

## Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation

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## Helen, Daughter of Zeus

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter introduces the story of Helen of Troy in Greek mythology: her conception by Zeus, her abduction by Theseus, the oath of the suitors, her marriage to Menelaus, the Judgment of Paris, her abduction by Paris, the Trojan War, and her retrieval by Menelaus, who raised his sword to kill her but dropped it at the sight of her beauty. This narrative is elaborated with attention to the particular concerns of this book, especially gender issues, the question of Helen's agency in her elopement, and the Greek values underlying the Trojan War (notably guest-friendship). The chapter goes on to describe Helen's role as a divinity in hero cult, where she was worshiped especially as an iconic figure of the bride. As a cult heroine, she enjoys a posthumous relationship with Achilles, who is the most beautiful and mighty of the Greeks, and as such Helen's closest male equivalent. The chapter ends with a discussion of Helen's divine, timeless beauty and the resources for representing it in art and literature.

*Keywords:* Achilles, beauty, Helen of Troy, hero cult, mythology, Trojan War

A pretty woman makes her husband look small,  
And very often causes his downfall.  
As soon as he marries her then she starts  
To do the things that will break his heart.  
But if you make an ugly woman your wife,  
You'll be happy for the rest of your life.  
—Jimmy Soul

When Zeus wanted to reduce the human population, which had grown bloated and impious, a character called Momos (“blame”) advised him to achieve this not by thunderbolts and flooding, but by “the birth of a beautiful daughter” and by marrying the sea nymph Thetis to a mortal man, “from which two causes, war arose between Greeks and non-Greeks” (*Cypr.* fr. 1). The daughter was, of course, Helen. As for Thetis’s marriage to the mortal Peleus, that resulted in the birth of Achilles, the greatest hero of the Trojan War. Achilles and Helen are often coupled like this as complementary causes of the war. She is its principal reason, he the principal agent of the slaughter, and the Trojan battlefield the arena that proves the supremacy of both. As a pair, they represent the gendered body at its most glorious: seductive female beauty and destructive male strength. The manifestation of supreme masculinity is predicated on the manifestation of supreme femininity, each exercising its intrinsic mode of power: her beauty is as deadly as his physical strength, her body as deadly as his body. Both therefore embody the combined splendor and horror of warfare itself, symbolized in the raging fire that will engulf Troy—the fire of Achilles’ strength and Helen’s beauty.

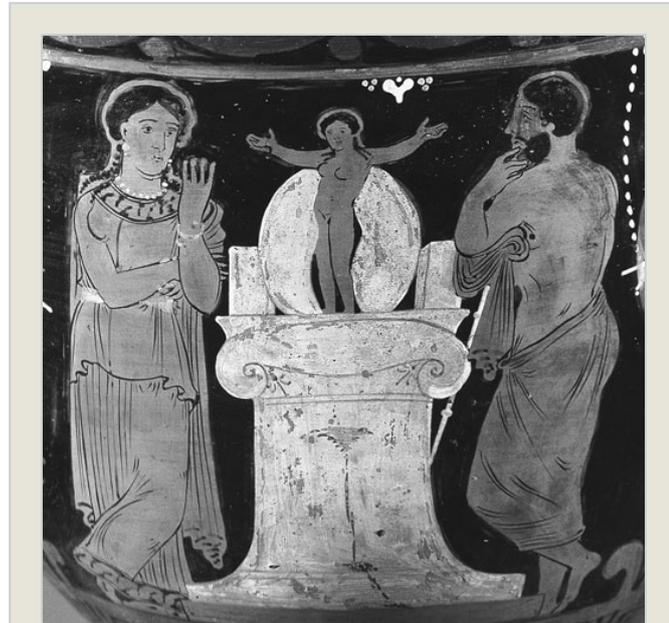
Momos’s advice was reported in a lost epic known as the *Cypria*. Its purpose is apparently to implicate mortals in their own destruction as a punishment for impiety. Like Pandora, then, Helen is a purposeful product of a vengeful Zeus (albeit through paternity rather than craftsmanship). As with Pandora, too, the erotic lure of her beauty is intrinsic to the god’s hostile purpose. What makes the Trojan War story distinctive, despite its countless permutations over time, is the fact that it is **(p.28)** always caused, somehow, by Helen as the embodiment of female beauty. Regardless of her presence or absence at Troy, her personal enthusiasm or reluctance, some kind of a Helen is always involved, and her beauty is always pivotal. She is conceptually essential to the Trojan War, and thus to ancient Greek constructions of Greek masculine identity, which is, in consequence, founded on the containment of the threat of female beauty.

In the *Cypria*, Helen’s function as an instrument of vengeance is reflected in the identity of her mother, Nemesis (“retribution”). Zeus pursued Nemesis in the form of a goose. She tried to escape by changing into a series of wild animals, but Zeus caught her and mated with her, both of them in goose form. As a result of their union, Nemesis laid an egg from which Helen hatched (see figure 2.1). According to a more obscure tradition Helen’s mother was a sea nymph, one of the daughters of Ocean (*Hes.* fr. 24). This underlines her eroticism, since water has **(p.29)** sexual connotations, and aligns her with Aphrodite—her patron goddess—who was born from the sea. In the story that became canonical, however, Zeus took the form of a swan to have sex with a mortal woman named Leda, and it was she who laid Helen’s egg. (Some sources reconcile this with the Nemesis story by having Nemesis lay the egg and Leda find and adopt it.) This makes Helen unique among heroines, since Zeus has no other female offspring via mortal women. Leda’s husband Tyndareus is, however, her adoptive father,

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and often simply referred to as her father. Leda and Tyndareus reside at Sparta, which is a fitting home for Helen's birth. Despite its dour reputation, this city was famous in ancient times for its beautiful women—a fame that was matched, unsurprisingly, by a suspicion among Sparta's enemies that their men could not control them. Though Helen was a Spartan, most texts from the classical period present her from an Athenian perspective, often reflecting negative stereotypes about Spartans of both sexes.

As a daughter of Zeus, Helen is half sister to many major divinities—including Aphrodite and the Muses—and some important mortals. She has a half-twin sister, Clytemnestra, whose mother is also Leda but whose father is the mortal Tyndareus. Clytemnestra was married to Agamemnon, son of Atreus, whose home is variously located at Mycenae, Sparta, or Argos, but who retains Spartan associations. She became notorious for taking a lover, Aegisthus, while her husband was away at Troy, and murdering Agamemnon upon his return. The sisters also have a pair of brothers, Castor and Pollux, who were likewise both born from Leda but had different fathers (Pollux was a son of Zeus and Castor of Tyndareus). Despite this divergent paternity, the boys are known as the Dioscuri, or “sons of Zeus”; in contrast to their destructive sisters, they became emblems of aristocratic brotherhood and male loyalty. Helen is also a half sister to Heracles, the mightiest of Zeus's sons by a mortal woman. Unlike Clytemnestra and the Dioscuri, however, he plays no direct part in her story.



*Figure 2.1* Helen emerging from the egg. Leda and Tyndareus stand watching on either side. Campanian red-figure bell krater, c. 340 BCE. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale 147950. Scala/ Art Resource, NY.

The daughter of Zeus was destined to be repeatedly abducted and/or married (not always clearly distinguishable concepts in myth, as we have seen). These multiple marriages provide the requisite evidence of her beauty's supremacy. In view of the close causal link between beauty and *erōs*, a woman who did *not* arouse such passions could scarcely qualify as the most beautiful in the world. At the same time, the number—and inadequacy—of Helen's various male partners suggests that the forces of female beauty and desire are in their essence

uncontrollable. The byways of mythology assign her many mates, but a handful stand out. The first is the Athenian hero Theseus, who abducted the young Helen with the help of his friend Pirithous while she was dancing in a group of adolescent girls (a frequent context for such occurrences) (see figure 2.2). This incident follows the standard pattern for mythic abductions, which typically lead to marriage or at least sex (two more concepts that are not always distinguishable). In some accounts, however, Theseus abducts her prior to puberty, and she remains a virgin. Either way, the Dioscuri respond by invading Attica to rescue their sister; after pillaging Athens they bring her safely home.

**(p.30)**

When Helen reached marriageable age, noble suitors came to woo her from all over Greece. Our earliest account of their courtship comes from the *Catalogue of Women*, an epic poem of uncertain authorship (though it is attributed to Hesiod), which recounts the pairings of numerous mythic heroines with various gods and heroes. The *Catalogue* tells us that Helen's suitors wanted to marry her sight unseen: all but one of them was drawn by her "renown" (*kleos*)—in other words, by the very idea of such beauty (cf. 199.2–3, 199.9, 204.56–63). This begins Helen's special association with *kleos*, "renown" or "reputation," a

word that is most often used for the glory sought by warriors in battle but which means, fundamentally, "what people say." The *Catalogue* also subtly indicates the emasculating effect of Helen's beauty on her suitors. Typically a man desires to "lead" a woman in marriage "as his wife" (e.g., 43a.20). This pattern is even used for Aphrodite in the *Homeric Hymns*: when the male gods first see her, each of them wants "to lead the goddess home to be his wife" (*HH* 6.16–17). Yet in the *Catalogue* hero after hero desires "to be the husband of lovely-haired Helen," reversing the normal structure of marital desire and control.

In some later accounts Helen is actually allowed to choose her own husband, a rare practice that gives a woman more prestige and power but also makes her responsible for the consequences. One source explains that this unusual arrangement was intended to prevent strife among the suitors and thus curtail



*Figure 2.2* Abduction of Helen by Theseus. She reaches back toward her friends for help, while Pirithous waits on the left with a chariot to whisk them away. Detail of an Attic black-figure hydria, c. 510–500 BCE. London, British Museum B 310; *ABV* 361.12, 355, 695; *BAD* 302007. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

the threat to other men's marriages, specifically Agamemnon's to **(p.31)** Clytemnestra (Hyg. 78). In the *Catalogue*, Odysseus is also a suitor, though canny enough to know he cannot win (198.2–6). He is not yet married to his famous wife Penelope, of course, but his interest in Helen creates a certain tension with his more familiar status as the well-matched and loyal—if not faithful—husband of the *Odyssey*. In more traditional versions Helen's husband was chosen by her male relatives, but Tyndareus tried first to preempt strife by making the suitors swear that they would come to her husband's defense and help him seek revenge if any man should "take her from him by force" (204.78–84). In the view of one hostile source, this oath is evidence of collective mental impairment caused by desire for Helen, which blinded each man with irrational hope (Eur. *IA* 391–94). In any case it only exacerbated the problem, by transforming the conflict from a dispute among individual men into a clash of massed armies.

However the selection was made, the not-so-lucky winner was Menelaus, Agamemnon's younger brother. This might seem like a strange choice of mate for the world's most desirable woman, since Menelaus is a second-ranked hero in more ways than one. He is not only a younger son but a mediocre warrior, presented throughout the tradition as less than supremely heroic at best. In the *Catalogue*, Menelaus does not even woo Helen himself; Agamemnon does so on his behalf (197.4–5). Nevertheless, he is chosen because he provides the most courtship gifts (204.41–42). This explanation is in keeping with the impressive wealth that is a standard feature of Menelaus's legendary persona. It is this that makes him a fitting husband for the supremely precious Helen. Only he can afford her.

This seemingly odd pairing also has a certain mythic logic. Menelaus's erotic susceptibility to Helen—often strongly emphasized—parallels her own erotic weakness. Both, moreover, are a discredit to their gender. As the essence of the unfaithful wife Helen is, obviously, a failed woman, and this in turn emasculates Menelaus by rendering him the quintessential cuckold. Their marriage exemplifies, in consequence, a kind of gender reversal often found in mythological couples. The more one partner diverges from his or her gender stereotype, the more the other partner does so too. Female self-assertion emasculates men, while male weakness unleashes in women a "masculine" autonomy. This is exemplified most conspicuously in Aeschylus's portrait, in his *Agamemnon*, of the "manly" sword-wielding Clytemnestra and her feminized paramour, Aegisthus.

Helen is scarcely "masculine" in any such obvious sense. But Menelaus, like the other suitors, desires "to be Helen's husband" rather than "leading" her as his wife (*Cat.* 204.41–43). The tradition allowing her to choose her own husband develops this emasculating innuendo, assigning Helen a male prerogative that places Menelaus in the position of a bride. Nor did Helen, like most women,

relocate to her husband's household upon marrying him; instead, the couple remained at her home in Sparta, an unusual practice that **(p.32)** places the woman in a much stronger position and is associated with greater female authority. When Helen sails away to Troy with Paris she thus jeopardizes her husband's status at Sparta, which is dependent upon his wife. That departure, in pursuit of her own desire, is itself a usurping of masculine prerogative made possible by Menelaus's failure to exercise proper husbandly control. As we saw in chapter 1, a woman was expected to relocate once and once only, from her father's house to her husband's, where she is supposed to stay put. Helen inverts this arrangement. She stays put at her natal home for her first, official, marriage, and after that is constantly on the move.

Our early sources have little to say about the marriage of Helen and Menelaus. Their wedding is celebrated, however, by a chorus of unmarried girls in a poem by Theocritus composed in the third century BCE. Helen is praised as an ideal bride, not only the most beautiful of her cohort of Spartan girls (all 240 of them), but the best at running, spinning and weaving, singing, and playing the lyre (18.22-25, 32-37). The chorus anticipate that Menelaus will have Helen forever (18.14-15) and pray for the couple's *erōs* and desire to be equal and reciprocal (18.50-55). Their wedding song thus affirms the fantasy that the most beautiful woman is, indeed, the supreme embodiment of female excellence (cf. above, p. 3). Given the well-known identities of the bride and groom, however, Theocritus's poem drips with irony. When the girls praise Helen's running (18.22), then compare her to a chariot horse (18.30), the audience knows full well that this horse will not remain yoked for long. In case there were any doubt on this score, Menelaus is mocked as a sleepy-headed drunk unworthy of such a wife (18.9-11).

Theocritus's chorus also pray that Helen may bear Menelaus a child that resembles herself (18.21), and this prayer, at least, was to be granted. According to the *Odyssey*, the marriage resulted in a single child, a girl named Hermione, with "the beauty of golden Aphrodite" (4.12-14). There is something a little strange, however, about the chorus's prayer. All children should resemble their parents, of course (cf., e.g., Hes. *WD* 235), but since there is no doubt about a woman's identity as mother, the crucial point, for a husband, is that his wife's offspring should resemble *him*. It seems strange too, at a wedding, to pray in effect for a daughter, as opposed to a son and heir. The prayer thus draws attention to Helen's lack of fecundity. In some other more obscure tales she does bear additional offspring, including sons to both Menelaus and Paris; but Hermione as her only child dominates the tradition. According to this canonical account, Helen puts an end to her husband's legitimate line, denying him a vital form of patriarchal self-perpetuation. A further prayer by Theocritus's chorus, for the marriage to result in a fine line of noble descendants (18.52-53), was not to be fulfilled.

In normal circumstances such failure to bear a son would jeopardize a Greek wife's position, since it denies her a woman's primary avenue to status within her husband's household. Since she did not relocate upon marriage, however, Helen needs no sons to establish her status at Sparta. Moreover, the absence **(p. 33)** of a son helps her maintain her independence. When a son grows up, he becomes another source of male authority over his mother (cf. *Od.* 21.350–53). The production of a beautiful daughter, by contrast, perpetuates Helen herself in a way that hints at the specter of an independent “race” of females (cf. above, p. 15). Not surprisingly, Hermione was to have a troubled future. Her marriage, like her mother's, would be highly problematic, with the bride an object of violent dispute between two suitors. To make matters worse she is also, in most accounts, unable to bear children.

Meanwhile, on a hillside near Troy, Paris was busy judging the relative beauty of three great goddesses. Zeus's reasons for assigning him this exalted role are rarely addressed, but the strong association between similar things in Greek thinking suggests that his primary qualifications were his own beauty and the personality that went with it. As many myths attest, Trojan men had an extraordinary erotic appeal for both male and female admirers, generally with negative consequences for themselves and others.<sup>1</sup> Paris is no exception. His beauty is, however, not that of a mighty warrior like Achilles, which is an effect of perfected masculinity, a proper expression of magnificent physical power. It is, rather, a “feminine” allure of the kind associated with fine clothing and luxurious accessories. In keeping with the attraction of like to like, this feminizing type of beauty is expected to make a man attractive to women. It is also closely linked with heterosexual excess and transgressive desire on the part of the man. Paris is the archetype of this feminized variety of masculine beauty: he is the masculine “beautiful evil.” The devastation he will bring his people is foreshadowed when his mother, pregnant with Paris, dreams she will bear a firebrand that will burn Troy to the ground. All this makes him a fitting judge for the fateful contest.

In the *Cypria*, Aphrodite prepares for the occasion by enhancing her beauty with perfume, clothing, and flowers, assisted by the Graces and Seasons (fr. 4). The erotic impact of her appearance may be gauged by her effect on Anchises in the *Homeric Hymn* (above, pp. 8–9). In this case, however, the desire she inspires was to be satisfied by her human surrogate, Helen, whom the goddess offers Paris as a “gift” or bribe. Like her Greek suitors, Paris desires Helen sight unseen. Excited by the prospect of marrying her, he awards Aphrodite the prize then sails off to Sparta, where he proceeds to woo Helen with courtship gifts (102–3). Many vase paintings show him appearing seductively in her boudoir, like figure 2.3, where his beauty is on full display. Menelaus simplifies matters by foolishly taking a trip to Crete, even telling Helen to take good care of their guest; Aphrodite then “leads” Helen to Paris. After consummating the relationship the couple sail away, taking with them a large number of Menelaus's

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possessions (103). Other sources indicate, alternatively, that they first have sex on an island called Cranae, off the coast of the Peloponnese. Either way, the marriage is subsequently ratified at Troy. **(p.34)**

**(p.35)** At first glance, Paris seems like a more suitable partner for Helen than Menelaus did. He is her male equivalent—the favorite of Aphrodite, marked by both erotic beauty and transgressive sexual desire. Their elopement even follows a more conventional wedding pattern than her original marriage. In contrast to Menelaus’s mildly ignominious relocation to Sparta, this time the man conveys the woman from her home to his. But Paris is *too much* like Helen. He is marked

throughout Greek tradition as unmanly in both appearance and behavior. His beauty, as we saw, is of a “feminine” type, his weapon of choice is the bow and arrow—typically deemed less “manly” than face-to-face combat—and he is at best a reluctant warrior. It is no accident that in Homer he is typically referred to as “Helen’s husband,” instead of Helen as “Paris’s wife,” reversing the usual naming pattern for married couples.

Paris’s offense is standardly labeled an “abduction” (*harpagē*). The abduction of *parthenoi*—unmarried adolescent girls—is a frequent occurrence in myth and acceptable, in its way, as a route to marriage (cf. above, pp. 12–13). The abduction of a married woman is, however, a very different matter. Paris’s crime is a heinous one, exacerbated still further by the fact that he was present in her husband’s house as a guest. This makes him the archetypal violator not only of marriage but of the institution of guest-friendship (*xenia*), which mandates the hospitable treatment of strangers and creates mutual obligations between host and guest. Guest-friendship was integral to the web of reciprocities that sustained ancient society, and its norms among the most sacred in Greek culture. It was ranked alongside respect for one’s parents and the gods, and lay under the protection of Zeus himself.

Paris’s deed is also often described as a “theft,” not only of Menelaus’s possessions but of his wife, who may be regarded, with caveats, as a possession of a very special kind. This kind of objectification is also implicit in the oath of the suitors, as recounted in the *Catalogue*, which binds them to take revenge on

*Figure 2.3a and Figure 2.3b* The meeting of Paris and Helen. In figure 2.3a an elegantly clad Helen sits in Aphrodite’s lap with her eyes cast down. The goddess Persuasion stands to their left, holding a box for cosmetics or jewelry. In 2.3b (a continuation of the same scene) Paris is pulled forward by the winged figure of Desire (Himeros). Attic red-figure amphora, 450–425 BCE. Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen 30036; ARV<sup>2</sup> 1173.1; BAD 215552. pbk, Berlin/Johannes Laurentius/Art Resource, NY.

any man who “takes” Helen “by force” (204.81–84). The verb translated as “take” is the Greek *helein*, which can also mean “capture” or “destroy,” and is used here, as often, in a way that puns on Helen’s name. In this case the echo underlines her status as an object for the taking. Even though Paris exercises no force against Helen herself, in her husband’s eyes the abduction obviously qualifies as a “taking” in the relevant sense. Deprived against his will of both wife and goods, Menelaus may easily be seen from a masculine perspective as the victim of **(p.36)** another man’s use of “force.” From this perspective, Helen’s own subjectivity and agency are irrelevant.

As we saw in chapter 1, however, the language of *harpagē* does not rule out complicity in the abductee. Though many such victims are, indeed, kidnapped against their will, including Helen herself when she was abducted by Theseus, this time she is not among them. The *Cypria*’s narrative is one of seduction, not kidnapping or rape. When Aphrodite “leads” Helen to Paris, the verb indicates not external coercion but the force of Helen’s own desire, which brings about a catastrophic failure in the essential womanly virtue of *sōphrosunē*, or self-control. This leads to an improper exercise of independent agency on Helen’s part—one that became emblematic of the danger of female movement as such. She seems to just *go*, unimpeded by the physical and ideological constraints that govern women’s lives. Our sources use three verbs in particular, over and over again, to define her transgression: “leaving,” “going,” and “sailing away.” These active verbs make Helen, like Paris, responsible for her own erotic choices. The degree to which that responsibility is weighted varies considerably, as we shall see. Depending on the author and text, it can be minimized to the vanishing point or blown up into criminal enormity. But it is never completely elided.

The same combination of male “taking” and female complicity is reflected in the visual arts, where the abduction is normally portrayed as wedding-like. Often Paris leads Helen by the wrist, as a bridegroom would, and the couple is surrounded by symbols of desire (see figure 2.4 and compare figure 1.4, p. 14). Sometimes Eros even fastens Helen’s sandals for her journey, like those of a bride (compare figure 1.2, p. 9). There is a noticeable contrast with images of her first abduction by Theseus, where she is usually shown as an unwilling victim. In figure 2.2, for example, she is bodily lifted from the ground and reaches back to her friends for help. When Theseus abducts the young Helen he uses force, and the conflict remains local. This is a mere preface to Helen’s real story, however, in which she is complicit in her “abduction” and brings about the greatest war of all time. The logic of myth makes it clear that her own desire is an essential ingredient in the enormity of the destruction caused at Troy.

This is only to be expected, given the Greek tendency to project transgressive desire onto women who inspire it (above, p. 11). In Helen's case, this process appears with exceptional clarity in a famous poem by Sappho, a poet from Lesbos living around 600 BCE. Helen is identified as surpassing all others in beauty, then used to exemplify the power of *erōs* not as an object of desire but as an agent following her own desire for Paris (see further below, pp. 111–16). Similarly, Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, a playful rhetorical piece from fifth-century Athens, begins by extolling the power of Helen's body to arouse men's desires, but goes on to analyze the causes of *her* desire, not theirs (see further below, chapter 8). Both of these utterly different texts exemplify a tendency in (p.37) many of our sources to focus less on Helen's desirability to Paris than on her own susceptibility to desire for him. She is not, in modern terms, promiscuous. She is, rather, a serial monogamist—a faithful wife, if temporarily, to each man in turn. In fact, her own feelings are rarely even mentioned in connection with most of these pairings. But the elopement with Paris becomes her iconic story, a story haunted by the idea that a beautiful woman is one who cannot control her own desires.

The elopement is, of course, all part of a divine plan, initiated by Zeus and carried through with the help of Aphrodite at the Judgment and thereafter. Both Paris and Helen are subjected to divine influence, as illustrated in figure 2.3 (above). In this poignant image Helen sits on Aphrodite's lap while Paris is badgered by the god Desire (Himeros). Both mortals seem reluctant to submit to the gods that egg them on—Helen's eyes are downcast, and Paris appears to hang back. Despite such divine involvement, however, both of them remain responsible for their own actions (cf. above, pp. 6–7). Paris's instrumental function in fulfilling the plans of the gods does not excuse his erotic susceptibility, but actually depends on it. His choice at the Judgment defines his identity: it is (p.38) a choice of what kind of person to be, based on the kind of



Figure 2.4 The abduction of Helen by Paris. Paris leads Helen away by the wrist like a bride. Aphrodite touches her head, and Eros flutters overhead. Behind Aphrodite is the goddess Persuasion. The other side (not shown) portrays the recovery of Helen by Menelaus. Attic red-figure skyphos, c. 490–480 BCE. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 13.186; ARV<sup>2</sup> 458.1, 1654, 481; BAD 204681. Photograph © 2013 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

person that he already is. The same applies to Helen herself. She is, to be sure, the goddess's victim, but Aphrodite's power works through her desires, not against them. When Aphrodite "gives" her to Paris this means, in essence, that if Paris seeks her out and seduces her she will succumb.

Menelaus's first reaction to Helen's departure receives little emphasis in most versions of the story. He went to Troy, accompanied by Odysseus, and tried to talk the Trojans into giving Helen back. After receiving a hostile reception (including, on one account, a murder attempt), he returned to Greece. His older brother, Agamemnon, then proceeded to assemble a vast army of allies with a total of a thousand ships. The fleet gathered at Aulis, a coastal town to the north of Athens, en route to Troy. There they were detained by contrary winds sent by the goddess Artemis (who favored the Trojans). In order to placate her, Agamemnon sacrificed his young daughter Iphigenia. This disturbing incident is mentioned nowhere in Homer, but in many other accounts of the war—especially in tragedy—it compromises the expedition by leaving the Greeks' hands stained with innocent blood.

When they finally reached Troy, the army of the Greeks (also known as the Achaeans) laid siege to the city, beginning ten years of brutal warfare against the Trojans and their many allies. The war was not only unprecedented in scale but marked the beginning of the end of the heroic world (in which gods and mortals mingled socially). Like Pandora opening the jar, Helen, by eloping, inaugurated the decline of the human race. In the classical period, starting with the Persian Wars of the early fifth century BCE, the Trojan War took on another kind of symbolic importance. When lines became drawn more sharply between east and west, or Greeks and non-Greeks, the Trojan War was used increasingly as a legendary justification for this dichotomy. As its object, Helen came to stand for Greece itself, an identity fostered by the similarity of her name to that of Hellas—the Greek word for Greece—and of its people, the Hellenes. Meanwhile the Trojans became viewed as archetypal "barbarians." In Greek, the word *barbaros* is not intrinsically negative, simply meaning "non-Greek-speaker," but it became increasingly pejorative over time. Paris, already a glamorous and less-than-manly figure in epic, became the very essence of the effeminate, luxurious barbarian, deficient in the values that made the Greeks, in their own view, superior to foreigners.

The moral case for the Trojan War rests on the violation of those values, especially the crucial institution of guest-friendship. Yet the war is never *only* about punishing Paris; it is also about reclaiming Helen. These two central motives for the war—revenge (on Paris) and retrieval (of Helen)—are variously emphasized by different authors and can be hard to disentangle from each other. Given the dim view the Greeks took of female adultery, this may seem surprising. Under the circumstances, one might not expect Menelaus to want Helen back at all. Yet her beauty makes her extraordinarily precious, just as **(p.39)** Zeus

intended when he conceived her. It is this that enables Paris's violation of guest-friendship to bear such enormous weight. Despite the heinousness of that violation, excessive revenge is condemned, in general, from Homer onward, and the war against Troy can all too easily seem to fall into that category. It can be justified only if Helen's abduction is treated as a special case. The scale and duration of the war are not mere unfortunate side effects of her beauty. They are, rather, the evidence for its supremacy. Conversely, her exceptional value, as the beautiful daughter of Zeus, makes her worth recovering at any cost.

The suitors' oath shows the high value placed on Helen not just by Menelaus but by the Greeks collectively. Yet the oath is invoked surprisingly rarely to explain their support for him in the Trojan War. They, do, however, have other motives. The Greek warriors are concerned with plunder, status, and above all *kleos*: glory or renown deriving from heroic exploits on the battlefield. Renown is passed down to future generations through story and song—especially in epic poetry—providing great heroes with a form of immortality. A glorious death in battle also immortalizes a man by preserving his youthful beauty from the decay of age. The value of such glory, and its central role in creating heroic identity, are displayed emblematically in the choice of destinies faced by Achilles, the greatest hero of all. In the *Iliad* his divine mother, Thetis, informs her son that he can have a long and undistinguished life if he returns home, or the “imperishable *kleos*” of a youthful death upon the plains of Troy (9.413). Though he vacillates between these options, he ends up embracing death at Troy and with it his heroic identity.

The myth of Helen's origins implicitly justifies the pursuit of these goals by granting her extraordinary value as *casus belli*. Yet many accounts of the war display uneasiness or indignation at the enormous cost in human suffering on both sides. Was Paris's offense really such as to merit this reaction? Or put differently, was Helen really worth it? If this question is a pressing one for the Greeks it is still more urgent for the Trojans, who are risking annihilation and cannot fall back on the claims of justice. Their refusal to return Helen as the war dragged on became something of a puzzle. The only available explanation, besides the value placed on Helen herself, is loyalty to Paris. Yet such loyalty is never invoked directly. Paris is uniformly despised by the Trojans generally and seems little loved even by his relatives. Nor does his death put a stop to the war. When Paris is killed in battle, other men quarrel over who should have Helen next, and she ends up with another son of Priam, named Deiphobus. We hear little about this marriage, which seems to exist primarily to fill the vacuum created by Paris's death. Helen must always have a mate, preferably one who has had to compete for her with other men. But Deiphobus's role underscores the fact that once Helen enters Troy, the Trojans are collectively complicit in retaining her. This can be explained only by the power of her beauty.

**(p.40)** After ten long years the Greeks finally conquered the city by means of the ruse known as the Trojan Horse. They constructed a hollow wooden image of a horse, secretly filled it with armed warriors, and tricked the Trojans into taking it into their city as a sacred object (*agalma*) to be dedicated to the gods (*Od.* 8.510). This trick, often linked with the crafty Odysseus, fittingly replicates the deed that initiated the war. As a beautiful, precious, yet dangerous object welcomed in by foolish men, the horse has a symbolic kinship with Helen—a kinship that also brings out her likeness to Pandora (above, pp. 16–17). Some say that Helen betrayed her adopted city by conspiring with Odysseus to implement the plot. Other later accounts have her signaling to the Greeks with a torch from the city walls, a motif developing a more traditional association between the torches at her wedding to the “firebrand” Paris and the conflagration that burned Troy to the ground.

The sack of the city was brutal. Old men and children were ruthlessly slaughtered and the women enslaved to the victors. Among other atrocities, Priam and Hecuba’s virginal daughter, Polyxena, was sacrificed on Achilles’ tomb. Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, slaughtered Priam himself at an altar and murdered his little grandchild, Hector’s son Astyanax. Ajax son of Oileus dragged Priam’s beautiful, prophetic daughter Cassandra from Athena’s temple where she had taken refuge, forcibly separating her from the statue of the goddess (see figure 1.3 above, p. 13). This incident became a canonical case of brutal and impious rape, in contrast to the equivocal “abduction” that took Helen to Troy.

As for Helen herself, many vase paintings show Menelaus encountering her among the ruins. In some images of this famous incident—which is known as the Recovery of Helen—Menelaus’s sword is raised to kill her (figure 2.5), but in others he has dropped it, overcome by her beauty (figure 2.6). Helen often retreats to the protection of Aphrodite or her statue (as in figure 2.6). In other renditions the scene is wedding-like. Menelaus sometimes grasps Helen’s wrist like a bridegroom, she may hold her hand to her veil in a bridal gesture (as in figure 2.5), and Erotes often flutter overhead (as in figure 2.6; compare figure 1.4 above, p. 14). After all these years, Helen still has the allure of a nubile *parthenos*. The effect on Menelaus and his sword illustrates graphically the emasculating power of her extraordinary beauty. The husband of whom she made such a mockery not only fails to punish her but takes her home again as his wife, ignoring the fact that she should be spurned as damaged goods for her adultery.

The surviving Greeks had numerous adventures on the voyage home. The *Odyssey* recounts the wanderings of Odysseus, who took ten years to return to his faithful wife Penelope, then slaughtered the men who had been preying on his property while courting her in his absence. Agamemnon reached home only to be murdered, along with Cassandra (now his concubine), by Clytemnestra. Menelaus's own ship, with Helen on board, was blown off course and they wandered extensively around the Mediterranean. Their most important (p.41) stop was in Egypt, a place that is linked persistently with Helen. Some authors even claim that she spent the entire war there. She did not elope at all, but was replaced by an indistinguishable double or *eidōlon* fabricated by the gods. It was this that the two armies fought over at Troy, while she herself waited out the war in Egypt. On this account, Menelaus retrieved her when he landed there on his way back to Greece. One way or another, however, they eventually arrived home to renewed domestic stability at Sparta.

Unlike other erotically transgressive women in myth, Helen does not come to a bad end. In fact, she does not come to an end at all. The only surviving account of her death is a peculiar anecdote



*Figure 2.5* Menelaus encounters Helen at the sack of Troy and raises his sword to kill her. She lifts her veil with her hand and returns his gaze. The other side (not shown) portrays a woman mourning a dead warrior. Attic black-figure amphora, sixth C. BCE. Vatican, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco 350; ABV 140.1, 686; BAD 310352. Scala/Art Resource, NY.



*Figure 2.6* Menelaus encounters Helen at the sack of Troy and drops his sword at the sight of her. She flees to the protection of Aphrodite (on the left). A figure of Eros flies between them as they make eye contact. Attic red-figure bell

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mentioned by the second-century **(p.42)** CE travel writer Pausanias. Helen was allegedly sent into exile by Megapenthes (Menelaus's illegitimate son) and

krater, c. 450–440 BCE. Paris, Louvre G 424; ARV<sup>2</sup> 1077.5, 1682; BAD 214486. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

Nicostratus (her own son with Menelaus); she went to the island of Rhodes, where she was killed in revenge by Polyxo, a woman whose husband had died in the Trojan War (3.19.10). Aside from this obscure local tale, we hear no reports of Helen dying. On the contrary, her myths feature a number of close brushes with death that seem to insist on her unkillability. Even the Rhodian story has a variant in which Helen escapes the vengeful Polyxo (Polyaen. *Strat.* 1.13). In another tale, the virginal Helen is chosen by lot to be sacrificed in order to avert a plague, but an eagle (the bird of Zeus) intervenes to rescue her (Plut. *Mor.* 314c). At the sack of Troy Menelaus almost kills her—but doesn't. Euripides teases us with the idea of Helen's death in his *Orestes*, which features a plot to murder her. In contrast to her well-known effect on Menelaus, this time her beauty is markedly inadequate to blunt her attacker's sword (cf. 1286–87). We even hear her voice, offstage, crying out that she is dying (1296–1301). But it turns out that she has simply disappeared (1493–98), "abducted" by Apollo under orders from Zeus (1629–37). Once again she turns out to be indestructible.

**(p.43)** Despite this lack of a defining death story, however, Helen does pass from human life, reappearing as an immortal recipient of hero cult. Cult heroes and heroines were, typically, significant mortals who exercised supernatural powers from beyond the grave. As such they were a species of divinity, albeit with less power and status than the gods proper. If duly honored with gifts and sacrifice they provided powerful protection; if not so placated they could be very dangerous. In historical times most of the prominent figures from epic—such as Achilles, Agamemnon, and Odysseus—were worshipped in this way. Such cults were strongly local, but an individual hero might have shrines in many places, and important figures were often claimed by several localities.

Helen is the most significant of all cult heroines. As such she is unusual in several ways, starting with the strange circumstances of her birth. The egg from which she hatched had cult associations. Depictions of the event often include an altar (see figure 2.1), and Pausanias claims to have seen the shell preserved in a shrine at Sparta (3.16.1). If her birth is peculiar, so is her death, or lack thereof. Hero cult typically centers on a tomb (real or imagined), and death is usually an important feature of a hero's or heroine's myth. (Her Rhodian death story is, in fact, linked with a local cult.) Helen shared with Menelaus a shrine known as the Menelaion, at Therapne near Sparta, which did come to be thought of as their tomb, but we hear nothing about how she arrived there (see figure 2.7). As for Menelaus, not only does he lack a death story but we are explicitly told, in the

*Odyssey*, that he will not die, but will live forever in Elysium because he has Helen as his wife and is thus the son-in-law of Zeus (4.561–69). This grants him special distinction even among cult heroes, most of whom were thought of as residing mysteriously underground near their tombs. Only a privileged few are given a blessed afterlife in a paradise like Elysium or the Isles of the Blessed.

Helen's cults were widespread. Most of them have some connection with her status as a supremely beautiful *parthenos* or bride and her consequent abductions. In the cult at Rhodes, her death story may represent the symbolic "death" of a *parthenos* making the transition to marriage. Another shrine, near Athens, was associated with her abduction by Theseus and retrieval by the Dioscuri. She was also linked with a shrine elsewhere in Attica, dedicated to her mother, Nemesis. This cult may have treated the Trojan War as an antecedent for Greek

retribution (*nemesis*) over non-Greeks in the Persian Wars, in which Athens played a leading role. The shrine was established, however, near the beginning of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, suggesting an Athenian desire to appropriate the Spartan Helen for themselves. Elsewhere, at Corinth and on the island of Chios, there were springs named for Helen, which may have been thought of as beautifying girls who bathed there (the Corinthian spring was known as "Helen's bath"). She was associated with a cult of Achilles in the Black Sea (see below), and both she and Menelaus may even have been worshipped in Egypt.

**(p.44)** Unsurprisingly, Helen's cult is best attested at Sparta. In addition to the shrine where her egg was on display, another was apparently dedicated to a sandal that she lost during her elopement. Her most prominent Spartan shrines represented the two sides of a girl's transition to marriage. At one of them, near the Platanistas ("plane trees"), Helen was worshipped by *parthenoi* in a cult that may be reflected in Theocritus's wedding poem (above, p. 32). Theocritus refers to dances and footraces, which were performed in Helen's honor, and mentions offerings of flower garlands and olive oil at a sacred plane tree. Her other major cult site was the Menelaion at Therapne. Since, as we saw, she shared this shrine with Menelaus, it presumably commemorated the marriage resumed after



*Figure 2.7* The remains of the Menelaion, the shrine of Helen and Menelaus at Therapne near Sparta, looking west toward the Taygetus Mountains. Photograph by Kirk Ormand.

the Trojan War. Even there, however, Helen was associated with beautifying young women, as we shall see (below, pp. 158–60). In cult, she can be simultaneously a desirable but dangerous *parthenos*, provoking transgression in herself and others, and an errant wife brought back under male control.

The fickle Helen might seem like a strange heroine for girls to celebrate at the point of marriage, but cult figures were, in general, far from saints. Heroines, like heroes, were worshipped not for their virtue but for their awe-inspiring nature, which could be manifested in all kinds of ways, including remarkable **(p. 45)** virtue but also shocking crimes. (Medea and Clytemnestra, for example, were both cult figures.) Heroines' marriages, in particular, are typically *not* exemplary, but set them apart in one way or another from the norm for mortal women. Both heroes and heroines were, to be sure, regarded as models for human behavior, but such imitation was limited to positive qualities. The cult of Helen does not endorse her adultery. It does, however, acknowledge the bride's beauty and also, more obliquely, her desire.

Helen is an emblematic figure of the bride in art and texts as well as cult. In poetry brides are likened to Helen for their beauty, and in art her elopement with Paris is presented as a wedding scene (above, p. 36). This "wedding" far overshadows her legitimate marriage to Menelaus in our sources. The desire that drives Helen's infidelity is thus vital to her image as a bride. She is complemented, to be sure, by other legendary models for young women, such as Achilles' mother, Thetis, who was famous for rejecting sex and marriage (below, pp. 99–100). Yet Helen remains the figure of the bride par excellence, since it is she above all who embodies the anxiety surrounding female sexuality that renders marriage inherently unstable. Like Pandora, she incarnates the tension that lies at the heart of women's role as an object of male desire who yet remains an agent with desires of her own. The ambivalence attending her complicity in her own abduction echoes the problem of identifying the subjectivity of the bride, and more generally women's finely calibrated position between coercion and consent in marriage.

Helen represents, in addition, the liminality of the bride, poised between the roles of *parthenos* and wife. Her beauty makes her the emblematic virgin ripe for marriage; yet she maintains this status, paradoxically, through repeated remarriage (or reabduction); this resituates her over and over again as the desirable bride while simultaneously rendering her the promiscuous woman par excellence. Like Pandora, or Aphrodite herself—who can play the *parthenos* when it suits her—she transcends the conceptual division between *parthenos* and mature woman so as to embody both the seductive beauty of the one and the overactive sexuality of the other. She represents woman simultaneously at her most desirable and most destructive.

If Helen is an iconic bride, however, then any bride may be a Helen. With each mythic marriage she reenacts the danger to a man of incorporating such a “beautiful evil” into his household. The Trojan War narrative suggests that this threat can ultimately be contained, albeit at enormous cost, by restoring the errant wife to her rightful husband’s control. Yet cult casts some doubt on this clear-cut narrative. Archaeological and literary evidence alike suggest that in the afterlife Menelaus continued to play second fiddle to his wife. In the *Odyssey* he obtains the privilege of immortality in Elysium only because of Helen, not for any special qualities of his own. Menelaus was, in general, a rather insignificant cult hero. At joint shrines like the Menelaion the female partner normally has a subordinate role (receiving, for example, less significant **(p.46)** offerings). At the Menelaion, however, despite its name, Helen was probably the more important figure of the two. Herodotus mentions, for example, that Helen had a cult statue (*agalma*) at Therapne—a rarity for heroes, let alone heroines—but says nothing at all about Menelaus (6.61.3).

Helen’s cults link her more closely with her brothers than with her husband. In Euripides’ drama *Orestes*, the immortal Helen is to sit at her brothers’ side and share their prerogatives, but nothing is said about immortality for Menelaus (1635–37, 1660–63). Her supernatural activities likewise associate her with the Dioscuri. She sometimes protects sailors, appearing along with them in the form of Saint Elmo’s fire, a flickering luminescence on the rigging of ships known in many places as “Helen’s fire.”<sup>2</sup> She even appeared at her brothers’ side to protect Sparta during a battle (Paus. 4.16.9)—an exceptionally martial role for a heroine. In other stories she acts quite independently. Like Aphrodite she can bestow the gift of beauty (below, p. 159), and in one well-known incident she blinds a poet who displeases her (below, p. 117). None of these stories mentions Menelaus. The immortal Helen seems to gad about quite independently of her husband, intervening in the human world in unusually diverse ways. Cult suggests, then, that her redomestication through the Trojan War may not have been entirely successful.

The most intriguing evidence for its failure is an anecdote in which we find Helen cohabiting in the afterlife not with Menelaus but with Achilles, at an important cult site of his in the Black Sea called White Island (Paus. 3.19.11–13). The connection is a fitting one. Achilles is, as we saw, Helen’s most direct male equivalent, his supreme military prowess the masculine counterpart of her erotic power. If she is an ideal bride, he is the ideal bridegroom, and they are often intriguingly linked as (potential) marital partners. In the Hesiodic *Catalogue*, for example, the only reason Achilles is not one of Helen’s suitors is that he is too young; had he been old enough, he, not Menelaus, would have won her (204.87–92). In the *Cypria*, we are told, Achilles desired to see Helen, so Aphrodite and Thetis arranged a meeting between them; having seen her, he restrained the Achaeans when they wanted to leave for home (105). And the eccentric Hellenistic poet Lycophron seems to marry them in a dream (*Alex.* 171–74). Like

her cohabitation with Achilles on White Island, this takes their affinity to its logical conclusion. Achilles is clearly the “right” man for Helen. For this very reason, however, they cannot be paired in the mortal world, but only in a dream or in the afterlife. A successfully (and therefore permanently) partnered Helen would lose her *raison d’être*. Marriage to Achilles would eliminate her story.

Helen’s exceptional features as a cult figure—her lack of a death narrative, extraordinary power, and independence—may help explain why she is often spoken of not just as a cult heroine but as a goddess. Unlike cult heroes, gods and goddesses are not, as a rule, promoted mortals. They are endowed with **(p. 47)** immortality and supernatural powers from birth, and never die. Some scholars believe that Helen was originally a prehistoric fertility goddess, who “faded” to become the mortal heroine of epic. If this is true, however, it is not something of which our sources seem to be aware. They present Helen not as an ancient goddess but as recently elevated to divinity. Be that as it may, as a cult heroine Helen was especially prominent, powerful, and popular. Regardless of her origins, the word “goddess” serves to acknowledge this extraordinary status.

These multiple, overlapping identities—epic heroine, cult heroine, and goddess—coexist in our surviving texts in a sometimes uneasy but creative collaboration. There are some obvious fundamental differences between the mortal Helen and her divine counterpart, especially when it comes to power, beauty, and the relationship between them. In contrast to the goddess, who seems unencumbered by the constraints that men impose on mortal women, the human Helen is subjected, albeit not always successfully, to masculine control. As a result, she is inserted into men’s lives in a more intimate way than her divine counterpart. Her only avenue to power is her beauty, which may exercise its spell with or without her consent. Either way it is bound up with erotic transgression, by men, women, or both, and shows its force through destruction. The divine Helen, on the other hand, can come and go, appear to men in dreams, strike them blind, or assist them in battle. She has special power to operate in the sphere of mortal female beauty, but she does not, as a goddess, control men through her personal allure.

That said, Helen’s beauty remains the defining feature that unites her various personae to make her a single, though complex, mythic figure. The extraordinary nature of that beauty also helps to blur, in her case, the normally sharp line dividing humans from the gods. Beauty is a divine force, an attribute of the gods, and a manifestation of their power. Helen’s paternity grants her more of this godlike charisma than any other woman. In consequence, even the human Helen never quite loses the aura of divinity, threatening boundary confusion and anxiety about the power of female beauty in the mortal world.

The line between mortal and goddess is blurred, in particular, by her beauty's timelessness. Erotic beauty is tied to youth, making it, for mortals, intrinsically evanescent. The gods, however, are not only immortal but ageless: once they reach their physical prime they remain there forever, in unchanging splendor. Helen's beauty likewise transcends the usual stages of mortal life. In art, she usually emerges from the egg looking like a nubile adolescent, as in figure 2.1 (above). In this representation her hair is nicely styled, betokening the kind of artifice associated with feminine allure. (Elsewhere she even wears jewelry.) This is typical of iconography for the births of goddesses, who are usually born fully grown, displaying their signature characteristics from the start. In the narratives of Helen's life, her abduction by Theseus prior to puberty suggests **(p.48)** that her beauty came unseasonably early. Nor does it ever fade. Starting in Roman times, writers began to amuse themselves with the idea of an aging Helen (see, e.g., *Ov. Met.* 15.232, *Lucian Dial. Mort.* 18). But in classical Greece she remains eternally young and nubile despite her misadventures.

This freedom from the constraints of time helps explain Helen's lack of fecundity. Ancient critics explained that the gods arranged it so, because she could not have been more prolific without impairing her beauty. If nothing else, the presence of a brood of children would undermine the illusion of virginal availability and make it more difficult to avoid questions about Helen's aging. Nor is she a very good mother to Hermione, whom she abandons along with Menelaus. Her beauty outlasts its proper season and purpose, impairing her ability to fulfill the role of mother as well as wife. In this she resembles her patron goddess Aphrodite, who is a goddess of desire, not reproduction, and is distinctly unenthusiastic about maternity. (When she becomes pregnant with Anchises' son Aeneas, she swears the father to secrecy and hands the infant over to the nymphs to raise [*HH* 5.247-73].) The timelessness of Helen's beauty may also help explain her lack of a death story. Dying young gives mortals a way to remain eternally youthful, like the gods, but Helen does not need death to preserve her beauty from decay.

As the ultimate manifestation of divine beauty in the human world, Helen is not merely an extraordinarily beautiful woman but the most beautiful of all, a status that remains unsullied by the vagaries of time or taste. This may seem bizarre or even absurd to the modern reader. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as current thinking would have it, then the concept of "the most beautiful woman" becomes meaningless. But Helen's absolute superiority is underwritten in ancient Greek terms by a rather different conception of beauty, as something that can, in principle, be measured objectively (cf. above, pp. 2-3). It is this that makes possible the very notion of the "most beautiful," and with it the existence of Helen, as *the* most beautiful woman, without qualification. The objectivity of beauty also increases the danger posed by female beauty, by allowing for the (imaginative) existence of a woman who is perfectly beautiful. If beauty as such exercises a power akin to divinity, then its objectively determined maximum will

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be, in effect, irresistible. A beauty that is in the eye of the beholder may launch a ship or two, but only a beauty upon which all beholders agree can bind a generation of heroic males under oath and generate an enterprise as cataclysmic as the Trojan War.

The very concept of such beauty is enough to give it power. The story of Helen's suitors, as related in the *Catalogue of Women*, suggests that her beauty is from the outset a report, as much as a presence (cf. above, p. 30). This may seem paradoxical, given the importance of vision in Greek conceptions of *erōs*. But if beauty is an objective quality, then a universal reputation for supreme beauty will guarantee desirability. (None of the suitors seems to have changed his mind at the sight of her.) This is not simply triangulation (desiring because others (p. 49) desire). Rather, having the reputation of being (the most) beautiful is equated with being (the most) beautiful: it elicits an equivalent desire. Later authors would develop the idea of Helen's reputed beauty as a force in its own right, independent of her physical presence. Despite the number of men who did, in fact, attain her, she has a long history of association with the unattainable—with visions, fantasies, and dreams. This reaches its logical conclusion in the strange story of her double, which allows Helen's beauty to transcend the limitations of space as well as time.

Helen's beauty and its disastrous consequences made her a potent symbol, for philosophers, of pleasure, construed as a threat to reason and virtue. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates likens the pleasures of food and sex, pursued by the masses, to Helen's *eidōlon* (*Rep.* 586bc). Aristotle urges us to view pleasure as the Trojan elders viewed Helen—as something to be eschewed despite its allure (*EN* 1109b7–12). These thinkers reflect the broader cultural discourse of masculinity as constructed through resistance to pleasure. A man who is “led” by pleasure puts himself in the position of a woman, who is “led” in marriage by her husband. A real man remains in control of pleasure, as of his wife. Helen's beauty makes her the mythic signifier of erotic pleasure, and thus the ultimate threat to manly excellence. Yet Plato also implies a positive use for her. If those who devote themselves to base pleasures resemble the warriors who fought over Helen's double, it follows that the “real” Helen stands for the true pleasure of philosophy.

Helen can serve such philosophical purposes because her essence is mythic and transcendent. Her meaning lies less in her beauty than in the idea of her beauty. This raises difficulties, however, for writers and especially for visual artists who wish to portray her. Absolute beauty, which transcends any particular person, would seem to be in essence unrepresentable. Artists can present a beautiful woman, but not *the most* beautiful. Any “realistic” portrait of Helen as a specific person, however beautiful to however many, is doomed to failure. Zeuxis, a fifth-century BCE artist renowned for his illusionistic realism, produced a famous painting of Helen. When seeking a model he allegedly held a contest of naked

*parthenoi*, selected five, and used the finest body parts from each to create a composite portrait. This approach implies, on the one hand, that supreme beauty is not instantiated in any one real woman, but on the other that there is such a thing as perfect female beauty, which is in principle instantiable, whether in Helen or in her image. Zeuxis's painting does not survive. No matter what it looked like, however, if it accurately portrayed the specific charms of these five women it must still have left his Helen's beauty open to critical judgment by those who might have chosen a different five.

The vases that provide most of our visual evidence for Helen's story adopt a different approach. Because vase painting is a highly stylized medium, and thus intrinsically "unrealistic," it can use conventional signs to represent the unrepresentable. It is also well suited, as a medium, to conveying Greek ideals **(p.50)** of beauty, which call for simple forms and eschew particularity. Together, stylization and lack of specificity allow the viewer's imagination to roam free, making it possible to represent not Helen but the idea of Helen by using acknowledged signifiers of beauty. Vase painting tends to draw attention to the eyes, for example (especially in archaic styles). This aspect of Helen's allure is made clear in the countless scenes where her beauty disarms Menelaus at the fall of Troy (e.g., figures 2.5, 2.6, above). Texts sometimes attribute this effect to the sight of her naked breasts (Eur. *Andr.* 627–31; Ar. *Lys.* 155–56). In art she is normally fully clothed, but almost always makes eye contact with her pursuer. In other images she is shown as a beautiful bride (e.g., figure 2.4, above) or, more voyeuristically, occupied with her appearance, especially in the many scenes where she is discovered by Paris in her boudoir. In figure 2.8, for example, she is elegantly dressed and adorned with jewelry, her hair is elaborately arranged, and she gazes into a mirror. As we saw in chapter 1, such accoutrements betoken the conscious display of female beauty, eroticism, and power over men.

These ornaments are the visible tokens of Helen's myth-heroic identity, like the armaments that identify the heroic male. Most male heroes are individuated (p.51) by their special equipment. Heracles, for example, can be recognized by his lion skin and club. But Helen's accessories do not particularize her. Instead, they assimilate her to other beautiful females, especially heroines, goddesses, and nymphs. What makes her supremely beautiful is not any charming individual quirk or idiosyncrasy but the absence of such peculiarities. This can make it hard to distinguish her from other beautiful women in art, unless they are named or placed in an unambiguous narrative context. Figure 2.9, for example, shows a group of mythological women engaged in domestic tasks. All are elegantly dressed, with long, elaborately arranged hair, generic visual descriptors that identify beautiful women not by their differences, but by their similarity. We can tell who they are only because several names are inscribed on the vase. Without these labels, the heroines would be interchangeable. It can even be hard to distinguish Helen from Aphrodite (note the resemblance between them, for example, in figures 2.4 and 2.6, above). This is not merely an intellectual obstacle for scholars: rather, it speaks both to the generic character of female beauty and to the threat inherent in an aspect of women that can make them indistinguishable from a mighty goddess.



*Figure 2.8* Helen sits on a chest (perhaps for textiles), wearing an elaborate coiffure, jewelry, and clothing, and looking into a mirror. Paris stands to the left and a figure of Eros flies overhead. Attic red-figure hydria, early fourth century BCE. Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen 3768; ARV<sup>2</sup> 1516.81, 1697; BAD 231037. pbk, Berlin/Johannes Laurentius/Art Resource, NY.

Poets and writers, like visual artists, convey Helen's appearance through the reiteration of conventional tropes. They usually avoid specific description, confining themselves to conventional epithets, such as having "lovely hair." As with the conventions of vase painting, this mode of description comports with the Greek view of beauty as both objective and generic, as opposed to subjective (p.52) and individual. But authors can also convey beauty indirectly, without entering the dangerous ground of specificity or "realism," by describing its effect on others. Most texts wisely avoid presenting Helen directly to the eye of the audience's imagination, insisting instead on her quasi-magical impact on other characters. This power resides not just in how she looks, but how she *looks*. The impact of her glance is strongly emphasized, in texts as well as art. Euripides' *Hecuba*, for example, declares that Helen sacked Troy "by means of her beautiful eyes" (*Hec.* 441-43).

Not surprisingly, the association of beauty with feminine speech also comes to the fore in literature, since this is the only aspect of Helen's charm that can be conveyed directly through texts, as opposed to the visual arts. We are told that the sixth-century BCE poet Ibycus (in a work now lost to us) supplemented the story of Menelaus dropping his sword—the most famous example of Helen's visual power—by having her converse with her husband from Aphrodite's shrine (fr. 296). In our surviving texts Helen often employs the kind of intimate conversation that we saw featured as part of Aphrodite's erotic arsenal (above, pp. 5-6). She also has special ties with epic poetry, which bestows renown on the men who fight for her. As the cause and object of the Trojan War she becomes its Muse, an emblem of heroic glory and an agent of poetic immortality.

This array of associations and symbolic meanings opens Helen to an impressive number and variety of reinterpretations of her character and story. Is she divine or mortal, glorious or tawdry, powerful or powerless, agent or object, innocent



*Figure 2.9* Four women engaged in domestic tasks. On the left sits Helen working wool; Clytemnestra faces her, holding a perfume bottle; a mirror hangs on the wall between them and their names (not visible in this photograph) are inscribed above. On the right, one woman holds a basket of fruit while another lifts a fold of her garment in a veiling gesture; the name of Cassandra is inscribed above them, but it is unclear to which of the two it refers. Detail of an Attic red-figure pyxis, c. 500-470 BCE. London, British Museum E 773; ARV<sup>2</sup> 1670; BAD 209970. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

or guilty, real or fictitious, absent or present (in Sparta, Troy, or Egypt)? This rich range of options and the multiple tensions among them go far to explain her perpetual allure and her special value as a vehicle for the reassessment of intellectual as well as poetic traditions. Authors in every period and genre use Helen and her story to wrestle not only with the legendary past but with questions of Greek identity, female subjectivity, human agency, and the power of discourse itself. She is, to use Hitchcock's term, the ultimate MacGuffin. She is also, as the story of her *eidōlon* betrays most starkly, a fiction or illusion in her very essence. Created by Zeus to manipulate men, men in their turn create and re-create her, striving ceaselessly to control her story and its meaning. Though Helen herself will always eludes their grasp, that does not prevent them from possessing her as an idea, a dangerous but beautiful toy that they are never quite willing to discard. In the chapters that follow we shall see one writer after another appropriating Helen for their own purposes, as they compete over her like the warriors at Troy.

Notes:

- (1) . Other examples include Anchises (above, p. 6) and Troilus (below, pp. 107–9).
- (2) . Helen's name also probably underlies the name "Elmo" (Skutsch 1987:191–93).

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