

CHAPTER 5

Helen of Troy: Marriage and adultery according to Hollywood

The most beautiful among mortal women in ancient myth is Helen of Troy (originally, of Sparta). Famous in Western culture long before Eve, whose story depended for its familiarity on the spread of Christianity, Helen is the West's original *femme fatale*.¹ The most fascinating aspect of her story is her illicit love for Paris, the handsome son of King Priam of Troy. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, had promised Paris the most beautiful mortal woman in return for awarding Aphrodite the prize of supreme divine beauty. Unable to resist such a tempting bribe, Paris made his fateful judgment. He then traveled from Troy to Greece for his reward. Helen was the wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta, and mother of Hermione.² But she fell victim to the passion instilled in her by Aphrodite. As Virgil famously put it, if in a different context: "Love conquers all."³ Helen, "crazed by the Trojan man," followed Paris to Troy.⁴ Hence the Trojan War and the fall of Troy, antiquity's biggest myth.⁵

¹ Hughes 2005 surveys the variety of ancient and later views of Helen, who in some accounts took the initiative and herself seduced Paris. For more specialized studies of Helen in classical and later literature see Suzuki 1989, Gumpert 2001, and Bettini and Brillante 2002, all with extensive additional references.

² Homer, *Iliad* 3.174–175, mentions Helen's child. Some sources add a second child, a son called either Maraphius (Porphyry, *Homeric Questions* [at schol. D on *Iliad* 3.175]) or Nicostratus (Hesiod, *Catalogues of Women* 70 [= 175 Merkelbach–West]; Cinaethon, *Fragm.* 3 West; Apollodorus, *Library* 3.11.1 [= 3.133]). In a few obscure sources Helen is the mother of even more sons. For thorough introductions to the ancient literary and iconographic evidence concerning Helen and Menelaus see Ghali-Kahil 1955 and Kahil 1988 and 1997. On Helen's children see Ghali-Kahil 34–35.

³ Virgil, *Eclogues* 10.69: *omnia vincit amor*. The expression had become proverbial in antiquity, as Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 5.16.7, attests.

⁴ The quotation is from Alcaeus, *Fragm.* 283.3–4 Lobel–Page, in David A. Campbell 1990: 333.

⁵ Cf. Edmunds 2002–2003. The diagram at Latacz 2006: 28–30 outlines the entire mythology relating to the Trojan War from its antecedents to its aftermath. On Helen in Homer see Ghali-Kahil 1955: vol. 1, 15–26. Roisman 2006 gives a recent assessment of her importance, with additional references. Cf. also Skutsch 1987.

Dangerous beauties for whose sake men rush to ruin themselves and others are naturals for popular storytelling in word and image. Especially gripping in tales of two lovers' irresistible passion for each other is the added complication of adultery, which makes one or both of them leave behind all sense of morality, shame, and responsible behavior. This kind of tale was admirably summarized in Samuel Johnson's comment about John Dryden's tragedy *All for Love, or the World Well Lost* (1678), which tells the story of Antony and Cleopatra. Its title and subtitle could equally characterize the love between Helen and Paris. In his *Life* of Dryden Johnson had written about the play:

it has one fault equal to many, though rather moral than critical, that, by admitting the romantick omnipotence of Love, he has recommended as laudable and worthy of imitation that conduct which, through all ages, the good have censured as vicious, and the bad despised as foolish.⁶

Hollywood has always taken care to affirm the omnipotence of love in its romantic films and to defuse the censure of the good people among viewers by recommending as laudable the conduct of the lovers, especially if these are played by popular stars. Hollywood can, of course, not avoid incurring the contempt of those whom Johnson called the bad and whom we may call the cynical, the realistic, or the hopelessly unromantic.

GREEK MYTH AMERICANIZED

The love between Paris and Helen conquered the silver screen for the first time in 1908 with Luigi Maggi's epic *The Fall of Troy*.⁷ In the era of sound, color, and widescreen, Hollywood twice told the story on a gigantic scale, in 1956 with Robert Wise's *Helen of Troy* and in 2004 with Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*.⁸ In anticipation of the latter the small screen produced

⁶ Quoted from Samuel Johnson, "Dryden" 78, in Samuel Johnson 2006: 79–164; quotation at 96.

⁷ Winkler 2006c is a list of films.

⁸ Two other, if rather ill-fated, films should be mentioned as well. *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927), directed by Alexander Korda in an attempt to expand his British production empire to Hollywood, survives only in short fragments and is excluded from discussion here. It is based on John Erskine's 1925 novel of the same name. For an impression of its visual splendor see Winkler 2006d: plate II. *The Face That Launched a Thousand Ships* was intended as a star vehicle for screen siren Hedy Lamarr as Helen, but funds ran out during production. Usable footage (ca. 67 minutes) was released in 1953, then cut by more than half and incorporated into Lamarr's next project, *The Loves (or Love) of Three Queens*, in which she portrayed other famous figures from history, when funding for this film dried up, too. This film was released in 1955. The directors were Marc Allegret and Edgar G. Ulmer.

its own version with John Kent Harrison's *Helen of Troy* (2003).⁹ These three films are of particular interest for the way in which they present to contemporary audiences the reason why their heroine did something that a decent American woman should never do: desert her husband and country and live in adultery with another man. On top of this, she causes a huge war. Can such a woman really be the heroine of a popular film, even have that film named after her? Where million-dollar epics are concerned, American studios and producers tread carefully in order not to offend the Puritan sensibilities of the predominantly middle-class audiences on whom they depend for their box office. For this reason someone who acts in as devastating a manner as Helen must remain acceptable to the majority of viewers. She must never appear to be driven merely by sexual desire. She need not be perfect, but she must not be all bad; instead, the story must leave some room for viewers to be able to feel for her. So a kind of balance has to be achieved. For example, a sinner or, in our case, an errant wife must realize that she did wrong, or she must pay a price in the end. Only in such ways is redemption possible for her. According to Hollywood's self-censorship, crime does not pay and sin must be punished or atoned for.¹⁰ Poetic justice is important not only as a means to satisfy audiences' moral standards but also as the best strategy for writers and directors to have it both ways: to be able to thrill audiences with the titillating tale of a beautiful woman who is set on a course of bad behavior and to remain piously on the side of right and morality. This makes audience identification with someone famously infamous possible. Even better and commercially safer, though, if audiences can actually take her side, if they can be made to feel

⁹ Wise's film had three credited screenwriters, among them classically trained scholar Hugh Gray. On the evolution of the script and Gray's contributions see the account in Eldridge 2006: 138–145. Petersen's script was written by David Benioff, whose second screenplay this was. Harrison's was by Ronni Kern, who had previously written the scripts for two comparable television films, the medieval *Guinevere* (1994), directed by Jud Taylor, and the biblical *Solomon and Sheba* (1995), directed by Robert M. Young.

¹⁰ On the Hollywood Production Code and for discussions and illustrations of why it came about see Viera 1999 and Doherty 1999. Doherty 347–367 prints the Code and its Addenda and Amendments. Viera 219 is instructive on “compensating moral values,” which are “good characters, the voice of morality, a lesson, regeneration of the transgressor, suffering, and punishment.” A case in point of the Code's power and general American squeamishness about sexual morality is George Sidney's *The Three Musketeers* (1948), a lavish and glossy MGM production. In Alexandre Dumas's novel Constance Bonacieux, D'Artagnan's first love, was in a loveless marriage to D'Artagnan's landlord, a man more than twice her age; in the film she is the landlord's goddaughter: unmarried, virginal, and pure (and played by demurely pretty June Allyson). In Richard Lester's *The Three Musketeers* (1973), made in an age of considerably more relaxed standards, she can be a wife again when she falls for D'Artagnan (and can be played by sex symbol Raquel Welch). But then she had been Bonacieux's niece in Fred Niblo's silent version of 1921. The D'Artagnan of no film, however, is as much of a rake where the ladies are concerned as their original had been.

that she was not really bad but was justified in her course of action. Hence Hollywood's rewriting of this part of Helen's myth and the kind of white-washing that is the inevitable result. The marriage of Helen according to Hollywood is different from the way antiquity had seen it.

Classical texts do not tell us about the relationship, as we would call it today, of Helen and Menelaus before their marriage, but what they tell us about the manner in which this marriage came about gives us the necessary clues. Leda, the wife of the Spartan king Tyndareus, had become pregnant with Helen by Zeus.¹¹ When Helen was of marriageable age, numerous heroes from all over Greece sued for her hand.¹² Their chief reason was her beauty, but the fact that she had been raised as the daughter of a prominent king added to her attractiveness, for Helen's husband would eventually inherit Tyndareus' kingdom. Tyndareus had to avoid all discontent, strife, or possible bloodshed between and among rival suitors before and after the choice of Helen's bridegroom and defuse a situation that was potentially dangerous to himself. So, either on his own accord or on the advice of wily Odysseus, Tyndareus made the suitors swear an oath that they would abide by the choice once it had been made and that they would come to Helen's husband's aid if ever the need should arise.¹³ There are two versions in our sources of what happened next. In the one Tyndareus himself chose Menelaus for Helen's husband.¹⁴ No mention is made in this version that Helen protested or was unhappy with Tyndareus' choice. Apparently she had no problem accepting Menelaus. In the other version Tyndareus granted Helen freedom of choice, and she herself selected Menelaus from among the suitors. In the words of a popular Roman compendium of ancient mythology: "he [Tyndareus] left it to Helen's decision to place a crown [or a wreath] on the head of the one she wanted to marry."¹⁵

¹¹ On Helen's parentage (divine vs. mortal father) cf. Clader 1976. See also Skutsch 1987 and especially Edmunds 2007, with additional references.

¹² Hesiod, *Catalogues of Women* 68 (= 196–204 Merkelbach–West); Apollodorus, *Library* 3.10.8 (= 3.129–131); and Hyginus, *Fabulae* 81, list their names. Euripides, *Helen* 99, adds Achilles. Dio Chrysostom, *The Trojan Discourse* (= Oration 11) 46 and 48–50, adds that foreign suitors came as well, among them Paris. On the genealogy of Helen cf. Hyginus, *Fabulae* 77–80.

¹³ On the oath, which Homer does not mention, cf. further Hesiod, *Catalogues of Women* 68.89–98 (= 204.76–85 Merkelbach–West; Tyndareus' idea); Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 51–65 (Tyndareus' idea again; cf. the quotation below); Isocrates, *Encomium of Helen* (= Oration 10) 39–41; and Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 1.9.1 (the briefest possible mention). Stockert 1992: 185 lists the textual sources of the oath. On Euripides and the non-Homeric tradition of the myth of the Trojan War see Jouan 1966, especially 167–187 on the texts concerning Helen, Paris, and their elopement.

¹⁴ So Apollodorus, *Library* 3.10.9 (= 3.132).

¹⁵ Hyginus, *Fabulae* 78.2; my translation. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.24.9 (1401b34), also says that Tyndareus had given Helen her choice. A bride freely choosing her groom is against custom.

In view of her later desertion of Menelaus the version in which Helen herself chose her husband-to-be is the more poignant and deserves closer attention. Why should Helen have chosen Menelaus? In characters from Bronze-Age mythology we cannot expect to find the level of psychological realism that we take for granted in the great fictional characters of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels. So we may be tempted to discount small details in large myths. But the old myths were told again and again. Their protagonists acquired great psychological depth in the treatments of the Athenian dramatists of the fifth century BC, especially in the tragedies of Euripides. In one of his last plays, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Agamemnon explains to the audience the reasons for the Greeks' expedition against Troy and specifically mentions how and why Helen came to choose Menelaus.¹⁶ Agamemnon recounts the suitors' oath, then continues:

When they had sworn (for Tyndareus cleverly won them over to do this), he allowed his daughter to choose one of the suitors, him to whom the sweet breezes of Aphrodite were carrying her. She chose Menelaus . . .¹⁷

Helen's choice of Menelaus for her husband is now understandable: she had fallen in love with him. Even if she had not, as could have been the case in the other version, Menelaus would still have been her best choice, as our surviving texts make clear beyond any doubt. Long before Euripides the archaic poet Hesiod had mentioned that Menelaus was the richest of the suitors in all of Greece and was particularly eager to win her.¹⁸ Sappho had called Menelaus "the best man" or "the man best of all."¹⁹ Menelaus was also young and handsome, with attractive blond hair.²⁰ Even in this detail

¹⁶ The play's textual problems and the question of the prologue's authenticity do not concern our subject. Even if Agamemnon's words are a later interpolation they still reflect at least a possible and, as placed into a famous work, a well-known and influential version of this part of the myth.

¹⁷ Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 66–69; quoted from Kovacs 2002a: 173. Euripides additionally calls Tyndareus an "old man" (66) to emphasize his experience and wiliness. On Euripides' expression "sweet breezes" (*pnōai* . . . *philai*) cf. Stockert 1992: 189–190. Stockert sees a rather different force in the adjective but remarks that it places additional emphasis on the goddess's personal involvement in causing Helen's passion for Paris.

¹⁸ Hesiod, *Catalogues of Women* 68.24–25, 52–54, and 99–100 (= 198.5–6, 204.41–42 and 89–91 Merkelbach–West; here the last-mentioned passage reads differently).

¹⁹ Sappho, Fragm. 16.7–8 Voigt. Editors have emended Sappho's incompletely preserved text slightly differently as [*per ar*]iston and [*panar*]iston, but the meaning is not in doubt.

²⁰ On Menelaus' imposing appearance cf. Homer, *Iliad* 3.210 (testimony of the Trojan elder Antenor to Helen). "Blond" or "golden-haired" (*xanthos*) is a standard epithet of Menelaus in the *Iliad*, although several other heroes are blond, too. Even in the *Odyssey*, when he is significantly older, Menelaus is called "blond" no fewer than sixteen times. Cf. also Hesiod, *Catalogues of Women* 68.24 and 52 (= 198.5 and 204.41 Merkelbach–West), and Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 175 and *Orestes* 1452. Roman authors continue the tradition.

Menelaus was well suited to Helen, because she, too, was blond. Homer does not mention her hair color, but Sappho does: “blond Helen.”²¹ Unless she was in love with somebody else, which according to our sources was not the case, Helen need not have hesitated about her own or Tyndareus’ choice of Menelaus. An ideal marriage seemed to be ahead for bride and groom, and for a number of years it was just that. To all intents and purposes theirs was a stable marriage, perhaps even a love match. Since there is no evidence to the contrary in surviving texts, we may assume that Helen was a faithful wife and a good mother. Only the sudden interference of Aphrodite which brought Paris to Sparta was to end the idyllic life of husband and wife, by now also parents. Had Paris not turned up, Helen and Menelaus might have lived happily ever after.

Ancient corroboration for such a view actually exists; our best authority is again Euripides. The ancients knew of a major variation of the myth concerning Helen’s elopement, according to which it was not Helen but a deceptive phantom that went to Troy with Paris. Unknown to Menelaus, Agamemnon, and all the Greeks, the real Helen spent the years of the Trojan War in Egypt and was there reunited with Menelaus on his return after the destruction of Troy. The earliest mention of Helen’s phantom of which we know occurs in Hesiod.²² In the fifth century Herodotus, the father of history, reports and analyzes this story in some detail.²³ In this version Helen could remain a faithful if absent wife to Menelaus for ten years, and her fidelity and chastity are not in question. Herodotus specifically states that she had not been touched; Menelaus got back a Helen “who had not suffered anything bad.”²⁴ The only guilt that could possibly be attached to the Helen who had been in Egypt is that of a brief misdeed earlier: according to one surviving text Helen had slept with Paris while still in Sparta.²⁵ Nothing, however, compels us to import that detail into this version of her story. If we wish to give her the benefit of the doubt,

²¹ Sappho, *Fragm.* 23.5 Voigt. Sappho uses the same adjective for Helen as Homer does for Menelaus. – The different cover illustrations of John Erskine’s novel *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* variously show a raven-haired Helen (e.g. the reprint editions Erskine 1925 and 1942) and a blond one (e.g. the reprints Erskine 1948 and 1956). Of the latter, the 1948 cover by Rudolph Belarski, known to connoisseurs as “that naughty nipple cover,” is the most daring.

²² Hesiod, *Fragm.* 358 Merkelbach–West. On the subject see especially Austin 1994: Part 2 (“The Revised Helen”).

²³ Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.112–120. At 2.116 Herodotus deduces from *Iliad* 6.289–292, which he quotes, that Homer had known this version, too, but had excluded it because it did not fit his epic narrative of the Trojan War.

²⁴ Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.119; my translation.

²⁵ So in *Cypria*, Argument 2. Menelaus leaves Sparta for Crete on the tenth day of Paris’ stay.

we can regard her as a pure wife. Her long wait for her husband may even remind us of that of Penelope, the quintessentially faithful wife in Greek myth, for Odysseus.

The Egyptian reunion of Helen and Menelaus after years of separation is the subject of Euripides' play *Helen*. (Euripides used the standard version for his plays *The Trojan Women* and *Orestes*.) The spouses, having just recognized each other, express their love:

Menelaus: O day of love-longing fulfilled, that has brought you to my arms.

Menelaus and Helen embrace.

Helen: O Menelaus, man I love best, the time
has been long delayed, but now my joy is come!
My friends, with what gladness do I greet my husband
and put my arms about him
after all the days that have dawned.

Menelaus: And I, how glad I am to have you! There is much I would speak of,
but for the moment I know not where to begin!

My heart exults, the hair of my head
stands on end, tears stream from my eyes!
I throw my arms about you
with pleasure <fresh>
to receive you!

Helen: O husband!

O sight I look on with my greatest joy! . . .
My friends, my friends:
no longer do I mourn or grieve for the past.
I have my husband, for whose return from Troy I waited,
waited so many years!

Menelaus: Yes, you have me, and I have you! It was hard to live through
so many days, but now I recognize heaven's hand.

My tears are those of joy: they have more in them
of gratefulness than grief.²⁶

But even the standard version, in which Helen *was* in Troy all through the war, contains a strong indication that husband and wife had originally been happy. Toward the end of the *Posthomerica*, an epic composed in the third century AD to bridge the chronological gap in the Trojan War narrative between the end of Homer's *Iliad* and the beginning of his *Odyssey*, Quintus of Smyrna includes a scene in which Menelaus and Helen are alone together at night after Troy has fallen. While the other Greeks were sleeping, reports Quintus,

²⁶ Euripides, *Helen* 623–637 and 648–655. The passages are quoted from Kovacs 2002b: 81, 83, and 85; textual layout slightly modified. On the play see further Holmberg 1995, with further references.

in his quarters

Atreus' son [Menelaus] was conversing with his fair-tressed spouse.
 Upon the eyes of those two sleep had not yet fallen;
 The Kyprian goddess [Aphrodite] hovered over their hearts, to make them
 Remember their former love bed and drive away all anguish.
 Helen broke their silence with the following words:
 "Don't start being angry, Menelaos, with me.
 I did not leave your home and bed of my own accord,
 But mighty Alexander [Paris] and the sons of Troy
 Came and snatched me away while you were far from home.
 I was constantly seeking to die a miserable death,
 By means of the cruel noose or else by the lethal sword,
 But people in the palace used soothing words to stop me,
 In spite of the grief I felt for you and our dear daughter.
 For her sake, for our wedded joy and for your own sake
 I beg you to forget the terrible trouble I've caused you."
 Menelaos in his wisdom made this answer:
 "Stop thinking now about the suffering of our hearts.
 Let that all be locked inside the black abode
 Of oblivion. It's wrong to keep recalling evil deeds."
 His words filled her with joy and freed her heart from fear,
 Sensing as she did that her husband's bitter anger
 Had ended. She threw her arms round him and from the eyes
 Of both flowed tears of pleasant lamentation.
 Joyfully then they lay down side by side
 And their hearts recalled how they were joined in marriage.²⁷

Helen also protests her innocence to Menelaus, if with much greater calculation and rhetorical manipulation, in Euripides' *The Trojan Women*.²⁸ The Helen of this play is clearly being insincere; the Helen of Quintus' epic just as clearly means what she says. The important point to be deduced from Quintus – the last line quoted above is especially revealing – and from the reunion of husband and wife in Euripides' *Helen* as well as from Agamemnon's words about Helen in *Iphigenia in Aulis* is that Helen and Menelaus had lived together in marital harmony and love. So we may be sure that they had been happy with each other until Aphrodite and Paris destroyed their idyll.

Hollywood's two silver-screen versions, however, introduce a major change into the interactions of these characters by altogether eliminating the goddess Aphrodite. Since modern audiences do not believe in the

²⁷ Quintus of Smyrna, *Posthomerica* 14.149–174; quoted from James 2004: 223–224. On the various ancient texts that mention Agamemnon's presence at or absence from Sparta during Paris' visit cf. Stockert 1992: 194–195.

²⁸ Euripides, *The Trojan Women* 914–965.

ancient gods and today are barely familiar even with the names of most and since the gods are almost always a liability when actors impersonate them on the screen, pagan deities are liable to be omitted from films set in antiquity. Except when a film purposely incorporates them into its plot they tend to be limited to on-screen appearances as statues or to make their power or desires known through oracles, priests, or prophets. Well-known examples in which the Olympians play major parts are Don Chaffey's *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and Desmond Davis's *Clash of the Titans* (1981). These films, however, illustrate the dilemma filmmakers face when they have to present gods to their viewers. In director Petersen's words:

Do you remember how Laurence Olivier as Zeus descended from the clouds in *Clash of the Titans*? At [seeing] this, the sixteen-year-old filmgoers today would giggle or yawn.

I think that, if we could consult with him up there, Homer would be the first today to advise: "Get rid of the gods." . . . the audience today can no longer deal with gods jumping out of the clouds and interfering.

As a result divine agency has to be replaced by human agency. As Petersen aptly said about audiences' expectations for *Troy*: "They want to see how Brad Pitt as Achilles takes his destiny in his own hand; they want Orlando Bloom [as Paris] to fight and then run away because he is a coward – and not because the gods command him to."²⁹ Greek writer-director Michael Cacoyannis, who made three films based on tragedies by Euripides, had expressed a view similar to Petersen's years earlier. When asked why he had eliminated the gods from his films, Cacoyannis replied: "To show them on the screen would be alienating to modern audiences, who should identify with the characters and be as moved as Euripides intended his audiences to be."³⁰ Notwithstanding the kinds of divine presence on screen as examined in Chapter 2, the gods have by and large lost their importance for popular adaptations of classical epic and tragedy. This is the inevitable, perhaps even logical, conclusion to a tradition of long standing, one that began with Homer. The famous "double motivation" in Homeric epic, which attributes causation to both divine and human levels simultaneously and which scholars often call "over-determination," is a noteworthy feature in the *Iliad*. Almost independently of each other, both a god and a hero are

²⁹ The quotations (in my translation) are taken from Arnold 2004 (the first and third passages) and Zander 2004 (the second passage). Zeus does not, however, descend from the clouds in *Clash of the Titans*.

³⁰ Quoted from McDonald and Winkler 2001: 79. Cacoyannis's films of Euripides are *Electra* (1962), *The Trojan Women* (1971), and *Iphigenia* (1977).

responsible for the latter's state of mind at a particular moment, or both equally want a specific course of action to take place.³¹

In the case of Hollywood's Helen and Paris, mortals indeed take charge of their destiny, and their decisions and behavior conform to the kind of psychological realism that audiences expect, even if it has to be forced onto a predetermined plot that used to work perfectly well in a different way. The subject of Petersen's *Troy* and Wise's *Helen of Troy* is the power of true love, the kind that has been regarded as ideal since the age of Romanticism. Although here it is dressed in ancient garb, it adheres to modern cinematic and narrative stereotypes. Consequently Aphrodite and everything supernatural has been radically excised from the romance of Paris and Helen in these two epics. Wise's film is the closest model for Petersen's, and both were produced by the same studio. Harrison's *Helen of Troy* is a partial exception, as we will see.

When a supernatural power is no longer available to cause Helen's passion for Paris, her love must be explained in a different way. Wise's and Petersen's films do so very cleverly. On the one hand they absolve Paris from the responsibility of coming to Sparta with evil intentions because he is not there to dishonor Menelaus, to violate the principle of hospitality, one of the most compelling social and ethical ancient codes of conduct, and to abduct his host's wife. Wise's Paris is a peaceful ambassador who wants to work toward a treaty between Troy and Greece while Petersen's is a member of just such an embassy led by his elder brother Hector. This had already been the case in *The Face That Launched a Thousand Ships*. Helen's irresistible beauty leads Paris astray. More importantly he is the noble rescuer of a damsel in distress rather than a callous seducer. Paris is the central male character and true hero of Wise's film while Petersen's Paris is one of three hero figures alongside Hector and Achilles. To make this change possible for Paris, however, the films need a new villain or villains. Conveniently Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae and commander-in-chief of the Greek army before Troy, are available to play these parts. In both versions of *Helen of Troy* but especially in *Troy* Agamemnon has been turned into a power-hungry and ruthless politician. There exists, in fact, an ancient indication of this side of his character. According to Thucydides, the most analytic of Greek historians, Agamemnon was able to force the other Greek kings to wage war on Troy because he already possessed supreme political power.³² In the films

³¹ For a definition and discussions of examples see Edwards 1987: 135, 231, 263–264, and 318–319.

³² Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 1.9.

Agamemnon is less the leader of an alliance of noble kings coming to the assistance of one of their own or defending the honor of Greece than the chief of a horde of rapacious thugs lusting after the immense wealth of Troy and using Helen's elopement as a convenient pretext for a war of conquest and looting. Troy was "a tempting prize of war for the Greek nations," as the narrator of Wise's film puts it.³³

The change in the films' presentation of Menelaus is pertinent to our topic. In all three he is overshadowed by his brother just as he had been in the ancient sources. For Wise and Petersen he had to be turned into a brutish husband, escape from whom becomes understandable and defensible if perhaps not wholly forgivable. Who in the second half of the twentieth century or early in the twenty-first could reproach a wife for running away from marital hell? As a result the cinematic marriage of Helen and Menelaus is already on the rocks before the appearance of Paris.³⁴ The husband is either pathetic or a monster, the wife is deeply unhappy, and the arriving adulterer becomes her savior from an unrelieved misery that without her rescuer would have lasted all her life. This change also conveys to audiences an important point about Helen's marital sexuality. Although no longer in the state of virginal purity that romantic stories have prized in their heroines since antiquity, she is unlikely to have had extensive sexual experience and, by implication, little if any joy in it.³⁵ Entrapped in a loveless marriage, she can be presented as a woman almost untouched

³³ This is not exclusively an American perspective on the Trojan War. The prologue to Cacoyannis's *The Trojan Women* informs viewers that with the fall of Troy "to the Greek ships passed the Trojan treasure – gold, gold in masses, armor, clothing, stripped from the dead. Troy's wealth was legend. For years the Greeks had looked toward the East and talked of the barbarian threat. When Helen, queen of Sparta, fled with Paris, deserting Menelaus for a Trojan's love, they were ready." Dio Chrysostom, *The Trojan Discourse* 64, states that the main reason why some of Helen's former suitors went to war over Helen was outrage at the dishonor to Greece while that of others was the expectation of great booty. Hector's words at *Iliad* 3.84–94 juxtapose Helen and Trojan treasures as the spoils of war in the context of the duel between Menelaus and Paris.

³⁴ An earlier hint at this marital situation occurred in an American novel by Rex Stout, serialized in 1916 in *All-Story* magazine (but not published as a book for eight decades), when Helen says: "Menelaus did not please me. He was merely my husband." The quotation is from Stout 1997: 19. Stout is best known as the creator of Nero Wolfe, private detective *extraordinaire*. But the mismatch of Helen and Menelaus goes further back. One of its most famous modern instances, this time as farce, was *La belle Hélène* (1864), the operetta by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy with music by Jacques Offenbach.

³⁵ So the beautiful (and blond) married female protagonist of Blake Edwards's marriage-and-adultery farce *10* (1979), who informs her smitten lover in one brief word that her chief interest in life is sex, cannot ever find true love. Her rueful lover realizes how superficial she is and returns to the older woman who really loves him. Women who relish their sexuality, whether married or not, are not quite the thing in mainstream Hollywood, as Richard Brooks's drama *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* had revealed two years before, to the shock or outrage of most viewers and to the detriment of its star's career.

despite her extraordinary beauty and allure. In modern parlance she is no more than Menelaus' "trophy wife." Since romance stories depend on their lovers' irresistible passion for each other, a Helen saddled with an unloved and unloving Menelaus is in a kind of second-best state: although married, she is innocent of all emotional attachments and ignorant of the power of love. The romantic ideal is still possible for her and Paris, for overwhelming passion hits both of them for the first time in their lives. So Paris' long-standing earlier relationship with the nymph Oenone in Greek myth is excluded from all three films as a matter of course.³⁶ Helen is his first, last, and greatest love, as he is hers.³⁷ The common happy ending of most romance stories comes with the lovers' wedding, the beginning of marital life which is excluded from such stories. As director John Ford once reported about *The Plough and the Stars* (1936), his film of Sean O'Casey's play:

After I'd finished the picture, [a] studio head said, "Why make a picture where a man and woman are married? The main thing about pictures is love or sex. Here you've got a man and woman married at the start – who's interested in that?" So after I left, he sent an assistant director out and they did a bunch of scenes where they *weren't* married. Completely ruined the damned thing – destroyed the whole story – which is about a man and his wife.³⁸

Marriage is rarely the setting for tales of great love. But a marriage triangle, especially with a plot in which a wife takes a new lover, is of immediate interest since it shows the beginning of love. While husband and wife are not generally the subject of romance, spouse and adulterous lover are.

³⁶ So is Corythus, Paris' and Oenone's son. That Corythus as a handsome young man went to fight for the Trojans, that he fell in love with Helen, that she in turn was attracted to him, and that his own father had him executed for this is also unsuitable to filmic adaptations. Cf. Parthenius, *Erôtika pathémata* (*Love Romances*) 34. Oenone made it onto the screen only once, in *The Face That Launched a Thousand Ships*.

³⁷ This also means that after the death of Paris, who in Greek myth does not survive as long as he tends to do in films, Helen's second Trojan lover-husband, Deiphobus, remains outside such a retelling. Stesichorus, *Fragm. P.M.G.* 223,5 Page, calls Helen "three times married," implying Menelaus, Paris, and Deiphobus; at Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 62, she is "the woman . . . of many men" (i.e. husbands). Helen's children by Paris (variously, three or four sons and a daughter also called Helen) are excluded as well.

³⁸ Quoted from Bogdanovich 1978: 64–66. In Vincent Sherman's *Mr. Skeffington* (1944) the wife of the title character, an older man whom she does not love, is told by her psychiatrist: "That's where a husband comes in: when your romantic days are over." She is unfaithful, they divorce, but as we may expect in such a glossy Warner Brothers melodrama she eventually comes to appreciate his true worth. The happy and romantically secure marriage of Nick and Nora Charles in W. S. Van Dyke's *The Thin Man* (1934) and its sequels is not really a counter-example since the films are primarily sophisticated mysteries rather than romances.

One other circumstance is fundamental for the change in the Helen of all three films. She has no children. The most obvious reason is that audiences expect their romantic couples to be young and unmarried; when the latter state is not possible, they must at least be emotionally unattached to anyone else. Except in comedies children tend to be obstacles to new romances of their parents.³⁹ An unhappy wife and mother who has resigned herself to a life without love may yet try to find consolation and relief within her marriage by utterly devoting herself to her child or children, as is the case in highly melodramatic films ("weepies"). In this way she can distance herself emotionally from her husband and seek or find some measure of fulfillment or at least a quiet peace. The mother of a small child is unlikely to run off with a complete stranger. Most importantly, however, a mother in Helen's situation could not take her child or children along on as dangerous and uncertain a voyage as she undertakes with Paris but would have to desert them outright. This comes closer to constituting unforgivable behavior on her part than anything else she might do. In European and particularly in American culture mothers are sacred and venerable figures who only rarely leave their children willingly.⁴⁰ As the classic cases of Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina reveal, tragedy is likely to ensue if they do.⁴¹ (The real-life case of Princess Diana is too well known to need discussion here.) By the same token examples of selfish, horrible, or downright evil mothers are extremely scarce in popular American culture; when they do appear, they stand out as scary exceptions that only prove the general rule.⁴² For examples that a boorish husband justifies adultery but that motherhood still trumps passion we may turn to two silent films from 1929. Both starred Greta Garbo, who played *femmes fatales* several times (and who later became the screen's most famous Anna Karenina).⁴³ In Jacques Feyder's *The Kiss*,

³⁹ An example is Melville Shavelson's *Yours, Mine and Ours* (1968), a comedy of remarriage rather than marriage. (It was remade by Raja Gosnell in 2005.) Cavell 1985 studies this kind of film. The couples in the classic films he examines have no children.

⁴⁰ Hence the scandal that accompanied a real case. When actress Ingrid Bergman left her husband and small daughter and her new home country, America, to elope with Italian director Roberto Rossellini in 1949 and then became pregnant, she was reviled in the American press and even denounced on the floor of the US Senate.

⁴¹ For overviews of the literary background, too extensive to be dealt with here, see, e.g., Tanner 1979, Overton 1996 and 2002, and Rippon 2002. All contain extensive further references.

⁴² I mention only the mothers in Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949), Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), Roger Corman's *Bloody Mama* (1970), and Robert Benton's *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) as examples. Contrast these with the apotheosis of the American mother, Ma Joad in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).

⁴³ Garbo's character in Fred Niblo's *The Temptress* (1926) is another example, if only up to a point. At the beginning she is married to an older and unsuitable husband who moreover flirts with other

which is set in France, a flirtatious wife dallies with two men. Her husband surprises her in the arms of one of them and attacks her; she kills him, then confesses but is set free. A modern feminist scholar comments: “We comprehend, from the start, that [her] husband is an insensitive bore, and we root for her liberation.” In John S. Robertson’s *The Single Standard* – a title with an obvious wordplay – Garbo is a wife and mother who is about to fall again for a former lover from her wilder days but eventually rejects him: “One man must always be first in my life . . . and he is – my son.” The same scholar observes about Robertson’s heroine: “Though she eventually decides to stay with her family, it is fairly shocking that this wife and mother is ready to abandon them . . . we surmise that, had not motherhood intervened, adultery would have been fine.”⁴⁴ The tie that binds strongest is that between mother and child.⁴⁵

Over the decades Hollywood has firmly established the kind of marital setting in which screenwriters and directors are to show us their Helen. She must not be blamed for wanting to escape her wretched fate, Paris must turn into her one true love, and the films can have their cake and eat it, too, for they get away with telling a touching romance which results from an illicit affair but in which the lovers cannot live happily ever after. The adulterers are vindicated since love triumphs, the cuckolded but bad husband gets what he deserves, and the audience can thrill to a combination of beauty, heroic nobility, spectacle, and all-around sentimentality – a sure-fire recipe for success. But how exactly do the films manage to achieve this turn-around?

WOLFGANG PETERSEN’S *TROY* AND ROBERT WISE’S
HELEN OF TROY

Troy, the most recent instance, presents the simplest case. An opening text tells us that Menelaus is weary of war. We see him at home in Sparta hosting a banquet in honor of the Trojan ambassadors Hector and Paris. But if we believe that Menelaus is a positive character, a toast he immediately proposes tells us differently: “May the gods keep the wolves in the hills and

women and is morally corrupt. She meets a dashing and romantic stranger and immediately falls in love with him. Appropriately enough, her name is Elena. But the plot then turns in a different direction.

⁴⁴ The quotations are from Fischer 2003: 106 and 104. Fischer 102–109 describes the films’ plotlines in detail and provides illustrations. In general cf. Staiger 1995.

⁴⁵ Exceptions may occur whenever a plot demands them. But as recently as 2007 a French film illustrates the power of mother love. The titular hero of Laurent Tirard’s *Molière* has to renounce his love for a married woman, who stays in her unhappy marriage for her daughter’s sake.



Fig. 26. *Troy*. Helen and Paris in Sparta. (Warner Bros.)

the women in our beds.” These macho words are not quite what we expect to hear from a decent or happily married man. Their irony is obvious since we know what will soon happen. Tight close-ups on Helen and Paris, who have been exchanging meaningful glances, now follow. Their affair has already begun, as we are about to discover.⁴⁶ Alone in her bedroom, Helen and Paris kiss and undress (Fig. 26). Intercut into their love scene is a moment in which Menelaus kisses one of the dancing girls in the banquet hall. This makes it understandable to us what Helen, close to tears over the imminent departure of Paris, tells him about her past married life: “Before you came to Sparta, I was a ghost. I walked, and I ate, and I swam in the sea, but I was just a ghost.” Once in Troy, she will elaborate: “Sparta was never my home. My parents sent me there when I was sixteen to marry Menelaus, but it was never my home.” So much for her choosing him and choosing to be with him, as she does in the ancient myth. And so much for her being from Sparta, where Tyndareus had brought her up since her birth.

Petersen does not include Helen’s elopement with Paris, as Wise and Harrison do. Instead, and largely from the perspective of an astonished Hector, we find Helen on board the Trojan ship returning home. The other films avoid such a narrative gap; they make the lovers’ elopement the turning point of their plots. The plot construction in *Troy* makes it easier for us to accept and become emotionally engaged in another romance that will develop once the Trojan War has started and that will eclipse the first, the one between Achilles and Briseis. Briseis has been made over into a

⁴⁶ For more details on Petersen’s Helen and her classical precursors see Cyrino 2006. On Helen and the film in general cf. further Cavallini 2005a: 53–79.

relative of the royal house of Troy rather than remaining the Lyrnessan princess from the myth. And of course she is virginal and not, as in the *Iliad*, the widow of a husband whom her new lover has slain. This new romance is both unexpected and predictable: unexpected since it is not the famous one audiences associate with the Trojan War, practically never included in films; predictable since it involves this film's biggest star, Brad Pitt, who cannot be left without his own love interest.⁴⁷

When Menelaus finds out that Helen is no longer in Sparta, he viciously threatens one of the servant women in his household: "Where is she? I swear by the father of the gods I will gut you here if you don't tell me." Soon after, in Mycenae, he tells Agamemnon the reason for such a savage outburst: "I want her back so I can kill her with my own two hands. I won't rest till I've burned Troy to the ground." So much for his peaceable nature. By now everybody in the audience knows that Helen is well rid of him. When, in a surprising twist away from our mythical sources, Hector kills Menelaus, nobody in the audience feels sorry for him. Helen then passes the final verdict on her relationship with her husband: "He lived for fighting. And every day I was with him I wanted to walk into the sea and drown."

Roughly the same plot pattern, if with greater elaboration, appeared in Wise's version. Helen finds Paris, shipwrecked in a storm, on a beach close to Sparta. (Geography is not something filmmakers tend to be overly concerned with.) Since she is ravishingly beautiful and approaches him walking across the shallow water, he understandably mistakes her for Aphrodite, the foam-born goddess (Fig. 27). She, however, does not reveal her identity to him but pretends to be a slave. Next she saves him from a Spartan shore patrol that is looking for survivors of the Trojan ship which had been sighted. We learn that the most important Greek kings have assembled in Sparta to plan war against Troy. (In *The Face That Launched a Thousand Ships* Menelaus had been planning such a war as well.) We are given an idea about the oppressive environment in which Helen lives when she warns Paris: "Our soldiers have a habit of plunging a dagger into strangers." She hides him and urges him to return to Troy. But Paris falls immediately in love: "I'll offer to buy you from the queen . . . Don't you believe I could love a slave?" This in turn quickly makes him attractive to her when they meet shortly afterwards "under the magic of the moonlight," as Paris romantically puts it. She confesses: "My heart is yours, Paris, but

⁴⁷ The only Trojan-War epic in which Briseis plays a prominent part is Marino Girolami's *Fury of Achilles* (1962), an unusual muscleman epic in that it incorporates, if in a condensed or simplified manner, several scenes or moments from the *Iliad* that do not usually make it into Trojan War films.



Fig. 27. *Helen of Troy* (1956). Paris' first view of Helen. (Warner Bros.)

I can never be." Immediately they kiss. He still does not know who she is.

Once Paris is in Sparta and tries to work for peace between Troy and Greece, Menelaus quickly becomes suspicious that his beautiful wife already knows this handsome foreigner. In a crucial scene he confronts her in her private quarters to find out more. The scene is chiefly intended to demonstrate to viewers the unhappiness and emotional distance between husband and wife and to make the illicit love between wife and adulterer legitimate. Wise denies Menelaus even a shred of audience sympathy and makes viewers firmly root against him and for Helen and Paris. In the careful manner of its staging and in its dialogue it accomplishes this goal effectively if not at all subtly.

Menelaus barges in on a Helen in a pensive mood; she is with her handmaid Andraste and a deaf-mute older manservant.⁴⁸ Accompanied by ominous music on the soundtrack, Menelaus loudly bangs the bronze door when he enters and commands Helen: "Tell your servants to go." When she complies but the old man does not react, Menelaus yells at him: "Get out!" This is sufficient to reveal to us that he is rather a nasty sort and that he has never taken any interest in the people most closely associated with his wife, as her rebuke also tells us: "When will you learn? The man can neither speak nor hear." The only function of this servant's presence is to show Menelaus in a bad light from the beginning. The dialogue between him and Helen almost immediately turns into a shouting match. Wise shows us their emotional distance by keeping them apart from each other on the

⁴⁸ The maid's name is Adreste at Homer, *Odyssey* 4.123, and would have been more accurate in the film in this Ionic form or as Adraste.



Fig. 28. *Helen of Troy* (1956). The dysfunctional marriage of Helen and Menelaus. (Warner Bros.)

screen and by cutting back and forth between shots in which each appears alone. When Menelaus approaches Helen, her head turned away, it is only to threaten her about Paris: “I might do many things with this prince. I might send him home with his appearance altered.” Walking away from him, Helen comments: “I imagined once I had married a king.” Menelaus rushes after her and urgently asks: “Why did you marry him?” His next observation makes him sound like the stereotypical tyrant of melodrama: “When a king takes spoils, he robs no one. When he kills, he commits no murder. He fulfills justice.” All viewers are meant to disagree with such a callous demonstration of autocratic *Realpolitik* and with Menelaus’ warped sense of justice. “The way of a Spartan,” Helen bitterly comments. Clearly she feels as little at home in Sparta as Petersen’s Helen in hers. Her observation to Paris a bit later that she “hates cruelty” elicits his comment: “You’re not a Spartan.” She answers: “I am. The daughter of a king who chose a Spartan husband for me.” Evidently she is not Spartan by birth.

The climax of the scene between Menelaus and Helen soon arrives. Helen keeps a guilty silence when Menelaus demands that she admit knowing Paris. Menelaus bursts out: “Silent as ever. No words for *me*, no words for your husband. I *am* your husband!” He roughly seizes her and pathetically pleads: “Say ‘husband’ to me.” In a close shot he now pulls her to him, moving his hands to her neck (Fig. 28). For a brief moment we may think that he is about to caress her but quickly realize otherwise. In an even tighter close-up on both their faces Menelaus, repeating his last words, seems on the verge of strangling her. The story, of course, forbids this. So he utters a final threat against Paris, turns, and leaves. Despite his violent talk and behavior Menelaus has shown himself to be a pathetic weakling. Now he even has

to strain to open and close the huge bronze door that he had banged shut when he entered. His defeat is complete. This marriage is dead. Wise drives home such a conclusion when he shows us Menelaus next, receiving the news of Helen's disappearance. He is participating in a kind of sauna-cum-orgy with Agamemnon and others. The room is drenched in lurid red light. The artificial nature of this lighting is obvious; so is the point it makes.

The quarrel between Helen and Menelaus clinches the way in which the film presents them as a married couple. Wise and his screenwriters now proceed to reinforce audiences' emotional attachment to Helen and Paris even more. When Helen has prepared Paris' escape from Sparta and meets him by the sea for their last farewell, they again talk about Troy, Sparta, and war. The appearance of an armed Spartan patrol forces them to hide in the bushes, and now comes what was to be expected: a tender love scene in which they kiss and embrace. Paris urges her: "Oh, Helen. Helen, you are a slave as long as Menelaus possesses you. Come away to freedom. Come to Troy with me." These words make evident to even the slowest viewer what is at stake, for Paris puts into thoroughly American terms why Helen should elope with him: her marriage is enslavement, her love will give her liberty. The operative word is "freedom," readily understandable to one and all. The script had prepared us for this theme when shortly before this meeting Helen had unexpectedly granted freedom to Andraste and, not entirely sensibly, had sent her away on her own. There was no dramatic reason for her doing so. Helen herself realizes this since she tells Andraste: "Freedom is made of quicksilver sometimes." In retrospect her kindness makes sense, for she herself deserves freedom even more. The fact that Helen sets her personal slave free also goes against the Homeric tradition because in the *Odyssey* Andraste (as Adreste) is Helen's maid a full twenty years later. The one mention of her name in the *Odyssey* is the source for her name in the film. The deviation from Homer occurs without any necessity; its only point is to prepare us for Helen's own change of fortune: from enslavement, as it were, to freedom. Viewers familiar with classical Greek may note a measure of irony here. The name of Helen's servant means "not running away" and is an adjective regularly used in Greek literature for slaves. (In its masculine form as a proper name, Adrastos is a speaking name of heroes who stand their ground in battle; four of them are mentioned in the *Iliad*.) In Wise's film, then, the slave obtains her freedom while remaining true to her name; her mistress will soon obtain hers by doing what a discontented slave might do: run away.

At this moment Helen still intends to remain in Sparta, but the screenplay makes sure that her own quicksilver moment rapidly arrives. Up on a

coastal cliff the lovers are surprised by Spartan archers. Helen commands them to leave; their leader refuses. Paris takes advantage of the altercation between Helen and the officer, seizes her around the waist, and jumps into the sea with her. They escape unharmed. The manner of their flight absolves Helen from all responsibility, for it is not her but Paris who makes a decision for both of them. So far Helen has remained innocent; unlike Petersen's, she has not willingly left her husband, and she has no more than kissed Paris. Only later, having arrived in Troy, does she become responsible, although the film includes a brief scene in which Hecuba, queen of Troy and Paris' and Hector's mother, explicitly exempts Helen from guilt for the war and, by implication, for the eventual fall of the city. Hecuba calls her "a woman of self-determination, a queen, with more courage than I would have had to sail against the tides of heaven." King Priam officially proclaims her "a princess of Troy."⁴⁹ No bad woman could be so described or so honored in a work intended mainly for a middle-class audience. That director Wise had his American viewers firmly in mind with this kind of story becomes clear in his own words:

I think my aim in *Helen* . . . was to reflect the times and life of the period and to have a better understanding of the people. I wanted it to be modern in terms of the acting and delivery of the scenes. That's what I was after in my approach to it.⁵⁰

The better understanding of this distant period has to come from the storyteller's necessity to make it modern not only in terms of acting but also in terms of character portrayal. Historical epics reflect the times and life of their own period far more than the past they ostensibly bring to life.

In the scenes discussed and at some other moments Wise and his writers take pains to exculpate Helen thoroughly. That this was their and their studio's intent becomes evident from "Interviewing Helen," one of three episodes of Warner Brothers' promotional television series *Behind the Cameras*, in which the studio advertised new films to millions of viewers before their release. Series host Gig Young meets Helen on the walls of Troy – ironically, right after the television network on which *Behind the Cameras* was aired had shown Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942), a famous melodrama in which a wife, married to an unloved older man, again meets her former lover who, at film's end, nobly puts the greater good of the war-torn world before their personal happiness. For viewers not overly familiar with the mythical past Young announces: "The time, by my wristwatch which

⁴⁹ Cf. Homer, *Iliad* 3.164, where Priam declares Helen's innocence.

⁵⁰ Quoted from Cary 1974: 65.

won't even be invented by another 2,900 years, is five in the morning. These are the battlements of the fabulous city of Troy, queen city of the ancient world . . . and at this moment center of the world's attention." When Helen appears, Young predictably characterizes "the run-away queen of Sparta" with Christopher Marlowe's immortal words: "The face that launched a thousand ships." Helen immediately asks: "Who says this of me?" Young's answer – "History" – elicits a passionate denial from her:

Then history lies. You think a woman and her love could be the cause of all this? . . . That is Greek talk to fool the Trojans. I am only the excuse for war, not the reason. My husband lusts not for his queen but for the treasures of Troy . . . This war has been his dream for years.

Helen's subsequent words do not exactly conform to the details of the film that viewers will encounter in theaters, but no matter. Over the footage of Paris jumping into the sea with her, Helen explains: "I fled with Paris to save my life . . . what I left behind in my husband's heart was hate, hate for all his ambitious friends to feed upon." Her life, however, is not in danger in Sparta.

The film's theatrical trailer shows us both sides of Helen, her responsibility for the Trojan War that anyone who has not yet seen *Helen of Troy* expects even if the film itself presents a very different Helen, and her absolution from guilt. Over the wooden horse entering the city, a headline exclaims: "Hers the *Sin* that inspired time's greatest treachery." The invention of the Wooden Horse, usually a triumph of ingenuity, here is the ultimate proof of sinister Greek slyness. But if the Greeks are bad, the Trojans must be good. "Beware the Greeks bearing gifts," Helen appropriately says in another clip from the film, almost quoting a famous expression from Virgil's *Aeneid*.⁵¹ But does *Helen of Troy* really show us "All the Storied Wonders of Homer's Immortal 'ILIAD'," as another card in the trailer proclaims, or of Greek mythology and literature? Of course not. Instead it shows what the trailer's next card promises: "*All the Gloried Moments* of its Inspired Romance!" And this in "Olympian scope and vastness," as the announcer modestly proclaims. This is a story made new for modern audiences, for in Homer's immortal *Iliad* the romance of Paris and Helen had turned sour much earlier. Homer's Helen yearns for Menelaus, whom she calls a "better man" than Paris.⁵²

⁵¹ Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.49.

⁵² Homer, *Iliad* 6.349–351. At *Iliad* 3.139–142, Helen weeps in her "sweet yearning" for Menelaus. Even more important is the bedroom scene between Helen and Paris at *Iliad* 3.383–447, on which see, e.g., Edwards 1987: 195–196. Edwards 195 speaks of "Helen's strength of mind and her contempt

But in Hollywood Menelaus cannot win. In *Helen of Troy* he cuts a pathetic figure; in *Troy* he is a hulking brute. Wise's Menelaus cannot defeat Paris in combat; Petersen's even gets himself killed. In neither film is Menelaus handsome, let alone blond. Both films had stacked the deck, as it were, against him from the start in such a radical and obvious way that viewers simply *must* regard his marriage to Helen as utterly unsuitable and as a sure recipe for misery. The actors cast in the part of Menelaus are far too old for the actresses who play Helen and can hardly represent a young and beautiful woman's love interest. Wise's spouses, Rossana Podestà (b. 1935) and Niall MacGinnis (b. 1913), are twenty-two years apart; Petersen's couple, Diane Kruger (b. 1976) and Brendan Gleeson (b. 1955), twenty-one. Both men are on the hefty side, their bulk reinforced by the unheroic and rather unattractive costumes they have to wear. All this contrasts with the slender beauty of their wives. No wonder that Helen is ready for a dashing young lover. She practically owes it to herself to elope. She owes this even more to her spectators and their expectations concerning romance. "I don't want a hero, my love. I want a man I can grow old with," Petersen's Helen tells Paris. That neither she nor Wise's Helen can spend a lifetime with the kind of Menelaus they are stuck with is self-evident. And so she remains a good woman.

Here a brief excursus to consider two ancient spectacles from the early 1950s is appropriate because they show us that Hollywood's justification for famous adulterous affairs tends to follow a predictable set-up. Henry King's *David and Bathsheba* (1951) is based on a sacred text from biblical antiquity.⁵³ King David lusts for the beautiful woman he has seen bathing in the nude and contrives her husband Uriah's death. David is suitably guilt-ridden afterwards; he repents and redeems himself. In this way viewers can stay on his side throughout, especially since he is played by Gregory Peck. Still, this David is not all bad even in his adultery because he and Bathsheba for the first time find an emotional bond that has been lacking from the lives of either, for both have loveless marriages. His first wife asks David shortly before he sees Bathsheba: "Does my presence displease the king?" "Of course not," he answers, but we know that this is only David's polite way of confirming her suspicion. A lonely David then learns that his pretty neighbor is just as lonely. "I first saw Uriah on our wedding day when my father brought me to his house," Bathsheba says. David only kisses her after he finds out about her situation: "I said nothing to you until you told

for Paris and for her own past folly." On Helen's (unchanged) view of Menelaus as expressed in retrospect several years later see Homer, *Odyssey* 4.259–264.

⁵³ 2 Samuel 11–12.

me that there is no love in your marriage. Yes, you told me that, and so did Uriah.” David had previously made sure to find out what kind of man her husband was; Uriah turned out to be interested only in battle and glory, not love.⁵⁴ David then nobly sends Bathsheba away, but she confesses that she has been observing his loneliness and was hoping to end it. David, just as surprised at this as the audience, asks why she has not told him so when he made his desire known to her, and she replies: “Because first I had to know what was in your heart. If the law of Moses is to be broken, David, let us break it in full understanding of what we want from each other.” Then she tells him that she will not be his lover but his wife, a proposition to which he agrees. We share their full understanding and agree, even at the price of Uriah’s death. Love conquers all, as it must. “I need someone to share my heart,” David says before another kiss at the scene’s fade-out. So, Hollywood trusts, do we all.⁵⁵

Three years later, ravishing redhead Susan Hayward, King’s Bathsheba, appeared in Delmer Daves’s Roman epic *Demetrius and the Gladiators* as one of the most scandalous adulteresses of history: Messalina, third wife of Emperor Claudius and a woman notorious for her nymphomania. Devastating portrayals of her in Tacitus and Juvenal have made sure that Messalina’s name is still familiar.⁵⁶ As she was in history, this film’s Messalina is unsuitably married to a much older husband. She finds romance with fictional gladiator Demetrius. But can such a wicked woman count on audience sympathy? Yes, because Demetrius is a Christian, and when no less a moral authority than St. Peter warns him about their sinful ways, Demetrius and Messalina end their dalliance. At the film’s end, when Claudius becomes emperor, Messalina declares publicly that she will be a faithful wife from then on: “It’s no secret from any of you that I’ve mocked my marriage vows, that I’ve openly disgraced my husband and myself. That . . . is ended. I am Caesar’s wife, and I will act the part.” This Messalina can be redeemed. She still loves Demetrius but nobly sacrifices her emotions for the greater good of the state. In history Claudius had Messalina executed for marrying one of her lovers in a public ceremony, but in this film the couple’s marriage can be saved for a bitter-sweet ending. No moral conversion had occurred in Carmine Gallone’s *The Affairs of Messalina*

⁵⁴ Cf. 2 Samuel 11.11. The biblical David meets Uriah after he has slept with Bathsheba and contrives the latter’s death only when he hears that she is pregnant (2 Samuel 11.4–7).

⁵⁵ Bruce Beresford’s *King David* (1985) still presents David in loveless marriage when he meets Bathsheba. Since this film covers David’s entire life in the same running time that King’s version devoted to his affair, Bathsheba is little more than a minor character.

⁵⁶ Tacitus, *Annals* 11.12 and 26–38; Juvenal, *Satires* 6.115–132. Messalina was about thirty-five years younger than Claudius; she married him when she was about fourteen.

(1951). Its Messalina met with a sticky end because she remained bad throughout – “EMPRESS OF LOVE IN AN ERA OF SIN!” and “HISTORY’S MOST WICKED WOMAN!” according to the film’s English-language posters.

In Chapter 3 we encountered the contrast between Old-World sophistication and New-World simplicity. A film rather neglected today uses the same perspective and illustrates why the adulterous Helen of Greek myth does not work in “down home” American culture. In George Cukor’s *Heller in Pink Tights* (1960), a comedy-melodrama set in the American west, a run-down troupe of traveling players arrives in a rough frontier town and begins rehearsals for *Beautiful Helen of Troy*, an adaptation of Jacques Offenbach’s *opéra*. The star of the troupe plays Helen; the director is Paris (in a blond wig). Everybody wears tights and flamboyantly silly costumes. But the theater owner, a local bigwig, objects to the subject of their play. The scene is played mainly for humor. The dialogue, here quoted in excerpts, confirms our theme:

Actor [*Menelaus, in the most ridiculous costume of all*]: A vile seducer outrages –
Pierce [*interrupts*]: What’s that? . . . What did he just say?

Actress [*Helen, quoting*]: “A vile seducer.”

Pierce: That’s what I *thought* he said. What kind of a show are you giving here, anyway?

Director: This is a comic opera, Mr. Pierce. *La belle Hélène* – you know, the story of Helen of Troy?

Pierce needs a few explanations. But then he finds out that Helen, obviously attracted to Paris, is also married:

Actress: But I’m not in love with my husband. But I am – how do you say – flighty?
 And besides, he’s much older than I am . . .

Pierce: Nope. It won’t go in Cheyenne . . .

Director: But this is a *classic*, Mr. Pierce!

Pierce: What’s so classy about her running around with you instead of her husband?

Actress: But he’s so much nicer, and he lets me do what I want.

Pierce: Last month the mayor’s wife started to run around with a young stud like him, and the mayor shot him stone dead. There wasn’t a man in town that didn’t shake his hand for doin’ it, even the sheriff. No, sir . . . ; you can’t get away with makin’ fun of marriage in Cheyenne . . . If all you’ve got is this fiddle-faddle, you can pack up and keep goin’; I don’t want you.

That is the end for *Beautiful Helen of Troy* in Wyoming. But Pierce the moralist then falls for the actress himself. And who could blame him since she is played by a blond Sophia Loren?

JOHN KENT HARRISON'S *HELEN OF TROY*

The third American screen perspective on the marriage of Helen and Menelaus presents a refreshing change from the two other trite versions. Harrison's *Helen of Troy* is unusual for incorporating Helen's childhood and for being distinctly if by no means radically feminist. We meet Helen as a teenage tomboy who is unaware of her budding sexuality. Her abduction by Theseus, the Judgment of Paris (before Helen's marriage), and her wedding to Menelaus are also included. The narrator assures us that he will tell us only the truth: "Let me tell you the real story. I know. I was there." But as always the story is treated with considerable neo-mythological freedom.⁵⁷ Supernatural aspects, put on screen by means of computer-generated images, preserve an aura of divine intervention that goes further than the mere invocation of gods and the display of their statuary in Wise's and Petersen's films. Paris, for example, sees an image of Helen in the golden apple that Aphrodite holds out to him; at the same moment, but far away, Helen sees Paris reflected in a pool of water. Both are smitten on the spot. From now on Helen only awaits the appearance of her unknown beau. This plot point determines her future and the way the film will present her marriage to Menelaus.

Helen's abduction from Sparta by Theseus, who reveals to her the identity of her true father Zeus, leads to a rescue mission on which her brother Pollux is killed. (His Greek name Polydeuces would have been a better choice than this Roman one.) Greek heroes including Odysseus, Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Achilles attend his funeral. Agamemnon and Menelaus had already met Helen on Agamemnon's wedding to her sister Clytemnestra, when Agamemnon had immediately begun lusting after Helen. At the end he receives his long-deserved come-uppance when Clytemnestra kills him in revenge for the sacrifice of their little daughter Iphigenia. Iphigenia's death is the climax of the film's first half and firmly establishes Agamemnon as arch villain of the Trojan War. But the character of Menelaus is conceived very differently. In true romantic fashion he falls in love with Helen at first sight but only worships her from afar. We realize that he is a decent sort, a "nice guy." And his age actually suits his future bride's: actor James Callis (b. 1971) is only four years older than Sienna Guillory (b. 1975), his

⁵⁷ The same observation concerning narrator and filmic story in a historical context applies to Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004), in which Alexander the Great's former general Ptolemy serves as narrator both on screen (he introduces the main story, told in flashback) and off screen (in voice-over). Ptolemy, who was there, knows what really happened (according to writer-director Stone's version).



Fig. 29. *Helen of Troy* (2003). Tyndareus blames Helen before the Greek kings. (Universal)

Helen. He is also good-looking and slim (if still not blond).⁵⁸ Most unusually, his is the voice that introduces the story before the opening credits. The chief function of narrators in epic films is to bridge the gap between characters and viewers, to make sure that temporal or cultural differences between past and present do not intrude too much on our enjoyment or understanding of the story we are watching. This is why most narrators speak to us from an omniscient or godlike perspective (and are males). If a narrator is also a character within his own story, we can be reassured that he is a “good guy.” Once we come to realize that our narrator will play a major part in the story, we know implicitly that he will not be a villain. Harrison’s Menelaus does not disappoint our expectation.

The Greek heroes, assembled in Sparta for Pollux’ funeral, are all impressed by Helen’s beauty. Tyndareus blames Helen for the death of his son and successor and angrily offers her to whoever may want her: “Is there any among you who will take this cursed woman? Is there any among you who wishes their home devastated, his country brought to ruin, his heart broken beyond repair?” (Fig. 29). These words are excessive, but they reinforce the traditional understanding of Helen that the film intends to change with its supposedly real story. At the same time we are meant to feel that Tyndareus is being unfair to Helen and to side with her, for the

⁵⁸ In retrospect one may think that Callis is miscast as Menelaus. Since he is much better-looking than the blandly handsome Paris of Matthew Marsden, the two actors might have switched parts for better effect. (So might Rossana Podestà and Brigitte Bardot, the Andraste of Wise’s film.)

film can then show her to be no such ruinous woman after all. (The really destructive character is Agamemnon.) Only Menelaus takes pity on her in her public humiliation. He realizes that all the others except happily married Odysseus desire her for themselves. (In myth, however, Odysseus is among the suitors.) The Greeks now form a purely political alliance, choosing Agamemnon as their “high king.”⁵⁹ “Can we agree to unite in time of war?” asks Agamemnon – not that any war is as yet on the horizon. To bring about the alliance Odysseus proposes the oath that binds them together and to cast lots for Helen. Menelaus immediately objects to her being used as a pawn in a political game and, to use a modern term, to be married off for reasons of state, not for love. But he agrees in order to ensure that among her suitors there is at least one – himself – who cares about her. To everybody’s surprise and as if aided by supernatural powers – i.e. through a computerized special effect – Menelaus wins her hand.

Paris appears in Sparta on his peace mission on Menelaus’ wedding day and recognizes his hitherto unknown love. So does she him. Their first meeting occurs during a scene that has no parallel in any other film. Before her wedding a nude Helen is forced to walk through a large hall filled with the Greek kings and their retinues and to display herself to everybody’s eyes on a pedestal, her second public humiliation. None other than Agamemnon has cooked up the idea. The reaction on the part of most men (but not Menelaus) is predictable. In a concession to modern audience expectations and relaxed standards concerning nudity even on prime-time television, Harrison shows us Helen’s walk on the screen. He films her first from behind in a medium close-up to full-length body shot as she enters the hall, then mainly in close-up head-and-shoulder profile during her walk, and finally in long-shot rear views while she steps up to the platform and stands immobile (Fig. 30). But why was this scene included? Audience titillation may be a partial reason, as are several moments of explicit on-screen violence throughout the film. But it is more likely that this is intended as a feminist moment, meant to point up male chauvinism by showing us a Helen exposed, both literally to lustful gazes and sexist comments and figuratively as victim of a ruthless power play.⁶⁰ Helen is

⁵⁹ This official-sounding title of Agamemnon’s had previously occurred in Shanower 2001, the first installment of an ongoing series of highly cinematic graphic novels retelling the Trojan War myth. Numerous parallels to Shanower’s version, detailed and surprisingly accurate if still free in some respects, recur in Harrison’s and Petersen’s films, whose screenwriters conceivably knew the first two volumes of Shanower’s series.

⁶⁰ The “male gaze,” as scholars like to call it, especially at females and their bodies, is a fundamental aspect of cinema, exemplified by this scene in *Helen of Troy*. Cf. Chapter 3 on scopophilia and the work by Laura Mulvey cited there. It is to be noted, however, that the filmmakers verbally pull their



Fig. 30. *Helen of Troy* (2003). Helen on display. (Universal)

not in love with Menelaus and does not know that he loves her, so she sees herself being condemned to the kind of marriage no modern audiences would want to wish on her or, for that matter, on themselves. On their wedding night and in their first scene together a shy Menelaus pays her a compliment, and she replies: “You’re a generous man.” She recognizes his nobility, but love this is not. That night Helen, still virginal, attempts to commit suicide, but Paris rescues her at the last moment. Her only escape from exposure and humiliation will be with him.

There is, however, more to the scene of Helen running a nude gauntlet. She knows in advance what awaits her, and this knowledge makes her defiant. “They can look all they want,” she informs Clytemnestra, “but they’ll never see me.” Feminists among viewers may cheer this line, for it is intended to reveal her indomitable spirit in the face of male oppression. But the effect is limited, for even so defiant a Helen is condemned to remain an object of lecherous male gazes, both in the hall in Sparta and on the television screens in American living rooms. She has already been such an object in several earlier scenes and will continue to be one, for under her rather diaphanous gowns her physical charms are repeatedly on display. Her tomboyish curls and womanly curves move freely and frequently, more

punches far more than they do visually, for the only two audible comments in this scene are too tame to qualify as sexist heckling: “Truly magnificent” and “Breathtaking.” Instead we get an obvious cop-out: a disembodied female voice chanting rather plaintively over Helen’s walk, presumably meant to reveal her emotional state and to instill in us a measure of pity for her.

even than Diane Kruger's a year later on the big screen. Harrison grants his Helen two scenes of callipygian allure in motion, Petersen gives his only one static one. So the scene of Helen's nude walk is an exercise in hypocrisy: the filmmakers can titillate their viewers and tell them: *Look what an indomitable, even emancipated, mind we've given our Helen*. Simultaneously they engage in the stereotypical "objectification," as modern terminology has it, of a female character. In retrospect such a conclusion is unavoidable, for the film's pre-credit sequence – the one in which we first hear from Menelaus as our narrator – consists of a montage of important moments from the story and *begins* with a brief frontal view of Helen being undressed for her nude walk, for which we have no context as yet. In three other very brief shots the opening montage returns to this scene, if without showing her naked. But for a short moment it will soon show us Helen's nude backside from another scene in which she so appears. Wise's Helen insisted in her conversation with Gig Young, previously scripted by men, that she is not what most people believe her to be. Harrison's Helen, scripted by a feminist, cannot maintain anything of the sort. Could she actually speak for herself, she might well resent being subjected to such a double standard. Director Harrison, writer Kern, and actress Guillory apparently have no qualms about that. Nor, presumably, do most males in the audience.

No such custom as a nude prenuptial walk existed in antiquity, and Harrison and Kern do not pass it off as historically or mythically authentic. But later history records an at least partial analogy. In a pavilion especially built for this purpose on an island in the river Rhine, on May 7, 1770, fourteen-year-old Austrian princess Maria Antonia, en route from Vienna to Paris to marry the *dauphin* in an arranged marriage of state, was forced to strip naked and display herself before an assembly of French aristocrats who had come to inspect her. She broke out in tears but passed the test. Three years after Harrison's *Helen of Troy* Sofia Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette* contains a recreation of this historical episode. "All eyes will be fixed on you," her mother, Empress Maria Theresa, warned the bride in a letter detailing how the future *dauphine* was to conduct herself in her new environment.⁶¹ In neither history nor film is this young woman able to preserve her invisibility while being fixed by everybody's eyes. Nor is Harrison's Helen. They can look at her all they want, and they *can* see her.

Helen's nude scene makes sense only in terms of plot purposes, for soon afterwards Helen will demonstrate her capability of taking her fate in her

⁶¹ Quoted from Weber 2006: 19; source reference at Weber 300 notes 41 and 42. Weber 24–27 describes the episode in detail. Somewhat different is the short account in Fraser 2001: 60–61; her book was reprinted in 2006 as tie-in to the film.

own hands. As it was in Wise's film, Paris' life is in mortal danger, and Helen rescues him and accompanies him to the Trojan ship at anchor in the harbor of Sparta. Intending to stay, she tells Paris: "Go now! You're free." And: "You have my love . . . Now go! I beg you: please go!" They kiss in close-up, but she is still a faithful wife. However, when the ship with Paris on board has cast off, she suddenly changes her mind: "No," she tells herself. She jumps into the water and climbs on deck. This time the decision to run away is entirely hers. The scene of her nude walk now takes on added meaning because it has prepared us for her own agency in her elopement. Anyone, we believe, who can handle such an undignified spectacle as well as she did can take charge of her own life. In this, Helen differs greatly from the heroines of Wise and Petersen.

Arrived in Troy, Paris evokes Helen's treatment in Sparta before King Priam and the Trojan elders. To the objection of one of them that Helen "belongs to Sparta" Paris retorts:

Where she is treated worse than a Hittite whore? Forced to walk naked among Aegean kings who leer and spit obscenities. I did not *take* her. I saved her from a people who find no worth in women, place *no* value on beauty, and seek their only honor through glorious death in battle.

Paris then appeals to Priam's and the Trojans' sense of "kindness and compassion." Of course they keep her, and the plot can proceed as it must.

Even so Harrison's Helen is a less traditional character than the Helen of all other films. The very color of her hair gives us a clue. Rossana Podestà, a brunette, had to wear a gigantic if attractively braided blond wig. Diane Kruger, a real blonde, would turn out to be too bland to make much of an impression on anyone but a besotted Paris (much less to launch a thousand ships). Sienna Guillory's hair is fair but with a reddish tinge, shading over into what ancient Greeks described with the adjective *pyrrhos*. Yes, Harrison's Helen is a blonde, still the ideal to many American males, but there is no danger that she might be mistaken for a dumb one. "I gave myself up," Helen will say ten years later to Cassandra in Troy, in a reference to her futile attempt to save Paris and to end the war by offering herself to Agamemnon. "You gave yourself up, but you didn't surrender, did you?" answers Cassandra. "Did you?" No, this Helen does not surrender.

As in the *Iliad*, Menelaus and Paris duel over Helen and victory, but we are in for yet another surprise. Harrison's Menelaus, unlike Petersen's, is not out for revenge on Helen but only on Paris. "I'll have the Trojan's head on a spike," he had told Agamemnon on hearing of Helen's elopement. In their duel Menelaus succeeds in wounding Paris, but it turns out to have been an

unfair fight, for Menelaus realizes that the sword blade with which he has wounded Paris had been poisoned, presumably by Agamemnon. Menelaus does not exploit this advantage; instead, he and Paris together catch their breath, sitting side by side in a manner comparable to that of two "buddies" in any American action film. "Do you honestly believe that you deserve her more than I do?" asks Menelaus. Paris replies: "Yes; yes, I do." Menelaus now confesses that he is ashamed of the way she had been treated in Sparta. They talk about Paris in Sparta, and in the process husband and adulterous lover almost bond with each other over their common love for Helen and their common problem with Agamemnon. Both agree that Agamemnon is not waging this war for Helen but only for Troy. "Then why are we trying to kill each other?" asks Paris, and Menelaus answers: "His amusement." Paris asks next: "Have you ever thought that someday you should defy him?" He is turning into a kind of psychological counselor to his arch rival and enemy. Such a moment could never have fit Wise's or Petersen's films.

Immediately after his greatest heroic exploit, killing Achilles, Paris is himself viciously killed by Agamemnon and dies in Helen's arms while having a last vision of Aphrodite. Amid general slaughter during the fall of Troy Agamemnon brutally kills Priam and rapes Helen in full view of Menelaus, who is helpless to prevent it. Agamemnon meets his own bloody end the very next day. With all the other heroes of the story dead except for Odysseus, who is not central to this version and has dropped out of the story, only Menelaus is left. His voice is again heard on the soundtrack to prepare us for his reunion with Helen and for the end of the film. "War is waged by nations, but it is human beings that pay the price," he begins. The survivors "are left with the memory of shame and misery and bloodshed. In these dark times the only thing we have left to hold on to is love, the one true gift of the gods. And it is through love that we hope and pray the gods will send us peace." These commonplaces accompany images of Helen wandering forlorn around Troy. She comes to the spot where Paris had died and touches the traces of his blood. A vision of Paris now appears to her, and they embrace. "Wherever you are, take me with you," she begs, but he cannot. "Will we ever meet again?" she asks, and he answers, sounding strangely like Jesus: "I've prepared your place." The vision fades on a gentle kiss. Now Menelaus appears behind her, sword in hand (and in close-up). Helen offers him the back of her neck as if she were no more than an animal to be slaughtered on a sacrificial altar. But of course Menelaus cannot kill her. "I do not thank you for my life," she says, and he understands. "I cannot love you," she continues. Menelaus resigns all claims to her, as his next words imply: "What will you do?" Her answer:

“I will follow.” Anachronistically actress Guillory delivers it in the modern fashion that expresses uncertainty or tentativeness by inflecting the last word as if it were followed by a question mark. “I accept,” Menelaus says simply. Then he turns and moves away. She follows, if after a last look at the place where Paris had died, and they walk off into the distance.⁶²

In spite of the maudlin tone of this final scene the reunion of husband and wife is curiously moving. Harrison’s version is far removed from those of Euripides or Quintus of Smyrna, but the mood of resignation on the part of both spouses fits the atmosphere evoked in Book Four of the *Odyssey*. Helen and Menelaus are back in Sparta. Ten years after the end of the war Odysseus’ son Telemachus visits them in search of information about his father and receives their hospitality. An apparently joyful occasion is in progress at his arrival – a double wedding: of Hermione to Achilles’ son and of Menelaus’ son Megapenthes to a Spartan woman. Nevertheless, and despite the general splendor of his surroundings, Menelaus readily yields to reminiscences about the past, especially his own sufferings during eight years of return after the Trojan War and the death of his brother upon returning to Mycenae. Menelaus explicitly states that he takes no pleasure in being the lord of his wealth, that he would readily part with two thirds of his possessions if only those fallen in the war could be alive again, and that he regularly gives himself over to mourning and grief. He specifically mentions Odysseus as a cause for his sorrow.⁶³ When Helen appears, she is struck by Telemachus’ similarity to his father; she, too, is immediately reminded of the war that had started, she says, over her “dog eyes.”⁶⁴ All of them, including Nestor’s son Pisistratus, Telemachus’ travel companion, break into tears, thinking and speaking of Odysseus, the one hero who still has not overcome the aftermath of the war. Helen can only calm them by secretly pouring drops of a magic potion into their wine.⁶⁵

It is unlikely that Harrison and Kern were thinking of Homer’s *Odyssey* in connection with the ending of their film. Still they manage to capture the impact of a devastating war on a wife who was one of its causes (or pretexts) and the lingering impact of that war. Presumably their Helen

⁶² A slight verbal echo of Homer, *Iliad* 3.255 (“the woman and the spoils shall follow the winner”), the herald’s words before the duel of Menelaus and Paris, is probably unintentional. – Hedreen 1996 points out the variety of differences in ancient accounts and visual representations of this part of the myth.

⁶³ Homer, *Odyssey* 4.78–112.

⁶⁴ Homer, *Odyssey* 4.138–146. The adjective *kynôpis* (145) expresses Helen’s strong sense of shame.

⁶⁵ Homer, *Odyssey* 4.184–186 and 219–233. Despite some liberties the fundamentally melancholic life of Helen and Menelaus as portrayed in the *Odyssey* is beautifully brought to life in the corresponding sequence of Franco Rossi’s *Odisea* (1968).

and Menelaus will never be happy together, certainly not in any romantic sense of the word or in a way that a mass audience would wish for the titular heroine of an epic story. But despite some half-hearted grafting of feminism and contemporary psychology onto an ancient subject theirs is a better way to end a modern adaptation of antiquity's most famous myth than Wise, Petersen, and their screenwriters could think of. On its own neo-mythological terms and by its own route Harrison's film reaches a conclusion that conforms to the Homeric atmosphere.

INNOCENT HELEN: PALINODES FROM STESICHORUS
TO HOLLYWOOD

All three Hollywood adaptations of Helen's story either completely absolve her from responsibility for behavior that led to the most famous war in the history of Western civilization or present her in ways that make her involvement in the causes and conduct of this war understandable or forgivable. Two of them connect their twist on the myth with the answer to a question many viewers may have asked themselves: Why is someone who should be called Helen of Sparta better known as Helen of Troy? The films provide an easy-to-grasp explanation. David Benioff and Petersen's is the simplest:

Paris [to Priam]: Father, this is Helen.

Priam: Helen? Helen of Sparta?

Paris: Helen of Troy.

Kern and Harrison explain what amounts to a kind of name change rather melodramatically. Priam reaffirms Agamemnon's blame for everything and so justifies his fateful decision not to hand Helen back to the Greeks in a way that makes him appear rational, understanding, and benign. This Priam is a fatherly "nice guy":

Priam [to Helen]: We also agree that to sacrifice your honor or even your life will not appease his desire [for war] or make peace more likely. For these reasons we invite you to consider this city to be your home for as long as you shall live. Furthermore, should you choose to renounce any further affiliation with Sparta, you shall henceforth be known as Helen of Troy. Do you accept this offer?

Helen: I accept.

Wise and his writers, however, take the greatest care to justify Helen's name change. Priam naturally wishes to know not so much who she is as who she

will be. Cassandra then comes up with the new name for Helen. I quote the relevant dialogue in abbreviated form:

Priam: By what name, my lady, shall we know you? . . .

Helen: I am Helen, queen of Sparta.

Priam: The wife of King Menelaus?

Helen: His wife no more. . . .

Cassandra: She will bring the disaster I have prophesied. Her name will be written in letters of fire. Helen. Helen of Troy.

But Helen must not be the cause of the inevitable fall of Troy, so a later scene absolves her of all responsibility. Helen secretly leaves Troy to give herself up to Menelaus and end the war, but Menelaus again proves to be as bad a husband as we already know. Paris nobly rescues Helen from the treacherous Greeks and takes her back to Troy. Priam now reaffirms her ties to the city and raises her status:

Priam: Helen, through you we have learned that they seek plunder, not justice . . . Cassandra, we have found there is great wisdom in you. What more can you tell us?

Cassandra: New storms shall ride the sky, but the guilt will be Athena's, not Helen's.

Priam: Thank you, Cassandra. [*To Helen:*] Such courage must not go unrewarded. Helen, you will be a princess of Troy.

Someone unexpected is responsible for Troy's fiery disaster. Athena, to the Trojans (and viewers) of this film a goddess of war, is conveniently on hand to be blamed for the catastrophe. Apparently not even the Greek kings are as evil as she is.

The process of whitewashing Helen has a venerable if today not very well-known history, which the ancients themselves started. The archaic choral poet Stesichorus used the term *palinode* ("recantation") to denote just such a thing. Stesichorus is himself the subject of myth-making because he was said to have lost his eyesight for disparaging Helen in a poem entitled *Helen* (or possibly in another composition, perhaps *The Fall of Troy*). It was Helen herself, now deified, who inflicted this punishment on the poet. Realizing the cause of his blindness, Stesichorus composed his *Palinode* and received his sight again. His poems survive only in fragments; our chief evidence for the *Palinode* is Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates says:

For those who have sinned in their telling of myths there is an ancient purification, known not to Homer but to Stesichorus: when he was blinded because of his slander of Helen he was not unaware of the reason like Homer [who was

and remained blind], but being devoted to the Muses recognised the cause and immediately wrote,

That story is not true, and you did not go on the well-benched ships and you did not reach the citadel of Troy; and having composed all the Palinode, as it is called, he at once regained his sight.⁶⁶

The story referred to as untrue is that of Helen's stay in Troy. In antiquity Stesichorus generally received the credit for starting the alternate account of her stay in Egypt.⁶⁷ Ancient authors already engaged in early neo-mythologism.⁶⁸

Taking their cue from Stesichorus, three Greek orators presented the case for rather than against Helen as demonstrations of their rhetorical expertise. The first of them is Gorgias, the famous Athenian teacher of rhetoric in the late fifth century BC. In his *Encomium of Helen* he sets himself the task of acquitting Helen of responsibility for the Trojan War:

<it is right to refute> those who rebuke Helen, a woman about whom the testimony of inspired poets has become univocal and unanimous as had the ill omen of her name, which has become a reminder of misfortunes. For my part, by introducing some reasoning into my speech, I wish to free the accused of blame and, having reproved her detractors as prevaricators and proved the truth, to free her from their ignorance . . . For either by will of Fate and decision of the gods and vote of Necessity did she do what she did, or by force reduced or by words seduced <or by love possessed>.⁶⁹

Gorgias then refutes these four charges that have been brought against Helen; I quote only the essential passages:

If . . . one must place blame on Fate and on a god, one must free Helen from disgrace.

⁶⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus* 243a; the translation is quoted from David A. Campbell 1991: 93. The lines quoted are now Fragg. *P.M.G.* 192 Page of Stesichorus' surviving work. The first line reappears at *Phaedrus* 244a. Cf. Isocrates, *Encomium on Helen* 64–65.

⁶⁷ As mentioned above, Hesiod was the first to refer to Helen's phantom and Herodotus deduced Homer's knowledge of this version. On Hesiod, Plato, Stesichorus, Euripides, and their contexts see Woodbury 1967.

⁶⁸ The neo-mythologism of Stesichorus is particularly noteworthy. Ancient testimony (*P.M.G.* 193 Page) mentions a second Palinode by Stesichorus, in which he may have blamed Hesiod for the story that Helen was the mother of Iphigenia by Theseus; cf. Bowra 1963. On Stesichorus' Helen see especially Austin 1994: 90–117. In general, and in connection with cinematic neo-mythologism, see Danek 2006, with additional references. See further Vöhler, Seidensticker, and Emmerich 2004, especially the editors' introduction ("Zum Begriff der Mythenkorrektur," 1–18), in which they distinguish among variation, correction, and criticism of myth.

⁶⁹ This and the following quotations are from Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen* 2, 6, 8, 14, 15, 19, and 21. The translations are taken from "Gorgias' Encomium of Helen," tr. George Kennedy, in Sprague 1972: 50–54.

But if she was raped by violence and illegally assaulted and unjustly insulted, it is clear that the raper, as the insulter, did the wronging, and the raped, as the insulted, did the suffering . . .

But if it was speech which persuaded her and deceived her heart, not even to this is it difficult to make an answer and to banish blame . . . The effect of speech upon the condition of the soul is comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies.

. . . if it was love which did all these things, there will be no difficulty in escaping the charge of the sin which is alleged to have taken place . . . If, being a god, Love has the divine power of the gods, how could a lesser being reject and refuse it? But if it is a disease of human origin and a fault of the soul, it should not be blamed as a sin, but regarded as an affliction. For she came, as she did come, caught in the net of Fate, not by the plans of the mind, and by the constraints of love, not by the devices of art.

So far so good. Gorgias closes, however, by stating: "I wished to write a speech which would be a praise of Helen and a diversion to myself." He as much as admits that he is not being serious, that his oration is what Greek authors used to call a *paignion* ("playful trifle"). There is obviously nothing wrong with this approach, but it indicates that Gorgias practices what Sophists took pride in preaching *and* practicing: to make the weaker case appear the stronger, as the Sophist Protagoras had famously put it.⁷⁰ Gorgias' *Encomium* is a rhetorical exercise for its own sake and for the intellectual delight of his listeners, not a serious-minded rewriting of myth for the sake of elucidating a mythic-historical truth.

In his own *Encomium on Helen* Gorgias' student Isocrates, another influential Attic orator, specifically refers to an earlier work in Helen's defense; scholars identify it with Gorgias' encomium. Isocrates criticizes it for being more of a defense speech than a true encomium of the kind he is delivering. Noteworthy for our context is Isocrates' whitewashing of Paris, especially in connection with his famous judgment:

some . . . have before now reviled Alexander [= Paris]; but the folly of these accusers is easily discerned by all from the calumnies they have uttered. Are they not in a ridiculous state of mind if they think their own judgement is more competent than that which the gods chose as best. For surely they did not select any ordinary arbiter to decide a dispute about an issue that had got them into so fierce a quarrel, but obviously they were as anxious to select the most competent judge as they were concerned about the matter itself . . . only a mortal man of greatly superior intelligence could have received such honour as to become a judge of immortals.

⁷⁰ Protagoras' claim is attested at, e.g., Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.24.11 (1402a23), and Cicero, *Brutus* 8.30. A practical demonstration occurs in Aristophanes, *Clouds* 889–1104.

From this astonishing take on Paris follows Isocrates' conclusion about Paris' life with Helen:

Would he not have been a fool if, knowing that the deities themselves were contending for the prize of beauty, he had himself scorned beauty, and had failed to regard as the greatest of gifts that for the possession of which he saw even those goddesses most earnestly striving?

Toward the end Isocrates mentions that Helen attained immortality and conferred on Menelaus the supreme gift a mortal can attain:

she so amply recompensed Menelaus for the toils and perils which he had undergone because of her, that when all the race of the Pelopidae [descendants of Pelops, among them Agamemnon and Menelaus] had perished and were the victims of irremediable disasters, not only did she free him from these misfortunes but, having made him god instead of mortal, she established him as partner of her house and sharer of her throne forever.⁷¹

Even more astonishing may be what Dio Cocceianus, better known as Dio Chrysostom ("Goldmouth" on account of his oratorical skills), has to say about Helen in the first century AD. In his *Trojan Discourse* Dio reports what a venerable Egyptian priest told him about Helen and Menelaus: the complete opposite of what was commonly believed and told in Greece. The real story as preserved in Egyptian records is, according to this priest, beyond suspicion "since Menelaus had come to visit them [the Egyptians] and described everything just as it had occurred."⁷² Dio follows Herodotus, who, as we saw, had also heard from Egyptian priests about Helen's stay in Egypt and specifically mentions that the Egyptians assured him that the source of their information was none other than Menelaus himself, for back then Menelaus had told *his* Egyptians what had really happened.⁷³ Herodotus concludes that this must be the correct account.⁷⁴ Here, as in Harrison's film, we get the truth straight from an impeccable eye-witness – or so we are told.

According to Dio's priest – or rather, according to Dio's rhetorical trickery – Tyndareus and his sons decided that they could lay the foundation for their eventual dominion over both Greece and Asia if Helen married

⁷¹ Isocrates, *Encomium on Helen* 45–48 and 62; quoted from Van Hook 1945: 85–87 and 95. For proof of their immortality Isocrates refers to the tomb of Helen and Menelaus at Therapne outside Sparta, where they received cultic honors as gods; cf. Herodotus, *The Histories* 6.61, and Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 3.19.9. On Isocrates' work cf. Papillon 1996.

⁷² Dio Chrysostom, *The Trojan Discourse* 38; quoted from Cohoon 1932: 475.

⁷³ Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.118. ⁷⁴ Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.120.

Paris after Clytemnestra had already married Agamemnon.⁷⁵ Dio reports via his Egyptian:

“Thus it was that Paris took Helen as his lawful wife after gaining the consent of her parents and brothers, and took her home with him amid great enthusiasm and rejoicing. And Priam, Hector, and all the others were delighted with the union and welcomed Helen with sacrifices and prayers.

“Then see,” continued the priest, “how foolish the opposite story is. Can you imagine it possible for anyone to have become enamoured of a woman whom he had never seen, and then, that she could have let herself be persuaded to leave husband, fatherland, and all her relatives – and that, too, I believe, when she was the mother of a little daughter – and follow a man of another race? It is because this is so improbable that they [the Greeks] got up that cock-and-bull story about Aphrodite, which is still more preposterous . . .

“And how in the world after coming to Greece did he [Paris] become intimate with Helen, and talk to her, and finally persuade her to elope, without thinking of parents, country, husband, or daughter, or of her repute among the Greeks, nay, without fearing even her brothers, who were still living and had once before recovered her from Theseus and had not brooked her abduction? . . . It would have been impossible for her to go with Paris in any such way, but possible if she was given in marriage with the full consent of her kinsfolk.”⁷⁶

In the name of rationalism, common sense, and logic we are served a tale that is more radical than any neo-mythologism Hollywood could have dreamed up. The double mention of Helen’s ties to Greece in Dio’s passages quoted above is good rhetorical strategy: if you have to assert something important, drive it home by repetition. So the priest later summarizes the whole story of Helen and Paris and Tyndareus’ wish to form an alliance by marriage with Troy yet again.⁷⁷ And again: “The reason was, in fact, that they [Tyndareus and his sons] had voluntarily given Helen in marriage since they preferred Paris to the other suitors on account of the greatness of his kingdom and his manly qualities, for he was no man’s inferior in character.”⁷⁸ Scholars who despair over the extent to which modern media distort the supposed truth of ancient myth or dismiss such versions as hopelessly inaccurate and therefore *infra dig* might do better to remember the ancients. They, not Hollywood writers or directors, take the cake of neo-mythologism. As we just saw, not only Helen but even Paris comes

⁷⁵ Dio Chrysostom, *The Trojan Discourse* 51.

⁷⁶ Dio Chrysostom, *The Trojan Discourse* 53–54, 58, and 60; quoted from Cohoon 1932: 487, 491, and 493. After his reference to the Judgment of Paris Dio has his priest discuss the “true” character of Priam, Hector, and other Trojans in support.

⁷⁷ Dio Chrysostom, *The Trojan Discourse* 68.

⁷⁸ Dio Chrysostom, *The Trojan Discourse* 73; quoted from Cohoon 1932: 503.

off better than anything screenwriters could begin to imagine. The vexed question *What is truth?* evidently does not apply to myth. But if we do attempt an answer, we are bound to say: *Truth in myth is anything that makes for an effective story from any given narrative point of view.*⁷⁹ So we find from antiquity to today various versions of the same story, even mutually exclusive ones. But which version of a myth is the “correct” one? For example, *was* Helen in Troy or not? Does it matter? Does not the existence of a dual tradition make for an altogether more fascinating tale about her?

Clever “corrections” of the traditional Trojan War myth on an even larger scale circulated in antiquity under the names of Dares the Phrygian (i.e. Trojan) and Dictys the Cretan, authors who – no surprise here – claimed to have been eye-witnesses of the war and were now finally telling the true story, if from opposite points of view.⁸⁰ To mention just two examples of Dares’ neo-mythologism, Troy fell not because of Odysseus’ invention of the wooden horse but because Aeneas betrayed his home city. And his Menelaus is not blond.⁸¹ Dictys is of greater interest to us because his account is much longer than Dares’. Dictys, not unlike Benioff and Petersen, omits everything irrational or supernatural. The Greek heroes’ oath occurs after and not before Helen’s elopement.⁸² Dictys’ Helen, just arrived in Troy, informs King Priam that being married to Menelaus “did not suit her.”⁸³ Still Dictys can claim, presumably with a straight face:

As to what happened earlier at Troy [before the war], I have tried to make my report as accurate as possible, Ulysses being my source. The account that follows based as it is on my own observations, will meet, I hope, the highest critical standards . . . Everything I have written about the war between the Greeks and the barbarians, in which I took a very active part, is based on first-hand knowledge.⁸⁴

Dictys and Dares do not, however, represent the extremes of ancient neo-mythologism. Lucian of Samosata, the satirical Sophist of the second century AD, briefly turned to the “true” story of the Trojan War in a dialogue called *The Dream, or The Cock*, in which he pokes fun at the Pythagorean concept of the transmigration of the soul. A talking rooster, who claims

⁷⁹ Cf. my comments in Winkler 2006a: 12–18.

⁸⁰ These two works now survive only in later Latin translations; that of Dares is considerably abridged and is not attested until the second century AD. The one by Dictys is generally dated to the first. For English versions of both, with additional background information, see R. M. Frazer 1966.

⁸¹ Dares, *The Fall of Troy* 39–41 and 13.

⁸² Dictys, *Journal of the Trojan War* 1.12; so also Dares, *The Fall of Troy* 11.

⁸³ Dictys, *Journal of the Trojan War* 1.10; quoted from R. M. Frazer 1966: 29.

⁸⁴ Dictys, *Journal of the Trojan War* 1.13 and 5.17; quoted from R. M. Frazer 1966: 30 and 118.

that his spirit descended from Apollo and entered any number of human and animal bodies – among the former Pythagoras himself and Pericles' mistress Aspasia – reveals to his astonished owner that at the time of the Trojan War he had been the Trojan hero Euphorbus and had killed Achilles' friend Patroclus but was in turn killed by Menelaus. Asked by his owner if everything had occurred as Homer tells it, the rooster contemptuously dismisses Homer as an ignoramus who during the war had been a camel in far-away Bactria (roughly, modern Afghanistan). As Euphorbus, of course, the rooster had known Helen. But Helen was not as beautiful as everyone believes; even worse, she was already an old woman. Lucian's palinodic animal, we realize, firmly has his tongue in his cheek, if such may be said about barnyard fowl.⁸⁵

The works discussed here are not the only ancient ones that tamper with parts or details of the Trojan War narrative and its related myths in sometimes contradictory fashion.⁸⁶ But they suffice to show us that Hollywood's rewriting of classical myth is nothing radical or deplorable but rather something utterly traditional, if not necessarily meeting the highest critical standards. The films are modern palinodes. We can tell this even from the identical narrative stances of Stesichorus ("That story is not true" – he implies the claim *but mine is*), Dio Chrysostom ("Menelaus . . . described everything just as it had occurred" – i.e. differently from the common version; so already Herodotus), and Harrison (Menelaus saying "that is not the way it happened . . . I know. I was there"). Directors and screenwriters who turn to ancient myth might well be surprised by the extent of ancient "rewrites," to use a Hollywood term, if they knew of them. Conversely classical scholars who decry a film like *Troy* as un-Homeric ought to remember that in the first century AD Ptolemy Chennus wrote an epic in twenty-four books actually called the *Anti-Homer* (*Anthomêros*). Classical film philologists, however, who take a close look at both the ancient myths and the literary tradition based on them are not likely to be surprised by the carefree extent to which an epic film has changed a myth but rather by the very traditionalism with which all such changes occur.

Wise's Helen had already made this point, if unwittingly. Just before their escape from Sparta she had told Paris: "What is remembered is forever young." From this perspective the words of Paris to Helen in Petersen's *Troy* take on added resonance. He tells her: "We will be together again, in this world or the next. We will be together." And so they are, together again and

⁸⁵ Lucian, *The Dream, or The Cock* 16–17. Euphorbus appears in Books Sixteen and Seventeen of the *Iliad*, where he wounds but does not kill Patroclus and is killed by Menelaus.

⁸⁶ All the literary variations concerning Helen are dealt with in Ghali-Kahil 1955: vol. 1.

again in the world of film – a new world to the characters of the stories and a kind of “next” world that provides them with a continuing afterlife. For mythical figures the most powerful realm of survival today is the cinema. In the works of the ancient authors we encountered in this chapter Helen lost Paris but won back Menelaus. In Hollywood all three are remembered, but it is Helen and Paris rather than Helen and Menelaus who are forever young.