? Where, or more importantly, who is the actual, visible, tangible Helen? This question is echoed throughout the many tales of her life. Helen's visibility is the ultimate mystery, and the desire to reveal her—not only to possess her, to own her, but also to know her in every sense—is often the driving force of action in stories about her.

It is a fascinating process to pick out the threads of her complex history as used by Adam Shapiro (producer of other television epics like "Attila" and "Dune"), screenwriter Ronni Kern, and director John Kent Harrison for the 2003 USA Network television miniseries "Helen of Troy." The film's jacket touts it as "inspired by Homer's *Iliad*" and "one of the most epic adventure stories of all time." Surprisingly, perhaps, this made-for-

TV version of Helen's life is by no means ignorant of some of the more obscure variations in her life story. "Helen of Troy" seeks to provide a modernized, accessible, yet authoritative version of the story of Helen and the Trojan War she launched. The opening credits of the film feature a male voiceover telling viewers that they may have heard of Helen, of the assembled cast of characters who attacked Troy, and of Troy's eventual fall, but "that is not the way it happened. Let me tell you the *real* story. I know. I was there." The voice is revealed to be Menelaus' and thus the filmmakers attempt to invest their alternate – and emphatically non-Iliadic – version of Helen's story with "eyewitness" authority. But Menelaus is an eyewitness to only part of the story in any version, and thus his claims to authority as a narrator are moot. It is significant that the filmmakers do not have Helen narrate her own story. Although it would pick up on the tradition of Helen as a poet-figure, such a move would be impossible, for the premise of Helen's myth – and Helen's appeal – is that no one has full access to her consciousness.[2]

As virtually every text before it has tried to do, this film attempts to fix Helen's notoriously ambiguous character. This version presents us with an innocent girl unaware of her uncanny beauty, who falls in love with Paris and flees an abusive home life in order to be with him. But in its attempts to clarify and explain Helen's story, the film is pulled in opposite and conflicting directions. On the one hand, it studiously mines the mythological tradition for stories of Helen's and Paris's lives before the Trojan War; on the other hand, it invents episodes and introduces modern, rationalizing explanations in order to fully "motivate" the story for a contemporary audience. It emphasizes her innocence and victimization, but at the same emphasizes her active agency. The result of

these two strands of storytelling, ironically, is an epic that is as over-determined as the *Iliad* itself: in attempting to eliminate conflicting elements in Helen's character and multiple causes for the war, the film replicates the over-determination of ancient epic, suggesting there is an irreducible indeterminacy in Helen's character and in the story of the Trojan War.[3]

This points to the fundamental tension structuring this film: it is torn between tapping alternative mythological traditions to Homer for authoritative ancient stories which valorize Helen, and inventing episodes in her story to fill in what are still felt to be "gaps" in motivation or explanation. The mythological traditions and invented episodes conflict, moreover, because the former tend to depict Helen as a passive victim, while the latter are designed to showcase Helen's agency.[4] In attempting to streamline and clarify, therefore, this film expands and confounds. The essential problem – that any story with multiple versions calls into question the concept of an "authoritative version" – remains unsolved. This is the problem that has always haunted Helen in the Western tradition.[5] As we will see, it is the problem that also haunts the Trojan War. In a sense, Helen and the Trojan War symbolize each other: they are over-determined, and indeterminate.[6] Even this most modern version of their stories is forced to follow this traditional pattern. In this version of her story, Helen almost becomes an symbolic repository of other important female voices in the Classical tradition, particularly Cassandra's. Both women possess a disturbing and eerie otherness, and both women are abused or subjugated because of sexual rejection. Cassandra's certain knowledge of doom leads nowhere because no one heeds her. Helen's passivity as an object to be won and owned makes her

equally helpless against her fate. If only the certainty of Cassandra could be combined with the charm and agency of Helen...

Another retelling: "Helen of Troy" and the mythical tradition

"Helen of Troy" draws liberally and ecumenically from the mythological tradition. Quick references to story lines outside the film's focus are common, such as Achilles's passing reference to his choice of fates, or Odysseus's avowal that he would rather plow salt into his fields than go to war. Because the film is interested in establishing Helen's (blameless) character before the war, it draws heavily on the Epic Cycle and other non-Homeric sources which present Helen as an innocent victim in some way.

Theseus and Helen

In the film, the nubile young Helen, shunned by Tyndareus for her unstated but presumably culpable role in her mother Leda's death, spends her days at home alternately taking tomboyish rides on her spirited horse and brooding over her mysterious role in Leda's demise. In a conflation of events, at the time that Agamemnon, accompanied by Menelaus, arrives to marry Clytemnestra, Theseus and Pirithoos also reach Sparta, disguised as travelers, to abduct Helen, still supposedly a mere child. After making off with the girl, Theseus and Pirithoos throw dice for Helen. When Theseus makes the successful toss, Pirithoos good-naturedly suggests that he should go after Persephone and disappears from the film. We are now ready to experience the relationship between Theseus and his captive child bride, something absent from ancient accounts but used

here to fill out Helen's psychological profile and as neat foreshadowing of what will happen to Helen's men at Troy.

A middle-aged Theseus, who seems older even than Tyndareus, playfully tells the sulking Helen that she had better get used to him, since one day they will marry. Though Theseus is obviously aroused by Helen's slender calves clad in fetching lace-up sandals, here he restrains himself from sexual contact with her. Gone is the arrogant and promiscuous Theseus of ancient myth: this Theseus is slated to become the gentle and loving father figure Helen never had. It is Theseus who finally reveals to Helen that her mother committed suicide because she had been unfaithful to her husband with none other than Zeus himself, Helen's biological father, and not because of anything that Helen did or caused, as her human stepfather Tyndareus had led her to believe. Theseus in essence raises Helen to womanhood. In a later scene we can tell by her neater hairstyle and more sophisticated garments and jewelry that she has matured into the ravishing creature all men lust after. Despite her obvious adult sexual interest in him, Theseus humbly declines her advances, telling her that their relationship was only "a kind of practice" and that someday she will be with a man truly worthy of her (alluding to Paris).

Unaware of their innocent and loving relationship, Pollux alone (Castor does not appear in the film) bursts on the scene, and in a battle to the death (despite Pollux's immortal status in myth), stabs Theseus in the gut before receiving a similar fatal blow from the dying Theseus. Helen screams impotently on the sidelines, unable to save either man. In one unnecessary battle, Helen has lost the two men she loved and trusted most in

the world and just begins to sense the unwieldy burden of her overwhelming attractiveness. Now a woman, Helen can see the destruction her very existence engenders among the men she loves, and among those who love or lust after her. Though presented as the most desirable woman in the universe, she will be doomed to a pure but star-crossed love affair that ends in death for her soul mate, Paris.

The Encomium *of Helen and Paris*

The film opens with the birth of Alexandros. This choice of beginning connects the film to an impulse in the mythological tradition that attempted to locate the ultimate cause of the Trojan War – the birth of Paris? the birth of Helen? the wedding of Peleus and Thetis? the Judgment of Paris? – which, by implication, could have averted the war had it been prevented.[7] The young Cassandra urges Priam to kill the boy, and Priam, respectful of Cassandra's gift, has the baby exposed on Mt. Ida. Alexandros is rescued by a shepherd, renamed Paris, and grows up to be a shepherd. He is given the opportunity to claim his royal identity by the confiscation of his family's prize bull for some suspiciously gladiatorial-style games given by Priam. Paris enters Troy and fights as a gladiator to win his bull back, finally conquering Hector himself. This prompts Cassandra and his parents to recognize him, and despite her warnings, they take him back as their son. Thus Paris is established as unambiguously heroic, sympathetic, and virtuous. His decision in the Judgment of Paris, not surprisingly, is motivated by the simple experience of love at first sight, upon seeing Helen in Aphrodite's visionary golden apple. He is also blameless in his choice, since he sees Helen in "real time," before she is married.

Meanwhile, a pre-pubescent Helen (played less than convincingly by the same actress who plays the mature Helen) has a vision of true love reflected in the waters of a pond: Paris. This vision sustains her through the awkward years of her adolescence, as she is kidnapped by Theseus, rescued by Pollux, and finally married off to Menelaus. This Helen is loved by no one: her father Tyndareus blames her for the deaths of Leda and Pollux; Theseus refuses to touch her, first out of restraint at her age and later out of humility; the Greek kings who compete for her hand lust after her, but do not care about her; and even Menelaus, who seems smitten with her, forces her to display herself nude to an assembly of Greek dignitaries once they are married in Sparta. Small wonder, then, that when Paris arrives on a suicide diplomatic mission to Sparta (concocted by his father to eliminate him without blood-guilt), he appears like a savior to the miserable Helen, who is about to attempt suicide. They profess their love for each other and flee in short order; neither is guilty of anything more than attempting to escape an abusive and/or deadly situation. They are presented as star-crossed lovers, each marked out as uncanny by their respective peoples, but blameless themselves.

It seems that the producers of this film felt the need to eliminate moral ambiguity in this famous story of adultery, whether to connect it in viewers' minds to more well known story patterns (*Romeo and Juliet* and its avatars), or simply to make the characters more "likeable." While the white-washing of Paris's character seems amusing, [8] the attempt to do the same for Helen's character is far more interesting – and problematic. One problem is the fact that the same actress plays both the pre-pubescent and the adult

Helen (28-year-old Sienna Guillory). She attempts to give a childlike air to her character in the film's early scenes through awkward, coltish body language, lack of grooming, and a distracted air, but the contrast between her adult body and the other characters' references to her as "not yet a woman" is confusing. She *is* a woman. Whether the decision not to cast a child actor to play the child Helen was based on the fact that Helen, in the mythological tradition, is presented as already womanly and desirable at a freakishly early age, or whether it was based on the difficulty of casting any one person to play the Most Beautiful Woman in the World, much less two people who must also resemble each other, it highlights the difficulty of visually representing Helen at all.[9]

Another difficulty with "clarifying" Helen's character is that it renders the Trojan War difficult to explain. In this film, Helen repeatedly attempts to either kill herself or return to the Greeks once she is in Troy, only to be thwarted at every turn. In the near-total absence of gods who cause events, or Fate, which decrees them (both of which factors this film downplays radically), humans are the main force at work in this world, and human factors would seem to allow Helen's self-sacrifice. But Helen's efforts seem destined to fail. For example, when Paris returns from Sparta to Troy with Helen in tow and the Greek fleet hot on his heels, Priam is furious with him for bringing war to his city. Paris's self-defense is twofold: he asserts, "Agamemnon brings war, not I," and claims, "I did not take her," implying that Helen came with him of her own free will. Paris describes Helen's miserable situation in Sparta as being trapped in a society where "men place no value on beauty," nor, by implication, on women. Priam is softened by his son's eloquence and seems poised to resign himself to keeping Helen. Enter Helen

herself – in a golden headdress that is surely meant to evoke, for the knowledgeable viewer, the golden "Jewels of Helen" famously worn by Heinrich Schliemann's wife Sophia in photographs, since vanished. Helen announces that she wishes to be returned to her husband. Instead of *listening* to her, however, Priam and the Trojan elders are *looking* at her. "Golden Troy," as the city is repeatedly called by the Greeks, clearly places a high value on beauty. Helen will stay, and the Trojan War will happen, despite Cassandra's warnings, despite Priam's misgivings, despite Helen's own efforts – in fact, *because* of her own efforts.

Helen and Paris as cursed

Greek religion presents divine power as an ambivalent force in the world. Each god wields a power that has both positive and negative dimensions. For example, Apollo is the god of healing, but also of plague. Thus the gifts that the gods bestow on mortals are often burdens as well. "Helen of Troy" does a fine job of showing how both Helen and Paris, the most beautiful mortals on earth, were marked out by those around them as uncanny or cursed.

In this film, Leda committed suicide after giving birth to Helen, out of shame at having been unfaithful to her husband, and Tyndareus blames Helen for Leda's death. Theseus is the one who reveals Helen's divine parentage to her, explaining, "That's why your beauty will never be matched. That's why no man will ever resist you." When Pollux dies rescuing Helen from Theseus, Tyndareus forbids Helen to mourn for her brother at the funeral and cries out to the assembled Greek captains, "Who will take this

cursed woman?" He is greeted with a long silence. Through no fault of her own, Helen is marked out by the gods. She is not responsible for her moral ambiguity. In this way, the film manages to express myth's uneasiness about Helen while at the same time presenting her as innocent.

Paris is similarly marked out as both cursed and blameless. While Priam and Hecuba claim him as their son upon his return to Troy, Hector and Cassandra resist welcoming him. Even kindhearted Priam is finally persuaded that Paris is dangerous for Troy, and he sends him on an embassy to Sparta where he expects Paris will be killed. When Paris and his followers arrive with great speed at the Spartan court, there is a background noise of wind, and one of the Trojans remarks, "Such a strong wind – the gods obviously favor your mission," to which Paris replies, "Don't count on it."

Cassandra: the voice of Classical tradition

Cassandra gets a good deal of screen time in "Helen of Troy." Unlike Helen, she is played by both a child actor in the early part of the film and an adult actor for the rest of the film. At the beginning, she appears as a child in the Trojan palace while Hecuba is in the final stages of labor. Cassandra screams "Kill him! Kill him!" before the baby is delivered and its sex known. Priam takes her aside and asks if she has had another one of her visions. Gone is Cassandra the Tragically Unheeded Warner; in this film she is Cassandra the Respected Prophet. But she counsels something unimaginable, and the most Priam can do is order his newborn son exposed. We see how the filmmakers have tweaked Cassandra's character: she is the seer doomed to be partially and half-heartedly

respected. Her words are respected, in fact, up to the point when modern sensibilities (presumably) find what she has to say intolerable. Audiences can countenance a child being exposed in this story, the filmmakers seem to believe, because exposed children in Greek myth are always rescued, but they cannot countenance a child being murdered at birth. The Trojans, as we will discuss below, emerge at the beginning of the film as sharing modern sensibilities, while Cassandra, by contrast, is the voice of traditional Greek morality. She repeatedly urges the Trojans to kill Paris, both when he is a newborn and when he is an adult. Alone among the Trojans, she hates Helen and blames her for the Trojan War. And finally, she is punished for her primitive and bloodthirsty counsel, banished to an anachronistic dungeon. Her voice, in fact, is the voice of the Classical tradition in this film: she lays out the plot, is initially respected and obeyed to some degree, and is finally ignored and forgotten. But she passes along her crucial wisdom to Helen herself, who then assumes the mantle of tradition—as always, in her own way.

"Bonus features": invented scenes

"Helen of Troy" feels it necessary to provide additional motivation or explanation for certain features of the story, implying that modern audiences would find the traditional tale to have gaps in its logic. Most of these additions expand on the idea of Helen and Paris as truly and mutually in love. Significantly, these additions also play up Helen's agency, even in situations where she seems to be victimized.

True Love: The Magic Apple

In attempt to establish the nascence of Helen and Paris's mutual love long before Helen's involvement with other men – making it somehow "purer" and side-stepping the morality issues their relationship imposes – the film inserts one of the only scenes involving the presence of deities: the famous Judgment of Paris. While Paris hunts for a lost goat in a mountain cave, the three goddesses appear to him in a blurry mist, each offering him a splendid reward for his vote. Aphrodite cradles the golden apple, and as she holds it out in front of Paris, he sees a vision of the young, scantily dressed Helen frolicking with her horse alongside a country stream. Helen, in turn, gazes into the stream and sees, instead of her own face, a reflection of Paris, extremely handsome and ripe with youthful manhood. They are mirror images of each other: both are misunderstood and mistrusted by their own people, and yet they are both fated to be together and are doomed to unhappiness. Unlike the pusillanimous Paris of ancient myth, this Paris is certainly Helen's equal, as he proves again and again in games, at court and in battle. This makes it morally feasible for Helen to choose to flee Sparta with him, for he and he alone appreciates and understands her special beauty and is determined to treat her with respect and admiration, unlike her unfeeling husband and his folk who humiliate Helen and treat her as an *objet d'art* rather than a passionate and sensitive woman.

Helen's nude scene

The captains of Greece perform a sortition (using their signet rings) to determine which man will wed Helen. Odysseus has the idea of having all the competitors swear an oath beforehand that they will all come to the defense of Helen's husband. Once

Menelaus has won the lottery and claimed Helen as his bride, Agamemnon decides that Menelaus must give the other Greek captains "proof" that Helen is worth their oaths. He orders her to display herself naked to the assembled captains in Sparta. As she disrobes in the women's quarters, preparing to comply with this order, her sister Clytemnestra asks her how she can bear the thought of such humiliation. Helen replies, "They can look all they want, but they won't see me," implying that she values her interior agency and subjectivity over her external appearance. Emphasizing her invisible and unknowable interiority over her external appearance, however, reintroduces the idea of Helen's ambiguity; the Greeks can look all they want, but they will not see, or know, the real Helen.

Helen's odd choice of words – "they won't see me" – may be intended to suggest the ancient concept of Helen's *eidolon*, her phantom double which Stesichorus hints and Euripides explains went to Troy in place of the real, blameless Helen. The image of Helen, the outward appearance of Helen, was what caused the Trojan War, while the real Helen, unknown to anyone, lingered for ten years in Egypt, faithful and chaste. This poetic invention was designed to remove shame from Helen, although it was a paradoxically self-undermining move, since it re-inscribed her famous ambiguity.[10] While this film does not do anything more than hint at the concept of the *eidolon*, it does use the idea of Helen's "visibility" to suggest a split in the way various people see her, and ultimately in her character. When Paris enters the Spartan hall where Helen stands, nude and emotionless, in front of dozens of Greek captains, she gazes eagerly into his eyes. Afterwards, we see Helen covering herself hastily with a robe; she says to her sister

that she felt no shame until she saw Paris. Her shame drives her to attempt suicide by jumping from the palace wall; Paris catches her at the last second, and they quickly confess their love for each other, triggered by the vision in the apple long ago. Clytemnestra observes this seduction scene unnoticed, catches Helen alone in the corridor, and slaps her hard across the face, asking, "What are you *doing*?" Helen replies wildly, "I've started to become *visible*!" In other words, her external appearance and her interior essence are collapsing into each other; her true self, her secret feelings, her agency, are visible in her famous face. Just as Stesichorus, Euripides, and Gorgias did, the filmmakers, in attempting to produce a blameless Helen with a sense of interiority, have re-inscribed her ambiguity and her indeterminacy. In this newly invented scene, she has become her old, blameworthy *eidolon*.[11] And as Helen begins to feel shame, we see the beginning of her deceptiveness. She smuggles Paris out of the palace to his ship, saving his life; at the last moment, she jumps off the pier and swims to the departing ship, leaving Menelaus, igniting the war.

The Trojans as humanist feminists

Picking up on Homer's full, humane portrait of Trojan home life in the *Iliad*, the filmmakers portray the Trojans as the heroes of this film. They are humanist, believing in mercy, humane treatment, and the right of all people to a decent life. These qualities make them better than the Greeks – exemplified by ruthless, calculating Agamemnon and macho skinhead Achilles – but softer than them as well, and doomed to fall to them. The Trojans refuse to give Helen back to her husband, not because Paris refuses to allow it, as in the *Iliad* (7.362), not because they are avenging earlier woman-stealing by the Greeks,

as in Herodotus (1.4), not even because they are fated to keep her and drag out the war for ten years, but because Priam senses that Helen was mistreated at home, and wishes to spare her a lifetime of ill treatment.[12] Similarly, Priam refuses to kill Paris despite his confidence in Cassandra's prophetic abilities: "Why will you not believe?" Cassandra asks him incredulously and despairingly, to which Priam replies, "Because, child, we *cannot* believe. We *must* not believe." Rather than being doomed by Fate or the gods, the Trojans doom themselves. They are simply too far ahead of their time.

But this merely adds to the list of reasons why the Trojan War happens in this film. The film cannot do away entirely with Fate and the gods; Cassandra's presence hints at Fate, and the Judgment of Paris depicts the three goddesses briefly. Paris and Helen fall in love through divine intervention. Thus the "explanation" that the Trojans doom themselves through progressive social policies is layered on top of the other old and new reasons for the war, enhancing the sense of multiple inevitable causes.

Agamemnon's political-economic ambitions

Compounding the problem of over-determination in this film is the character of Agamemnon, who is made to bear the brunt of all the modern, Realpolitik causes of the war. Agamemnon is described by the other characters (on both sides) as politically ambitious and is greeted by them as "High King Agamemnon." He sacrifices Iphigenia after only a moment's hesitation, weeping as he does so, but stating flatly, "There's our wind," as he throws the child's body to the side of the altar. In addition, he is greedy, desiring access to the shipping lanes in the Bosporus which Troy guards and refusing to

allow Menelaus any spoils from the war other than Helen.[13] His character is summed up by his behavior during the sack of Troy, when he rapes Helen in full view of Menelaus, who is prevented from intervening by Odysseus. Agamemnon has taken golden Troy; Agamemnon has taken golden Helen. Thus ancient character assassination and modern rationalization are fused in this villain. And thus Helen's identification with Troy is made explicit by this invented episode.

The ending

The two impulses at work in "Helen of Troy" are clearest in the ending of the film, which is comprised of two episodes in the story of the fall of Troy (neither originally involving Helen), somewhat awkwardly juxtaposed. The second-to-last scene in the film shows Clytemnestra in Troy, walking in on Agamemnon, nude and langorous in a large bathing pool. Helen, naked, bruised, and silent, is cowering at the edge of the pool. Agamemnon, who has leered at Helen throughout the movie, and who rapes Helen during the fall of Troy, has just raped her again. Clytemnestra raises her sister to her feet, covers her with a cloak, kisses her, and sends her out of the room. Agamemnon tells her curtly not to interfere in his affairs, and Clytemnestra replies that she has come on behalf of Iphigenia. Then she throws a net over him, wades grimly into the pool, and stabs him to death.

The last scene in the film shows us Helen just outside the walls of Troy. It is the morning after the fall of the city, and she is walking, dazed, through the smoldering rubble. She finds the spot where Paris was killed (he dies rescuing her from giving

herself up to the Greeks, in yet another futile effort to stop the war) and touches the bloodstain. She has a vision of Paris's ghost, who tells her he has prepared a place for her at his side in the afterlife. At this moment, Menelaus finds her, and without saying a word, she bares her neck for his sword. He hesitates, then sheathes his sword, asking:

Menelaus: Do you think I would kill you, Helen?
Helen: I do not thank you for my life.
Menelaus: I understand.
Helen: I cannot love you.
Menelaus: What will you do?
Helen: I will...follow?

When in an earlier scene Helen exchanged a few hurried words with Cassandra as Troy literally fell around them, Cassandra urged Helen to "follow." Helen has not been destined to be the pilot of her own ship, but rather to be the plaything of fate. Helen does not understand this until, amidst the destruction, she meets her husband, who is obviously willing to take her back. She honestly admits she can never love him, but by stating, albeit hesitantly, that she will follow him, she commits herself to him and to her fate and for the first time, becomes an active agent of her destiny. For what else can Helen do but be possessed by a man? They walk off in silence, he in front, she behind, looking back over her shoulder.

Both of these scenes are well known from the mythological and literary tradition about the fall of Troy, but both are tweaked in significant ways. In the second-to-last scene, a version of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* set in Troy, Helen has taken Cassandra's place as the passive victim of Agamemnon's brutal lust. She does not speak a word during the entire scene, and is sent off-camera by Clytemnestra before the action takes place. The last scene in the film is a conflation of the Epic Cycle's *Little Iliad* and

Vergil's *Aeneid*. The confrontation between Menelaus and Helen comes from the *Little Iliad*, in which Menelaus was prepared to kill Helen until she bared her breasts to him and thus saved herself. In the film, Helen also has the power to follow her own fate, but not as the Epic Cycle would have it: Menelaus, still hopelessly in love with Helen, gives her the choice of what to do with her life. When the two of them walk out of the burning wreck of Troy, it evokes the end of book 2 of Vergil's *Aeneid*, when Aeneas and his wife Creusa walk out of the burning wreck of Troy, Creusa following several steps behind Aeneas, doomed to die.

Cassandra, as we have argued, serves as the voice of the mythological tradition in this film. It is not so surprising, therefore, that she disappears at the end of the film, when the plot plays fast and loose with myth. In Helen's final meeting with Cassandra, the prophetess tells her that her fate is "to follow." At the end of the film, Helen takes over for Cassandra, speaking cryptic words in tragic-style utterance. Helen substitutes for Cassandra in the rape scene. The New Helen, the filmmakers' Helen, substitutes for the voice of tradition. Yet she is silent, because unlike Cassandra, she cannot predict the future. And because she is silent and passive, this scene depicting her as an innocent victim of Agamemnon's brutality is not an adequate ending for her character. It says nothing of her love for Paris, nothing of her feelings about the end of the war, nothing about Menelaus. It provides no closure for the modern audience. So we are transported to the walls of Troy for the ending, for access into Helen's consciousness. We see her greeted by Paris's ghost, and hear her ask him whether she will be reunited with him in the afterlife. He promises that she will. But in presenting us with the New Helen, the

active agent making her own choices, the filmmakers have to reinstate her famous ambiguity[14]: "I will follow" is a perfect tragic-style ambiguous statement, interpreted one way by the deceived character and another way by the audience. The New Helen has come full circle: she is as elusive and deceptive as the Old Helen. Her silence after this line, as she hesitantly follows her husband out of the burning city, lowers the veil again on her consciousness: while she has told Menelaus she cannot love him, we are left wondering whether she meant to mislead him with her last words. In assimilating Helen to the blameless Creusa, the film also likens her to the ghost that Aeneas, famously, could not hold on to. Once Helen is given the chance to actively follow her own destiny, she retreats even further from our grasp. As one scholar says of an earlier revisionist version of Helen's story, we are left wondering "just how new the new Helen of this play really is."[15]

Lisa Rengo George and Anne Duncan

Works Cited

Austin, Norman. *Helen of Troy and her shameless phantom*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1994.

Bassi, Karen. "Helen and the Discourse of Denial in Stesichorus' Palinode." *Arethusa* 26.1 (1993) 51-75.

Clader, Linda Lee. *Helen: the evolution from divine to heroic in Greek epic tradition*. Brill: Leiden, 1976.

Foley, Helene. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford, 2001.

Gantz, Timothy. *Early Greek Myth*: *A guide to literary and artistic sources*. The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London, 1993.

Gumpert, Matthew. *Grafting Helen: the abduction of the classical past*. University of Wisconsin Press: Madison and London, 2001.

Holmberg, Ingrid E. "Euripides' *Helen*: Most Noble and Most Chaste." *American Journal of Philology* 116 (1995) 19-42.

Juffras, Diane M. "Helen and other Victims in Euripides' *Helen*." *Hermes* 121 (1993) 45-57.

Paglia, Camille. "Homer on Film: A Voyage Through *The Odyssey*, *Ulysses*, *Helen of Troy*, and *Contempt*." *Arion* 5.2 (1997) 166-197.

Pantelia, Maria C. "Helen and the Last Song for Hector." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 132.1-2 (2002) 21-27.

Shaffer, Diana. "The Shadow of Helen: The Status of the Visual Image in Gorgias's *Encomium to Helen*." *Rhetorica* 16.3 (1998) 243-257.

Solomon, Jon. *The Ancient World in the Cinema*. Yale University Press: New Haven, 2001.

Suzuki, Mihoko. *Metamorphoses of Helen: authority, difference, and the epic*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1989.

Woodbury, Leonard. "Helen and the Palinode." *Phoenix* 21 (1967) 157-76.

Worman, Nancy. "This Voice Which Is Not One: Helen's Verbal Guises in Homeric Epic," in *Making Silence Speak: Women's Voices in Greek Literature and*

Society, edd. André Lardinois and Laura McClure. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2001.

_____. "The Body as Argument: Helen in Four Greek Texts." *Classical Antiquity* 16 (1997) 151-203.

Zeitlin, Froma I. *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1996.

---

[1] "There is no definitive myth of Helen, then, but a host of Helen myths, all posing as the truth": Gumpert (2001) 3.

[2] As has been extensively discussed, Helen is connected with poetry and mimesis throughout the Greek tradition: see Austin (1994) 38 and n.21, Clader (1976) 6-12, 32-33, 81; Gumpert (2001); Pantelia (2002); Suzuki (1989) 40-41, 54-56, 68-70; Worman (2001) 22, 30-37 and (1997) 159; Zeitlin (1996) 406-11. See also Bassi (1993) 65 n.31.

[3] Even in "revisionist" texts like Stesichorus's *Palinode*, Euripides's *Helen*, and Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, which attempt to simplify Helen's story by providing alternative and more acceptable reasons for her behavior, over-determination remains a problem. Gorgias, for example, provides *four* reasons for Helen's behavior, and thus *four* reasons for why she should be held blameless.

[4] Shaffer (1998) 250 argues that Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* "is double-edged…[it] proves her innocence but only by transforming her from a subject who wills her own actions into a passive object." The film "Helen of Troy" undertakes the reverse transformation out of the same motive, with the same "double-edged" results. On Helen's problematic agency (defined as her oscillation between subject and object positions) in ancient Greek texts, see in particular Worman (1997).

[5] Beginning with Stesichorus's *Palinode* and then Euripides's *Helen* and Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*. See Austin (1994) 90-117, 137-203; Bassi (1994); Gumpert (2001); Suzuki (1989) 13-15; see also Shaffer 1998); Woodbury (1967); Zeitlin (1996) 409-16.

[6] Gumpert (2001) analyzes this indeterminacy in Helen's tradition through a Derridean lens.

[7] This recurring theme is especially apparent in the artistic tradition, both in ancient vase-paintings and in Renaissance and later paintings. The artist must choose one moment

from the story to suggest the entire myth, and over and over again, artists choose a beginning that is pregnant with its own destruction.

[8] Solomon (2001) 107 notes that the 1956 film "Helen of Troy" took the same approach to Paris's character.

[9] Worman (1997) 161 points out that in the *Iliad*, "Helen's actual physical body is never described directly; the external audience is given neither a glimpse of her flesh nor a flash of her foot," and Clader (1976) 12 notes that "the closest Homer ever comes to a physical description of the most beautiful woman in the world" is at *Iliad* 3.158, where the elderly men of Troy say she looks "terribly like one of the immortal goddesses." Blonde or brunette? Slim or voluptuous? Any visual depiction of Helen must choose, and therefore must disappoint. In the vase-painting tradition, scenes that depict Helen and Menelaus tend to show Helen accompanied by Aphrodite, Eros, and/or Peitho; see Worman (1997) 182 n.104. This iconography is both a sign of her special status and a concession that depicting Helen alone will not convince the viewer of her singular beauty.

[10] See Bassi (1993); Foley (2001) 318; Holmberg (1995) 26; Juffras (1993). Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* produced the same result: Shaffer (1998) 250.

[11] In this way, she parallels the experience of Helen in Euripides's *Helen*: see Juffras (1993) 56.

[12] Suzuki (1989) 14-15 notes that Herodotus contradicts himself at 2.118, where he insists Helen could not have gone to Troy – and thus partakes of the tradition of ambiguity about Helen that goes back to the *Iliad*.

[13] Paglia (1997) 189 notes that the 1956 film "Helen of Troy" opens with a shot of a map of the Hellespont and a "booming voiceover" informing the viewer of the area's "commercial importance." Austin (1994) 23-25 discusses the tendency among modern scholars to reduce the causes of the "real" Trojan War (if there was one) to economics, and notes that Helen herself "transcends economic categories"; she is the one woman who is never made a slave after the war. Though men fight for the right to possess her, she cannot be reduced to chattel. Again, Helen's presence in the story indicates over-determination.

[14] On Helen's ambiguity in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, see Suzuki (1989) 18-19, 34-38, 66-73. See also Austin (1994) 10-11; Holmberg (1995) 28; Woodbury (1967) 167; Worman (1997) 155-67.

[15] Juffras (1993) 46, on Euripides's *Helen*.