Adaptation and Appropriation of Helen in twenty-first century texts

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"How much can you change and get away with it, before you turn into someone else, before it's some kind of murder?"

Richard Siken*, War of the Foxes*

1 Introduction

For millennia the character of Helen from ancient Greek myth has fascinated readers for its ambivalent presentation and it is the ambivalence with which she is written that hides her motivations, resulting in an eternal quest to truly understand her actions. This ambivalence also makes Helen a character susceptible to adaptation and appropriation as she has no one-sided narrative in the classical texts; instead, her story is littered with contradictions. The gaps provided by these disagreements have spawned countless stories over the centuries to develop and explore the nuanced character as first seen in Homer's *Iliad*. This thesis is concerned with how Helen has been adapted in the twenty-first century, namely in the 2004 film *Troy*, the 2020 play *15 Heroines* and the female-authored *The Silence of the Girls, The Song of Achilles* and *A Thousand Ships* (2018, 2011 and 2019, respectively). These texts and how they portray Helen will be juxtaposed with classical depictions of Helen, which include Homer's epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; Virgil's poem the *Aeneid;* Euripides' plays *The Trojan Women, Andromache* and *Helen,* and Ovid's set of monologues in the *Heroides*. Such juxtapositions can reveal whether Helen is seen as a less sympathetic character due to the presumed acquiescence to her role as catalyst for the war. Additionally, the role of Helen will be analysed in context with the treatment of Briseis and Dido as these characters act as foils for Helen in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* respectively. Helen and Briseis are women fought over as prizes in the Trojan war, while Helen and Dido are queens betrayed by gods for the furthering of the god's favourite male heroes. All three female characters have lost (either through their own actions or others) their first husbands, they have seen a loss or reduction in their previous high standing, and they are subject to the whims of men and the gods. Taking these core similarities into account, this thesis will examine whether there is a difference in how Briseis, Dido and Helen are treated in adaptations, and if it can reveal whether Helen is seen as a less sympathetic character due to the presumed acquiescence to her role as causing the war.

As no 'definitive' version of Helen exists, any comparisons between modern iterations of this character will typically use the version of Helen created by Homer as the 'original', with other classical accounts discussed as appropriate to the context. The character of Helen as depicted in the *Iliad* differs to the Helen in the *Odyssey*, despite Homer being considered as the author of both, and it is these differences that Genette sees as anticipating the changeable characterisations of Helen

(1997, 338). As Helen does not remain a constant, unchanging character between these two texts, it cannot be assumed that the Homeric Helen is a static, inviolable creation, and is instead malleable and open to interpretation. The contradiction between the characterisations in these poems can often lead to discussions of the authorship of these two texts and the question of Homer's true identity, but for the purpose of this analysis of Helen's character it will be assumed that both texts were composed by a singular author. A further issue is created through the use of translations as the scholars I cite use different translations than I do, creating strikingly different accounts and thus it becomes apparent that translators have a lasting impact on the interpretation of characters through their choice of words. This thesis is unable to explore the role of bias in translation as regards the presentation of Helen but it ought to be recognised that the reader's impression of Helen can be easily tainted by the translator, which therefore has a lasting impact on Helen's reception in the western canon as these translations can be and have been used to create modern adaptations.

The Homeric Helen is still present in literature in the twenty-first century although she has been revised and recreated, much the same as the ship of Theseus paradox- how much can she be changed before she no longer resembles her first incarnation. I will examine whether the Homeric Helen is recognisable in modern adaptations of Helen or if she is merely a ghost used to add legacy or depth to a modern author's version of the Trojan war. Does Helen remain present in modern adaptations or has she been killed in the name of progress?

To examine these twenty-first century retellings of the Trojan War Julie Sanders' work in *Adaptations and Appropriations* is a key theoretical framework. She considers that whilst both adaptation and appropriation comment on their source text, adaptations are "achieved most often by offering a revised point of view from the 'original', adding hypothetical motivation or voicing what the text silences or marginalizes" (2016, ch. 1), whereas "appropriation frequently effects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (Sanders, 2016, ch. 2). Both forms of rewriting the source text create a dialogue between the old and the new, with the new used to critique or amplify what the old source text was considered to be lacking. To supplement Sander's theories of adaptation, Gérard Genette's work on palimpsests will also be used to analyse these modern revisions. Transposing the characters of the *Iliad* into texts more accessible and acceptable to an audience in the twenty-first century requires the marginalized to come to the fore. By providing these alternate perspectives that go beyond the narrative of the hypotexts, these modern adaptations prolong or complete a text (the *Iliad*) that is regarded as complete in its own right (1997, 175). Each of these texts offers a different type of continuation of the hypotext: *The Song of Achilles* can be considered an analeptic continuation as it follows Patroclus prior to the events of the *Iliad*; *The Silence of the Girls* is told from the perspective of the silenced

Briseis, offering an elleptic continuation as she fills in the missing gaps of Homer's poem; and *A Thousand Ships* bridges the end of the *Iliad* with the events of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* as a proleptic continuation. Neither *15 Heroines* or *Troy* fit as neatly into these classifications, nor are they as neatly tailored to fit Homer's narrative as the other texts are, which is perhaps illustrative of the difference between adaptations that try to fit into and around the source text, and those that appropriate the story to rewrite it.

1.1 Helen in Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

The constant transmutation and reinvention of Helen of Troy throughout history is driven by the author's need to communicate something through the pre-established character of Helen. She is at times the victim, the villain, the manipulator or manipulated. The multi-faceted character that first appears in Homer's *Iliad* is further complicated as no definitive version of her actions exists, and indeed, Homer's other text the *Odyssey* presents a different interpretation of Helen. I will briefly explore how Helen is presented in Homer's epics, and this interpretation will serve as the basis for the concept of the 'original' Helen. Helen in the *Iliad* is a very prominent character; she has conversations with mortals and gods, she interacts with the king of Troy and she has a public role at Hector's funeral. She is, it appears, a visible person in Troy despite her oft repeated claims that aside from Hector and Priam she is treated poorly. She also shows distaste or apathy towards Paris, although this interaction is coloured by the role of Aphrodite and the threat that if Helen denies Paris, and thus Aphrodite, she will lose the favour of the gods. Homer cleverly sets out Helen as vulnerable and subject to the whims of the gods much like the other characters, but places her in such a position that she is kept outside the frame of action, skirting around Troy and never being fully involved. Helen is opinionated and visibly expresses her displeasure at the situation she finds herself in, and as such she is not merely an icon of beauty without a voice.

Like other female characters (Andromache, Hecuba and the female goddesses for example) in the *Iliad*, Helen is able to express her opinions. In Book 3 of E.V. Rieu's prose translation of the *Iliad*, Helen decries Aphrodite's meddling in her life by stating: "You are plotting, I suppose, to carry me off to some still more distant town, in Phrygia or lovely Maeonia, to gratify some other favourite of yours who may be living in those parts" (*Il.* 3. 400-402). This statement gives a clear impression that Helen did not leave with Paris willingly and that she is essentially a hostage and bargaining chip to the gods. Her bitterness towards her situation is furthered in "No, go and sit with him yourself. Forget you are a goddess. Never set foot on your Olympus again but go and agonize over Paris, go and pamper him, and one day he may make you his wife- or his concubine. I refuse to go and share that man's bed again - it would be quite wrong" (*Il.* 3. 406-411). Helen has the strength not only to defy the goddess but also to suggest Aphrodite debase herself with a mortal. By the end of the scene Helen has been cowed by Aphrodite but for a moment Helen is a character defiant enough to argue with the gods.

In Book 24 during Helen's lament for the deceased Hector, she cries "godlike Paris brought me here to Troy and married me- I wish I had perished first" (*Il.* 24. 763-764), indicating the sheer depth of her regret for her actions and implying that she was a passive participant. She sees herself as a victim unable to present herself as such due to other characters' dislike of her for causing the war, and as such her grief for Hector encompasses her grief for herself as well as the fact that she is left without an ally, "[s]o these tears of sorrow I shed are both for you and for my luckless self. No one else is left in the wide realm of Troy to treat me kindly and befriend me. They all shudder at me" (*Il.* 24. 773-776). The Helen created in Homer's *Iliad* is one of victimhood, a woman not in control of her life and fully aware of how she is hated by the Trojans and Greeks. The self-recrimination is apparent as only Helen addresses herself as a "cold evil-minded slut" (*Il.* 6. 345). The language used is derogatory and in contradiction to how Helen is portrayed elsewhere in the poem. When taking the twenty-first century definition and connotations of the term 'slut' into account, it implies a sense of agency, that Helen has chosen to wed Paris and has chosen to leave Menelaus and abandon her family in Sparta; her actions those of an "uncontrolled, lustful" woman (Blondell, Disarming Beauty, 2013, 64). The apparent sexual nature of this insult differs to how Helen is characterised throughout the rest of the poem, and as such her self-recrimination could potentially be a result of the language used by the translator rather than Homer creating such a dichotomy in how Helen views herself. Whereas Rieu's translation has Helen self-describing herself as a 'slut', other translations choose to not explicitly sexualise Helen in this manner. The same line in Murray's 1924 translation becomes "a dog, a contriver of mischief and abhorred of all", which is comparatively similar to Alexander's 2015 interpretation "an evil-thinking dog who strikes cold fear", as both focus on the effect of Helen's wielding of power and inducing fear rather than lust. The severity of this insult, however it is translated, implies that Helen is her own harshest critic. Whilst she might blame herself for the war resulting from her actions, she does not often seem to view herself as deliberately cruel or evil, and indeed the accusations of others rarely enter the realm of evilness or cruelty. The dog analogy, with its connotations of the domesticated wild animal, indicates that Helen's behaviour deserves punishment; her actions have caused insult and she is degraded by her transgressions (Franco, 2014, 80). However, Helen's "temerity of a direct gaze may be associated with an expression of feigned innocence that conceals in shameless arrogance a consciousness of guilt" (Franco, 2014, 86), once again casting doubt on the sincerity of Helen's words and feelings. Gumpert shares Franco's double-edged effect of interpreting dog-based insults as reflecting Helen's guilt but "at the same time they render her endearing, even innocent" (2001, 9). The dichotomy created through Helen's self-recriminations (Helen faking her guilt as opposed to Helen that accepts she ought to be punished for her transgressive behaviour) creates a character of artifice that is not wholly apparent elsewhere in the poem.

In the *Odyssey,* also translated into prose by E.V. Rieu, Helen is presented slightly differently than in the *Iliad*; she appears subservient to her husband and lacking in the defiant spirit she demonstrated in the *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey* Homer presents Helen primarily through other characters' perspectives. Odysseus judges Helen as being the cause of the "death of many a good man" (*Od*. 14. 68). However, elsewhere he names Helen as being responsible but the blame is shifted elsewhere as the war was fought *for* her rather than because of her (*Od. 11. 438).* He also places the blame on the gods, as he "saw Helen of Argos, for whose sake the Argives and the Trojans by a god's will suffered so much" *(Od.* 17. 119-120), rather than any mortal. Penelope also blames the gods for the war, partially absolving Helen of guilt as she says to Odysseus:

> Helen of Argos, born of Zeus, would never have slept in her foreign lover's arms had she known that her countrymen would go to war to fetch her back to Argos. It was the god that drove her to do this shameful deed, though not until that moment had her heart contemplated that fatal madness, the madness which was the cause of her woes and ours. (*Od.* 23. 216- 225).

Helen's circumstances in the *Odyssey* have changed, she is reunited with Menelaus and "repenting the blindness which Aphrodite sent me when she brought me to Troy from my own dear country and made me forsake my daughter, my bridal chamber, and a husband who lacked nothing in intelligence and looks" (*Od*. 4. 261-265). She once again points out the blame should fall to the gods instead of her, and that she was a victim who was taken rather than choosing to leave.

Some scholars interpret Helen in the *Odyssey* as manipulative and in control of the situation, citing her drugging of the men to remove their grief for the day (4.219-226), as well as when she presented Telemachus with a robe she created herself (thus undermining Menelaus' gift of hospitality) and declared it must be worn by his bride (15.112-129). Perhaps the most significant moment of her taking control of the situation can be seen when Menelaus is asked to interpret an omen but she speaks for him, and the gods, instead, resulting in Telemachus declaring he will worship her as a goddess if she is correct (15.160-182). By reframing Helen as having ulterior motives to ensure she retains her status of power, her actions in the aftermath of the Trojan War can potentially be interpreted as feminist as she is given interiority and agency; if Helen has power how can she conceivably be weak and vulnerable to men's control? However, others interpret Helen as a victim of circumstance and the gods, which seems more in accordance with Homer's portrayal. Neither he, nor the narrator of the epics, condemns Helen's actions; he ascribes Helen with the human characteristic of fallibility but her divine parenthood is the protection that prevents her punishment.

1.2 Helen in the Twenty-First Century

This thesis will look at whether Helen has been transmuted or if she is a facsimile reproduction when used in twenty-first century literature. I will focus on representations of Helen in the film *Troy* directed by Wolfgang Petersen*,* the novels *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker*, A Thousand Ships* by Natalie Haynes and *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller, as well as the 2020 play *15 Heroines*. All these literary texts seem fascinated with the notions of blame, guilt and responsibility as they postulate on whether Helen is the cause of the Trojan war as well as reflect changes in societal attitudes to women and their role in patriarchal society. The texts concerned present alternate versions of the Trojan war and its aftermath, and by switching the focus away from the masculine narrative of war, these adaptations become a vehicle for rectifying the omission of personal narratives and resurrects characters typically excluded from speaking.

The first chapter will examine the results of portraying Helen visually in the 2004 film *Troy*. The Homeric Helen is undefined in appearance, as Homer remains vague in his descriptions of her physical beauty and allows each reader to create their own version of Helen. By showing her on film, the image reduces Helen from a goddess-like, divine beauty to one that is merely human and realistic, and thus attainable. This realism, and the humanisation of Helen, reduces the impact of her power and has the effect of letting her be judged due to society's standards of modern beauty. Additionally, the film removes the gods from the narrative, thereby making the humans the only ones to blame for what has happened. To ensure that Helen is presented as likeable and therefore forgivable, the film changes the plot from the *Iliad*, furthering the tradition of adapting the myth to suit a new audience. However, despite the assumption that a modern adaptation would be more feminist in terms of the treatment of female characters, Helen is a fragment of the character created by Homer. She has few lines and when she is on screen she seems to be objectified, displayed and uninvolved. In contrast, the role of Briseis is increased. Her storyline is also changed as she undergoes a significant revision to become the willing lover of Achilles and the killer of Agamemnon.

The contrasts in how these two female characters are treated reveals that Helen has been prized for her beauty in this film and because she is beautiful and the war is fought because of her beauty, her actions cannot negate this. Helen's relationship with the audience of the film is tenuous, as her actions affect how much her character is sympathised with. By reducing her position in the film, and thereby reducing her actions and opinions, it mitigates the risk of alienating the audience through a disastrous misjudgement of how they would perceive her.

The second chapter will examine the twenty-first century novels *A Thousand Ships, The Silence of the Girls* and *The Song of Achilles,* and how they, following multiple waves of feminism and influenced by twenty-first century norms, have adapted Helen for a modern audience. By reframing the myth these authors position women as the protagonists (with the exception of Miller's *The Song of Achilles*) to tell the previously untold account of the war from a female perspective. Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* and Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* give Helen a voice for herself outside the bounds of a male author and a male-dominated narrative. The collective ensemble of voices in these novels reflects Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, as well as the use of the chorus in his other plays for presenting collective voices in judgement of Helen. These texts appear sympathetic to Helen, playing on her youth and isolation in Troy. Interestingly, these texts also develop Briseis further than any of the classical versions of the Trojan war, as she gains agency, motivations and a voice. In contrast, Madeline Miller's text *The Song of Achilles* is narrated by Patroclus and it is his and Achilles' voices that condemn Helen. Helen here appears reminiscent of being the decorative object in Petersen's *Troy;* she does not have a voice nor any character development. Briseis does undergo some character development, although it would be difficult to consider it positive. She gains a voice but her relationship to her captors is uncomfortably reminiscent of colonialism at times; she is a peasant girl that Patroclus 'educates'. These three novels use the character of Helen for different purposes, the varied characterisations of Helen are a result of the different focalisations of these texts as each novel explores the Trojan war from a different perspective. She is at times given her own voice and agency and on other occasions denied this as she is subsumed into the wider discussion of guilt, blame and victim-shaming.

The third chapter discusses the 2020 play *15 Heroines*, an adaptation of Ovid's *Heroides.* The fifteen monologues are arranged in groups of five and *The War* covers the Trojan war from the perspectives of the women affected. Helen is not one of these women but her voice is present in the others' accounts. By denying Helen a physical presence *15 Heroines* avoids the pitfalls faced by the film *Troy*; an absent Helen is one that retains her divine beauty. The monologue given by Dido (entitled *The Choice*) is indicative of the purpose of the wider span of monologues; these women are able to voice their stories for themselves and can choose how they are remembered. Dido reclaims her narrative from the *Aeneid*, and she lists her accomplishments as a source of pride and ensures her legacy is remembered as hers alone. Helen is not given this option; instead, her actions are judged by others. This collection of monologues came in the wake of the MeToo movement and as such the shifting of blame from Helen to Paris is a subtle but noticeably different position to take. The women at times blame Paris and the gods for the Trojan war but Helen is more often portrayed as a victim, a prize, a stolen wife. The language used once again reduces Helen to a possession rather than a person but it is the antagonism and reproach that Helen faces from these women that serves to re-humanise her as she is guilty of having personal flaws, but not to blame for the war. Without Helen being present in the *15 Heroines* her voice screams for recognition of her story through the voices of other women, creating a social commentary on the role of the female ensemble in literature and society.

The twenty-first century adaptations and appropriations of Helen range from re-creating a fully fleshed out character that bares resemblance to Helen in name alone, to repetitions of the classical Helen, to characters created from the gaps left by Homer in his characterisation. This thesis aims to explore how Helen has been changed for a twenty-first century audience and whether she is recognisable in her modern guise. Has Homer's Helen been killed to make way for a more modern, feminist version of her?

> *"Myth is by nature a dynamic entity, evolving and constantly being reinterpreted over generations. It cannot be static, or it ceases to maintain its truth value. The Trojan War and its historicity have become, in part because of films like Troy, an essential part of our own twenty-first-century global mythology."*
>
> Dué, 2007, 254

2. Helen on Film: how is Helen translated for a modern audience when she can be seen visually?

When presented on film or in art, the creator must make a conscious decision on how Helen is visually portrayed. Homer's descriptions of her physical attributes are sparse, and other classical iterations of Helen follow this pattern. As a result of this, modern adaptations have free reign over how they present Helen, often using the lack of definitive physical characteristics to reflect the beauty standards at the time of production. Petersen's *Troy* from 2004 is no exception, as the model Diane Kruger was cast to play the most alluring woman in Greek myth. However, by focussing on Helen's beauty and how to convey her power through this beauty without divine influence, the film loses the agency and individuality that characterises the Homeric Helen. It is not only Helen's divine parentage that is amiss in *Troy*, but also her ties to Sparta. Whereas in Homer's text Helen is the daughter of the Spartan royals, in *Troy* it is Menelaus who has royal ties to Sparta. This creates the underlying notion of ownership of Helen: she has lost the royal status she had in the *Iliad* and has been subsumed into Menelaus' royal family. By removing Sparta as Helen's home, it implies that she has no obligation to stay there after meeting Paris, and by having the marriage be arranged for her it casts Paris as her rescuer (Roisman, 2008, 140), avoiding the moral issue of her leaving with the Trojans.

Translating Helen from a verbal medium to a visual one creates problems which are compounded by the film's removal of the divine. If there are no gods, Helen cannot be semi-divine, and must be an ordinary human. Additionally, her actions cannot be caused or influenced by the gods or goddesses, the Judgement of Paris did not take place, and Helen was not the prize offered to him. The goddesses cannot interfere with their relationship in *Troy*, and thus their actions and decisions are their own. In Homer's *Iliad,* Helen is portrayed as the human counterpart to the goddess Aphrodite, creating a clear distinction between human beauty and divine beauty. However, as *Troy* removes the gods and goddesses, there is no divinity for Helen and as such her beauty is purely human. The realism and attainability of Helen's beauty reduces the motive of the war being fought for her as an object, and instead it foregrounds the war as being fought for love. The film goes beyond the narrative of the *Iliad,* implying that Helen's actions are merely used as a justification for Agamemnon's military goals, and, under the pretence that he has lost the woman he loved, Menelaus' anger stems instead from losing control.

2.1 Visual depictions of Helen in the film *Troy*.

Descriptions of Helen in Homer's epics, and indeed in later versions of the myth, are often vague and lacking in detail. Rather than telling us what made Helen beautiful, traditionally the focus has been on how Helen affects those around her and the impact of her beauty on others. The ambiguity of Helen's beauty allows the reader to create their own version of Helen, free from the constraints of societal and temporal notions of beauty. *Troy* is different, as it must show Helen's superlative beauty in a visual medium, and it must do so quickly to capture the audience. Helen in *Troy* conforms to twenty-first century western beauty standards: she is blonde-haired, white-skinned and waifish, thus maximising the audience appeal (Roisman, 2008, 147). By having Helen as the singular blonde amongst the dark-haired Trojan women she is also visually different, instantly identifiable in crowd scenes, and always kept distinct from the ensemble. *Troy* is not very original with the colour schemes used by the costuming department as Helen appears in a limited number of colours to signify her situation. At the banquet celebrating the peace between Sparta and Troy, she wears heavy red robes and gold jewellery (see figure 1), thus creating the impression of decadence in comparison to the costuming of the Trojans. Red is typically used in costuming to denote lust and desire, and as such it can be inferred that the Helen in Sparta is symbolic of sin and temptation. This costume seems directly influenced by Edward Poynter's 'Helen' (1887) in which she is depicted in heavy red robes with gold embroidery, a golden crown, and thick gold and red jewellery. Poynter's Helen features a woeful face, large blue eyes and a bare shoulder, she is guileless and beguiling simultaneously. By creating a relationship between Helen in *Troy* and this painting, *Troy* uses past depictions of Helen to evoke a particular response in the audience to give weight to the film's depiction of Helen. The decadence with which she is portrayed in the red gown emphasises Helen's status and wealth, as well as communicating her relationship to Menelaus. According to Ancient Roman tradition, brides were decked in a red veil, which visually indicates Helen as wife to Menelaus, but as Yu explains in *A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Symbolic Meanings of Color,* it also makes her the source of conflict as in both Roman and Egyptian traditions red is the colour associated with the respective gods of war and the call to arms (2014, 59). Helen's red gown appears heavier than any of the later outfits, suggesting that her marriage to Menelaus weighs heavily on her and she is freed when she leaves him and Sparta.

Conversely when she arrives in Troy and is paraded through the streets she is decked in white (see figure 2). A parasol shields her from the sun implying modesty, but also performing a subtle nod to the need to preserve her complexion and retain the epithet “white-armed”. The draping of the gown and the contrast of its light colour against the blue of the Trojans marks Helen as different (see figure 3) and thus exotic in her difference. Additionally, clothing Helen in white symbolises her innocence to the audience, it makes her unerringly bridal to a modern western audience and connects her to Paris, rather than associating her with Menelaus. This choice in costume emphasises the story that Helen and Paris are in love, signifying them as the couple to achieve the Hollywood happy ending. Her acceptance and assimilation into the Trojan royal family is demonstrated by a change in costume. Helen appears in a gown reminiscent of the dark blue the members of the Trojan royal family wear, albeit marginally darker, in the scene following the discovery of the Trojan horse. Her jewellery is turquoise and less extravagant than what she wore when the film first introduced her; she no longer needs physical adornments to signify her status. A significant contrast between Troy and Sparta can be seen in how much skin she reveals while still remaining clothed and in public. In Troy her gowns often bare her shoulders, a more modern signifier suggesting she is now free from the constraints of the Spartan court to dress as she pleases. Alternatively, it can be seen as a demonstration of her guile and femininity. Helen is a decorative object, paraded by Menelaus in the banquet hall and Paris through the streets of Troy, and as such her outfit befits that role. However, this style of dress is seen on Andromache as well, lending credence to the idea that it demonstrates her assimilation to Trojan culture, and it is the culture itself that is more freeing.

Helen’s nudity in the film has no precedent in the classical texts as her body is not described in the *Iliad*. Whilst it provides a visual indication of her beauty it also offers a disconnect. Her beauty is realistic and human, therefore it is open to audience critique and rationalisations as they weigh up whether she is beautiful enough to have caused such devastation. By showing her as human the film reveals that there is nothing special about Helen, and the “‘realistic’ Helen erases the ‘real’ Helen of Greek myth, insofar as the latter is phantasmal in her very essence” (Blondell, Third Cheerleader, 2013, 65). Helen in *Troy* is real and visual, whereas Homer’s Helen is ambiguous and undefined, and by locating Helen’s allure in her physicality, it serves to distract from her mythical beauty.

In contrast to the self-assured Helen of the *Iliad*, the Helen of *Troy* appears reticent, diminished and unsure. Her hands are often clasped, her gaze directed downwards and rarely meeting the person she is speaking to. Whilst these actions may indicate modesty, it furthers the idea that she is distant, otherworldly and cold, contrasting the involvement and passion of the Homeric Helen. Roisman counts that of the “thirty-some appearances in the film, in only eight does

[Helen] speak more than a single line" (2008, 145). Helen is present physically in *Troy* but not verbally, and if she was not present it would be difficult to say she would be missed. When she does speak, she speaks only to tell the audience of her unhappiness in her marriage to Menelaus, to justify her actions and to reassure Paris; however, her declarations are never unprompted and are always led by Paris when the two interact. Helen is supplementary to the male narrative of Paris (Roisman, 2008, 145), and thus she lacks the critical scorn of the Iliadic Helen, remaining a devout lover regardless of how naïve Paris is shown to be. *Troy* does not manage a feminist interpretation of Helen when presenting her in the twenty-first century: she merely serves as a visual reminder of what the conflict is over but not who she is.

2.2. Victim or instigator: How Helen and Paris are apportioned blame in *Troy*.

As the focus on Helen's physical appearance increases, her self-recrimination and acceptance of blame diminishes in *Troy*. By removing the gods from the film, the scenes of Helen interacting with them must be removed and with them the strongest examples of Helen's personality and speech. In the *Iliad* the gods' role in the Trojan War and the influence they wield over the mortals could be read as excusing the mortals' behaviour as they are subject to the whims of the gods. However, according to Blondell, a mortal who acts under the influence of the gods retains responsibility, and therefore blame, for those actions. Helen as a "[a] beautiful woman who inspires such misdeeds is often the first to suffer, as an innocent target of rapacious male lust, regardless of her own desires (or lack thereof)" (Blondell, Female Beauty, 2013, 7), suggesting that even without the gods Helen bears the responsibility for the war because of her beauty.

Removing the gods from *Troy* recentres the issue of guilt and places the issue of intention and blame at the feet of the mortals. Paris is absolved from blame as he did not judge the competition between the goddesses at which Helen was a bribe. This alternate version of the myth removes the weight of blame from Paris as he no longer arrives in Sparta with the intention to betray Menelaus (Winkler, 2009, 219). Therefore, because Paris no longer comes to Sparta with the intention of taking Helen as his rightful prize, he instead pursues the wife of Menelaus out of desire, a more 'honest' act which still breaks the rules of hospitality and endangering the pact of peace. Paris' previous wife, Oenone, is typically forgotten in accounts of the Trojan War and this appears true for Petersen's *Troy*. Neglecting to mention Paris' wife, whilst emphasising Helen's abandonment of her husband, reinforces Paris as the saviour of Helen and that theirs is a story of true love, in an attempt to elevate them from responsibility and blame.

For Helen, without the Judgement of Paris taking place she is no longer a prize to be given to Paris and thus can be assumed to be making her own choice, and therefore carrying more blame in Petersen's version of the myth. In *Troy* when Paris follows Helen to her bedchamber in Sparta, she tells Paris that she has made several mistakes, implying that she was foolish to meet him in private. Her speech lacks conviction, as later demonstrated when she leaves with Paris. The temporary regret is needed to placate the audience, Helen has committed adultery but she recognises she is flawed, and when coupled with Menelaus' character, her actions become forgivable and the issue of blame is side-stepped. Helen is still portrayed as a victim in *Troy,* but, as she is in a loveless marriage to Menelaus, Paris fulfils the saviour archetype and Helen the damsel-in-distress. Shifting the characters into stereotypical roles reduces their agency and makes their actions predictable, thereby lessening their impact as individuals in the story. The film opts out of depicting the alternate storylines of how Helen came to Troy, whether she chose to join Paris or whether she was taken, and instead presents a more sanitised version to make it more palatable to the Hollywood audience. This source of conflict in the *Iliad* makes Helen more interesting as it causes the reader to consider whether she loves Paris or whether she wishes to return to her first husband Menelaus. By making Menelaus a reprehensible character, it justifies Helen falling in love with Paris and remaining in Troy is the 'best' outcome for her which thus justifies the war. Showing Helen falling in love with Paris absolves him of the guilt of the alternate versions of the myth in which he steals Helen away to Troy.

To be acceptable to modern western audiences, Helen and Paris' story had to be free of malice or deceit. There could not be any ambiguity over the rightness of their decision as it would sever the audience's connection to their story and thus weaken the emotional impact the film intended. By portraying Helen as Menelaus' possession, and thus Helen's marriage to him as loveless, Helen's desire for Paris is seen as truthful as this is her first experience with the romantic ideal of overwhelming passion (Winkler, 2009, 221). The removal of the gods means that neither Paris nor Helen are subject to their influence; they cannot be considered victims of the gods and therefore their actions are entirely their own. That is not to say that they are blamed for starting the Trojan war, after all, when considering all the causes of war Priam has fought, love makes the more sense as a motive.

In the *Iliad*, Helen is a fierce defender of her role as responsible for causing the Trojan War, but Helen alone is the one blaming herself; Priam places the blame with the gods (3.161-65) and Hector with Paris (6.325-32). Incidentally, the actions of the Greeks seem above reproach in the *Iliad*, with Helen, Paris and the gods bearing the unequal amounts of blame at the expense of recognising the agency of the male characters in choosing to pursue her (Menelaus) and prolong the war (Achilles). Blondell states that "blame is an acknowledgment of power, […] such texts disempower Helen by the very refusal of blame" (preface, 2013, x) which seems to ignore the power imbalance, assuming that blame results from someone wielding power rather than the one subject to it. Blondell seems to consider that blaming Helen for the Trojan War gives her power, whereas the *Iliad* seems to refute this. As one of the oldest versions of the myth does not place all the blame on Helen, then *Troy* seems to follow the *Iliad*'s lead by not blaming Helen entirely, but neither does she gain power through her position in the war in either version.

2.3. The role of Briseis as a foil for Helen in *Troy*.

The plot of *Troy* often differs from its source texts, and this is significantly apparent in the character of Briseis who is given a love story to parallel Helen's. Whereas the role of Helen is diminished in the film, Briseis is elevated, falling in love with Achilles. Notably, Briseis in *Troy* does not have a first husband slaughtered by Achilles, instead she is rescued by Achilles from Agamemnon. Helen and Briseis have different situations but whereas Helen is shown to be passive in her role, Briseis is more active, killing Agamemnon and changing her situation. Briseis' story is more tragic, Achilles dies and she must escape a burning Troy alone whereas Helen and Paris escape together. Despite these differences in *Troy*, in the *Iliad* both women are taken (whether by choice or not) from their first husbands, and they are fought over as prizes of the war.

Helen and Briseis meet when Helen is introduced to Priam in Troy and Briseis welcomes her returning cousins, Paris and Hector. Briseis is subject to jokes about her beauty and how her choice to serve in Apollo's temple is a shame for the men due to depriving them of a chance to marry her. This casual sexism is directed at the foil of Helen, as Helen herself must be above these comments to ensure her value and status is not diminished. Despite these comments Briseis appears exuberant and youthful, her tone and physicality much more active than the quiet Helen. Whereas Helen is an embodiment of beauty, and remains statuesque in the pursuit of beauty, Briseis is immediately established as a multidimensional character instead. Briseis' choice to serve at the temple can be read as a rejection of the male gaze and the objectification of women; she has opted out of the patriarchal society's role expected of her whereas Helen has no role other than to attract attention through her appearance and be objectified (Weinlich, 2015, 195). Briseis is a character the audience can connect with as she refuses to comply with societal expectations throughout the film whereas Helen is a victim of expectations.

The victimhood of Briseis is approached differently than Helen's. Whereas Helen requires rescuing from her marriage to Menelaus, Briseis kills Agamemnon when he attacks her and attempts to kill Achilles. Helen's role as a forced bride to Menelaus evokes audience sympathy and justifies the breaking of her marriage bonds by running away from Sparta with Paris. The brutish character of Menelaus creates a version of Helen who is vulnerable and needs saving, which differs from the classical texts where she is not typically presented as such. Briseis is normally cast as the one in need of a male saviour. In the *Iliad* she is held captive in the Greek camp as a slave to Achilles and Agamemnon. In the *Iliad* she is not saved, remaining a slave until the end of the text. It is only in the afterlife afforded by *Troy* that she is able to be undergo a radical transformation. Briseis is no longer a foreign princess, she does not have the husband and family as she does in the *Iliad*, instead she is rewritten as a member of Priam's family. However, her role to divide the Greeks is still pivotal, albeit construed differently. Rather than a war-prize taken from Achilles by Agamemnon, Briseis in *Troy* is a lover of Achilles stolen by Agamemnon. Briseis, like Helen, still has the role of causing turmoil as she is subject to the masculine narratives for dominance. Whereas Helen goes from a loveless marriage with Menelaus to a presumably, love-filled marriage with Paris, Briseis initially attempts to kill the man she falls for. Briseis attempts murder twice, and is successful once, whereas this is not an option for Helen.

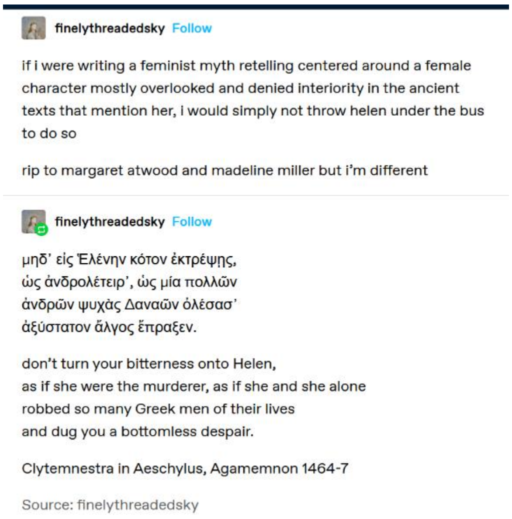
Helen is held frozen by her role in the war, she cannot act too divisively for fear of alienating the Trojans whom she relies on for safety (the writer and director cannot risk her alienating the audience for fear of the film losing its happy ending). Briseis and Helen occupy the two love stories that start in this film, but only Helen's has the traditionally happy ending with her and Paris leaving Troy. However, as Briseis can be seen to have undergone character development and grown whilst Helen appears to have stagnated, their stories no longer mirror each other. Despite this, Weinlich still reads them together, viewing Briseis' physical presence and active participation as reflective of Helen's maturity and intelligence. Briseis does whereas Helen speaks, and "[b]oth women show maturity in their knowledge of what can and should be done in a given situation and what cannot" (2015, 200). Both Helen and Briseis act in ways befitting their circumstances and, although their circumstances and endings are different, both achieve a sense of freedom at the end of *Troy*.

2.4. Does the film *Troy* meaningfully adapt or appropriate the character of Helen?

Troy is more of an appropriation rather than adaptation of Homer's epics, as it uses the names of the characters to form its own story, the plot differing greatly from previous accounts. Of the two main female characters, Helen and Briseis, one is reduced to an icon rather than a character, whereas the other undergoes significant development from the sparse mentions of her in the *Iliad*. Helen is a prize, and her speech, when it occurs, is stilted and lacklustre as it lacks the drive and passion of Homer's creation. *Troy* seems to struggle under the weight of Helen's legacy, the core narrative must be underpinned by the love story between her and Paris for the film to be effective but the original texts are wrought with contradictions. If the audience doubts at any point that the love between Paris and Helen is ingenuine, then the entire war is cast into doubt and Helen no longer becomes a sympathetic character.

By creating a narrative in which Helen willingly leaves with Paris, the film attempts to demonstrate that Petersen's Helen is no longer considered to be a prize that Paris has stolen from Sparta. Instead, her decision demonstrates agency and free will, rather than objectification. Following from this decision it ought to be assumed that *Troy* creates a Helen that is less objectified and therefore more acceptable to twenty-first century ideas of feminism. Unfortunately, the film does not succeed as it places Helen neatly into the role of the fragile woman requiring rescue from a marriage she was forced into, thereby reducing her from the Homeric version and diminishing her role in the Trojan War by removing her internal conflict. The removal of her uncertainty, her arguments with the gods, and her chastisement of Paris serves to disempower Helen rather than empowering her. The assumption that a 2004 film ought to be feminist is supported by the changes in Briseis' role as she is given agency by completely rewriting her character but for Helen the film denies her power and agency.

Troy's difficulties in adapting Helen for a modern audience indicates that her character is static and that she is frozen in the time of the epic. There is no modern niche or archetype that she can fit into in *Troy*'s narrative without causing plot holes in the film. Helen is silenced to allow others to speak for her and there is little to no character development which is a striking contrast to the Homeric Helen of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Roisman, 2008, 145). Perhaps the legacy of Helen prevented this film from exploring her character as she is positioned so tenuously in both the Homeric account (her beauty is her saving grace from punishment) and in *Troy* (her love for Paris is her saving grace from the audience). Anything that could jeopardise her and Paris' relationship as based on 'true love' has the potential to deconstruct the entire plot. *Troy* attempts to revise too much of the myth and Helen is buried under the weight of the film's attempt to carve out its place in the canon of the Trojan myth.



finelythreadedsky Follow

if i were writing a feminist myth retelling centered around a female character mostly overlooked and denied interiority in the ancient texts that mention her, i would simply not throw helen under the bus to do so

rip to margaret atwood and madeline miller but i'm different

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μηδ' εἰς Ἑλένην κότον ἐκτρέψῃς,
ὡς ἀνδρολέτειρ', ὡς μία πολλῶν
ἀνδρῶν ψυχὰς Δαναῶν ὀλέσασ'
ἀξύστατον ἄλγος ἔπραξεν.

don't turn your bitterness onto Helen,
as if she were the murderer, as if she and she alone
robbed so many Greek men of their lives
and dug you a bottomless despair.

Clytemnestra in Aeschylus, Agamemnon 1464-7

Source: finelythreadedsky

3. Silence and self-representation: Helen's voice, agency and blame in twenty-first century novels.

Modern novels retelling the myth of the Trojan War often seem to struggle with the problem of Helen. The ambivalence of Helen's motives, agency and allegiance in Homer's *Iliad* tends to restrict modern authors in their adaptations. Helen's actions are absolute and the war results from them, so the only changes they can make are in how Helen presents herself and how she is seen by the ensemble of characters around her. Modern novels must also navigate western conceptions of free will, choice and agency, changed notions about femininity and gender due to the development of feminist theory, and the expectation that their work will say something new. In light of this desire for a new perspective, Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* is a retelling from the perspective of Briseis, exploring the issues of slavery and personhood. Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* follows the collapse of Troy from multiple female perspectives as told by the muse Calliope to the poet telling the tale; the text explores the multitudinous sources of blame and responsibility with an ecological twist. Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* is told from the male perspective of Patroclus, focussing more on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in the lead up to the war and in the Greek camp. These texts all try to foreground or depict previously marginalised or untold stories, but is Helen's characterisation paying the price for developing these other characters?

3.1 Does Helen have agency and a voice in twenty-first century revisions of the myth?

Helen is often elevated to a man's role in classical texts, whether she is of comparable strategic wit to Odysseus, enticing the Greeks to reveal their subterfuge in the Trojan Horse (*Odyssey*, 4,270-289); or depicted as a poet recounting how she saw through Odysseus' own disguise (*Odyssey*, 4, 235-264); or shown as actively assisting the Greeks in their invasion of Troy (*Aeneid*, 6, 511-527); or as being the source of the Trojans' reputations and glory (*Trojan Women*, 380-412). It is through these, typically masculine, traits that Helen is assigned agency in the classical texts. In the modern novels, however, Helen is often presented through her own voice (as remembered by other characters), and is shown making her own choices, having her own thoughts and feelings. By presenting a Helen with emotion and interiority, modern authors attempt to create a nuanced Helen, to varying degrees of effectiveness.

The Song of Achilles assumes Helen's agency over her first two marriages, although both of these choices are seen from a male observer's perspective. As a child Patroclus is entered into the suitor competition for Helen's hand in marriage by his father, and as such he bears witness to her being given the opportunity to choose her husband. Odysseus proposes Helen be allowed to choose, but only because it allows Tyndareus, her father, to escape the blame of the failed suitors for not being chosen, already setting in motion Helen as a scapegoat for the male characters' choices, or lack thereof. When Tyndareus asks Helen if she accepts this, she agrees, another supposed act of choice, although it is difficult to see what alternatives were available. Patroclus creates the impression that Helen is in control: "Helen's voice, and the veil, gently fluttering with her breath, held us all captive" (Miller, 2011, 12); the men are passive, held spellbound by her. This again serves to blame Helen for the men's actions, her physical being as responsible for their responses, but as subject to her king she has no choice but to be present. Helen's choice of Menelaus is given "without hesitation, startling us all. We had expected suspense, indecision" (13), which creates the impression that Helen has made her own decision, and made it promptly. However, Patroclus also reveals that Odysseus and Tyndareus have made prior arrangements; Helen's cousin Penelope is to be wed to Odysseus and Helen's sister, Clytemnestra has been claimed by Agamemnon, Menelaus' brother. Helen's choice could therefore be an attempt to retain her relationship with her sister as they are now sisters and sister-in-law. This idea is later suggested by Patroclus himself when Achilles asks why Helen chose Menelaus (222). Additionally, by showing Tyndareus and Odysseus striking a deal it is implied that the issue of Helen's husband has been often discussed prior to this display of suitors, and therefore it cannot be determined that Helen's choice had not been made prior to this, with influence from her father and others. Helen is given the ability to pick a suitor from the pre-determined list of approved suitors which creates the fallacy of choice. By having Helen pick her husband, the text indicates that Helen is different, in that she is awarded a choice rather than being awarded as a prize to the best suitor. However, the lack of clarity, and obscuring of political machinations, creates the effect that Helen's choices may not actually be her own. Helen's supposed choice recalls a notion from post-feminist rhetoric, namely, that she is 'empowered' to make a choice, but her options are limited and any negative repercussions are wholly her fault (Anderson, Modern Misogyny, 2015, 19). Helen is given the appearance of having a choice throughout this text, although each 'choice' is false, and thereby each act of agency is not actually an act of her own choosing.

Comparatively, *A Thousand Ships* denies Helen agency through a female lens as Creusa recounts the common attitudes held by the Trojans about the Greeks. She recalls how "[n]o one believed their pretext: that they had come to claim back some woman who had run off with one of Priam's boys" (Haynes, 2019, 10), indicating that Helen's crime has been minimised to merely 'running off' with Paris, thereby allowing her to retain responsibility for that choice, but her actions were seen as an opportunity by the Greeks to wage war on Troy. Creusa further reduces Helen's agency, stating that "[t[he Spartan king -- the Trojan wives muttered as they gathered by the water to launder their clothes -- had probably sent Helen away with Paris deliberately, to give him and his fellow-Greeks the excuse they needed to set sail" (11), thereby denying Helen the very agency required to choose to run away with Paris. Both modern texts deny Helen agency but whereas Haynes' denial of agency mitigates Helen's responsibility because she is being used as a pawn, Miller's demonstrates how the allusion of choice can be used to blame someone who appears to have free will.

Regardless of the number of lines she is given, Helen is presented with the opportunity to speak for herself in these modern texts, whether through her own words or through her weaving. Homer established the motif of Helen as weaving a tapestry to tell her story, "a great web of purple cloth […] into which she was weaving some of the many trials that the Trojans and Greeks had suffered for her sake at the hands of the War- god Ares" (*Iliad,* 3, 125-129). Weaving has oft been considered a physical manifestation of speech, when the voice has been silenced (Gumpert, 2001, 5). By having Helen weave the trials of the Greeks and Trojans Homer firmly places Helen as a narrator in the Trojan war as she physically weaves the story Homer is telling. This motif is picked up and developed in the modern texts *A Thousand Ships* and *The Silence of the Girls* as a secondary method of communication for Helen. The inclusion of weaving allows for the authors to make subtle references to the *Iliad* and thus add credence to their interpretations of Helen, as well as providing a point of demarcation as they give a voice to a Helen who is silenced by previous versions of her. As weaving was “the age-old women’s way of telling stories in the wordless medium of their world” (Keaney & Lamberton, 2019, 13), it is still used in modern texts to give Helen a voice.

In *The Silence of the Girls* Barker, through a young Briseis, depicts Helen’s tapestry, which shows the war in all its gruesome glory. “Half a dozen battle scenes covered the walls, a sequence that taken together told the whole story of the war so far. Hand-to-hand combat, men decapitated, gutted, skewered, filleted, disembowelled” (Barker, 2018, 129). This suggests that not only is Helen cognizant of battle injuries and how to depict them, she is reminded of the human cost of a war fought for her sake. As such, this tapestry could be seen as a self-inflicted punishment for Helen as it demonstrates her internalisation of blame. Briseis observes that Helen has not depicted herself amongst the players of the Trojan war, potentially marking herself as an observer rather than a participant. “Helen’s weaving in the *Iliad* is distinct. While Andromakhe weaves a conventional and impersonal floral design, Helen’s weaving is both self-referential and historical” (Roisman, 2006, 9), which, if applied to the tapestry in *The Silence of the Girls*, indicates that Helen’s absence is deliberate, personal and multifaceted. A Helen consumed by guilt could consider herself as unworthy to share the space with the heroes of the war she has caused; whereas a Helen who is controlling the situation around her may consider herself to be above the debased nature of battle and death. Additionally, it could indicate Helen’s ambivalence in and to the war. If she is merely a pawn or an excuse used for the war, her story is not bound up in the war and she gains no glory from it. Briseis interprets Helen’s absence as a sign of rebellion resulting from her exclusion from witnessing the combat between Paris and Menelaus to determine her future. Thus, she has “deliberately made herself invisible, but in another way, perhaps the only way that matters, she was present in every stitch” (Barker, 2018, 130). Helen is present in the tapestry and the Trojan war, her weaving can say what she is not able to verbalise, it speaks in the places where she cannot.

Whereas Helen in *The Silence of the Girls* shows her weaving to Briseis, Helen in Haynes’ *A Thousand Ships* denies ever weaving one. The city has fallen and the women are awaiting collection by their new masters when Odysseus comes to collect Helen. When she proclaims she has no belongings to collect, he asks “[y]ou wove no tapestries while you waited for your husband to bring you home? I though you would have created something quite ornate in all these years” (Haynes, 2019, 209), referencing the *Iliad* and calling to mind the repeated battle of wits between Helen and Odysseus from the *Odyssey.* Helen responds that her “weaving was nothing compared to that of these women” (209) in reference to the other captive Trojans. Whilst it could be considered that Haynes’ Helen is simply not a weaver and did not create her famous tapestry, it is more interesting to consider why she would create one and then deny its existence. Much like Barker’s account, this too has many potential interpretations. It could be a sign of Helen's humbling in the face of the destruction of Troy and its people; a compliment to elevate the Trojan women who will become slaves in the homes of the Greeks; or a closing off of the Trojan chapter of her story. As established earlier, Helen's weaving is highly personal and individualised; it is also, perhaps, the only thing that can be truly established as Helen's. By refusing to claim a tapestry as her own it becomes part of the collective treasure of Troy, much the same as Helen is now 'of Troy'. Helen is aware that she must now resume her role as Menelaus' wife but by not giving him the tapestry she wove of the war, it could be considered a part of her personhood that she refuses to give back, and thus an act of self-silencing. In the *Odyssey* Helen is shown as accumulating hospitality gifts of her own (4.129-132), adding value to her husband's possessions through her position as his wife. In addition to adding external value through relationships with other households, the weaving of tapestries was an internal generation of wealth (Blondell, Happily Ever After, 2013, 77). The physical tapestry represented value, as did the woman skilled enough to create it. When Helen denies having any possessions to take with her from Troy, or having woven any tapestries, she could be seen as denying her position as Menelaus' wife through her refusal to add value to their marriage. Odysseus seems surprised that Helen has not woven anything, and therefore has not generated anything of value, and his surprise seems to indicate that he is unsure why they fought for her return if she has no material possessions of value to bring with her back to Greece. Helen has not fulfilled her obligations to Menelaus' household, she denies him the wealth that could have been gained through her skills and denies having anything from Troy to take to Sparta.

3.2 Ensemble views of Helen and how she is seen by the protagonist

Using an ensemble of characters allows authors to present debates and opposing perspectives they would not typically be able to discuss due to the constraints of the novel format. Euripides' *Trojan Women* is a classical example of the ensemble cast discussion about Helen's character, and is duplicated, almost in entirety in Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*. Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* presents Helen's reaction to the ensemble instead, and Miller's *The Song of Achilles* differs from these two texts as the ensemble is restricted to two players, and they are men rather than women. The purpose of the ensemble, in both Euripides' play and the modern adaptations, is to navigate the issues of Helen's allegiance and motivation, and where possible, to conclude if she is worthy of sympathy for her role in the war and how her legacy has been treated. In Euripides' *Trojan Women* "Helen has posed something of a puzzle throughout: is she to be treated as Greek or Trojan, victor or captive? Poseidon noted at the outset that Helen had been grouped ‘with justice’ among the Trojan prisoners (34-35). The Trojan women, however, disown her” (Gregory, 1997, 170) and it is these questions that modern writers still grapple with.

Discussions of blame and responsibility occur between Helen and Hecuba in *A Thousand Ships* and reflect Euripides’ *Trojan Women*. In Euripides’ play “Helen speaks first, adopting a number of self-serving and mutually incompatible strategies. Her first is to attribute crimes to other people that detract and distract from her own. Thus Helen claims Hecuba ‘gave birth to the source of the evils’ when she bore Paris; next that Priam is at fault, because he failed to destroy Paris at birth” (Gregory, 1997, 172). In contrast, in *A Thousand Ships* Helen instead tries to absolve Hecuba of her self-imposed guilt.

> ‘It isn't her fault,' said her mother [Hecabe], her voice ragged from the long night. 'It is mine.'
>
> ‘Yours?' said Polyxena, and Andromache saw that she and Helen shared a brief expression of perplexity. 'How can it be your fault?'
>
> 'We were told when he was born that he would be Troy's downfall,' cried Hecabe. 'The prophecy was clear: we were to kill Paris or he would live and kill us all.’ (Haynes, 2019, 179).

In this scene, not only does Hecabe herself refute claims that Helen is responsible for the war, she also introduces the prophecy regarding Paris, and a potential relationship between Helen and Polyxena is revealed. After Hecuba retells the story of their casting out of Paris to be killed as a baby, Helen refutes Hecuba’s self-assigned blame.

> 'Did Priam also know the herdsman had this weakness?' Helen asked. Hecabe nodded. 'So, again, it is not your fault. Or at least not your fault alone,' Helen said. 'Priam made the same decision, and Paris was his son, Troy his kingdom. You were his partner in all things, but you were not his ruler. The larger share of the blame lies in Priam's hands.'
>
> ‘In Priam’s grave,’ Hecabe said. ‘But among the living, I carry the guilt.’ (181)

The ensemble of *A Thousand Ships* works to ensure that blame is spread over multiple characters, establishing the idea that not one singular person can be responsible for the downfall of a city, as well as establishing that the burden of guilt is one carried by the living. Blondell observes that Euripides reverses the pattern of blame in the *Trojan Women* in comparison to the *Iliad*. In the *Iliad* Helen is the only character to explicitly blame herself, whereas in the *Trojan Women*, everyone blames Helen except herself. The effect of this, she notes, is to make Helen seem less guilty in the *Iliad* by acknowledging her guilt whereas by claiming innocence in *Trojan Women* she appears less innocent (Happily Ever After, 2013, 189). By combining both self-recrimination and the bearing of guilt, as well as acknowledging it as a shared guilt, *A Thousand Ships* sits neatly between the two classical texts it stems from.

The notion of blame and responsibility is further explored in *The Song of Achilles*, but in this instance the ensemble consists of a male cast. As Achilles and Patroclus discuss Helen's leaving of Menelaus, Achilles asks if Patroclus thinks Helen went with Paris willingly, to which Patroclus responds: "I think if she did she will not admit it to Menelaus" (Miller, 2011, 222). This creates a shadow of doubt over Helen's autonomy in leaving Sparta but implies she now has a choice over what narrative her former husband hears. Achilles does not appear to share this doubt over Helen's willingness, claiming "[s]he must have been willing, though. Menelaus' palace is like a fortress. If she had struggled or cried out, someone would have heard" (222). This phrase is hauntingly familiar to a twenty-first century reader as it is oft repeated in western media when determining the validity of women's accusations, and reflecting the pervasive notion that women are responsible for raising the alarm when attacked,[1] and if they do not, no crime occurred. He further states, "[s]he knew he must come after her, for his honour if nothing else. And that Agamemnon would seize this opportunity, and invoke the oath" (222), indicating that Helen should have known better. In this regard, Helen is once again held responsible by the male characters, as she is blamed for not considering the repercussions whereas Odysseus is not held responsible for suggesting the oath, nor Tyndareus for enforcing it. Achilles also makes reference to Helen leaving Menelaus, to deliberately trigger the war for her legacy to be increased: "[s]he used to be known as the most beautiful woman in our kingdoms. Now they say she's the most beautiful woman in the world" (222). This reduces Helen to a woman obsessed with her own beauty, and furthering her own glory and prestige, regardless of the human cost. This conversation assigns Helen with agency in choosing Paris and makes the assumption that she willingly left Sparta, whilst also suggesting that even if she were kidnapped it was her fault for not calling out and being saved. This view of Helen is also affected by the reader's knowledge that neither Achilles nor Patroclus wanted to be involved in the war. Presuming agency on behalf of Helen legitimises their distaste for the war and protects them from accusations of flaunting responsibility, of not upholding their oaths (Patroclus) or fighting for Greek glory (Achilles). Whilst the accounts of Helen's supposed choices ought to be indicative of blame, without preestablishing Helen’s agency, and without Helen defending herself, the discussion lacks weight and remains unconvincing.

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[1] The requirement for victims to 'hue and cry' has been ingrained in law for rape cases, and although it has morphed into the prompt complaint requirement, it still puts the onus on verbalising victimhood as a key component in cases being considered valid (Anderson, 2004, 9-10). As such, from the language of victim blaming used by Achilles with regards to Helen, it can be inferred that from his perspective, because Helen did not cry out, no crime has been committed and therefore she was a willing participant.

Whereas the other two novels use the ensemble to examine blame apportioned by Helen and others, *The Silence of the Girls* takes a different approach. As the novel is from the perspective of Briseis, it instead uses anecdotes to reveal other characters’ attitudes to Helen, as well as Helen’s views of the Trojan women. Briseis recalls witnessing an interaction between Helen and a Trojan man who “had stepped forward and greeted Helen with every sign of respect, chatting, smiling and then bowing as he took his leave. Only I happened to turn round as we walked past and I saw him spit on her shadow” (Barker, 2018, 124) revealing the duplicitous nature of the people Helen meets, rather than that of Helen herself. Briseis also gives an insight into how Helen views the ensemble. She at times finds humour in calling the Trojan women “the ladies” (126, 128), suggesting she does not take them seriously as they cannot harm her. However, Helen’s attitude towards men differs, “she had a pretty good idea what they were thinking- the same thing they'd been thinking since she was ten years old. Oh, yes, I got that story too. Poor Helen, raped on a river bank when she was only ten. Of course I believed her. It was quite a shock to me, later, to discover nobody else did” (126). By revealing that only Briseis believes Helen is a victim not only shows how Helen was perceived by her peers, but it also elevates Briseis as she becomes the singular character to trust Helen. Her shock at this also reinforces how Briseis is being created as a model protagonist. If she also shared the others’ disbelief, it would reflect worse on her than on Helen for gaining the reader’s sympathy and trust. Not only is Briseis supportive of Helen as a victim, she agrees with her ridiculing the Trojan women for “[t]he stupid way they copied her hairstyles, her make-up, her clothes . . . It was astonishing the way really quite intelligent women seemed to believe that if they carried their eyeliner beyond the outer corner of the lid and gave it a little upward flick, they'd have Helen's eyes” (128). This results in a unified Helen-and-Briseis against the rest of the Trojans.

3.3 Does elevating other characters diminish Helen?

The modernisation of myth will always reveal problematic issues due to socio-political changes. As such, these three authors have attempted, to varying degrees, to make their novels more acceptable to a twenty-first century audience by rewriting minor characters from the *Iliad.* Whilst *The Song of Achilles* could be considered the most problematic in its handling of Helen, the other texts also struggle to bring the myth and its characters in line with modern societal values. To elevate Briseis and other oft-neglected victims of the war Helen is often cast aside or reduced to elevate the more sympathetic characters. Her role and personhood are diminished so the others can be seen as ‘good’ in relation to her.

Miller’s Helen is never seen unveiled and rarely heard. Patroclus recalls the effects Helen had upon her suitors, but he could not distinguish her from the other two women sitting with her at the ceremony. This, coupled with the scene where Achilles and Patroclus discuss Helen’s motivations, are the only scenes she features in. Briseis, on the other hand, has an increased role and it is her character that is developed, humanised and made relatable to the reader. Briseis becomes a farm girl in this version, instantly making her more relatable by removing the prestige of the *Iliad*. As such, Briseis takes the role of the tragic heroine, not Helen. Her tragedy is to be a slave “in the land of one’s birth […] to be made utterly homeless at home” (Patterson, 1991, 176), so whilst Helen is static and trapped in her marriage, Briseis is physically enslaved but her character develops throughout the novel. Whilst Briseis escapes her fate, Miller’s characterisation of Helen stagnates and has no effect or impact on the characters in this version of the myth. Helen is more humanised and relatable in Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* as she is seen through Briseis’ childhood memories; she has a friend, entertains Briseis, and she finds humour in those who mock her. Despite this, Helen is shown only in a years-old memory and the novel offers her no character development or resolution. Instead, she becomes a fond memory for Briseis, but nothing more.

In *A Thousand Ships* Helen, whilst physically occupying the same space as the captive Trojan women, is presented as something ‘other’. Haynes makes use of the divine to reinforce Helen’s difference, and to maintain the emotional distance between Helen and the Trojan women, and Helen and the reader. To emphasise how isolated Helen is, comparisons can be drawn between her interactions with fellow enslaved women, and the interactions between Briseis and Chryseis. Briseis and Chryseis have personal conversations, and not only do they have emotional freedom, they also have more physical movement. This differs marginally from the *Iliad* where Helen shares with the enslaved Briseis and Chryseis a restriction of her movement and ability to leave (Roisman, 2006, 4), although she occupies a higher status. In Haynes’ text, however, Briseis and Chryseis are moved around the camp whilst Helen and the Trojan women are restricted to where the Greeks have put them. Helen is distanced from her peers by her status as Menelaus’ wife, thus escaping the fate of the other women, but also appearing unconcerned about her future. This, coupled with introducing Helen to Troy with her jewellery resembling shackles “the ropes of gold she wore around her neck and wrists” (Haynes, 2019, 10) creates empathy for Helen as she is a prize to be handed to the next winner, rather than choosing her fate.

Helen in twenty-first century novels, then, suffers from the authors trying to say something new within the restricted frame of the Trojan myth. She is often a memory, a ghost haunting the text, but when she is present, she is still blamed for her role in the war. The story regarding Helen does not undergo significant revisions, instead it is the presentation of Helen’s own voice and the characters that blame her that are enhanced and developed.

> *"All he ever wanted is to have Helen as his wife. He had her, he lost her, and now he has her again. My presence is scarcely required at all, so long as it cannot be said that I am with someone else"*
>
> Haynes, 2019, 134

4. Using Helen as a vehicle for social commentary: what does the absence of Helen mean in *15 Heroines*?

The play, *15 Heroines*, consists of three sets of five monologues, with 'The War' focussing on the events of the Trojan War. The monologues are modern adaptations of Ovid's *Heroides*, in which he himself adapted prior incarnations of these women of myth. Helen, although present in the source text, is conspicuously absent in *15 Heroines*, yet she is still very much present as she haunts the stories of the other characters and is given a voice through theirs. Laodamia gives Helen a past, Oenone grounds Helen firmly in the traditional context of the Trojan War, and Hermione offers her a future beyond the scope of the narrative created by Homer. Providing these glimpses of Helen humanises her for a modern audience as her character takes precedence over the archetypal role she is typically reduced to. By focussing on the female voice and experience, and humanising these characters in *15 Heroines*, the play is able to illustrate the problematic trend in classic (and modern) media whereby female characters are harmed to further the story arcs of male characters. The misogynistic portrayal of Helen, Briseis and Dido in the Greek hypotexts presents these women as less valuable, they exist as "justifications for men to embark on violent rampages in the name of justice and revenge. They often have no agency or purpose other than being living plot devices" (Faulkner, 2018). *15 Heroines* resists this reductionist view by allowing these marginalized women to speak for themselves, following Ovid's legacy in attempting to counter this notion by giving agency, motive and interiority to these female characters. Helen is the exception to this, she does not have her own monologue, and is instead presented through the perspectives of women whose lives have been impacted by her actions.

4.1. Helen: the other woman, the traumatised mother and the pinnacle of love

The lack of her own monologue by Helen in *15 Heroines* avoids the histrionic or superficial presentations of Helen that other recent adaptations have created. Instead, she is created entirely through the other characters and is therefore seen from multiple perspectives, predominantly from the perspectives of women she has wronged, with the exception of Dido. Dido serves as a foil to Helen in the *Aeneid*: a beautiful queen who, manipulated by the gods, falls for a son/ son-in-law of Priam only to lose her husband to further the glory of the gods' favoured hero. As such, in *15 Heroines*, Dido recognises Helen as another woman who has fallen in love. She sees Helen without judging her past actions, and instead presents Helen without assigning blame or accusations regarding her role in the war. Indeed, this lack of moralising of Helen is a stark contrast to other adaptations of the Trojan War, yet this cannot be accounted for by the progress made by feminism alone, as other twenty-first century adaptations do not revise the way Helen is treated. Instead, it could be considered to be specific for adaptations of the *Heroides* as Ovid's text rewrote the narratives of these women by giving them their own voice. He not only wrote about female characters but he wrote from their perspective, altering the myths somewhat from the accepted versions. Having these female characters revise their own narratives allows them to take control of their narratives without adhering to societal obligations. Instead, these women "emerge as readers with interests and foibles, who draw conclusions which are revealed as their own rather than further iterations of tradition" (Lyne, 2008, 322). *15 Heroines* continues this tradition as the women co-opt anecdotes from other characters; for example, Laodamia takes a story from Paris and in doing so removes the male gaze and sexualisation of Helen. As Ovid had already weakened the male narrative in the *Heroides, 15 Heroines* further severs this masculine and patriarchal view of Helen, allowing her to be a woman rather than a figurehead for morality.

Ovid's order of monologues has been revised in *15 Heroines*, and so Oenone appears first to give a sense of history and ground the stories within the Trojan War. In Ovid's text, her letter begins "[w]ill you read? Does your new wife forbid" (Ovid, 40), casting Oenone as the antagonistic, scorned woman and Helen as a controlling force over Paris. In *15 Heroines*, *The Cost of Red Wine* begins with "[a]re all men like this?" (Precious, 2020, 13), repositioning Oenone as the victim and Paris as the active force. Removing Helen from the opening serves to remind the audience that Paris is Oenone's opposition, not Helen, and thus Oenone is allowed to grow as a character herself without being overshadowed by Helen. Oenone's monologue posits Helen as a trophy for Paris, an object rather than a person: "your prize, your trophy. All eyes on you" (Precious, 2020, 14). She views Helen as a passive character swept away by Paris, but in doing so she soon contradicts herself as she claims Helen erases Paris' past. Despite refocusing the blame onto Paris in Precious' adaptation of Ovid's letter from Oenone, he still becomes a secondary character in the story of HelenandParis; he fades into the background again as Helen is refocussed on by the author. The passivity of Helen is also apparent in Ovid's creation as "one stolen so often must encourage theft" (Ovid, 44). The victim blaming of Helen is not so apparent in *The Cost of Red Wine*, where the accusations are levied against Paris. Omitting Helen's active voice almost places her as a bystander and beyond reproach. However, Oenone does not consider her so. She actively removes Helen from her future narrative and draws a distinction between herself (as representative of women) and Helen, cast aside and not included.

> My hands will be mine and hers,
>
> When I say her,
>
> I DO - NOT - mean Helen
>
> I mean every woman who has ever lived,
>
> I mean every woman whose heart has ever been broken (Precious, 2020, 20).

This act of removing Helen positions her firmly as someone 'other', and yet she does not become a figure of hatred herself, but as a result of her actions. Oenone's emotional breakdown makes her situation recognisable to the audience, inducing sympathy for her and reducing Helen from the woman a war was fought over to merely the 'other' woman.

Helen is also present in this play through the voice of her daughter, Hermione, who was abandoned by both parents at the age of nine, when her mother eloped with Paris and her father went in pursuit of Helen. Hermione describes her parent's marriage as one-sided, with Menelaus "so in love with a woman not so in love with him" (Mahfouz, 2020, 33). However, she also recognises the fortune of women in ancient Greek times, acknowledging that Helen's birth resulted from what was "unlikely a consensual conception" (33). This comment on the notion of rape, which can be found in many classical Greek myths, can be read as a contemporary critique as there does not appear to be much condemnation of these actions in Ovid's text, and as such reflects a shift in public reception of these stories. Hermione's criticism of Aphrodite as "an evil bitch" (34) is a sentiment that directly evokes Helen's opinion as found in the *Iliad* (Book 3), and by emphasising Aphrodite's manipulation of Helen, Helen cannot be seen as all-powerful and in control of the situation. Both Hermione and Helen blame Aphrodite as being the cause of this upheaval. By having Hermione reflect her mother's view on the true cause of the Trojan War (Aphrodite's 'giving' of Helen to Paris as a prize) it highlights how often this is missed in retellings of the story. Helen is often blamed as the sole cause of the war, with both men and gods alike escaping blame.

Despite the similarities between adaptation and original, Hermione's monologue, *Will You?,* is potentially the first time we see negative consequences for Helen after the war. Euripides' *Helen* makes sparse reference to Helen’s suffering, albeit only in regards to Helen hearing of the deaths of her mother, Menelaus and her brothers. The chorus asks:

> What kind of torment, what regret,
>
> what suffering has not been yours? (*Helen,* 222-223)

Despite this apparent torment Helen remains unchanged in Euripides’ play as the news has limited effect on her actions. *Will You?* then becomes far more interesting as it chooses to go beyond the corpus and actually show the effect of trauma on the victim. Upon Helen’s return Hermione recounts how the war has changed Helen:

> Mum's eyes don't recognise mine
>
> amongst the other smiling girls.
>
> She is ghostly, she is silent.
>
> She is carried to her room that hasn't changed one bit,
>
> the sheets the same as the day she left.
>
> She doesn't ask for me. (Mahfouz, 2020, 35)

This differs significantly from Ovid’s version, in which Hermione’s focus is on Helen’s beauty instead:

> When you returned I went to meet you –
>
> I tell the truth - but I did not know your face.
>
> You were the most beautiful woman
>
> I had ever seen, you had to be Helen,
>
> but you asked which one was your daughter. (Ovid, 72)

Not only does Mahfouz’s version of Helen not ask for Hermione at all, she appears to show no recognition of her circumstances, creating a sense that Helen is highly traumatised and unable to process her return to Sparta. The diminutive of ‘Mum’ also reveals Hermione’s quest for recognition, and her desire for family is emphasised to heighten the loss that Helen’s absence has caused. In contrast, Ovid’s Helen seems to have not suffered for the last decade and instead seems unaffected. She does look for her daughter but the lack of recognition distances Helen from the audience as she is cast as poorly fulfilling the role of Hermione’s mother. Hermione’s letter in the *Heroides* reveals how she is unable to replicate her mother’s effect on men; Hermione must invoke Orestes to fight for her whereas Helen did not have to ask Menelaus. Her inability to emulate her mother creates a disconnect between them, the emotional distancing Hermione feels emphasising the physical division between the women (Fulkerson, 2005, 97). *Will You?* actively tries to fix that relationship, unifying Hermione and Helen as victims subject to the whims of their male counterparts, and creating a shared experience. By doing so, Helen becomes more accessible to the audience, she is no longer a distant unknown, but instead can be empathised with and understood through Hermione.

Another comparison to Helen comes in *The Choice* as Dido puts forward her version of the events of the *Aeneid*. Dido is in a comparatively similar situation to Helen: they both lose their first husbands, are manipulated by a god to fall in love with the male protagonist (Aeneas and Paris, respectively) and both are then abandoned by both gods and men. They are used as plot points to drive the story of the male characters but neither are entirely passive. Book 6 of West's prose translation of the *Aeneid* presents Helen as instrumental in the destruction of Troy as Deiphobus recalls she was "signalling to the Greeks from the top of the citadel [...] this excellent wife of mine, after moving all my armour out of the house and taking the good sword from under my head" (*Aeneid*, 6, 517-524). Whereas Helen destroys a city, Dido is working to build hers when fate intervenes, and as such they can be seen as foils to each other. When Dido examines her feelings towards Aeneas in *The Choice* she draws a comparison to Helen and Paris:

> This wanting
>
> This desire
>
> Him.
>
> I understand now.
>
> Paris and Helen. I understand. (Duffy, 2020, 72)

Conflating her relationship to one so infamous not only helps to contextualise Dido and Aeneas as epic lovers, but also Dido as a woman with no happy ending. Fulkerson suggests that Ovid's *Heroides* displaces the authorial authority; the story and its ending is already known to the reader but not the woman writing the letter, therefore any sense of agency or potential to change her 'fate' is known by the reader to be false (2005, 17-18). If Ovid's narrator is unaware of their position in the greater narrative, the authors of *15 Heroines* attempt to refute this as the monologues do seem to have an awareness of the source texts they use, their position in the literary canon and the inevitable end they face. The author is less foregrounded in these monologues, as the language is less formalised and structured, thereby imbuing the character-as-author with a sense of credibility. Helen is not afforded this credibility due to being unable to represent herself in this play, but Dido speaks for all the characters as she resists her version being subsumed into the past, masculine narratives. Towards the end of her monologue, and her life, she demands recognition for herself (and the others), rather than being reduced to an archetypal role.

> When my story is told, I pray they tell of the choice;
> the choice to love
> the choice to want
> the choice to stay
> the choice to go
> the choice to die (Duffy, 2020, 75).

Dido's agency, and therefore her choice, can be applied to Helen as Dido conflates their stories. If Dido accepts the consequences as a result of her choice, it produces a narrative parallel with Helen, whose choices also led to dire consequences. The acceptance of choice and the fierce defense of being allowed to retain agency through choice removes the moralising from Dido's story, and therefore Helen's choice as well. Although this ignores the socio-historical context of women in the classical world, it redirects the idea of Helen as a victim or seductress archetype, and instead reclaims her as an independent character with interiority and motive.

4.2. Agency, Blame and Morality: Redirecting the narrative to hold men accountable

15 Heroines not only gives voice to women typically silenced in their source texts, but also refocuses attention on the interaction between the women, their male counterparts and the consequences of their actions on a wider scale. As there are no male monologues the authors of *15 Heroines* incorporate the masculine narratives into the women's speeches, thus removing the he-said, she-said tension. By doing so, the monologues discussing Helen reposition the idea of blame and responsibility away from the issues of choice and morality. In doing so, the characters of Menelaus and Paris are emphasised; Menelaus is seen as a surprising choice for Helen whereas the depiction of Paris is drenched in vitriolic insults. Helen is no longer singled out as the only character to cause the war, but is instead re-positioned within the collective of characters that contributed to the outbreak of war.

Paris is described as “fuckboy”, “fuckwit” and “man whore” by Laodamia and Oenone respectively (27, 14, 16), to which we may add Oenone’s more general insults of “motherfucker”, “son of a bitch” (both, 16) and “beautiful bastard” (21), all of which culminate to create an impression that Paris is unheroic, superficial and hated by his contemporaries. This undermines the modern narrative that Paris is a respected prince (as seen in *Troy*) and instead acts to humanise a Helen that fell in love with him despite these flaws. The sexualising of Paris rather than Helen reverses the typical portrayal of the couple, and the derogatory nature of these names also serves to diminish the love story element of this myth, as Paris does not retain his princely status and the relationship between Helen and Paris is less about love and more about him chasing her. The context of these slang terms is a comment on Paris’ behaviour and his acting out of lust rather than Helen and her role; he is to blame in creating the situation that led to the Trojan War and Helen is therefore absolved of guilt.

However, Laodamia’s monologue subtly reveals an alternative perspective as she provides Helen with a past that does not revolve around the men in her life. Laodamia recounts the events at the palaestra, an anecdote Paris provides in Ovid’s *Heroides*, but by removing the male narrative’s sexualising of Helen, it emphasises Helen’s personhood.

> Nothing that girl does surprises me.
>
> I'm sorry I don't like her. It's not just because you went after
>
> her and she pied you off. It's not because of that. I know Helen
>
> of old, see. I once naked-wrestled with her in the palaestra and
>
> take it from me - she fights dirty. You know me, P, I'm loyal.
>
> And I tried with that girl I really did. But I've had it with her this
>
> time. She's broken the girl code. And there ain't no coming
>
> back from that in my book. […]
>
> Well good luck to her. It won't end well. (Jones, 2020, 27)

Laodamia is given an anecdote that is Paris’ in the *Heroides*, but by having a female character tell it, it can be repurposed without the male gaze, removing the sexualisation of Helen and giving her a female cohort. As well as removing the male gaze that affects Paris’ version of the story in the *Heroides*, it removes the scorn of Peleus’ account from Euripides’ *Andromache.*

> ‘A Spartan girl

could never, even if she wanted to,
exhibit wise restraint. They bare their thighs,
they go with young men, they desert their homes
for wrestling grounds and races, with their clothing
undone. To me, it is unbearable.
So, is it any wonder that you Spartans
can't teach your women wisdom and restraint?' (*Andromache*, 611-618)

All three accounts of this wrestling anecdote are directed to different audiences to provoke different responses. Peleus uses it to shame Menelaus by implying Helen's lack of faithfulness is endemic to all Spartan women who engage in a physical act that Peleus sees as immoral. Additionally, by conflating Helen to all other Spartan women he removes her 'otherness', acting to undermine Menelaus' position as husband to the exceptional Helen. Paris' version of Helen's wrestling also induces a negative reaction as it too sees something inherently sexual and therefore shameful in Helen's actions. To a modern audience both Peleus' and Paris' versions of this account seem highly sexist as they police women's activities, evoking aspects of victim-shaming and the sexualising of an innocent act. In contrast, Laodamia's account of the story for Protesilaus lacks this overarching narrative of shame as Laodamia is not an observer of Helen, but a participant with her. Reworking this story removes the sexualising and moralising of the women's actions, and instead Laodamia uses it to highlight Helen's intelligence and trickery with "she fights dirty". Laodamia's inclusion of Helen in her monologue creates a Helen that is removed from the male gaze, and from the ensemble of Trojan women who dislike her. Instead, she is repositioned in Sparta, before the war, and before she is removed from those who know her.

Throughout the monologues that reveal glimpses of Helen, she is seen in relation to women rather than as a singular woman amongst an army of men. Laodamia's opinion of Paris and Helen is juxtaposed by her view of Menelaus, which is further supplemented by Penelope and Hermione. Menelaus, according to Laodamia, is an object of sympathy, and therefore his actions in pursuing Helen can be considered justified:

the one I really feel sorry for is
Menelaus! Mugged off BIG TIME! I mean we all knew he was
punching when he met Helen but he worked at it and he won

> her fair and square. (Jones, 2020, 27)

Hermione seconds this, as her father was a “young muscle-man, so in love” (Mahfouz, 2020, 33), so his actions following Helen’s leaving are defensible. Her opinion of Menelaus is coloured by her abandonment by her mother and it is this trauma that is so apparent in the *Heroides* yet is missing in this adaptation. Whereas Ovid’s Hermione constructs a narrative in which she is a poor facsimile of her mother, unable to evoke the same strong emotions in men (Fulkerson, 2005, 97), the Hermione of the *15 Heroines* directs her anger instead at the historical pattern of abduction and rape. By negating the jealousy and feelings of inadequacy within Hermione’s account, Helen is not the villain of her childhood. Comparatively, Hermione is instead let down by Menelaus who promises her to Achilles’ son and thereby repeats the motif of women being given or taken by men. The idea of men as dominant and controlling situations and women they encounter is supported in Penelope’s account. The wife of Odysseus is typically presented as the traditional archetype of the faithful wife in direct opposition to Helen. However, she too views the Greek men negatively, scornful of their reliance on military strength: “Neanderthals. Barely two brain cells to rub together. Warriors you call them. Thugs is what they are. Self-serving thugs” (Khalil, 2020, 52). This denigration of Menelaus reflects Peleus’ views from Euripides’ *Andromache* as he considers Menelaus to be Achilles’ murderer, calling him “polluted” (632-633). Whereas typically it is male characters who get to exchange invectives in the classical texts, in *15 Heroines* it is the women who are given this role, without the male character present to refute their accusations. Not only does this criticism of men allow women to voice previously unheard opinions in the Greek source texts, but is also elevates the women to a position typically occupied by their male counterparts. The culmination of how Menelaus and Paris are presented in these monologues judges their actions and makes them assume responsibility. By having the female characters give their perspective of what happened, the play presents a more critical view as these women judge the morality of the men, a strong divergence from the typical moralising of Helen.

Even Oenone, Paris’ scorned wife, resists the temptation to see Helen as the villain. Instead, she directs her attention to the actions of Paris and casts him in the active role, and herself and Helen as casualties. Redirecting the focus of the story to Oenone and Paris’ relationship, as opposed to Helen and Paris’ allows Oenone to become a more developed character in her own right, as well as refuting the idea that Helen was the primary instigator of the war. When Oenone does discuss Helen, she directs her hatred towards the relationship rather than Helen herself, recognising that Helen is a tool with which Paris can improve his social standing:

> Your prize,

> Your, your, your trophy.
>
> All eyes on you!
>
> All eyes on you!
>
> Isn't that right, Paris? She is a measure of your success in the world. (Precious, 2020, 14)

This is a significant change from Ovid's Oenone, who focuses on Helen as the object of her scorn, as a fickle woman easily swayed by men:

> Does she burn with love?
>
> She loved Menelaus the same way.
>
> He lies in a deserted bed, so shall you.
>
> You and he alike are trusting fools. (Ovid, 43)

In contrast, the Oenone of *15 Heroines* is more self-conscious, comparing herself to Helen, asking Paris what she lacks that Helen has, and she acknowledges her speech comes out of bitterness and grief. The main intention of her monologue is to recognise her worth without and distinct from Paris, and as such, she gives a remarkably different impression of Helen than in the *Heroides*. Oenone, Laodamia, Hermione and Penelope redirect attention away from Helen, so the question is no longer about whether she left willingly or if she should be blamed for the deaths of Greeks and Trojans alike, but instead whether the men in the narrative have been held accountable for their actions. Helen is no longer merely the cause of the Trojan War in this context as she is seen through her relationship to other women and how they feel connected to her.

4.3. The absence of Helen: how her story is told for her

The character of Helen is threaded through the monologues of other characters, as these female characters reclaim their narratives and each other's. By using Helen as a foil, a past companion, a traumatised mother or the emblem of passionate love, it creates an interwoven story that emphasises the commonalities of these classical stories and their relevance in modern society. *15 Heroines* is an effective adaptation of Ovid's *Heroides* because it takes these characters and their stories and embellishes them, rather than appropriating the characters and rewriting them to the extent that the only familiar part of them is their name. The reader is relied upon to accept these changes, much the same as Ovid's readers were, and to allow these heroines to have the authority to change their stories (Fulkerson, 2005, 146). As such, the character of Helen is told by proxy and her absence is significant because whilst it does not change the events of the Trojan War as experienced by these women, it does minimise her role in causing the war, and instead enhances her beyond the scope of the war.

Tsagalis proposes that Briseis be seen as the sacrificial surrogate of Helen in the *Iliad* as their abductions cause conflict amongst men, with Helen's abduction becoming secondary to Briseis' (2004, 162) due to Achilles and Agamemnon's conflict becoming more prevalent to the story than Troy versus Greece, but in *15 Heroines* this ranking of suffering is missing. Instead, this play humanises the women of myth and puts them in the foreground, allowing the male characters to fade into the background unless they are specifically required to create tension and counterparts for the women. In contrast to Helen's absence and her lack of voice, Briseis speaks for herself in *Perfect Myth Allegory*. This monologue makes repeated references acknowledging that Briseis' story is typically told by men, and this monologue can therefore be read as a stand-in for the other silenced voices of myth. Briseis' role in this play is a direct contrast to Helen's absence. Briseis is given the opportunity to present herself as opposing the male gaze she is subjected to. She has given herself "the joy [of] being free to wander into a history I alone have written" (Zakarian, 2020, 47); a declaration of self-emancipation from the masculine narratives that dominate her story, and her removal from being identified by her relationships to men. Briseis' monologue recognises the multitudinous identities that women of myth are given through adaptations, as well as the idea that this reinvention is imposed to change the narrative of which they are part. Briseis' comment, "we women run through these thin tales like a sparse thread" (Zakarian, 2020, 45), can be seen as a direct reference to Helen as a weaver, and therefore teller, of her own story as discussed in the previous chapter. It emphasises the scarcity in the primary texts of Homer, Virgil, Ovid and Euripides of these women telling their stories as navigated by anyone other than a male author or male focalisation. They are used as props in retellings of men's stories, but they are present and, as the growing trend in modern literature indicates, they are finally being given their voices. Dido acts as a second sacrificial surrogate for Helen in this text as parallels are drawn between the two women as falling victim to love. Whereas Helen cannot speak for herself, Dido can, but because of this she loses her futurity through choosing death, which also protects her from future harm. The dichotomy of Hermione's traumatised and ghostly Helen and Dido's self-sacrifice, and thus self-preservation, highlights the importance of legacy and the controlling of one's own story.

As readers we already know the ending of these stories and as such, we "refuse […] the heroines the opportunity to create a different ending" (Fulkerson, 2005, 6), restricting them to the male versions of their stories. Modernising the characters, the language and the concepts they handle helps to alleviate these restraints, as does removing Helen, who typically acts as the keystone character upon which other elements of the story can be rebuilt. Hermione makes Helen's status as an archetype and the signifier of the Trojan War clear as she remarks, "[t]here is no such thing as free choice. It's a myth as big as my mother" (Mahfouz, 2020, 36). Helen is typically the character to which blame and responsibility is attributed; the other female characters react to and orbit her, unable to increase their presence without negatively affecting her. She is a scapegoat for male responsibility, a prize to be won or stolen; she is seen as both victim without agency and yet so powerful she can manipulate all around her*. 15 Heroines* avoids this by removing Helen and therefore the predominant narrative of war, and in doing so creates a far more complex Helen. She is close to the war and all it entails, but distinct and separate from it, and therefore her character has been granted the freedom to change and develop beyond the Helen of classical myth.

5. Conclusion

Our perceptions of agency, choice, blame and guilt have changed significantly since the first iterations of Helen in literature. Modern retellings of ancient Greek myths and stories must grapple with these changes, making their characters more acceptable to modern standards whilst retaining enough of the original character. In addition to these issues, rewritings of female characters must balance the influence of feminism whilst remaining (to some degree) true to the original narrative. The twenty-first century versions of Helen can be seen as inheriting the issues that faced their predecessors: did Helen choose Paris or was she taken by him; was she a victim of men's desires or did she have power and influence over them; was her loneliness in Troy self-enforced or was she disliked by the Trojan women. These issues surrounding the ambiguity of Helen have been subsumed into the archetype that has been created over time of a woman so beautiful a country went to war for her. As such, regardless of "how flawlessly she is reconstructed, Helen will be forever unpersuasive. People will not accept her being over their story" (Austin, 1994, 155), the imagined, mythical Helen overwhelms the Helen of literature. Twenty-first century adaptations attempt to confront our perceptions, and misconceptions, of Helen that have been created from the countless reinventions of her character, and it is this cumulative idea of what, or who, Helen is that tends to overpower the literary character first written about by Homer in the *Iliad*. The twenty-first century adaptations mentioned here all use Helen in a small role, possibly in an attempt to mitigate the effect of creating a pastiche of her, whilst retaining her use as a signifier of the Trojan war, and as the keystone around which they can reconstruct their version of the Trojan cycle. These adaptations have struggled to create a Helen separate from her legacy, whilst being able to do so for other characters. Helen rarely gains anything from these modern interpretations as they often fail to contribute anything to the narrative that has not already been said and discussed ad infinitum, yet there is something intangible about her that attracts these constant attempts at reinventing her story.

Despite the apparent failings of these modern adaptations in their inability to separate Helen from her role in the war, these texts fall short of being considered wholly appropriative in regards to Helen as they rarely, if ever, move away from the Helen created in the *Iliad*. Petersen, Barker, Miller and Haynes leave Helen where she is situated by the hypotext, in the midst of the Trojan War, and any changes they do make to the characterisation of Helen predominantly serve to detract from prior incarnations of her character, rather than positively develop it. The assorted monologues of *15 Heroines* makes an attempt at appropriating Helen, the language is modernised and the settings varied, but most significantly Helen is absent unlike in the *Iliad* where her presence is a constant source of tension. Each modern iteration can be traced back to a classical source, and as there was no coherent portrayal of Helen in Greek times, these modern texts can be seen as continuing the tradition of a malleable Helen that can be adapted to fit any version of the Trojan war. However, giving Helen a voice, having her presented from a sympathetic female perspective, and recentring her role in the war constitutes a form of concession to the modern era for which she is being rewritten. There is very little innovative change in how Helen is presented between the classical and modern versions of her; instead the most significant change comes in how she is seen by other characters. Enabling other female characters to develop allows for a more diverse range of voices and opinions within the context of the Trojan War, although, as they are often developed to counter Helen, this comes at the expense of developing Helen herself. Whereas these other characters, predominantly Briseis, are able to be completely reinvented as required, Helen cannot. Her immutable role as a queen taken from Sparta to Troy and back again entangles her in issues of sexism, classism and privilege; her status can make her seem boring to a modern audience due to its lack of struggle and originality. The change to female-authored versions of the story in the twenty-first century also elucidates the problem with assigning agency and the resultant moralising of her actions according to modern principles, resulting in reducing her to a signifier rather than a character that can be developed beyond the bounds of the Helen of myth.

The Helen of *Troy* is susceptible to criticisms of the actress as she is conflated with Helen, as one cannot be seen without the other, to the detriment of both. Criticisms of the actress' appearance are subsumed into the narrative of Helen and weakens her position as the infamous beauty. Within the film Helen is forced into the background, she barely speaks and rarely instigates anything; she is domesticated and silenced to preserve the narrative of the other characters. She is seen entirely through the male gaze in this iteration, but it does not serve her well. The same effect is apparent in *The Song of Achilles*, in which, despite the novel having a female author, Helen is seen only from the perspective of men. This novel makes no changes to the role of Helen, instead, she is reduced down to whether she chose to leave with Paris or if she was stolen, and if she was aware of the consequences. Condensing the role of Helen down to the singular discussion of her moment of choosing prevents her from developing as a character. The preconceptions of Achilles and Patroclus reflect the reader's preconceptions of Helen, and perhaps the novel does contain a veiled criticism of how Helen has been trapped within a narrative focussed on that singular moment. However, it is interesting to note that whereas Achilles' history is rewritten, alongside Briseis' and Patroclus', Helen's is not. She remains trapped in the context of the Trojan War but whilst Homer allowed her to act of her own accord, she is merely a prop to be used by male characters in these two adaptations.

The Silence of the Girls appears at times to use Helen as a didactic tool as seen and written from a female perspective. The recounting of Helen's rape allows the novel, as focalised through Briseis, to make a comment on the prevalence of rape culture and how women are systemically disbelieved as victims. Briseis' choice to believe Helen acts counter to the opinions of the majority in the novel, with the other Trojans representing the views of the past and Briseis as the more accepting, progressive future. By constructing a Helen that is seen enjoying her time in the company of other women, as opposed to being the sole woman in the company of men, this novel attempts to humanise Helen and make her more sympathetic to a modern audience through a sympathetic narrator. In *A Thousand Ships* Helen is arguably seen through an unsympathetic narrator as she must earn the respect of the other women, which she does by redirecting the narrative from singular female responsibility to shared responsibility between male and female characters. Whilst this initially seems rather positive as Helen is able to defend herself and assuage the guilt of others for comparable decisions, it does reinforce the notion of Helen as someone 'other' and separate from the Trojan women. She must take the higher ground in this context, acting kindly to the Trojan women who alienate her whilst there is little to no acknowledgement of how they have wronged her. This, in combination with the Muse's irritation towards Helen, creates an overwhelming impression that in this novel Helen deserves her mistreatment. This novel, as well as many other adaptations of Helen, seems to have a concealed bias stemming from ideas of internalised misogyny as Helen appears to have a voice, agency and a choice, but she is instead still seen as deserving of punishment as a result of acting on her sexual desires.

15 Heroines is the most recent of these twenty-first century texts and is the only one to present Helen through physical absence. Her character is created through the monologues of women who knew her and knew of her. She is given a past before the war as well as a future; showing her traumatised is a sharp divergence from the classical texts as she does not neatly fall back into her role as Menelaus' wife in Sparta but is instead shown as having suffered. This text avoids the moralising of Helen's choice and whether she was seduced or the seducer; what happened, happened and she is not condemned for it. This gives more freedom and space to the character outside her role in the war as the play attempts to answer the question of where does Helen end and the war begin. She is repositioned into the female narrative where she can become a character, rather than a prize, an archetype, or a scapegoat as her beauty becomes secondary to a character that is developed from multiple perspectives.

The inclusion of Helen in modern adaptations can sometimes feel forced when her role is marginal or unoriginal, especially when other female characters undergo complete revisions. By recreating the other characters of myth and revising their stories until the only similarity they bear to the classical texts is their name, and refusing Helen the same treatment, marks Helen as different. Whether it is a sign of respect as she is allowed to remain the same over thousands of years, or a moralistic refusal to redeem her from her past actions, it is undeniable that Helen's appearance in modern adaptations is often bland. In some of these texts there is a pervading sense that Helen has been included purely out of obligation and duty; after all, how can you depict the Trojan War without Helen? The authorial resentment at having to include Helen could offer an explanation of why her character is underdeveloped and unchanged, but it is equally likely that the lack of development she undergoes is a reflection of how society has not changed all that much in how women are perceived and portrayed. As other female mythical characters have the opportunity to be developed in modern literature because their stories are not as dominant as Helen's in the public consciousness, and therefore the writers have almost free reign to completely reimagine them, it is telling that these women are reinvented to suffer. They are raped, enslaved and killed, rarely receiving anything resembling a happy ending. Helen escapes these fates in modern literature, much the same as she always has, but she escapes at the expense of other women's lives and livelihoods. These adaptations focus on the time of the war and Helen must survive, and perhaps it is this limiting time frame that prevents any significant changes being made to her character. The legacy of Helen haunts these texts, and the authors often do little to create a character that is instantly recognisable through name alone.

The modern texts continually revise and revitalise the Trojan War for new audiences, operating within the canon of the classical texts and ignoring the more contemporary entries into the corpus (rarely, if ever, do we see Marlowe's or Shakespeare's Helen affect the Helen these twenty-first century writers have created). Instead, each modern adaptation uses the source text of Homer, supplemented at times by other Greek and Roman adaptations, to retell a story whose ending is inevitable. Euripides confronts this immutable ending in his play *Helen*, as the woman herself declares:

> If only I could have been wiped clean- just like
>
> a sculpture- and taken on a new appearance:
>
> an ugly one, no longer beautiful. (266-268)

Helen acknowledges that without her beauty her story would be completely different, but she cannot rewrite the narrative and change the ending. Helen's story is static and she is used as the centre point around which the Trojan war revolves, all other characters and plot points can be amended and used, yet hers is resistant to these significant changes. Instead, she remains as mythical as she was when Homer first depicted her. Her choice, or lack thereof, has kept Helen as ambiguous, and it is this uncertainty and inability to determine her thoughts and motivations that firmly roots her narrative to that one part of her life. Whereas her fellow characters are allowed to undergo innovative adaptations and appropriations, Helen remains timeless, stuck by the Trojan War and the weight of the myth around her.

6. Film Stills

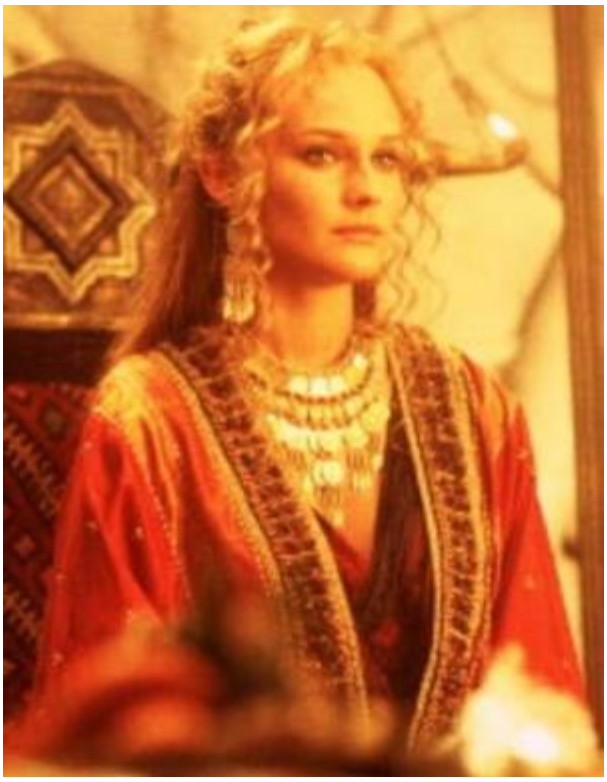

Figure 1. Image of Diane Kruger as Helen in Sparta (*Troy* 2004)

https://www.warnerbros.com/movies/troy

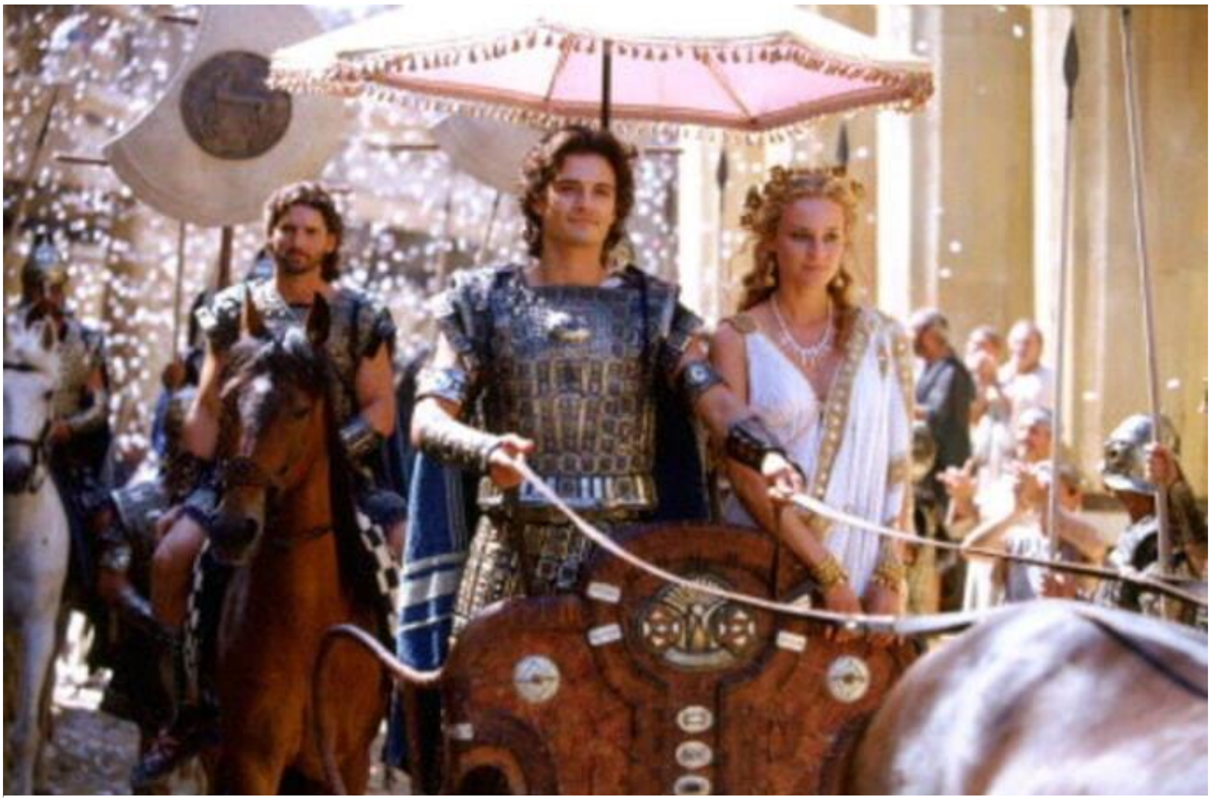

Figure 2. Paris, Helen and Hector parade through the streets of Troy (*Troy* 2004) https://www.warnerbros.com/movies/troy

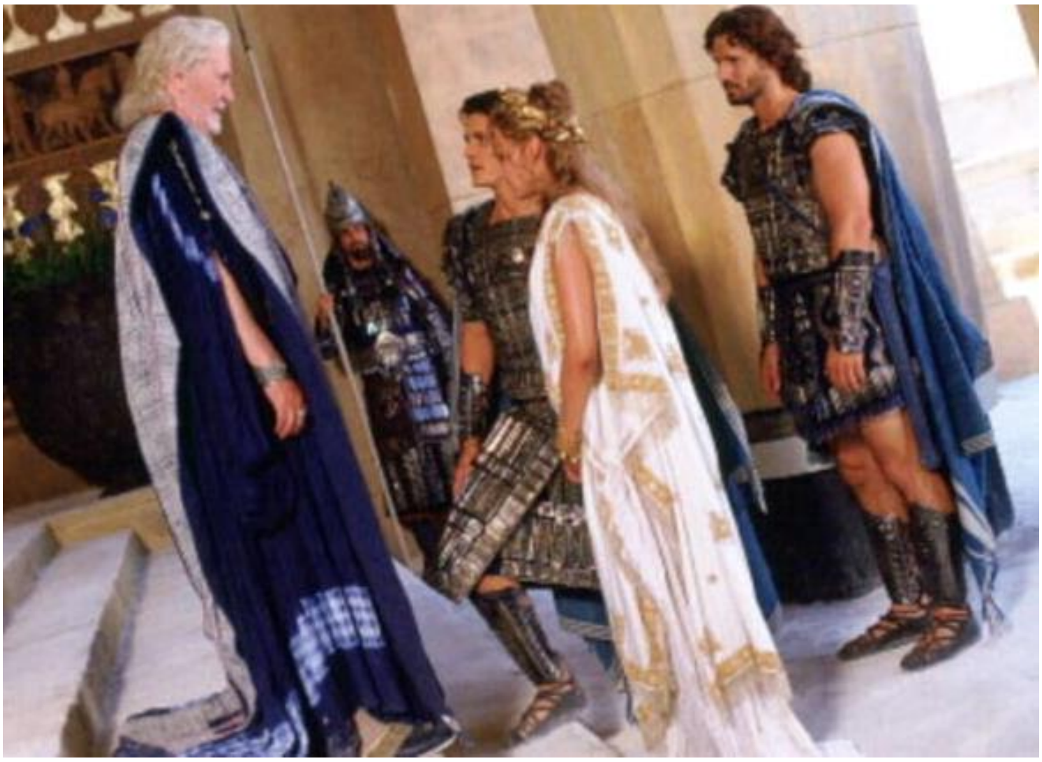

Figure 3. Image of Paris introducing Helen to Priam, overlooked by Hector (*Troy* 2004)

https://www.warnerbros.com/movies/troy

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