An Enduring Logic

Homer, Helen of Troy, *and Narrative Mobility*

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Interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict.

— Fredric Jameson

It is a curious fact that narrative has long been the province of men. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*— the precursors of today's sword and sandal films— it is men who go on journeys and, as strangers, wash up on familiar shores. It is the men of classical literature who travel to war, sail for commerce or piracy, encounter unknown peoples, pilgrimage to sacred sites, and narrate their adventures. And thus it is men whose mobility, as paradigmatically represented in myth, initiates and complicates plot. As the narratologist Jurij M. Lotman observes, "Characters can be divided into those who are mobile, who enjoy freedom with regard to plot-space, who can change their place in the structure of the artistic world and cross the frontier ... and those who are immobile, who represent, in fact, a function of this space" (167). Mobility is at base gendered, since characters and readers are "constrained and defined within two positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other" (de Lauretis 121). Famously, Helen of Sparta contests such foundational constraints when, as wife to Menelaus, she leaves her married homeland and travels to Troy with Paris. In the process, she enacts a spatial imagination at odds with those who control women's bodies and thereby provokes, to borrow a phrase from Fredric Jameson, "strategies of containment" relating to honor and gender (53–54). Her mobility — personal and erotic — does more, of course, than set in motion the Trojan War, since Helen's actions provide the occasion for the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

as well as for the many plots which treat Homer as a narrative exemplar. It follows that Helen's uncharacteristic migration speaks to the potential of different plots that lie latent in Homer's epics and therefore in narrative more generally. At issue here is not the primary role of myth in plotting, a role that classicists and narratologists alike emphasize, so much as how Helen's example returns through the master trope of mobility to provoke recent sword and sandal films on Troy and thereby contest the character types and plot functions available to women in them.

Evoking a Tradition

It has become a scholarly commonplace to note that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* begin the literary canon and yet are near endpoints of an existing oral genre. Homer's works, Seth L. Schein explains, are "product[s] of a Greek poetic tradition that may have been as much as a thousand years old by the time the epics were composed, [emerging] probably in the final quarter of the eighth century B.C., and that had roots in a still older Indo-European poetic tradition" (3). Scholars first inferred the presence of this pre–Homeric tradition by noting the recurrent elements— the words, epithets, phrases, types of description, rituals, subjects, themes, mythological references, and so on — that serve as formulae which singers and, later, rhapsodes perform (see, e.g., Parry; Lord). Following Mikhail Bakhtin, we might say that Indo-European life in common was made possible by the utterances of its everyday speech genres. These, in turn, got absorbed into the secondary speech genre of oral poetry that the Greeks formalized through performance and discipleship. In this model, individual utterances, speech genres (be they simple or complex), and the literary and extra-literary strata of national languages weave and are rewoven through song (Bakhtin 65–66). The resulting catalog is available to speakers, whether sanctioned or not, which ensures that speech can be put to emergent purposes and plots.

The *Iliad*'s back story begins when Paris, the prince of Troy and son of Priam, travels to Sparta where, in a grave breach of hospitality, he seduces Helen, the wife of Menelaus. Together, Paris and *orea Eleni* depart for Troy to live as husband and wife. Menelaus and his elder brother, King Agamemnon, raise an army in response and sail, with perhaps one thousand ships, to Troy, where they intend to claim Helen, if not also the walled city's wealth. Rebuffed, they begin a war. The *Odyssey*'s back story commences a decade later as the victorious Greek federation leaves Troy ablaze and seeks its home-coming, now enriched by plunder, its men now aroused and distracted by slave-wives.

Homer's interdependent works represent the two faces of ancient epic. One face — that of the gods— is distant and proximate. From their sanctuary on Olympus, the gods observe humans. So too do they shape-shift and move

among the mortals. In both cases, the gods use men as pawns in their quarrels and for entertainment. Tactically, the gods disrupt the Trojan War, adding to its body count. They complicate as well the *nostoi*-story of Odysseus and his men, testing their endurance with hardship and loss. Throughout, the gods play favorites, betraying and disturbing at will. Odysseus, for his part, is fated by them to spend almost as long getting home as he spent warring at Troy. Goddesses contend for his affections, becoming obstacles to his mobility before either releasing or being overcome by him. Calypso, for instance, plots to have him for her husband and only reluctantly allows him to leave her island; Circe enthralls his men only to become enthralled in turn. Athena, so deadly in the *Iliad*, travels repeatedly to aid Odysseus so that his journey home—its own masterplot—can occur and the suitors get killed. Understandably, the ancient Greeks respond to the gods' interventions with fear that takes the form of worship. Their rituals propitiate the gods and goddesses, earning their care and perhaps even forestalling fate.

The second face of ancient epic belongs to warriors, those men who endure a trial (*peira*) in battle and strive, alongside their compatriots, for imperishable glory (*kleos aphthiton*). Living and fighting heroically bring honor, provided that both occur under maximum duress and are met courageously. The greatest renown occurs when a warrior is affirmed by enemies and friends alike and granted immortality by a singer, typically as part of dying on the battlefield. Odysseus is semi-divine, a hero, and therefore atypical. Ever resourceful, he contributes the idea of the Trojan horse, leaves the enclosure-gift to sack the city, and survives the fighting, unlike others that Homer dotes on. Later, in the *Odyssey*, he is surprised to hear the story of Troy sung by Demodocus, the famous singer, a meta-commentary which suggests how quickly history is refashioned as myth. Marking the penultimate point in his travels, the song causes him to relive his suffering. King Alcinous observes Odysseus' anguish and asks why he mourns when "hear[ing] of the fate of the Greeks and Trojans. / This was the gods' doing. They spun that fate / So that in later times it would turn into song" (8.624–26). Here Homer's *Odyssey* is unequivocal: oral song, a kind of weaving, results from and compensates for the suffering induced by the gods.

Like Odysseus, Helen of Argos is one of the few characters to span the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. She too is semi-divine, having been born of the violent union of Zeus and Leda, a figure aptly named as Nemesis. Helen is the daughter of King Tyndareus and sister to Castor, Pollux, and Clytemnestra. As a young woman, she marries Menelaus and gives birth to Hermione. Thus she deserts her husband, daughter, and married homeland by leaving Sparta with Paris for Troy. Conflicting accounts explain her motivation but concur that Helen chooses a younger not an older man, mobility over stasis, travel rather than domesticity. Importantly, Helen journeys across the Mediterranean, a domain traversed by classical gods and men, not women, a time-space where ill winds

bring tragedy. As Tim Cresswell observes, mobility "operate[s] within fields of power and meaning" (10). Helen's leaving is thus a double affront—to her husband and to her social station. "For nearly three thousand years," Bettany Hughes observes, "she has been upheld as an exquisite agent of extermination" (2).

Despite being a catalyst of the war, Helen is offstage as the *Iliad* begins. Nine years have passed, and she is now much-spurned. Homer's invocation begins *in medias res* and, by so doing, signals her importance even as it effaces her history. Like the modern scholars who follow Homer, it focuses on the actions of men, asserting that "Achilles' rage" has "cost the Greeks / Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls / Of heroes into Hades' dark" (1.1–4). Homer's proleptic invocation is more complex than it appears, since it confers responsibility on Achilles and Zeus, shifts temporal registers, and confuses consequence and cause (Genette 36–37). After the fact, readers learn that Chryses, Apollo's priest, has come to Troy to beg Agamemnon to accept ransom for his kidnapped daughter. Despite the bounteous offer, Agamemnon rebukes Chryses, who prays to Apollo for revenge. A nine-day plague of arrows then routs the Greeks.

Homer is interested in more than godlike rage or heroes' fates, for the epic's first book turns on the tension between story and narrative, mobility and immobility. Because Helen's flight dishonors Menelaus, it must be righted with a compensating, and more powerful, display of force. Yet that response fails. Now, much later, the Greeks cower, under attack: "death-fires crowd the beach" (1.60). True to form(ula), Achilles calls an assembly to determine what is to be done. There, following Calchas' prophetic reading, he and Agamemnon taunt each other unforgivably. A flurry of movement then begins around them. Chryses returns to Chryse. Athena, roused to action by Achilles' desire to murder Agamemnon, arrives from Olympus. Satisfied that Achilles will not kill his fellow king, she returns to the hall of the gods. Agamemnon sends heralds to take "fair-cheeked Briseis" from Achilles, who was his war prize in the fight for Thebes (1.336). Briseis leaves for Agamemnon's tent to warm a rival's bed. Twice dishonored, Achilles prays to Thetis, the daughter of the Old Man of the Sea. She arrives and promises to speak to Zeus. Simultaneously, Odysseus sails with Chryses' daughter and one hundred oxen that will be sacrificed to appease Apollo. Thetis arrives on Olympus and persuades Zeus to risk Hera's wrath and "Give the Trojans the upper hand until the Greeks / Grant my son the honor he deserves" (1.540–41). Thus do rage and loss bequeath betrayal.

With fine economy, Homer's exposition represents the characters and conflicts around which the narrative turns, confident that listeners know their bases in myth. To develop, his narrative must then define its plot-spaces: the Greek beachhead, the plain where much of the fighting occurs, and Troy. At stake are two questions. Will the Trojans drive the Greeks into the sea or

home? Will the walls of Troy hold? The central issues are thus movement and, as an index of plot, succession. Unpredictably, Homer chooses delay, working against the propulsive force of the invocation. In effect, rage must wait rather than be expressed in violence. Even as Agamemnon's forces anticipate Odysseus' return, Achilles "the great runner [stands] idle by his fleet's fast hulls" (1.517). How the Greeks will breach the frontier plot-space of Troy without he and his fifty ships of men is unclear. Responding to the structural conflict between motion and stasis, the epic shifts to representing battles that gain little ground.

In terms of plot, the Achaean Greeks camp on the beaches and fight on the plain of Troy because Helen left Sparta. She might have loved Paris, been seduced by him, or even responded to a god's erotic incitement without causing war; but by enacting the determinative plot function of absentation, to borrow from Vladimir Propp's taxonomy, she spurs Menelaus, Agamemnon, and the federation to treat her leaving as an abduction and depart in response. Upon arrival, Menelaus asks about Helen (the function of reconnaissance), gains information (delivery), and demands her return (a counter-action). Spurned, he must fight to regain what he lacks or return dishonored, outcomes which are two sides of a dilemma and function as well. What energizes this emergent doubleplot is thus more than a desire to redress lost honor, for the *Iliad* reflexively foregrounds the dynamic of narrative and modulates its progress.

Because mythic sources precede the *Iliad*, Homer can borrow from the oral tradition in ways that focus attention on his warrior-heroes. Yet Homer does more than merely borrow; he compensates for reducing Helen's role in the plot by weaving the stories of battle with references to women experience. His story requires, for instance, the Judgment of Paris, a prior set-piece which contributes to the misjudgment of Helen, Paris, Priam, Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Achilles and sets a causal chain in motion that affects thousands. So too does it require the inspiration made possible by the Muses. The emergent plot turns as well on goddesses who travel to Troy and determine events. More prosaically, Homer foregrounds the conflicts which arise around Chryseis and Briseis, the prisoners whose erotic service rewards Agamemnon and Achilles for heroism. These women are not mere tokens; they, too, impact the action, since mistreating the first leads to widespread death, and appropriating the second generates the rage that so clouds the thinking of Greek leaders. It is therefore difficult to see — amid the comings-and-goings of book one — how "the *Iliad* is the story of Achilleus," as Richmond Lattimore confidently asserts or, more to the point, how its story, like narrative more generally, names men as subjects and women as both non-man and plot-space (17; de Lauretis 167). Hence readers would do well to question whether classical narrative, from its paradigmatic origins in Homer, is actually the province of men.

Ecphrasis and Narration by Other Means

Helen enters book three when Iris, the herald-goddess, comes in disguise to report that Menelaus and Paris will soon fight to the death over her. At the time, she is working the loom silently, "designing into the blood-red fabric / The trials that the Trojans and Greeks had suffered / For her beauty under Ares' murderous hands" (3.128–30). When Iris adds that the war may soon end, Helen dresses and leaves the room crying in quiet anticipation. Unlike King Priam, who cannot bear to watch his son fight Menelaus, Helen goes to the Scaean gate to see the combat. As she arrives, the Trojan elders speak warily of her almost inhuman desirability: "Whatever she is let her go back with the ships / And spare us and our children a generation of pain" (3.167–68). Homer doesn't say if Helen overhears, focusing instead on her confession to Priam:

> Death should have been a sweeter evil to me
> Than following your son here, leaving my home,
> My marriage, my friends, my precious daughter,
> That lovely time in my life. None of it was to be,
> And lamenting has been my slow death [3.182–86].

Decrying her decision to journey with Paris, Helen uses the first-person pronoun seven times in five lines, a fact which does not dispose readers in her favor. Once atop the western wall, Helen answers Priam's questions — aiding the war effort by identifying the Greek heroes by name and quality — and calls herself a "shameless bitch" (3.190). That she ends book three in Paris' bed speaks to how amenable she is to the power of others' desire and plotting. Clearly, she is a narcissist-pariah whom the gods manipulated and may manipulate again.

The Helen who weaves and the Helen who, under Iris' influence, laments are at base similar, for each are narrators of a sort. The first Helen works the loom silently. Her account there is set against a "blood-red" background or history; together, the images represent Trojan and Greek trials and their attendant suffering. As she weaves, she signals key moments in a multi-temporal, yet unspoken, plot. Weaving in the epic has a reflexive dimension as well since it parallels Homer's signifying practices. In other words, his text narrates Helen's ecphrasis, which is a trope whose root terms mean "out" and "speak" and therefore signals mobility and orality. Her outspoken narration thus has the selective force of a singer transposed to women's material culture. By extension, Helen works in two Homeric temporalities by weaving signs of heroic suffering, which she in part compelled, and by telling Priam her abject state of mind. Despite her separation from and considerable repression by others, then, Helen tells her stories. It follows that readers see weaving as recompense for her failings and language as a field of action. Plot is not just for men or heroes or even singers; as "the organizing dynamic of a specific mode of human understanding," to borrow from Peter Brooks, its utterances and forms — however repressed — can return to serve women as well (7).

It would of course be a mistake to exaggerate Helen's influence on the *Iliad*. She spends the epic in Troy, occupying a feminine plot-space, and waits more than she acts. Achilles, for his part, offers a variation on her example, since, by withdrawing from battle, he and his men initially reside in a less-masculine plot-space too. Together, Helen and Achilles are thus obstacles to peace as well as to narrative resolution for much of the plot. Homer fills the gap created by their absence with other warriors and battles but also with women. As the epic nears its conclusion, the *Iliad* again foregrounds a profound conflict — the negotiations, between Priam and Achilles, over Hector's corpse — that it counterpoints to women's actions. The concluding book shows, for instance, that Hera and Athena remain steadfast in their hatred, refusing to forgive Paris for spurning them and "honor[ing] the one who fed his fatal lust" (24.35). Thetis laments in advance the death of Achilles. Iris interrupts Priam's mourning and compels him to go to Achilles and retrieve his son's body. Hecuba sees that her husband prays properly before traveling to the enemy's camp. Andromache cries for Hector, certain that Troy will fall and "All the solemn wives / And children you guarded will go off soon / In the hollow ships, and I will go with them" (24.782–84). Thus are plot resolutions— death for heroes, sexual slavery for women — announced and shown to be gendered. In the process, Homer's heroic song shifts from the warriors to the embattled civilians, from outside on the plain of Troy to inside its walls. The latter plot-space is populated by older men, women, and children, and yet Homer insists upon its parallel resonance. Even Helen's second, self-absorbed oration has a kind of grace as she recounts Hector's kindness. Rage, unleashed, again vies with pathos for our attention. Thus do the gods spin the fates of humans, like so much carded wool, as Homer weaves mythic elements into a final, shared tableau.

By ending the *Iliad* before the *Odyssey* begins, Homer emphasizes the epics' interdependence, since it falls to his second song to explain details unrepresented by the first. Bridging the two is a reflexive emphasis on spinning. In a remarkable metapoetic turn, Helen's work at the loom anticipates Penelope's focus as silent but significant weaver. For her part, Helen weaves as the *Iliad* more or less begins; Penelope weaves as the *Odyssey* more or less ends. Helen, a foreigner, fears that the Greek soldiers will storm Troy. Penelope, by contrast, is at home, surrounded by familiar objects and servants, but also repressed by circumstances. Having broached the walls of her palace, the suitors seek her hand — indeed, her kingdom — in marriage, should Odysseus not return in time. Like Helen, then, Penelope is at odds with those who share her plot-space; unlike her, she is devoted to memory, not forgetting, and her epic to "alternate story patterns," itself an ecphrastic metaphor (Slatkin 228). She responds as Helen does, with seclusion, work, and sadness, and weaves a different object, a burial shroud, which will honor her father-in-law upon his death. Famously, Penelope weaves by day, keeping the suitors at arm's length, and unweaves by night. Her ecphrasis stalls— and thereby protects— her own marriage plot from revision by men.

Penelope treats the burial shroud as a social responsibility, a necessary response to Laertes' abject condition and widower status. A form of women's work, it is also a means by which women make and sustain culture. Thus it is a mimetic object at once functional, with respect to ritual, and immanent to the text — a sign, that is, of the braided tissue of signification and reading (see, e.g., Barthes 159; Snyder 193–95; Filson-Rubin 151–52). Moreover, as Penelope labors, undoes her weaving, and elaborates what had been woven, she produces an object that differs from Helen's but shares the same aesthetic practice. The imaginative substitution of Penelope for Helen, of burial shroud for story-cloth, of ecphrasis for ecphrasis, reinforces our sense that women narrate in ways that may elude men's notice. The two faces of epic representation — that of the gods and heroes— should therefore expand to include a third: women and their signifying practices, since both comment upon and extend Homer's Ur-narratives in space and time.

Mobility and Genre Hybridity

In the last sixty years, two films have helped to expand Helen's authority beyond that accorded her by the *Iliad*. The first was directed by Robert Wise and shot in Italy. Dubbed into English, *Helen of Troy* (1956) is a CinemaScope peplum, complete with departures from Greek myth and not-quite-supernaturally attractive stars. Its women wear bullet bras under peplos; its men have glistening skin. Wise introduces Helen by placing her outside of domesticity. She is on a beach and has found Paris, who apparently escaped drowning at sea by tying himself to the mast of a ship, an invention with a clear debt to Odysseus' fight with Poseidon. From the first, Wise's Helen is unapologetically mobile, which may well be the film's signature innovation. She is free to rescue Paris from his immobility and, soon thereafter, to nurse him to health. Helen has a kind of subjective mobility as well, since she represents herself to Paris as a slave, not as someone who is married to a king, before their contentious love takes form.

Of greater interest for my purposes is *Helen of Troy* (2003), a USA Network miniseries, which has its own revisionist intentions. It begins with a voice-over from Menelaus, whose role inverts the Muses' gender and implies other inversions will follow. From the first, his remarks interpolate viewers by addressing them directly: "You may have heard the story of Helen, a woman whose beauty launched a thousand ships and started the most famous war in history." Once Helen departs, "ten thousand men, the best that the gods and dreams of glory could have fashioned ... [were] led by my brother, Agamemnon, the mightiest of the Greeks, and Achilles, who could strike down ten warriors with one blow." As Helen's witness-victim, he will tell "the real story" (*Helen*).

The film opens with a weave of images that move forward and back in time. In the first image, Helen disrobes and walks among drunken royals before standing — in a sequence worthy of a 1980s seminar on feminist film theory — on a platform, alone. The kings and princes have formed a political federation to ensure that Helen's husband is protected from the betrayals her beauty may inspire. They insist upon seeing Helen naked before she marries Menelaus to see if their decidedly homosocial alliance is needed. The opening sequence then shifts to the mini-series' second episode. Helen has fled to Troy, and now the federation's ships amass to revenge her infidelity — a tragedy in the making, as indicated by the ships moving across the screen from right to left. The assault on Troy's beachhead ensues before the film cuts to Helen inside the city. A quick image of Troy's citizens fleeing the federation's soldiers from the angle of fate follows before we see Helen while an off-stage Priam reflects on whether to protect her and therefore fight the Greeks. Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon and Helen's sister, then has two scenes. One represents a marriage proposal; the other alludes to domestic happiness with her daughter, Iphigenia, and beloved sister.

A pattern emerges from these initial images. Director John Kent Harrison and writer Ronni Kern use the voice-over to announce crucial plot points, moving from domesticity to battle and back. Like Homer, they rely on our knowledge of mythology to limit their exposition. In the process, Harrison ties words in the voice-over to the image of those characters and events. Thus, we hear and see Helen, the ships, war, the valiant struggle, the golden walls of Troy, Agamemnon, Achilles, Paris, love, and so on. The approach is like the often-scorned technique of mickeymousing song and dance movements through editing; and yet, it produces a clever weave of word and image, summary and incident, oral and visual signifier. Together, the compound signs also announce individual plot functions, including, in rapid order, reconnaissance, delivery, departure, counter-action, and wedding. Tension is thus created before the storyline proper begins. Viewers soon infer that legend and the *Iliad* are to serve Helen and her story at least as much as history and the godlike rage of heroes.

An insightful reworking of myth opens the film proper. Hecuba is in labor, and a very young Cassandra runs through the palace, in a deft tracking shot, shouting, "Kill him, kill him." Her childish command is prescient, since Alexandros has not been born and thus no one knows his gender. Frightened by the vision, Cassandra declares to King Priam that "If he lives, Troy will burn" (*Helen*). As its back story begins, then, *Helen of Troy* changes legend twice, since Cassandra is too young to have been made a seer by the gods and her vision appropriates a dream in which Hecuba gives birth to a firebrand that spreads flames over the city. The double revisions speak to the role of children in the mini-series. More directly, they elevate Cassandra and, by extension, such younger women as Helen and Clytemnestra over their mothers, a peplum convention. Persuaded, Priam orders his newborn, swaddled in a purple weaving, to be thrown from the highest point on Mount Ida. But Alexandros is left to die, not killed. A shepherd finds and raises him, thereby starting the parallel editing — of Paris and Helen's back story — that follows.

The audience is shown the young shepherd, now in a flash-forward, years later. Tracking an errant goat, he enters a cave and meets Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. It is the Judgment of Paris repurposed. Each woman offers a bribe for his vote in the impromptu, and ill-advised, contest. Speaking last, Aphrodite holds out a golden apple and promises the world's most beautiful woman to him if he selects her. The apple makes a portal through which he sees Helen and she, from a distance, sees him. Wordlessly, Paris chooses love over glory in battle. Helen, in equal wonder, touches his cinematic image in the puddle below her.

Both images dissolve into a shot of Helen on horseback, which introduces the motif that enables the Trojan defeat. A joyful and accomplished rider, she has left the city's walls and its domestic constraints. Her relationship with the horse is both sensitive and mutual. Indeed, it calls diegetically to her three times as she walks to a bluff-edge alone and looks at a train of men coming to see her family. The camera, conventionally enough, captures King Atreus and princes Agamemnon and Menelaus in an over-the-shoulder, high-angle establishing shot. But, as Helen watches, it changes to her point of view. By allying Helen with the cinematic apparatus, Harrison increases her authority and signals her agency. From the first, then, she is less an object of representation and more its subject. It follows that we see what Helen selects for us to see, and even her reactions, shown in shot/reverse shot, are thoughtful. Pollux, the heir to the throne, arrives to admonish her, saying, "You know you can't go outside of the city walls. Father is furious." Apparently, Helen disobeys as she sees fit — and often. "Come on," Pollux orders. "Let's get you back and dressed.... You can't go to a wedding looking like that" (*Helen*).

At this point, Helen is not *orea Eleni* but an older girl. Tall, gangly, lacking screen make-up, she is energetically curious, not conventionally feminine. Information about royals coming from Mycenae interests her more than her sister's marriage proposal and wedding. Classicists expecting Helen to be stately and ethereal encounter, instead, a spirited and rambunctious adolescent (see, e.g., Roisman 144). Pollux, for his part, would school her in femininity so that she is proper, a goal that shades off into propriety and property. Despite his injunctions, Helen arrives late to the formal greeting with King Atreus, leaving Tyndareus — who has no presence in the *Iliad* — to introduce only his "most beautiful and obedient" daughter. As Agamemnon tells Clytemnestra that he will take her for his wife, Helen interrupts the proposal and captivates the princes. Tyndareus would have her go to her room and be properly (re)dressed, but the princes intervene. Unhappily, he introduces her as "my youngest, still a child — an untamed and disrespectful child" (*Helen*). The contrast between Helen and Homer's narcissist, Helen and Clytemnestra, is pointed.

In *Helen of Troy* we meet a free spirit who borrows actions from the domain of the masculine and repurposes them; thus her mobility, not immobility, is often at issue. Harrison's camera obediently follows as Helen walks, rides, looks, strides the palace's halls, and sails the Aegean. It will fall to Pollux to tell her what she does not know: "Your beauty, your spirit, it makes men weak" (*Helen*). Spiritedly, it will fall to Helen to tell him what only Paris may sense: she has had a vision and is uninterested in princes who visit and proposals and marriages because, defying tradition, she has made her marriage-choice.

That future is delayed when Theseus, the king of Athens, enters the palace and kidnaps her. Kidnapping is narrative sleight-of-hand, at once a complication and form of misdirection. Common in classical warfare, as the examples of Chryseis and Briseis suggest, it removes Helen from her parent's care — putting her into the masculine world — even as it infantilizes her. A foreigner, Helen thus washes up onto new shores, where she comes to love her captor, even offering herself to him before he is ready to love her. The rapid succession of departure and arrival emphasizes Helen's unfeminine mobility; enacting her desire for Theseus extends mobility, as an organizing trope, to eros. In the process, the miniseries spans past and present, weaving Helen's story into a modern genre, the sword and sandal film, as Theseus kills four Trojans during the kidnapping and, in turn, is mortally wounded when Pollux arrives to rescue Helen. She does not seek rescue — itself a re-gendering — and is horrified as Theseus kills Pollux and thus denies her a brother and Tyndareus an heir.

The problem here may be with a different kind of descent. Derived, in part, from Homer's epics by way of Italian cinema, sword and sandal films elevate warriors, with their metonymic swords, over the citizens in sandals who get positioned as audience. Such spectacles focus on war, hand-to-hand combat, the debasement and revenge of former slaves, the toppling of murderous regimes— not a trans-tribal love story or a girl's coming-of-age. Content with Helen as narrative catalyst, Homer mentions her "seventeen times in the *Iliad*— [but] on eight occasions her name is coupled with the word *ktema*, 'treasure' or 'possession'" (Hughs 80). He compensates for such a strategy of containment, first, by representing goddesses and women other than Helen in action, and second, by granting women an even more expansive role in the *Odyssey*. *Helen of Troy*, for its part, reasserts Helen's narrative primacy and thereby inverts aspects of the very genre it occupies.

To be sure, there is any number of historical reasons why such an inversion should give viewers' pause. Few of these, however, pertain to the workings of plot. As Bakhtin shows, speech genres are anonymous forms that may be dialogically altered by anyone who knows the proscribed utterances and can reimagine them. Propp, for his part, insists that the elements, functions, and characters in wondertales and myth are open to substitution and inversion. A stepdaughter, for instance, may be persecuted by a father, mother, visitor, witch, or other magical figure. Her persecution is a constant; the plot's structure stays

the same despite differing villains. By extension, a young man or, through inversion, a young woman might go in search of a lover, friend, magical potion, or lost relative. Here the functions of departure and absentation endure and are more or less gendered as the sought-for person or sought-for object changes. Like characters in general, women characters resist their object-status and can do so because plot, too, is structurally — if not practically — anonymous. Plots vary, therefore, as a result of how the available, because mythological, functions are used. Narrative is thus more at odds with sociality than studies of ideology often attest.

A Marriage Deferred

With Pollux dead, *Helen of Troy* expands the role of its heroine, inside and outside of domestic life. As Menelaus, in voice-over, explains, "The great kings of the Aegean were drawn to Sparta like moths to the flame" (*Helen*). He, Odysseus, Achilles, Agamemnon, and others arrive to assess the elderly king's daughter and kingdom. The eligible among them vie for Helen. Tyndareus recognizes their ambitions and stands her before them, even as his son's funeral bier burns. The scene shows Helen, in a gauzy fabric that reveals her breasts, to the gazing men. "By your actions," he rages at her in a tightly framed two-shot, "you have left me without love or hope and Sparta without its future king" (*Helen*). Here, "actions" is a telling metaphor for gender insubordination as well as a synecdoche for plot — since Aristotle's *Poetics* the structural spine of story. The camera then cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot of men's shields and the bier, occupying the mid-ground, and Helen and Tyndareus, in the background. Spatially, war and parental obligations clash. "It should have been you who died," Tyndareus exclaims, pulling her roughly. Walking towards the kings and princes, he rages, "Is there any among you who will take this cursed woman? Is there any among you who wishes their home devastated, his country brought to ruin, his heart broken beyond repair? I leave her to you" (*Helen*). His interdiction is a curse; the men then violate it by casting lots for her. The twin functions of interdiction and its violation signal that they do so at considerable risk.

As princess, Helen is the sought-for person in Propp's taxonomy and is therefore positioned in/as feminine plot-space. Menelaus shows as much by watching her intently, spurning the ritual occasion. Agamemnon, too, is visibly captivated; Achilles, who says he "fears nothing," is silent before her and thus showcases a double denial. As Helen stands within touching distance of Pollux's body, Harrison contrasts her grief with the men's erotic distraction. Breathing in smoke, charcoal, and burning flesh, she mourns, silenced and abandoned. Observant because he has married well, Odysseus cautions that "Tyndareus is right" about the danger she poses, adding, "The path to her bed is strewn with ash and death" (*Helen*). The other men grasp only that they could easily fight

over her and vow to join forces, rather than compete for a woman, however beautiful. *Helen of Troy* thus elevates its central character to womanhood by killing the two men, and therefore the two sympathetic authority figures, who know her best. Shortly thereafter, Tyndareus and Atreus die, empowering Menelaus, who wins Helen and Sparta, and Agamemnon, who becomes king of Mycenae.

The brothers are brutes, ambitious and unfeeling. Menelaus is the false hero in Propp's list of characters; his brother, the patient villain. They compel Helen to debase herself, naked, before the kings and princes. Shown during the voice-over that begins the film, the full scene foreshadows what she can expect of marriage. In an unexpected reversal, Helen sees Paris, for the first time in person, as she is displayed. He recognizes rather than objectifies her, in defiance of the political economy of the gaze (see, e.g., Mulvey; Doan). Now the film makes two crucial turns in its (proto)feminist reimagining of the *Iliad*'s back story. It sets them up by showing Helen trying to kill herself, as her mother purportedly did, only to be saved by Paris. He is as endangered as she, since Menelaus and Agamemnon plan to kill him once they learn enough about Troy to make diplomacy unnecessary. The first turn then occurs as Helen saves Paris from assassination, which shows her ability to wield weapons and foil plots even in a culture that powerfully constrains a woman's mobility. The larger point here is that her reversal is undertaken for love, and against authority, as a way to change the structure of the artistic world she will inhabit.

Earlier, we met a young Helen who resists being someone's war prize. To Theseus, she explains, hyperbolically, "You must have me confused with my sister. I'm not the daughter of Tyndareus who does what anyone says" (*Helen*). Now we meet a woman whose actions extend from defying fathers to resisting kings whose power extends over life and death. Her decisiveness is modulated by foresight and thought — in a phrase, by the capacity to plot; her disobedience is put in the service of a will that undercuts sociality. The gods do not compel this Helen to love and rescue Paris. She decides to do so, her mind unclouded by romance or lust and cognizant of love's potential consequences. Together, the two flee on horseback so that Paris and his men may sail for Troy. At the dock, Helen stays behind, justifying her choice until, in a second instance of reciprocal yearning, she turns, runs along the harbor's edge, and leaps— the camera tracking her all the while — into the water. Characteristically, she chooses mobility, spatial and erotic, rather than the social immobility that the Greeks and marriage require. On the masculine domain of a ship, she transgresses the gendered divides of myth and narrative together.

The energy of the plot cannot continue to be hers, since *Helen of Troy*, in its second and final segment, shades off into a sword and sandal hybrid that seeks to expand its audience. We see as much as Agamemnon prepares his men for invasion, a time-honored set piece. Aggrieved, Menelaus now asks for his brother's help in avenging Helen's flight. He receives it with a caveat: Agamemnon will have the war prizes, once Troy falls, and Menelaus receive no tribute. Only then is the Greek federation recalled. Achilles soon comes to the forefront of the plot, although without his Homeric hatred of Agamemnon. He is eager to fight, not sulk over a woman from a feminized plot-space, and thus he epitomizes the warrior caste's pursuit of imperishable glory. His armor is cross-hatched, not encompassing, the better to show off his body; and his head is shaven, extending what Maggie Günsberg calls the "body-as-spectacle" focalizing of peplum (104). *Helen of Troy* emphasizes his masculine forcefulness by eliding his shield, one of the most powerful instances of ecphrasis in history (18.461–652) and, following Rene Girard, a mimetic object (146). It comes to Achilles from Hephaestus at the behest — unsurprisingly — of Thetis. Like Helen and her weaving, the shield honors the determinate tensions joining war and homeland, glory and domesticity, and thus is too feminine for a film hero. In keeping with the peplum's model of masculinity, Achilles is also less fleet of foot than muscle-bound. Readying for war, other men like him spar with Agamemnon, their burnished muscles set off by thick loincloths.

Agamemnon must transport the armies he has mustered to Troy in the face of calm seas. Called to account for them, Calchas explains that Artemis will provide a following wind in exchange for his daughter's life. Agamemnon's lone humanizing tendency, to this point, has been his fatherly devotion, but he appeases the goddess and has Iphigenia — who resembles Helen and is a sign of innate domesticity — brought through a horrible gauntlet of armored warriors. Acting as a father and king, he kills his daughter and thereby what remains of his femininity as well. In response, the film reverts to its structure of parallel editing; only now, it sets the love of Paris and Helen, near Troy, against the preparations for war in Mycenae. Domesticity recedes even further in importance as it conflicts with imperial ambitions. Peace still abides, but as the federation's ships appear on the horizon, the plot turns in Homer's direction. Helen, so central to the mini-series, moves towards its margins but not, as her *Iliad* counterpart did, in silence and shame.

At stake is the gender-divide signaled by the space of Troy itself. Prompted by Calchas' insight, the Greek federation travels far to penetrate its walls. The warriors who will do so embody a primal masculinity, unhampered by women or children. The minimal domesticity they allow in their camps serves only the purposes of war. Troy, by contrast, is a center of trade and wealth. Its well-dressed citizens speak of beauty, compassion, kindness, and mercy which, by comparison to what audiences see at the Greek beachhead, are feminine virtues. Paris pointedly contrasts the Greek treatment of women with that of the Trojans to rouse the assembly. A woman, Cassandra, is Troy's seer and so speaks of returning Helen to her husband, not pursuing war. Indeed, the plot of the final installment leaps forward to year ten of the conflict, aided by her very public vision. The structural equivalent of the mini-series' opening sequence, it is marked by an adroitly cross-hatched set of images. As Cassandra narrates over

the flash-forward, her words and the images often align. The sequence becomes a visual analogue of a woven fabric — of masculine femininity — and thereby recalls Helen and Penelope's work at the loom. Addressing the Trojans and film audiences simultaneously, Cassandra predicts that

> for ten years the Greeks will pillage our country and attack our gates. For ten years they will raid the southern shores, enslave our neighbors, fatten themselves on their butchered cattle, and become rich with spoils. And our friends will flee here and flee here [and] flee here until these walls are packed with broken people and our city is filled with sorrow, our streets flooded with tears, until there will not be one of us with food to eat, water to drink, or air to breathe [*Helen*].

Priam interrupts, demanding that Troy speak with "one voice," which is his, but Cassandra will not be silenced (*Helen*). A story of the future-as-fated cannot be Troy's, and so her competing vision is repressed when she, now an obstacle to plot, is jailed, a space which qualifies as the most potent affront to agency short of death. Her freedom is doubly gone because its enabling conditions — narration and mobility — are to be compromised for years.

Helen of Troy cuts to the Greek camp, where Agamemnon decides, paradoxically, that it is time to retreat and attack. If the Greeks, to this point, have fought more with force than tactics, their king now intends to do the reverse. How they might do that goes unsaid as the film crosscuts to Mycenae, where swans are shown from a slightly high angle. They are the sign of Leda and Zeus and therefore of Helen. The camera tilts up and tracks to the left, showing a member of the royal household walking, before emphasizing a woman's right hand and arm. The camera tilts again to reveal Clytemnesta, standing alone; to the unidentified man, she says, "When the outcome of Troy is determined, I wish to know it" (*Helen*). The moving camera, a sign of emphasis, is itself a mark of mobility. Harrison then cuts back to Troy, as if to imply that Clytemnestra's presence is an afterthought.

It is a measure of Harrison and Kern's resolve that Helen's own mobility is not sacrificed to the exigencies of the sword and sandal film. Because the mini-series subsists on the principle of imaginative substitution, it can refine the Homeric tradition so that Helen is an active presence in its traditionally masculine plot. It does so, most easily, by using gaps in Homer's timeline to embellish her character and that of other women. Given how minor a diegetic role Helen plays in the two epics, it is easy to insert a new love scene, for instance, after a day's battle or as part of her back story. Crucially, the mini-series also changes the characters who once acted in myth or Homer's epic while retaining their actions and plot functions. For example, when Menelaus and Paris fight over Helen in the *Iliad*, their battle occurs early in the epic, if late in the war. The idea for doing so is Paris.' In the mini-series, by contrast, the idea is Agamemnon's. From a plot perspective, the person who proposes the function of a difficult task and thereby compels the hero and villain to struggle — another such function — is of little importance. What matters is that a

fight occurs and is represented. The outcome of their battle in the *Iliad* looks to be tragic for Paris, as Menelaus drags him back to the Greek lines by his helmet. However, Aphrodite snaps the strap holding the headgear, covers Paris "in mist, and loft[s] him into / The incensed air of his vaulted bedroom," where he will entice Helen into having sex (3.408–09). The broken strap returns, as does the covering mist, in *Helen of Troy*, but Agamemnon's poisoning of Paris — a plot invention — now dominates the sequence. The function of trickery, rather than Paris' receipt of a magical agent, is its focus. Paris escapes the combat because he and Menelaus recognize that his branding — another such function — is significant only because the blade that cut him was poisoned dishonorably. Hector, not Aphrodite, pulls Paris to safety. Thus is Agamemnon exposed as the character-villain, not the peplum hero.

The two episodes also end differently. In the *Iliad*, Helen upbraids Paris, wishing for his death at the hands of "a real hero"; her allegiance is clearly to Menelaus. The filmic Helen supports her beloved, cheering his unanticipated survival (3.457). Matters then worsen for Troy when Hector steps in, with Paris incapacitated, and challenges Agamemnon, in effect substituting himself for his brother. Achilles, seeking glory, then takes up the challenge for Agamemnon, becoming a substitution for a substitution. Helen taunts Achilles from Troy's western wall, telling Hector, "He hungers only for glory; if you do not feed him, he will starve" — strong words coming from the catalyst of a ten-year war (*Helen*). Priam and Hecuba also tell Hector not to fight, but he dies at spear point before the assembled armies. In the *Iliad*, by contrast, Hector and Achilles meet in book twenty-two, and only after Hector runs from his foe three times around the city. Athena comes from Olympus and interrupts his flight, assuming the form of Deiphobus, Hector's favorite brother. S/he persuades Hector to stand his ground, promising to fight with him. Again, Priam and Hecuba plead with Hector to come into the city and avoid Achilles, but he refuses. Suddenly realizing that he is alone, Hector proposes to Achilles that they agree to return the loser's body for a ritual burial rather than treat it as spoils. Achilles rejects the offer, too angry at Hector for killing Patroclus, who was wearing his armor at the time. Dressed as Achilles, Hector suffers a fatal wound to his throat that enables him to narrate pathetically. Beyond the death of Hector, then, Homer directs our attention to the multiple substitutions — Breseis for Chryseis, Patroclus for Achilles, Athena for Deiphobus — informing his story. *Helen of Troy* borrows Homer's logic so that, at the level of plot, it may expand the role of Helen in particular and women more generally. Such women borrow actions from the domain of masculinity and make them their own. These are risky but exhilarating moves in an epic-peplum hybrid.

The most important plot substitution, from Helen's perspective, occurs after Hector dies but before the Trojan horse arrives in *Helen of Troy*. Helen grieves for him by mobilizing decisively. First, she goes to Cassandra, who is still in jail. "I will do anything to save him," she says of Paris, "anything. Tell

me what to do" (*Helen*). Emboldened by Cassandra's ambiguous response, she leaves under cover of night for the Greek camp — a foolhardy action — to offer herself to Agamemnon and so end the war. In the process, Helen does what the Greeks cannot: breach the walls of Troy, changing both her plot-space and plot-function. Once outside the walls, she watches as Achilles drags Hector's body with his chariot; he is motivated to do so not out of rage over Briseis and Patroclus, as in the *Iliad*, but as part of a brutal strategy to debase the Trojans and inspire the Greeks. Helen then kneels before Agamemnon and offers him "a trade: the daughter of Zeus for the body of Hector." "You think that's enough?" he asks, unmoved. "You think my daughter's death was for nothing?" (*Helen*). In effect, she offers her sexual and narrative slavery, re-engendering herself as non-man and object in the deal. He responds that her offer and body and uncharacteristic mobility are "nothing." "There is no trade," Agamemnon adds. "Not you, not Troy, not even my own life will balance the scales" after Iphigenia's death (*Helen*).

The *Iliad* offers a parallel scene but with quite different characters. The person who absents himself from Troy and attempts to redress Hector's abduction is Priam. He does so after Iris, mediating for him and his interests on Mount Olympus, arrives to give him the function of a difficult task. He departs for the Greek camp where, initially, his arrival goes unseen and his identity unrecognized. Prostrating himself before Achilles, not Agamemnon, Priam speaks of his advanced age and asks his enemy to recall his own elderly father. The two men, in a recognition scene informed by tragic pathos, then weep together alone. The ransom delivered, Achilles releases Hector's body to Priam, who returns to Troy with it, his lack redressed, his difficult task resolved. The *Iliad* ends on that profound, and temporary, reconciliation.

By transposing the core plot functions of the Priam/Achilles encounter to Helen's meeting with Agamemnon, *Helen of Troy* increases one woman's role in a peplum-hybrid. In the process, however, it risks feminizing a plot-space that is heroic and separate and therefore consummately masculine. The Greek camp is not feminized as such, since Agamemnon refuses Helen's offer, becomes distracted, and thereby enables her escape. Tellingly, their encounter *qua* substitution gives the audience a view of how the logic that undergirds plot works and can enable new substitutions. One soon occurs as Clytemnestra, having learned of the fall of Troy, travels there, like Helen before her. Asserting her own mobility at sea — the domain of sailors, not of a woman alone — she arrives as the war prizes are being sorted. Harrison tracks her progress in Priam's palace by moving from right to left and filming her through cross-hatched window coverings that are analogues to her clothing. Violating the 180-degree rule, he then shows Clytemnestra surprising her husband in his bath with two women who, in their nakedness before authority, recall Homer's Chryseis and Briseis. She pauses to greet a naked Helen and, disturbed, sees her sister's bruises and trauma, both of which occurred during her rape by Agamemnon. Doubly

emboldened by the loss of Iphigenia and the signs of Agamemnon's violence, *Helen of Troy*'s obedient second sister assumes the defiance of Helen and casts a woven shawl over her husband. Immobilized by her net-like weaving, a sign of scheming traditionally associated with the word *metis*, he is helpless as she looms over him, pulls a knife from her clothing and, screaming, stabs him repeatedly. Blood disperses through the pool, and Agamemnon floats, face-down, on his stomach. Thus, he is violated both by a woman's violence and usurption of plot.

Clytemnestra has killed the king whom *Helen of Troy* called "the mightiest of the Greeks," a task that no Trojan warrior could accomplish. As re-imagined by Kern and Harrison, her action offers a satisfying — and feminine-induced — climax to a brutal war story. Few parts of narrative are less gendered, of course, than the climax, since it is often where protagonist and antagonist face off, fight in hand-to-hand combat, and one or the other dies. The marriage-function, associated primarily with women and marriage plots, possesses a later temporality, since it typically comprises the denouement. It follows that Kern and Harrison have done something else remarkable by repurposing the oft-told tale of Agamemnon's death in the *Odyssey*. In Homer, it occurs because Clytemnestra, having committed adultery with Aegisthus, sees to her husband's murder. Thus does Agamemnon's *nostoi*-story end with sexual betrayal. Homer uses Clytemnestra's horrid example at strategic points to elevate Penelope and to counterpoint women and warriors. One would think that removing Clytemnestra's negative example would compromise Penelope. And yet, the reverse occurs when readers of Homer see *Helen of Troy* in light of the *Odyssey*. Penelope, shining among women, can now be seen as separate from Clytemnestra, as subjectively distinct rather than as a representative of a shared sex-class. Penelope's ecphrasis-plot subsequently grows in authority, since her resolute thinking stands on its own without another woman's illustrative contrast. She will be judged and judge — a fate that her testing of Odysseus underscores. Such an ancillary effect speaks to the power of women's lives and signifying practices, even in epics devoted to war and homecoming.

An Enduring Logic of Return and Plot Creation

Helen of Troy ends as the legend which enables its story began: with a journey. Bereft, Helen pauses to mourn the death of Paris. Menelaus interrupts her, asking, "What will you do?" His focus on "will" ascribes agency to Helen — a princess without a brother or king, a once sought-for person who is less a sought-for object than a dishonored war prize. His utterance also recognizes her power to decide. She answers, questioningly, "I will follow," thereby echoing him. "I accept," Menelaus says quietly, and they walk single-file into the negative space of the future (*Helen*). Their progress dissolves into the mini-series' closing

image. It is of Troy, which was discovered by Heinrich Schliemann in the nineteenth century. In this way, the miniseries ends badly for its central figure but not as badly as it might have, as the virtual erasure of Helen from *Troy* (2004), the Brad Pitt-led sword and sandal film, illustrates. The strategies of containment that arose in response to Helen's transgressions with Paris succeed in *Helen of Troy* and, so great are the resulting losses, they cannot but fail. As the double provocation of Helen in Homer's epics and in epic filmmaking shows, mobility is a master trope for narrative and also a prize that may temporally elude the sexual division of labor.

After her death, Helen was worshiped by Greek women, young and old, and I cannot help but think that her mobility, every bit as much as her beauty, was its basis. Homer's warrior-heroes, Achilles' rage, Odysseus *nostoi*-story, sword and sandal spectaculars—all subtend women's stories and the masculine-feminine actions represented in them incompletely. Different plots, however repressed, linger like the archeological fragments of Troy, awaiting excavation and reuse. Patiently, they signal that other stories endure in the very logic of narrative, in myth as it is passed to us orally, since it is through the dialogical functions of substitution, extension, and inversion that the next stories—perhaps even the next women's stories—are to be sung and heard.

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Of Muscles and Men

Essays on the Sword and Sandal Film

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McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Of muscles and men : essays on the sword and sandal film / edited by Michael G. Cornelius.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7864-6162-2
softcover : 50# alkaline paper ♾

1. Epic films—History and criticism. 2. Masculinity in motion pictures. 3. Men in motion pictures. I. Cornelius, Michael G.
PN1995.9.E79O42 2011
791.43'652—dc23 2011030754

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On the cover: Reg Park in the title role of *Hercules in the Haunted World*, 1961; details from poster art of the films (top) *Atlas*, 1961 and (bottom) *Samson and the Seven Miracles of the World*, 1961

Front cover design by Mark Berry (www.hot-cherry.co.uk)

Manufactured in the United States of America

McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
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