

dance and joins the intimacy of warriors to that of lovers. "Mingle" is a standard term in Greek poetry for love-making. For example, Paris reminds Helen that, returning from Sparta, he "mingled [with her] in love and the bed" on an island (3.445). Nowhere is the association of love and war stronger than when Hector reminds himself of "the gentle cooing, / the kind between . . . a maiden and a young man who dally in love-talk with each other" (22.127–128), an image of budding eroticism which comes into Hector's mind just before he faces Achilles. Not long before, Hector spoke of the "love-talk of war" (17.228) to encourage his allies to join in battle and test whether they shall live or die. The language of Homeric heroes may suggest that the true intimacies of the *Iliad* are to be found in warfare. Martial and marital imagery become inseparable. But the result is the destruction, not the creation, of civilized order.

Troy does not and cannot capture all the complexities of the Homeric poem or its imagery, but in Achilles' dance against Hector's methodical if valiant sword work we sense a warrior who has turned mortal combat and the resulting fall of the sacred city into a god-like ballet of death.

I close with a memory which Michael Herr recorded as he looked back on the Tet Offensive in the Vietnam War: "And for the next six years I saw them all, the ones I'd really seen and the ones I'd imagined, theirs and ours, friends I'd loved and strangers, motionless figures in a dance, the old dance."¹²

CHAPTER NINE

Helen of *Troy*

Monica S. Cyrino

"Men are haunted by the vastness of eternity. And so we ask ourselves: Will our actions echo across the centuries? Will strangers hear our names long after we're gone and wonder who we were? How bravely we fought? How fiercely we loved?"

The opening voice-over of Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* expresses the film's self-conscious remembrance and re-creation of the glorious deeds of ancient heroes. Under the words of a smooth-voiced Odysseus the audience hears the ominous rumble of military drums punctuated by a woman's yearning song. Here is the double focus of the film's narrative: love and war, a war fought for love. The most famous war of antiquity was fought for the love of the most beautiful woman on earth, Helen of Sparta or, as she is more famously known, Helen of Troy. The distance she travels between her two names tells her story.

Early in the film, the camera pans along a steep wall of rock rising from dark blue waves, with ships anchored in the choppy waters. The viewers' eyes are drawn upward to a rough stone palace carved out of the sheer cliff face and set precariously high above the water. A title flashes on the bottom of the screen: "Port of Sparta – Greece." A cut to the interior of the palace reveals a long banquet table crowded with revelers enjoying a celebratory meal. At the center of the table, a tall, imposing man rises and addresses his guests: Menelaus, King of Sparta.

12 Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Avon, 1968; several rpts.), 66.

He faces two young Trojans, Hector and Paris, directly across the table: "Princes of Troy, on our last night together, Queen Helen and I salute you." At the mention of her name, the camera focuses for the first time on Helen. She is dressed in a lustrous gown of fiery red, decked in gleaming gold jewelry, and her blond mane of hair is tousled around her face and spilling down her shoulders. Paris is gazing intently at her, as if to induce her to look at him, but Helen's eyes are lowered. As her husband Menelaus continues to speak of the peace treaty between Sparta and Troy, Helen slowly looks up and fixes her kohl-rimmed eyes on Paris. They exchange a dark glance. Soon Helen steals upstairs and Paris, with a furtive peek over his shoulder, follows her.

While *Troy* claims to be "inspired" by Homer's *Iliad*, much of its action covers material narrated in lost works from the cycle of Greek epic poems on the subject of the Trojan War.¹ The narrative in the early part of the film was once told in an epic, composed after the *Iliad*, called the *Cypria*. Its title refers to the prominent role of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality, who had a major cult sanctuary on the island of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The contents of the lost epic are known to us from later summaries and quotations, and by all accounts its eleven books offered a rather tedious if detailed catalogue of several events leading up to the point at which the *Iliad* begins.² Many of the important episodes related in the *Cypria* center on the relationship between Helen and Paris, in particular on how the star-crossed pair came to be joined together. The *Cypria* opened with the tale of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the mortal king and the sea goddess who became the parents of the great Greek hero Achilles. This wedding was attended by all the gods, demigods, and elite humans except one. During the banquet, Eris, goddess of discord, disgruntled over being the only one left uninvited, tossed upon the table a golden apple designated "for the fairest," causing a major quarrel to erupt among the assembled goddesses. Zeus, the supreme god, wisely wanted no part in the decision of who was the fairest and assigned the judge's task to a mortal. This was Paris, who was idling away his time as a shepherd on the slopes of Mt. Ida above the city of Troy. In the famous Judgment of Paris, the young Trojan prince passed over the goddesses Hera and Athena,

1 On the film's use of material from the lost poems of the Greek epic cycle see Daniel Mendelsohn, "A Little *Iliad*," *The New York Review of Books* (June 24, 2004), 46–49.

2 The contents of the *Cypria* are summarized by Proclus, a fifth-century A.D. philosopher, in his literary handbook *The Chrestomathy*. For the text of Proclus' summaries see *Homeri Opera*, vol. 5, ed. T. W. Allen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912; rpt. 1978), 102–109. Of Proclus' six summaries of lost epics, the *Cypria* is the only anonymous one.

awarded the golden apple to Aphrodite, and so became the favorite of this dangerous goddess.³ As a reward to her judge, and perhaps even as a bribe, Aphrodite sent Paris to Sparta, where he was to obtain Helen, the most beautiful mortal woman in the world. But Helen was already married to Menelaus.

In a manner comparable to the *Cypria*, *Troy* begins the story of Paris and Helen a few days after their first meeting in Sparta. Viewers versed in geography may wonder at the film's fanciful location of Sparta on the Greek coast, which affords the royal palace of Menelaus and Helen an enviable sea view. Ancient Sparta, however, was landlocked in the middle of the Laconian plain, without direct access to the sea. (The closest port was at Gythium, modern Gythio, located twenty-seven miles south of Sparta.) Inside the palace Menelaus entertains Paris and Hector after they have concluded a pact between their two previously hostile cities. The frank, avid gazes between Paris and Helen across the banquet table indicate that their love affair is well under way. Although the Greek epic tradition makes no mention of Hector joining his younger brother on his trip to Sparta, Hector's presence in this early scene of *Troy* emphasizes the important bond between the brothers that propels much of the plot as the film progresses. Hector is a sympathetic character throughout the film, inviting viewers to identify with him through an attractive combination of his warrior's courage, family loyalty, and strong sense of duty to his homeland. When Hector watches with worried suspicion as Paris sneaks away to join Helen, the audience follows his anxious glance and realizes how perilous the pair's erotic passion is.

Upstairs in her bedroom, a long shot frames a pensive Helen undoing her hair ornaments at her dressing table.⁴ Paris slips through the door and never stops staring at her as he drives the bolt shut with a vigorous thrust, demonstrating the lithe insouciance and sexual magnetism of the legendary Trojan. In the Greek epic tradition, there are contradictory reports whether Helen and Paris consummated their passion in Sparta. The *Iliad* suggests that this occurred after their flight on the tiny island of Cranae nearby in the Laconian gulf.⁵ But the *Cypria* summary notes that Paris and Helen had sexual intercourse the night before they

3 The hostility of Hera and Athena toward the Trojan race because of the insult of Paris is mentioned at *Iliad* 24.25–30.

4 On Diane Kruger, a model turned actress, and Petersen's casting of her as Helen cf. my "She'll Always Have Paris: Helen in Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*," *Amphora*, 4 no. 1 (2005), 10–11 and 18.

5 Paris reminds Helen that they made love for the first time on the island of Cranae at *Iliad* 3.443–445.

set sail from Sparta, a much riskier place for their adulterous encounter. Like the lost epic, *Troy* dramatically puts the start of their sexual relationship in Sparta. “You shouldn’t be here,” Helen whispers, avoiding Paris’ eyes in the knowledge that to look at him means to succumb to him. The Helen of the *Iliad* also turns her eyes away from Paris in their bedroom in Troy (3.427), perhaps both to indicate her distress and to avoid his irresistible allure. Paris counters teasingly, aware of his powerful charm: “That’s what you said last night.” – “Last night was a mistake,” she replies. “And the night before?” – “I’ve made many mistakes this week.” Paris approaches her from behind, and there is a close-up of Helen’s face as he strokes her neck and shoulders. Her rapt expression indicates that her protests are all in vain. In response to his question “Do you want me to go?” Helen turns to him and drops her dress to the floor. The lovers embrace.

Some ancient versions of the story have Menelaus conveniently called away to the island of Crete for a family funeral while Paris is visiting Sparta, so the lovers have an easy escape.⁶ *Troy* radically concentrates the time of their encounter, forcing the lovers to face the anguish of their last night together. While Menelaus is distracted downstairs with a dancing girl and Hector continues to look anxiously up the stairway, the film exposes Paris and Helen in a moment of crisis. After lovemaking Paris gives Helen a beautiful necklace of pearls “from the Sea of Propontis”: the *Cypria* records that Paris bestowed many gifts upon Helen. An emotional Helen begins to weep at the thought of Paris’ departure in the morning, just as she is depicted weeping in the *Iliad*.⁷ She caresses her lover’s face and describes what the loss will mean to her: “Before you came to Sparta, I was a ghost. I walked and I ate and I swam in the sea, but I was just a ghost.” Paris responds with an impulsive invitation: “Come with me!” Helen’s eyes widen in surprise; she is tempted but doubtful. “Don’t play with me,” she warns him. Then Paris delivers a romantic and fateful speech destined to rouse even the disconsolate heart of Helen: “If you come, we’ll never be safe. Men will hunt us. The gods will curse us. But I’ll love you – till the day they burn my body. I will love you.” She nods, smiling through her tears. (This evokes Andromache “smiling through tears” in her encounter with her husband Hector at *Iliad* 6.484.) Here *Troy* effectively confirms the Greek

6 The tradition of Menelaus’ absence is noted in Proclus’ summary of the *Cypria* and is followed by Ovid, *Heroides* 17.160.

7 *Iliad* 3.142 and 24.773.

literary tradition of the seductive agency of Paris and Helen’s willing acquiescence to her “abduction” from Sparta.

The next shot shows the royal Trojan ship under full sail on the open sea. In the Greek epic tradition Helen and Paris set sail for Troy in amorous privacy *à deux*, dallying at various stops along the way.⁸ The *Iliad* alludes to the fact that Paris brought Helen back to Troy by a roundabout way via Sidon in Phoenicia. The *Cypria* also notes the stop in Sidon, which Paris, somewhat implausibly, sacked.⁹ But the film takes them straight to Troy. Here Petersen follows the convention of epic cinema by emphasizing male relationships, in this case the fraternal bond between the princes. Paris, aware of his illicit act, nervously approaches Hector on deck with a genial comment about the weather. Hector’s cautious nature causes him to reply with typical archaic Greek skepticism: “Sometimes the gods bless you in the morning and curse you in the afternoon.”¹⁰ Paris suddenly becomes earnest: “Do you love me, brother? Would you protect me against all enemies?” Then, below deck, Helen unwraps her hooded cloak and reveals herself to an incredulous Hector. Now comes a quick cutaway to Helen’s empty bedroom and a raging Menelaus. Back on the Trojan ship, Hector also is furious and berates Paris for betraying his family and bringing certain destruction to Troy. Hector’s reproach of Paris as an unwarlike womanizer in this scene of the film echoes his disparaging speech in the *Iliad* just before Paris meets Menelaus in single combat.¹¹ Paris is adamant: if war is to come, he will die fighting for Helen. Paris’ inexperience in military matters is well known from the ancient literary tradition, and in the film he also does not realize the political implications of his action. “I won’t ask you to fight my war,” he tells Hector. His brother, veteran of many armed conflicts, replies: “You already have.”

In a parallel scene of fraternal relations, Menelaus next sails to Mycenae – also implausibly located by the sea – to see his brother Agamemnon, who scolds him for trusting the Trojans: “Peace is for the

8 But the *Cypria* summary notes that Aphrodite commanded her son Aegeus to sail with Paris to Sparta.

9 *Iliad* 6.289–292 alludes to their roundabout journey. The Greek historian Herodotus records the story that Helen and Paris stopped in Egypt at *Histories* 2.113–116, but he also notes that the *Cypria* has them traveling directly from Sparta to Troy in only three days (2.117). Proclus’ summary records their stop in Sidon.

10 The sentiment is common in archaic Greek poetry. See, for example, Archilochus, fragment 58 (Campbell).

11 Hector calls Paris a “woman-crazy pretty-boy seducer” with no battle experience at *Iliad* 3.39–57. Here and below, translations of the *Iliad* are my own.

women . . . and the weak." Menelaus, still fuming, asks: "Will you go to war with me, brother?"¹² Later, Agamemnon expresses his delight that Helen has given him a reason to attack wealthy Troy: "I always thought my brother's wife was a foolish woman, but she's proved to be very useful." Consistently throughout the Greek epic tradition, Helen is the direct cause of the war, while the acquisition of wealth is only a secondary motive for the Greeks. The *Iliad* uses variations of the phrase "Helen and (all) the possessions" to describe the reason for the conflict; at one point, Paris says he will restore Helen's property and add some of his own but will not surrender Helen herself.¹³ By contrast, from its very beginning *Troy* emphasizes that Helen is merely the official pretext for war, intended to cover up a well-orchestrated and long-desired power grab by greedy Agamemnon. An introductory text has informed viewers that Agamemnon had already brought most of Greece under his rule by conquering it, and in an earlier scene Petersen has shown us an example of how Agamemnon's ruthlessness has prevailed. Now the abduction of Helen becomes an incendiary excuse and justification for the attack on Troy by a superpower Greek force, similar to the argument about "weapons of mass destruction" in the recent American-led invasion of Iraq. (The war council in Agamemnon's palace will have reminded at least some of the American viewers of their own political leaders.) Soon after, a magnificent computer-generated shot reveals the massive Greek armada sailing at full speed to Troy. The image is clearly intended to evoke the famous phrase from Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* describing Helen ("the face that launched a thousand ships"), but it also provides a menacing visual contrast to the earlier shot of the lone Trojan ship carrying the two lovers to their destiny.

According to the *Cypria*, Helen and Paris are married when they reach Troy. The film reflects this in an impressive sequence of their arrival at the city that is replete with wedding imagery. Petersen follows the couple's chariot with an overhead shot as it enters through the gates and proceeds through a crowd of cheering spectators. To the sounds of epic fanfare and beneath a shower of rose petals, Helen and Paris lead the procession, Hector following on horseback. Helen is dressed in a simple white gown, wearing Paris' pearl necklace, her hair smoothed down and tamed by a crown of golden leaves. Gone is the opulent wild

12 The brothers had also planned the expedition in the *Cypria*.

13 For the phrase see *Iliad* 3.70, 91, 285; 7.350, 400–401; 22.114. Paris offers to return Helen's property at *Iliad* 7.362–364. Herodotus, *Histories* 1.3, notes that the Greeks sought not only Helen but also reparations for her abduction.

mane of the Spartan queen. In her place the film audience now sees a pale and uneasy bride, made anxious by the stares and whispers of the Trojan matrons who watch her as she passes. As in the epic tradition, Helen's nervous demeanor suggests that she fears the censure of the women of Troy, for her relationship with Paris is not legitimate. In the *Iliad*, Helen tells Aphrodite that the Trojan women will reproach her if she joins Paris in bed.¹⁴ While Helen looks tense and uncomfortable, Paris is beaming.

The scene shifts to the royal palace, where King Priam awaits the return of his sons. When Paris introduces Helen, her eyes lowered in shyness and respect, Priam inquires archly: "Helen of Sparta?" Paris quickly corrects him: "Helen of Troy." As in the epic tradition, a magnanimous and fatherly Priam accepts Helen without question or blame and welcomes her into his now doomed city. In the *Iliad*, Priam expressly refuses to hold Helen responsible for the war with the Greeks and always treats her with tenderness and even admiration; he blames the gods, not Helen, for the war (3.164–165). So Helen's entry into Troy with all its pomp becomes, as it were, the first strike of the Greeks, since her beauty overwhelms the Trojans and weakens their resolve to send her back. This scene will be echoed later in the film by the fateful entry of the Trojan Horse, also accompanied by a celebration of the unwitting townspeople. The moment of her transition from "Helen of Sparta" to "Helen of Troy" signals the destruction of her adopted city. Tellingly, it is none other than Paris who makes this explicit with his words to Priam.

The remainder of the film finds Helen securely behind the walls of Troy, where she also remains in the *Iliad*. Since the *Iliad* focuses primarily on the war itself and in particular on the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles in its final year, Helen appears only in several scenes in Book 3 and briefly in Books 6 and 24. Her name is mentioned several times, especially in the earlier books, in connection with the war's causes.¹⁵ Helen's name is first cited in Book 2 as the motivation for destruction and warfare. She is mentioned twice as the direct cause of the deaths of many Greeks "far from their homeland" in Troy when the goddess Hera rouses Athena (161–162), who in turn rouses Odysseus (177–178), to motivate the Greeks to stay in Troy and fight rather than to grant the Trojans the glory of victory and the custody of "Helen of Argos."¹⁶ Later in the same book, Helen is again mentioned twice as the

14 Helen worries about criticism at *Iliad* 3.411–412.

15 *Iliad* 2.161, 177, 356, 590; 4.19, 174; 7.350, 401; 9.339; 11.125; 19.325; 22.114.

16 "Argos" here refers to the general area of the Argolid plain, where Mycenae was located. Sparta is further south in Laconia.

sole reason the Greeks want to retaliate against the Trojans for “the struggles and groans” they have undergone on her behalf. The old counselor Nestor urges the army to pay back the Trojans for their suffering “on Helen’s account” (356), and Menelaus is described as the one Greek who most strongly desires revenge against the Trojans because of his agony “over Helen” (590).¹⁷ This verbal emphasis on Helen’s accountability for the war in the early part of the *Iliad* corresponds to her prominence as the driving motivation of the plot in the first part of *Troy*.

Helen first appears as a character in Book 3 of the *Iliad*, and her conspicuous presence pervades much of the action in that book, which offers a kind of “flashback” to events that occurred before the war began and long before the start of the *Iliad*. Several of the adventures recorded in the *Cypria* are consistent with what we learn from the *Iliad*. Book 3 restages an earlier time by “reintroducing” Helen and the theme of her adulterous love affair with Paris for the purposes of “narrative integration.”¹⁸ At the beginning of the book, Paris, glamorously light-armed and attired in a leopard-skin, struts out from the Trojan ranks and challenges the best of the Greeks to fight him (16–20). Much to his consternation, Menelaus accepts his dare, knowing that he can easily defeat the inexperienced Paris in combat and achieve his vengeance (21–29). Although Paris is struck with fear (30–37), he agrees to face Menelaus in a duel whose outcome will end the conflict for both sides (67–75). The idea that the two men principally involved in the dispute over Helen would work out their claims in a separate and decisive battle belongs to an earlier narrative time frame and suggests the immediate aftereffects of Helen’s flight from Sparta.

High above the Trojan plain, Helen is in the great hall of the palace weaving a tapestry with scenes from the war being fought “on account of herself” (125–128). From this very first image of her and throughout the *Iliad*, Helen is one of the few characters who has a sense of the larger narrative scope and purpose of the war, which is being fought, as she later tells Hector, “so that hereafter we may be subjects of song for the

people of the future.”¹⁹ Helen’s tapestry, like the *Iliad* and even like *Troy*, is intended to be a record of the heroic trials suffered by Greeks and Trojans in the war started and waged because of her: “The work at the loom mirrors her life.”²⁰ The goddess Iris, disguised as a Trojan woman, approaches Helen and urges her to go to the ramparts to watch the fight in which she will be the prize (130–138). Helen, suddenly filled with nostalgia for Menelaus and her home in Sparta, goes to the wall at the city gates, weeping softly (139–142). As here, an air of melancholy and regret clings to Helen in each of her appearances in the *Iliad*. In Book 3 in particular she is constantly looking back on her past and vividly drawing it into her present. This emotional characterization of Helen serves to bridge the time between the first flush of excitement inherent in the romantic events of the *Cypria* and the guilty self-awareness she feels as the *casus belli* several years later in the martial narrative of the *Iliad*.

At the tower she finds Priam and several of the Trojan elders, who whisper together about the ineffably beautiful but dangerous and ruinous woman in their midst (154–160). Here the epic offers a single specific detail about Helen’s appearance, observed by the elders: “She seems strikingly like the immortal goddesses in her look” (158). Priam now greets her with affection, calling her his “dear child” as he asks her to name the various Greek leaders who are assembled beneath his city walls (161–170). The fact that Priam is unfamiliar with the Greek warriors and has to have them identified again suggests an earlier time long before the events of the *Iliad*, when the warring armies first encountered each other on the battlefield. Helen responds with similar fondness and respect for Priam, whom she calls her “dear father-in-law” (172). Yet the sight of her fellow Greeks overwhelms her with shame and self-recrimination, and she expresses her vehement wish that she had died before she left her home and family and sailed away with Paris (173–175). Nevertheless she acquiesces to Priam’s request and points out Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Ajax (177–235). During the catalogue, Helen’s emotions are again aroused when she fails to see her two brothers Castor and Polydeuces on the battlefield. She quickly explains their absence by surmising that they must feel humiliation over her dishonorable behavior (236–242). No one in the *Iliad* ever directly criticizes Helen except herself, and this she does with exquisite finesse and

17 On the association of Helen with violent conflict and death in the *Iliad* see Robert Emmet Meagher, *The Meaning of Helen: In Search of an Ancient Icon* (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2002), 29–33 (first published as *Helen: Myth, Legend, and the Culture of Misogyny* [New York: Continuum, 1995]).

18 Gregory Nagy, *Homeric Questions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 78–79, discusses how different themes from the narrative tradition about the Trojan War are integrated into the early part of the *Iliad*.

19 *Iliad* 6.357–358. On Helen’s consciousness of her literary afterlife see Mihoko Suzuki, *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989; rpt. 1992), 40–41.

20 Quoted from Paolo Vivante, *Homer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 86.

severity every time she appears.²¹ Helen's ability to express her pain so candidly affords her "an inner depth that projects her beyond the occasion and lets us see her as a character removed from time and space."²² Helen's harsh self-blame together with her anxiety for her brothers highlights the epic's attribution of accountability for the war solely to her.

The duel between Paris and Menelaus is inconclusive: Menelaus is clearly the victor, but Paris is rescued from his opponent's grasp by the goddess Aphrodite and set safely down in the bedroom he shares with Helen (325–382). The power of Aphrodite here parallels her prominence in the *Cypria*. Just as she had brought Paris and Helen together in Sparta, she will now unite them again in Troy. Aphrodite finds Helen on the ramparts and appears to her disguised as an old woman whom Helen loved dearly long ago in Sparta (383–389). She urges Helen to join Paris in bed, describing his radiant charm (390–394). Helen's grim present gives way to her romantic past when a beloved figure from her former home reveals to her a captivating image of Paris as he must have appeared to her at Sparta.²³ But Helen shakes off the nostalgic mirage when she recognizes Aphrodite through her disguise (395–398), then delivers a tart and impertinent rejoinder (399–412). The bitter tone of Helen's reproach is similar to her earlier self-recriminations. Helen is condemning her own susceptibility to the erotic temptation embodied by Aphrodite.²⁴ "Why don't you go sit beside Paris . . . coddle him and protect him . . . Not me . . . my pain just never ends" (406–412). In that moment, however, Aphrodite asserts her divinity with a stark threat: if Helen disobeys her, "I will utterly hate you as much as I strikingly love you now" (415). Helen shudders but does as she is told. She goes quietly, unseen, just as she had left Sparta under the irresistible force of the goddess.

In their bedroom, Helen turns her disgust and scorn on Paris. Yet she also demonstrates her emotional indecision as she confronts the misery of the present war and relives the erotic adventures they had shared in the past. Averting her eyes, Helen tells Paris she wishes Menelaus had killed him on the plain (427–433), then retracts her words and urges him not to fight again "or else you'll be killed" (434–436). But Paris is

well versed in giving a sweet reply that deflects any reproach or resentment.²⁵ After he answers Helen with soft words, acknowledging and soothing her anger, he leads her to bed with a seductive invitation that again brings the past immediately into the present: "Never before has love so filled my senses, not even the first time when I took you from lovely Sparta and sailed away . . . as I now love you, and sweet desire takes hold of me" (437–446). Gone are thoughts of her previous husband and home as Helen again chooses Paris. At the end of Book 3, their lovemaking fuses past and present into a single moment and impresses both upon the narrative of the *Iliad*.

As noted above, much of the first part of *Troy* presents material from Book 3 of the *Iliad* that also appears in the *Cypria*. The film echoes the epic impulse for narrative flashback when Paris and Helen are in their bedroom in Troy the night before the Greek fleet arrives. The film portrays Helen as conscious of her culpability for the war even as the audience is aware that power-hungry Agamemnon only uses her as a pretext. As she gazes out over the sea at night, there is a somber expression of dread on her face. "They're coming for me," she whispers. When Helen acknowledges the coming war, Paris impetuously suggests that they run away together, just as he did once before in Sparta. Helen answers sadly: "But this is your home," and Paris counters: "You left your home for me." There follows a conversation that could have taken place between them back in Sparta. "Sparta was never my home," Helen says, ignoring the literary tradition of Helen's inheritance of that kingdom from Tyndareus, her father.²⁶ "My parents sent me there when I was sixteen to marry Menelaus." In contrast to the Helen of the *Iliad*, the film's Helen never feels any longing for her ex-husband and family since she does not even consider Sparta her home. (*Troy* also ignores Hermione, Helen and Menelaus' daughter. Helen mentions leaving her child at *Iliad* 3.174–175.) But even in the face of Helen's gloominess, Paris remains naïvely optimistic, indulging in a pastoral fantasy that recalls his days as a shepherd on Mt. Ida: "We'll live off the land!" While Paris is idealistic and impractical, Helen is fatalistic, knowing that Menelaus will demand the ultimate retribution from him. "You're very young, my love," she tells him wearily. This is the only reference in the film to an age difference between Helen and Paris. Although never explicitly stated in the epic tradition, an age gap is suggested by the

21 Helen reproaches herself at *Iliad* 3.161–180, 241–242; 6.342–368; 24.761–775.

22 Quoted from Vivante, *Homer*, 90.

23 On the blurring of past and present in this scene see Vivante, *Homer*, 94.

24 Helen's connection to Aphrodite, a daughter of Zeus, is highlighted in this scene by the use of two epithets to describe Helen's divine paternity: "Helen, born from Zeus" (418) and "Helen, daughter of aegis-holding Zeus" (426). On this scene see also Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 59–61.

25 Compare Paris' smooth and disarming reply to Hector's reproach at *Iliad* 3.58–75.

26 The sources for this paternity, e.g. Hyginus, *Fabulae* 78, are significantly later than the *Iliad*.

different stages of social maturity evinced by their characters. Paris is consistently depicted as a reckless young playboy, in contrast to his more serious and domestically minded elder brother Hector. This scene of the film suggests a social and emotional break between Helen and Paris that diminishes the initial optimism of their romance.

The next scene is set in the great hall of Priam, where the Trojans meet in a council of war. Paris, who still believes the war is “a dispute between two men,” rashly declares: “I will challenge Menelaus for the right to Helen. The winner will take her home. The loser will burn before night-fall.” As in the *Iliad*, Paris initiates the duel, although in the film he challenges his rival directly. That evening in the palace courtyard, Paris explains to Priam how much he loves Helen as the two of them sit before a golden statue of Aphrodite.²⁷ Like Paris, Priam considers the war to be about Helen: “I suppose fighting for love makes more sense,” he tells his young son. The film portrays the similarity between Paris and Priam in their naïve belief in Troy’s invincibility. Hector, a greater realist, is aware that Agamemnon has come for power and will stop at nothing short of total dominion over Troy. Even Andromache, Hector’s wife, agrees with him: “Fifty thousand Greeks did not cross the sea for the Spartan queen.”

But Helen still thinks she can sway the outcome of the war. In the next scene, Hector finds her running through the shadowy courtyard, covered in dark veils. When he catches her, Helen begins to weep: “I saw them burning on the pyres . . . it’s my fault . . . All those widows, I still hear them screaming . . . their husbands died because I’m here.” Her guilt and remorse in this scene are consistent with her characterization in the *Iliad*, but the film takes Helen one step further. “I’m going down to the ships. I’m giving myself back to Menelaus,” she declares. Hector, the realist, stops her romantic and useless impulse to give herself up when it is too late: “This is about power, not love.” Helen is realistic, however, about Paris’ chances in the duel: “Menelaus will kill him. I won’t let that happen.” Hector assures her that it is Paris’ decision to fight, but Helen is not satisfied: “I can’t ask anyone to fight for me. I am no longer Queen of Sparta.” Hector stresses that her transformation from Spartan to Trojan is irrevocable: “You’re a princess of Troy now, and my brother needs you tonight.” Helen nods obediently and returns to Paris.

This scene evokes the meeting between Hector and Helen in the *Iliad* (6.313–368), although it takes place at a more critical moment. In the

27 The statue appears to be a likeness of the Auxerre Kore in the Louvre, an early archaic limestone figure dating to ca. 640 B.C.

epic, Hector goes to the house of Paris and Helen to rouse Paris back to war after the thwarted duel with Menelaus. He finds Paris fondling his weapons while Helen sits nearby directing the work of her handmaidens. Hector scolds his brother for his idleness, and Paris answers with his characteristic charm and cheerfulness. Then Helen addresses Hector, reproaching herself in bitter terms and wishing she had been “swept away” before coming to Troy, an echo of her earlier words to Priam. She agrees with Hector about Paris’ shortcomings, citing his “unhinged senses,” and invites Hector to rest a while from the labor of battle, “caused by me, bitch that I am, and the madness of Paris” (354–356). Helen continues to take responsibility for starting the war. Hector replies warmly but asks her to direct Paris back to the field. In the *Iliad*, Hector responds to Helen with gentleness and in terms of close familiarity, suggesting a natural sympathy between them.²⁸ The film version of their meeting exaggerates Helen’s emotions for dramatic effect and sets it at a more crucial juncture: it also adds a remarkable stroke when Hector sends her back to Paris, thereby mirroring the command of Aphrodite in Book 3 of the *Iliad*.

In *Troy*, however, the duel between Paris and Menelaus assumes very different contours. The camera flies from the Trojan ramparts over the armies assembled on each side. Menelaus reproaches Paris for abusing his hospitality and stealing his wife “in the middle of the night,” but Paris answers blithely: “The sun was shining when your wife left you,” confirming Helen’s willing participation in their affair. Above on the wall, Helen, dressed in shimmering white as in Book 3 of the *Iliad*, looks anxious but smiles at Paris when he looks up at her. Priam calls to her warmly, as he does in the epic: “Helen, sit with me.” On the field, Paris challenges Menelaus: “Let us fight our own battle. The winner takes Helen home.” Menelaus knows she is watching and wants to prove his valor, so he asks Agamemnon to let him kill “the little peacock.” Agamemnon is clear about his plan to seize Troy: “I did not come here for your pretty wife. I came here for Troy.” But he agrees to let his brother avenge his honor first, so Menelaus accepts Paris’ challenge. Amid sounds of Agamemnon’s evil laughter and Helen’s fearful gasps, Menelaus easily knocks Paris down, slashes the younger man’s thigh, and holds a sword to his throat. In the *Iliad*, Paris was saved from death at this moment by Aphrodite, but in the film Paris crawls back to the Trojan ranks and cowers at the feet of Hector. Menelaus, frustrated, turns his face to the ramparts and bellows at Helen: “Is this what you left me for?” Agamemnon uses the broken pact to launch the attack as

28 On the affection between Helen and Hector see Vivante, *Homer*, 55–56.

Menelaus lunges for Paris: "Fight me, you coward!" But Hector steps forward to shield his brother with his body and kills Menelaus. As he protects Paris from certain death, Hector again assumes the function of Aphrodite. A close-up of Helen's face shows her weeping in relief.

The death of Menelaus midway through the film has elicited much dismay and criticism from viewers, since the Greek epic tradition records that Menelaus retrieves Helen after the fall of Troy and takes her back to Sparta, where they resume their lives together.²⁹ Yet the removal of his character at this point has a strong motivation: it effectively erases Helen's function as the reason for the war and reinforces one of the film's major themes, that the true cause of the war is Agamemnon's outrageous greed for power. As Odysseus wryly informs Agamemnon in council soon after his brother's funeral: "The men believe we came here for Menelaus' wife. He won't be needing her anymore." The loss of Menelaus also serves to diminish the dramatic necessity for Helen's character in the film. The romance between Helen and Paris begins to lose its centrality to the plot, which now transfers its romantic focus to the more complex relationship between Achilles and Briseis.

After the duel, Helen is sewing the wound in Paris' thigh as they sit on their bed together. The tending of his wound may recall the story of the Trojan nymph Oenone, Paris' unhappy first wife, who was gifted with the power of healing.³⁰ Paris abandoned her when he went to Sparta for Helen; at the end of the Trojan War, a jealous Oenone refuses to heal Paris' arrow wound, which soon proves lethal. In this scene in the film, Paris is so ashamed that he cannot even look at Helen and seems to detach himself from her and their fateful bond: "You think I'm a coward. I am a coward. I knew he would kill me. You were watching . . . my father . . . my brother . . . all of Troy. Shame didn't matter. I gave up my pride, my honor, just to live." Helen tries to console him: "For love. You challenged a great warrior – that took courage." Helen attempts to remind Paris of their love and, in effect, to remain relevant to the plot, but Paris is visibly moving away from her and toward some new purpose. She begs him: "I don't want a hero. I want a man I can grow old with." Paris is silent and stony-faced, and his glum expression suggests he would rather be a hero. Modern film

demands that its flawed male protagonists somehow find redemption, and it is no surprise to the audience that Paris later is seen practicing his archery. Although nothing in the *Iliad* suggests an obvious dissolution of the romance between Helen and Paris, the film reflects the overall reduction of its importance in the epic even as it intensifies its focus on Achilles.

Our few remaining glimpses of Helen in *Troy* continue the diminution of her importance and point to her conversion to iconic status. Before Achilles meets Hector in hand-to-hand combat, a shot from within the walls of Troy shows us Hector waiting for the gate to open. The camera pulls back to frame Hector from Helen's point of view. Hector turns to look at her as she stands watching him in perfect stillness, veiled in ethereal white like a ghost. She lowers her eyes in sadness, as if to acknowledge her culpability for his imminent death. On the ramparts, Andromache turns away and collapses against the wall. Helen runs to her and embraces her while Hector is slain by Achilles. At Hector's funeral, a wide-angle shot reveals three women seated high on a dais: Andromache in the center, flanked by Briseis and Helen. All three are dressed in black. There is an ominous image of Helen holding Astyanax, the small child of Hector and Andromache, who in the epic tradition is doomed to die after the fall of Troy.³¹ In each of these appearances, Helen is a harbinger of destruction, a sinister spirit of death.

The funeral scene in *Troy* evokes the final moments of the *Iliad*. At Hector's funeral in Book 24, three royal women are also present, but they deliver mournful speeches to commemorate Hector. After the laments of his wife and mother, Helen addresses Hector; this is her last appearance in the *Iliad*. As in Books 3 and 6, Helen reproaches herself and wishes she had died before coming to Troy (762–764). She recalls Hector's constant kindness and courtesy to her during her years in Troy even when others among her Trojan in-laws justifiably blamed her for their woes (765–772).³² Helen's comments about Hector correspond to the tenderness of their exchange in Book 6, when even Hector recognized how much she loves him (6.360). Now, however, Helen acknowledges her precarious position in Troy and ends

29 The recovery of Helen by Menelaus is told in the lost epic *Iliou Persis* (*The Sack of Troy*), summarized by Proclus. Menelaus and Helen are in their palace at Sparta in Book 4 of the *Odyssey*.

30 The story of Oenone is most vividly told by Parthenius in his *Erota Pathemata* (*Sentimental Love Stories*) 4.

31 The death of Astyanax, whom the Greeks throw from the walls of Troy, is eerily foreshadowed in the lament of Andromache at *Iliad* 24.734–738. The event itself is recorded in the *Iliou Persis* and reappears in Euripides' *The Trojan Women*.

32 Helen observes: "It is now the twentieth year since I left my country" (*Iliad* 24.765–766). This may be an exaggeration, as the ten-year interval before the war is nowhere else mentioned in the *Iliad*.

her speech bemoaning her lack of friends: “everyone shudders at me.”³³ Like Helen in the film, the Helen of the *Iliad* manifests herself to others as an evil omen, and she knows it.

The last section of *Troy* covers events recorded in other lost works from the Greek epic cycle. Picking up after the end of the *Iliad*, a short epic called the *Little Iliad* introduces the famous tale of the Trojan Horse and briefly describes its entry into Troy. An even shorter epic, the *Iliou Persis*, provides a few more details for the story of the wooden horse. In this version, the Trojans are suspicious and discuss what to do about the horse before deciding that it is a divine gift; thinking they are delivered from the war, they take the horse inside the city amidst great celebrations. *Troy* stages the entry of the Trojan Horse according to this epic tradition but also offers a visual recapitulation of Helen’s entrance into the city. As before, a flying camera follows the progress of the horse as it rolls into Troy, surrounded by jubilant citizens. The similarity between the two scenes suggests a symbolic equation of the two events: the arrival of Helen in Troy marks the beginning of the city’s downfall, just as the entry of the horse signals its final destruction. On a balcony above a broad piazza, Paris and Helen are watching the people but engage in a rather icy exchange. Paris, who earlier argued that the horse should be burned, is disgusted by the revelry so soon after Hector’s funeral: “Look at them. You’d think their prince had never died.” Helen responds with her customary pragmatism: “You’re their prince now. Make your brother proud.” Paris does not look at her but stares straight ahead. The moment emphasizes Paris’ anger over the death of his brother in order to set up the film’s climax. Paris will avenge Hector by killing Achilles with his arrows and thereby redeem himself after his cowardice in the duel with Menelaus. But this new motivation for Paris leaves Helen increasingly on the sidelines as the film draws to a close. The war is no longer about Helen, and neither is *Troy*.

The final sequence focuses almost entirely on the romantic and ultimately tragic reunion of Achilles and Briseis in the middle of the burning royal palace. Agamemnon has tried to seize Briseis, but she kills him with a dramatic stab to the neck. Like the death of Menelaus, the death of Agamemnon at Troy is contrary to the Greek literary tradition but justified by cinematic necessity.³⁴ Since the film consistently

portrays Agamemnon’s ruthless greed for power as the real cause of the Trojan War, his spectacular death in the city he came to destroy affirms the modern ideal that evil is always punished. Yet one final moment presents an image of Helen as an icon both blameworthy and utterly untouchable. In a rush to save a few Trojans from the ruined city, Helen and Paris head for a secret tunnel under the palace. The newly valiant Paris urges Helen to escape without him, telling her he will stay in the city. Helen replies: “The city is dead. They’re burning it to the ground.” But Paris is conscious of his duty and even questions the value of their love: “How could you love me if I ran now?” She begs him not to leave her, but Paris offers her a wan assurance: “We will be together again, in this world or the next . . . we will be together.” In modern cinematic terms, Paris’ promise points to a lack of resolution in their relationship. His words also evoke a foreboding sense of the afterlife. According to the *Little Iliad*, Paris was already dead when the city was sacked and Helen left Troy. In the film Paris is stating the obvious, that they will only see each other again in the land of the dead. As the city blazes all around them, the last image the audience sees of Helen is her disappearing figure, holding a torch.

33 *Iliad* 24.773–775. Compare Helen’s description of herself as “chilling” at 6.344 and Achilles’ words about her at 19.325: “Helen, who makes us shudder.”

34 The death of Agamemnon at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra on his return to Mycenae was told in the lost epic *Nostoi* (*The Returns*), summarized by Proclus, and, most famously, in Aeschylus’ tragedy *Agamemnon*.

Troy
From Homer's *Iliad* to
Hollywood Epic

Edited by
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