ULTIMATE BEAUTY OR ULTIMATE BETRAYAL: THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF
HELEN OF TROY

By

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Helen of Troy. Helen of Sparta. The so-called face that launched a thousand ships. Homer's infamous Helen is known by many names and many titles, none of them easily forgotten. She is perhaps one of the most famous female characters in literature, and yet the *Iliad*, the epic responsible for her notoriety, is not *her* story. In fact, Helen is hardly mentioned at all. The *Iliad* is filled with warfare, struggle, battle, and glory, and a long list of male characters hardly anyone could be expected to remember. Its purpose is simple, to tell an epic tale of bloodshed and brotherhood, focusing on the heroes of old and their magnificence. So why does Helen's name endure?

In ancient myth, Helen of Troy was first known as Helen of Sparta, ruling as queen alongside her husband, Menelaus. As the only mortal daughter of Zeus, she was called the most beautiful woman in existence. Every man in Greece desired her, and thus the issue of her marriage was a complicated one. Because her suitors were so numerous, Helen was allowed to choose her own husband, deciding on Menelaus, with the remaining suitors swearing an oath to always protect their union. It is this oath that sparked the Trojan war, a legendary fight between the walled nation of Troy and all of Greece. It is also the beginning of the most famous love affair in history.

The gods chose Paris, a Trojan prince, to judge a beauty contest between three major goddesses: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. Each goddess offered him a prize in return for crowning her the winner. Hera offered power, Athena wisdom. But it was Aphrodite who offered Paris the hand of the most beautiful woman. After crowning Aphrodite the winner, Paris set sail for Sparta to claim his prize. Whether Helen was seduced or taken, it is not certain, but it was Helen's movement from Sparta to Troy that

led to ten years of conflict for both civilizations. Thus, the start of the most famous war in literature is shrouded in ambiguity. Did Helen fall for the beautiful Paris, and leave of her own free will? Or was she an unwilling victim, dragged from her home and country? And did it even really matter at all? The lack of Helen's own perspective in the *Iliad* only stimulates further questions. It is perhaps Helen's ambiguous nature that contributed to her fame, and inspired countless interpretations of her character, both literary and visual.

Starting in ancient Greek literature, a myriad of stories emerged focusing on Helen: what she did during the war, what came after, and even a few that changed the original narrative entirely. The main issues surrounding Helen in these works are the matters of blame and agency. Oftentimes, the more agency Helen retains, the more blame she faces from others.[1] The result is her complete objectification by both male characters in the text *and* male authors who choose to depict her. Furthermore is the issue of her beauty, specifically the problem of articulating it. Ancient authors give Helen little physical description beyond being the 'most' beautiful, which only adds to her ambiguity, and creates an additional avenue of blame to be considered.[2] It is, after all, her lovely face that two nations are fighting over.

In ancient times the debates surrounding Helen's character were mainly limited to literature. She does appear in vase paintings, although these images served a narrative purpose, and mostly focused on identifying characters, not analyzing them. In the middle ages, her popularity dipped due to limited access to ancient literature, however she does sporadically appear in illuminated manuscripts.[3] The trend of depicting Helen's

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[1] Ruby Blondell, *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 60.
[2] Laurie Maguire, *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 49-50.
[3] Karl Kilinski, *Greek Myth in Western Art: The Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 36-37.

ambiguity began to appear in western art during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, continuing into the Neoclassical[4] and re-emerging in the nineteenth century. Thus, in many of these post antique images of Helen, a dual reading is present, again concerning the issues of agency, blame, and beauty. The ways in which artists chose to depict Helen are complicated, and were influenced by a variety of cultural, religious, and political factors. While there may not be any one definitive 'Helen of Troy,' there is no doubt that she is an ambiguous character whose story allows for limitless interpretations, each artist manipulating her to convey their own message.

This paper will first discuss Helen in antiquity, analyzing depictions of her character in ancient literature in order to understand the creation of her ambiguity. Then, turning to the revival of interest in Helen in western art, it will analyze how Helen's ambiguity is explored visually. Lastly, it will discuss Helen in Victorian art, ending with a case study of turn-of-the-century artist Evelyn de Morgan's *Helen of Troy* as a culmination of the aforementioned themes.

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[4] Howard Oakley, "The Face that Launched a Thousand Artists: Helen (and Paris)," The Eclectic Light Company, March 9, 2018,
https://eclecticlight.co/2018/03/09/the-face-that-launched-a-thousand-artists-helen-and-paris/

II. HELEN IN ANTIQUITY

Helen's history in antiquity is far too long and complex for this paper to cover in its entirety. It begins with her possible origination as a nature goddess, or perhaps the human incarnation of Aphrodite, or even as the concept of 'woman' itself, likening her to other female figures such as Pandora or Eve.[5] Once she became the known character Helen of Sparta, there is still much ambiguity surrounding her parentage, her association with other mythical figures such as Theseus, who, according to some versions of myth, abducted her as a child, and her two divine brothers, the *Dioscuri*.[6] While these aspects of Helen are interesting to consider, they are less important in examining her actions in the various myths and plays concerning her place in the Trojan war. This discussion will focus on the Helen of Homer's *Iliad*, and the many tales surrounding her involvement, either direct or indirect, with the conflict.

Helen is pivotal to the overall story of the *Iliad,* yet she appears a mere six times in three out of its twenty-four books. For a woman at the center of a conflict as legendary as the Trojan war, she has very little to say about it. In addition to her limited voice, Homer altogether omits Helen's actual background. There is no discussion of her upbringing, her marriage to Menelaus, her time as queen of Sparta, or her coming to Troy – either willing or unwilling – with Paris.[7] The details surrounding these events are merely referenced or alluded to at most, leaving much of Helen's story up for interpretation. Perhaps the most important fact of the *Iliad,* however, is that there is no closure for Helen's character.[8] As Lowell states in *Stealing Helen: The Myth of the*

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[5] Robert Emmet Meagher, *The Meaning of Helen: In Search of an Ancient Icon* (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2002), 83.

[6] Maguire, *From Homer to Hollywood*, 2-4.

[7] Lowell Edmunds, *Stealing Helen: The Myth of the Abducted Wife in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 105.

[8] Maguire, *From Homer to Hollywood,* 37.

Abducted Wife in Comparative Perspective, "The myth of Helen is everywhere, in verse and art… And nowhere, never told as such, from beginning to end in any source."[9] If we are to take Homer's accounts as Helen's 'original' story from which to build on, then her complex beginning and ambiguous ending allows for much artistic freedom in interpreting her character. While in ancient literature each author uses Helen to make commentary about a specific issue or message, several patterns can be traced through a majority of examples.[10] These stories all revolve around four major concepts: beauty, desire, agency, and blame.[11] Analyzing several key sources from ancient Greek authors allows for understanding and unraveling Helen's ambiguity.

The major issue surrounding Helen's character is her degree of guilt in 'starting' the Trojan war, an event that begins with her movement from Sparta to Troy. Delving further into this topic raises two questions: was she a victim? Or was she a willing participant? Thus, there are two 'sides' to Helen's character to answer these questions. Let us start with the side that defends herself.

The Greek sophist Gorgias of Leontini produced a radical defense of Helen of Troy, his *Encomium of Helen*, in the 5th century BCE, in which he absolves her of all blame entirely. In his testimony, Gorgias focuses on justifying Helen's actions surrounding her elopement with Paris, rather than denying that they happened all, as some later authors try to argue.[12] Gorgias declares Helen's innocence on four main points. First, he states, if she was under the influence of the gods, then it is unreasonable to expect a mortal to be able to overpower divine will.[13] It is "'natural,'" Gorgias states, "for

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[9] Lowell, *Stealing Helen,* 103.
[10] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 51-52.
[11] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 51-52.
[12] Maguire, *From Homer To Hollywood,* 120.
[13] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 168.

the weaker to be 'ruled' and 'led' by the stronger."[14] Thus, if the gods decreed she go

with Paris, Helen had no choice but to obey. Second, Gorgias argues for the possibility

that Helen was violently abducted by Paris.[15] If this is true, then clearly it is Paris, the

abductor, who is at fault. Gorgias emphasizes Paris' culpability and Helen's victimization

by stressing that Paris is an active force, Helen a passive.[16] Next, Gorgias argues Paris

used persuasion, or *logos*, to manipulate Helen.[17] Again, Gorgias makes Paris and Helen

active and passive forces, respectively, thus focusing the blame on Paris.[18] As Ruby

Blondell states, in *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* "If Helen was persuaded by

speech to go to Troy, this was, according to Gorgias, the moral equivalent of violent

abduction."[19] This is due to the immense power of speech. As Maguire states in *The

Meaning of Helen: In Search of an Ancient Icon,* it is "superhuman in its ability to create

powerful effects."[20] Gorgias even likens speech to a drug, one that can either evoke or

remove a whole host of emotions and "bewitch the mind."[21] Lastly, Gorgias argues that

Helen was "captured by *eros,"* or, in other words, love.[22] Simply put, Helen's mind was

so severely overcome by the power of eros, that, just like with persuasion, she was

helpless to fight against it.[23] Using these four arguments, Gorgias concludes, it is

impossible to "consider the blame of Helen just."[24]

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[14] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 168.
[15] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 167-168.
[16] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 168.
[17] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 168-169.
[18] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 169.
[19] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 168.
[20] Maguire, *From Homer to Hollywood,* 121.
[21] Maguire, *From Homer to Hollywood,* 121.
[22] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 167.
[23] Maguire, *From Homer to Hollywood,* 121.
[24] Maguire, *From Homer to Hollywood,* 121.

At first glance, Gorgias seems to take a radical stance on Helen's character. A deeper look, however, into what Gorgias was *actually* trying to accomplish suggests otherwise. The genre of the *Encomium of Helen*, for example, is meant to be entirely satirical. As Blondell states, it "is not really *meant* to convince anyone, only to amuse."[25] Sophists such as Gorgias were interested in the "power of language,"[26] and thus through his *Encomium of Helen* he displays his immense talent in rhetoric, playing the ultimate Devil's advocate. Thus, Gorgias uses Helen "to explore more abstract ideas, for which she makes a natural focus, surrounding human agency, moral responsibility, and the power of persuasive discourse" rather than actually trying to defend her.[27]

Although the discussion of possible motives of Gorgias' *Encomium* give insight into Helen's thoughts and actions, giving her a – albeit limited – degree of agency, she becomes even more blameful in the eyes of the audience, who most likely find such rationales pointless, especially given that Paris seemingly would have been under the same influences that proved Helen's innocence.[28] Gorgias also carefully omits the destruction that follows Helen's departure, focusing on the act of elopement itself, but the facts are there nonetheless. By gaining a sense of agency in the defense of her actions, Helen also gains a significant degree of blame.

While the *Encomium of Helen* is meant to poke fun at and explore Helen's character, Euripides' play *Trojan Women* outright demonizes her. Written in 415 BCE, the story follows the aftermath of the Trojan war, where the now captive women of Troy await their fates: either to be killed or auctioned off like cattle to the victorious Greek

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[25] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 176.
[26] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 164.
[27] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 166.
[28] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 173.

heroes. Even Helen faces a gruesome future, as her husband, Menelaus, will presumably

kill her once they are reunited. The play explores the tragic outcome for the innocents of

the Trojan war. The main conflict arises between Helen and Hecuba, the former Trojan

queen. Not content to simply allow Menelaus to kill her, Helen defends herself instead of

taking on a hypothetical lawyer, literally taking center stage in order to convince both her

husband and the audience of her innocence. Hecuba, on the other hand, desperately tries

to persuade Menelaus to kill her, but with each passing moment the outcome seems less

likely.

In contrast to Gorgias, who attempts to rationalize Helen's actions by examining

the power of abstract concepts such as *logos* and *eros*, Euripides' Helen blames

seemingly every individual involved in the Trojan war except herself. Blondell discusses

the ever growing list of accusations Helen puts forth:

> She blames Hecuba, who bore Paris; she blames the old man who was supposed
> to kill the infant Paris but did not do so, thereby "destroying" Troy; she blames
> Paris himself—calling him the "beginning of the evils," the firebrand that burned
> down Troy, and Hecuba's "curse"—who chose Aphrodite at the Judgment, then
> married Helen allegedly "by force"; she blames Menelaus, whom she calls
> *kakistos*, "most evil," for being stupid enough to leave town while Paris was
> visiting; she blames Deiphobus, her second Trojan husband, who supposedly
> "abducted" her and kept her "by force" after Paris died; above all, she blames
> Aphrodite, who promised her to Paris as a gift, accompanied him to Sparta as his
> ally, and overpowered Helen's mind so that she "followed" Paris and "betrayed"
> Menelaus.[29]

By taking up her own defense, Helen also reclaims her agency, refusing to back

down from the challenges of the Trojan women who attempt to argue against her.

However, the context of the play seals Helen's guilt in terms of where the audience's

sympathies lie. She alone will escape a horrid fate, while the women of Troy wait to be

sold off as slaves to their Greek conquerors. Helen's staunch defense of her actions seems

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[29] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation*, 187-188.

incredibly tone-deaf in this moment, as she focuses on only herself and her own plights, instead of acknowledging the suffering she has caused.[30] Hecuba has lost her husband and kingdom; Andromache, her husband and newborn son. Helen, ultimately, causes all of it, and her defense only makes her seem more guilty. Another aspect to consider in *Trojan Women* is Helen's beauty. Ultimately, Euripides implies that Menelaus, who at first was intent on punishing Helen for her crimes by killing her, begins to waver more and more due to her overwhelming physical beauty. His uncertainty sets Menelaus up to be a weak character, who has fallen victim to lust and thus lost his ability for rational thought.[31] *Trojan Women* thus reminds its male audience to not fall victim to lust and beauty, lest they end up like the irrational Menelaus.[32]

An interesting comparison to the events of *Trojan Women* can be seen visually in an attic red figure vase from 440-450 BCE (Fig. 1) depicting a scene between Menelaus and Helen. Here, the figure of Helen throws up her hands, seemingly in an action of surprise, as Menelaus charges forwards with his shield. He looks as if he intends to strike her down, however, the sword falls from his hand. The accompanying figures of Aphrodite and Eros suggest that Menelaus has been overcome with desire for Helen, and, upon seeing her, is unable to kill her. It is her beauty here that saves her, absolving her from the guilt that Menelaus moments before was so certain of. It is important to note that the majority of vase paintings do not explore the complex ambiguities of Helen's story, and instead serve a mainly narrative purpose. The example here, however, shows how some artists used certain symbols or actions to reflect Helen's ambiguous nature, an important trend for later artistic periods.

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[30] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 188.
[31] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation*, 198-199.
[32] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation*, 199.

In essence, the moments in literature where Helen attempts to defend herself often work against her favor. In the case of Gorgias, Helen's defense is simply a playful exercise, or, as Blondell states, a "defense of the indefensible."[33] In *Trojan Women,* Helen's defense is seen as shameless and selfish, turning all who hear it against her, with her physical attributes being her only salvation. These instances, while giving Helen a degree of agency by exploring *her* version of the events surrounding the Trojan war, ultimately make her a more hated character, and her actions seem "a shameless and opportunistic evasion of responsibility."[34] In contrast, there are several examples in ancient literature that explore the exact opposite: moments where Helen's harshest critic is herself.

Helen's appearances in the *Iliad* are sparse, but in the instances where she *does* appear, she is certainly hard on herself. Throughout the epic, she curses her own existence, and is openly "self-critical, constantly aware of her own role in the tragic events at Troy, and contemptuous towards Paris."[35] She even goes so far as to call herself, in simple terms, an "evil-devising bitch."[36] Contrary to the times where Helen defends herself, here her constant self degradation makes her a much more sympathetic character, not only to audiences, but to the male characters around her.[37] Instead of escaping the consequences of her actions, as she did in *Trojan Women*, the *Iliad* shows her already facing them during her time in Troy. Helen is absolutely miserable, and seems to truly regret any association at all with the terrible events that unfold during the war.[38] However,

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[33] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 176.
[34] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Devastation,* 189.
[35] Alexandra Villing et al., *Troy: Myth and Reality* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2020), 85.
[36] Ruby Blondell, "'Bitch That I Am': Self-Blame and Self-Assertion in the *Iliad*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 140, no. 1 (2010): 9, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40652048.
[37] Hannah M. Roisman, "Helen and the Power of Erotic Love: From Homeric Contemplation to Hollywood Fantasy," *College Literature* 35, no. 4 (2008): 136, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25114378.
[38] Roisman, "Helen and the Power of Erotic Love," 136.

in lessening her blame, Helen also lessens her agency. As Blondell argues, it is because the men objectify Helen and see her as mere property that they do *not* blame her, and their desire to fight for her stems from a desire for warfare itself.[39] In contrast, it is Helen who most strongly blames herself, and in doing so redeems her character in the eyes of the men around her, reflecting how in Greek society 'good' women were meant to admit their faults and consistently work to correct them.[40]

In *Trojan Women,* Euripides wrote perhaps the most scathing take on Helen, but in another work also wrote the most redeeming. In his play *Helen,* written in 412 BCE, Helen of Troy never actually made it to Troy at all. It was, instead, a magical double that Paris took to his homeland, while the *real* Helen was kept safe in Egypt. After waiting over a decade for her husband, the play ends with a joyous reunion between Helen and Menelaus, and the pair sail happily off to Sparta together. Similarly to the *Iliad,* this version of Helen relentlessly blames herself, and even despises her own beauty, naming it as the cause of all her struggles. Here, Euripides 'saves' Helen's virtue by making her the ultimate beauty and ultimate woman: a woman who, despite her physical attributes, consistently rebukes them, and even though she was not present, still blames herself and accepts responsibility for the actions committed on behalf of her image.[41] If her beauty is the cause of all this destruction, better for it to not exist at all. In terms of Helen's agency, the setting for this play is extremely important. Helen is absolved of blame but she is also absolved of choice: she is essentially a prisoner in Egypt, waiting out the ten years long war for her husband to come collect her and return her to his household. At least in the *Iliad* her agency was debatable, here it is stripped entirely.

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[39] Meagher, *The Meaning of Helen*, 99.
[40] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Desire,* 58.
[41] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Desire,* 207-208.

In analyzing these examples, there is a clear duality to Helen: either she blames herself, thus losing her agency but gaining sympathy from others, or she defends herself, gaining back a degree of agency but also gaining a degree of blame. As Bettany Hughes states in *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore,* "When Helen is the active rather than the passive partner, men across time and space rush to label her a whore."[42] The uniting factor in ancient literature is desire and fantasy, in which Helen's beauty plays a central role. In an ancient setting, something was deemed beautiful *by* a desire to possess it, and thus beauty simply cannot exist without desire.[43] This desire, however, extends from Helen to the act of warfare itself.[44] Warfare, and more specifically the opportunity to show one's prowess on the battlefield, was the ultimate show of male superiority in ancient Greece. In his analysis of Helen, Isocrates equates her to a symbol for panhellenic unity. Here, her beauty is a worthy cause to fight for because it is equivalent to the beauty of those who desire her, and of Greece: she is "Greece itself."[45] Perhaps now the vase painting of Menelaus dropping his sword makes sense. In this moment of clarity, he realizes exactly what Helen, and her beauty, truly means, not only to him, but to all who fought on her behalf.

The ambiguities of Helen in ancient literature perfectly set the stage for her further use in later periods. As previously noted, the visual art of antiquity surrounding Helen mainly served a narrative purpose, but this situation began to change in later western art. In exploring Helen in a visual format, mainly painting, two distinct 'threads' of ambiguity arose: first, the continuing uncertainty about her blame and agency, and

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[42] Bettany Hughes, *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore,* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 143.
[43] Alexander Zistakis, "Beauty and Desire Ancient and Modern," *Looking at Beauty to Kalon in Western Greece: Selected Essays from the 2018 Symposium on the Heritage of Western Greece* 4 (2019): 272, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvcmxpn5.23.
[44] Maguire, *The Meaning of Helen,* 99
[45] Blondell, *Beauty, Myth, Desire,* 227.

second, a consistent theme of duality expressed by various artists. Often, art can be interpreted in many ways, and Helen of Troy no doubt became the perfect figure for artists to use in order to imbue dual meanings in their works.

III. HELEN IN POST-ANTIQUE WESTERN ART

Though the ancient civilizations responsible for Helen's story were lost, the memory of Helen–and her many ambiguities–persisted. Long after the fall of the great Greek and Roman societies, the epic tales concerning the events of the Trojan war such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* endured. The subject matter of these narratives provided a wealth of material for post-antique artists to draw upon, and they continued to explore Helen of Troy. Deciding how to depict such a character posed numerous challenges, not only because of her varied literary interpretations, but due to the absence of a description of her actual physical appearance. In ancient literature, authors scarcely described Helen apart from being 'the most beautiful,' so renditions of her became not only an analysis of her story, but commentaries on beauty itself. Starting in the Renaissance, a period marked by a revival of interest in antiquity as a role model for art, architecture, philosophy, and more, western artists began to dive more deeply into the character of Helen of Troy. Within these artworks, mainly paintings, two distinct threads emerged: the continuing ambiguity of Helen, relating back to ancient literary sources, as well as the use of Helen to convey messages relevant to the artists' own time and contexts.

It is first important to understand exactly how Helen came to reappear in western artistic tradition. A large part of her survival can be attributed to the popularity of Greek myths during the Roman period.[46] After the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity, however, there was a sharp decline in the availability of texts surrounding the Trojan war. The loss of the Latin and Greek languages amongst the general population furthered the near disappearance of both text and imagery relating to Helen. The culture of the antique past, however, was not altogether lost. The remnants of ancient

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[46] Kilinski, *Greek Myth and Western Art,* 33.

Greece and Rome still existed to a degree, and material that did not directly challenge the

church was at times deemed acceptable in religious and private settings.[47] Greek myths

could also have a political purpose, and thus their subject matter would often be

appropriated by Christian parties in order to "make the classics palatable to current

Christian morality and to induce the conversion of pagans to Christianity by

demonstrating Christian ideology in familiar pagan narratives."[48] Manuscripts, stained

glass and cathedral sculpture all could involve elements of the classical world.

The aristocratic circles of the Middle Ages also played a part in the conservation

of Greek epics.[49] The Trojan War, specifically, was popular due to its depictions of

"history mingled with chivalric romance," as stated by Chantry Westwell in her article

"The Legend of Troy in Medieval Manuscripts."[50] Examples of illuminated manuscripts

containing images of Helen are scarce, and they mainly served a narrative purpose, much

like ancient Greek vase paintings. A French example from the 13th century, the

Enlèvement d'Hélène or *Abduction of Helen* (Fig. 2) depicts four scenes, each pertaining

to the taking of Helen from Greece to Troy. Part of the *Grandes Chroniques de France*,

the first panel on the upper left depicts Priam sending Paris to capture Helen. Next, on the

upper right, Paris leaves for Sparta by ship. The bottom left panel shows Paris and his

soldiers seizing Helen, and lastly, on the bottom right, she is seen on the ship heading to

Troy. There is little commentary accompanying such images, however, a later example

proves a rare exception. Jean de Courcy, a Norman knight, produced *Meeting of Priam*

and Helen Before the Gates of Troy (Fig. 3), a part of the larger 15th century *Chronique*

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[47] Kilinski, *Greek Myth and Western Art*, 34-36.
[48] Kilinski, *Greek Myth and Western Art,* 56.
[49] Chantry Westwell, "The Legend of Troy in Medieval Manuscripts," February 5, 2015,
https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2015/02/the-legend-of-troy-in-medieval-manuscripts.html.
[50] Westwell, "The Legend of Troy in Medieval Manuscripts."

d'Histoire Ancienne.[51] As the title suggests, the scene shows Helen and her entourage

outside the gates of Troy, waiting to be welcomed in by the Trojan king, Priam.

According to Westwell, the work has a political undertone, stating the author's aim "was

to entertain and instruct his audience, while emphasizing the moral lessons to be gained

from history, at a time when Normandy was being conquered by the English under Henry

V."[52] Perhaps Jean de Courcey felt a degree of sympathy for the Trojans, who at this

moment welcomed into their city the very means of their destruction.

The end of the Middle Ages and the rise of the Italian Renaissance brought about

a newfound interest in the classics on a much deeper level. Beginning in the 14th century,

classical texts again became relevant due to a specific focus on the intellectual side of

antiquity.[53] Now that Christianity was no longer under direct threat from paganism, the

art, politics, and philosophy of the ancient world again flourished.[54] As Patricia Rubin

states, this resurgence was complex, and "was interpreted by some as a battle between

true spiritual values and corrupting forces, and by others as a liberating factor related to

the emergence of the modern individual."[55] New interest in antiquity created the perfect

environment to explore the ambiguous Helen of Troy, and thus she became a vessel that

artists and writers could manipulate in order to make commentaries on a variety of

subjects such as contemporary politics, cultural shifts, and moral issues.

One of the debatable issues concerning Helen, as discussed previously, was her

willingness in leaving Greece at all. The question still remained: was she an innocent

victim, or an active participant in her own 'abduction?' Two paintings, Francesco

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[51] Westwell, "The Legend of Troy in Medieval Manuscripts."
[52] Westwell, "The Legend of Troy in Medieval Manuscripts."
[53] Kilinski, *Greek Myth and Western Art*, 45.
[54] Kilinski, *Greek Myth and Western Art*, 38.
[55] Patricia Rubin, "The Seduction of Antiquity," in *Manifestations of Venus: Art and Sexuality,* ed. Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 25.

Primaticcio's *The Rape of Helen* 1530-1539 (Fig. 4) and Guido Reni's *The Abduction of Helen* 1626-1629 (Fig. 5) attempt to answer this question. Primaticcio, or a member of his circle (there is some debate) depicted an extremely tumultuous scene. The semi-nude figure of Helen is displayed in the center of the composition, being brutally manhandled by several Trojan men as they attempt to drag her forcefully to their ship. In each corner of the painting, there is further struggle between the Greeks and Trojans, each either trying to reclaim or remove her. Helen herself clearly attempts to fight back, and even strikes the face of one of the men restraining her, pushing his helmet off his head. To the left, women and children cower in despair over the theft of their queen. *The Rape of Helen* makes a strong case for Helen's unwillingness, much like the version of her in Euripides' *Helen*. A tragic victim, she elicits much sympathy from the viewer.

In contrast, Reni's version, painted nearly a century later in the baroque period, shows a much different scene. The immense strife of Primaticcio's rendition has been replaced with a much more peaceful setting. Here, Helen and Paris walk with their hands intertwined, Paris' hand softly grasping Helen's wrist in an ancient gesture of marriage, while attendants and soldiers flank the couple on either side. The lovers gaze softly into one another's eyes, and the figure of Cupid stands in the bottom right corner, holding his bow in anticipation of their affair. Reni puts much more responsibility on Helen's shoulders, and through the inclusion of Cupid he hints at the pair's budding romance. There is less sympathy towards Helen here, for she clearly isn't being forced into anything. Perhaps Reni's Helen was motivated by the divine power of love, as seen in Euripides' *Trojan Women*.

The two paintings are interesting, as they both represent a pivotal moment in the events of the Trojan war. Whether willing or unwilling, Helen's departure from Greece sparks the following ten years of conflict. Given this information, Primaticcio and Reni tackle not just Helen's ancient context of ambiguous agency in their paintings, but also address their respective contemporary political issues.

Primaticcio's use of Greek mythological subject matter, according to Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier, was inherently political, especially in the case of his Fontainebleau frescoes. Painted around the same time as *The Rape of Helen*, the frescoes Primaticcio produced at Fontainebleau for the French king François I allowed "valuable insight into the evolving self-image of the French monarchy."[56] The overall message Primaticcio wished to convey was one that spoke to the "relationship between masculinity and power,"[57] a theme most evident in his depiction of Hera, where the queen of the gods oversteps and is swiftly and harshly put in her place by her husband, Zeus.[58] Wilson-Chevalier's interpretation of such a scene is a warning against mixing women and politics, and a lesson on how to deal with women who forget where they rank in the grand scheme of a patriarchal society.[59] Winston-Chevalier sums up her analysis quite nicely:

> Light prevails over darkness, male prevails over female; the male ruler, associated with the Sun, and with the proper order of the cosmos on his side, is ready to fight any and all battles necessary to maintain his rightful place 'on top'…As for women…they came to be portrayed as potentially dangerous activists who had to be subdued.[60]

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[56] Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier, "Women on Top at Fontainebleau," *Oxford Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (1993): 43.
[57] Wilson-Chevalier, "Women on Top," 38.
[58] Wilson-Chevalier, "Women on Top," 41-43.
[59] Wilson-Chevalier, "Women on Top," 35.
[60] Wilson-Chevalier, "Women on Top," 44.

Taking the context of Primaticcio's royal patron into consideration, *The Abduction of Helen* fits perfectly within the Fontainebleau framework of masculine power and domination. Helen is quite literally being dominated, powerless against the male forces that carry her off to Troy. While the *Abduction of Helen* is not amongst the Fontainebleau frescoes, it certainly agrees with their message, and was perhaps even meant to join them. Not much is known about the patron for the piece, however Primaticcio's Gallery of Ulysses shows his deep familiarity with ancient texts.

Reni's *Abduction of Helen* is similarly political. During the time of the painting's creation, France and Spain were embroiled in territorial disputes.[61] These disputes alarmed Pope Urban VIII Barberini, who hoped to avoid conflict and thus protect both the papal territories and his own power. The Count of Oñate, the Spanish ambassador, first approached Reni to commission several paintings on behalf of king Philip IV of Spain.[62] As Anthony Colantuono states in his analysis of the painting, "it is no small coincidence that the subject of *The Abduction of Helen* is preeminently associated with the themes of war."[63] Given the historical context of its commission, the painting, in the hands of the Spanish court, could serve two messages: first, to send a message of warning to would-be challengers to Spanish authority, who could interpret the actions of Helen and Paris as harbingers of chaos, and second, to serve as a personal reminder to Philip IV not to stray from a righteous path, lest he end up like the ill-fated Paris.[64] However, just as Helen herself is an ambiguous character, Reni's *Abduction of Helen* could have a double meaning. Colantuono suggests that the *true* commissioner of the painting was Pope

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[61] Anthony Colantuono, *Guido Reni's* Abduction of Helen: *The Politics and Rhetoric of Painting in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 14.
[62] Colantuono, *Guido Reni's* Abduction of Helen, 18.
[63] Colantuono, *Guido Reni's* Abduction of Helen, 54.
[64] Colantuono, *Guido Reni's* Abduction of Helen, 54.

Urban VIII himself, pointing to Reni's hostile behavior towards the Spanish ambassadors and his consistent backing from both Pope Urban VIII and his nephew, Francesco Barberini.[65] By commandeering a work meant to be viewed by the Spanish monarchy, the Barberinis could send a subtle warning to Philip IV that "his actions could lead to a war that in its duration and destructiveness could rival the Trojan war."[66] In addition, by choosing the moment *prior* to the conflict, Pope Urban VIII was also suggesting that it was not too late to fix the mistakes that had already been made, and that Philip IV, much like Paris, "alone was in a position to determine whether or not Spain would go to war with France."[67] Unfortunately, Reni's masterpiece never made it to Spain, but the underlying messages of *Abduction of Helen* still stand as excellent examples of how Helen of Troy's ambiguity could be wielded.

In the late 18th century, the rise of Neoclassicism extended the interest in the mythological stories of ancient Greece. Access to translations of ancient epics was now much more widespread, especially amongst more educated groups, and new archaeological finds spurred further interest into the ancient world.[68] Artists began to look for "genuine ancient sources"[69] from which to draw, in part due to curiosity over "the origins and intellectual significance of myth, its links with institutions and customs, and its value as revelation."[70] Helen of Troy continued to be a popular figure artists used to make commentary on a variety of subjects.

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[65] Colantuono, *Guido Reni's* Abduction of Helen, 53.
[66] Colantuono, *Guido Reni's* Abduction of Helen, 99.
[67] Colantuono, *Guido Reni's* Abduction of Helen, 55.
[68] Dorothy Johnson, *David to Delacroix: The Rise of Romantic Mythology* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 5-7.
[69] Johnson, *David to Delacroix,* 7.
[70] Johnson, *David to Delacroix*, 12.

In addition to questions concerning Helen's willingness to leave Greece, a common debate in ancient literature was whether or not Helen's actions were influenced by divine powers, namely Aphrodite. Two paintings from the late 18th century, Jacques-Louis David's *The Loves of Paris and Helen* (Fig. 6), and Angelica Kaufmann's *Venus Persuades Helen to Love Paris* (Fig. 7) attempt to make sense of that issue. David's painting, finished in 1788, depicts a recognizable scene for those familiar with the *Iliad*. In the third book, Aphrodite persuades, or rather, commands Helen, who reluctantly agrees, to visit Paris' bedroom after an embarrassing display on the battlefield. In David's painting, however, there is no sign of hesitancy on Helen's face. She has a slight smile on as she leans into Paris , and warm blush on her cheeks as her garments slip erotically off her shoulders. A statue of Aphrodite stands to the left of the couple, the only remnant of divinity in David's rendition. The emphasis is on the mortal lovers, not the divine powers that might sway them.

In Kaufmann's painting, however, the gods take on active roles. *Venus Persuades Helen to Love Paris*, painted in 1790, shows the moment when Paris and Helen meet for the first time, back in Sparta. Aphrodite, here called by her Roman name, Venus, puts one arm around Helen's shoulders in an almost maternal gesture, while Cupid leads Paris by his cape towards her. Neither Paris nor Helen seem overly excited about the situation, and stare almost timidly at each other. In the battle between personal agency and divine will, Kaufmann clearly shows which one she believes will win in the end. Kaufmann further drives her point home through a repetition of pairs: twin doves sit at Aphrodite's side, Cupid holds two arrows in his hand, and in the background, two pairs of trees twist

around each other.[71] There is an overall sense of foreshadowing as the viewer

contemplates the consequences of such a union.

Turning first to *The Loves of Helen and Paris*, it is important to understand the

political context of the time David was operating in. Created just a year before the start of

the French Revolution, David's painting contains distinct political symbolism. While the

work itself was commissioned by a member of the French nobility, the comte d'Artois,

The Loves of Helen and Paris is in actuality a critique of the monarchy. David skillfully

uses Paris, who in the scene has just shirked his warrior's duties in favor of bedding

Helen, to allude to the overindulgence of the French aristocracy and their blatant

disregard for the common people.[72] As Yvonne Korshank argues in her article, "Paris and

Helen by Jacques Louis David: Choice and Judgment on the Eve of the French

Revolution," the moral implications of the scene are clear: "In Paris' choice of love over

wisdom and power, David found a metaphor for the French monarchy's narcissism and

evasion of duty on the eve of the French Revolution; and in his representation of the

myth, he expressed ideas of liberty symbolically."[73] Comparing this work to David's

more serious paintings, such as *The Oath of the Horatii,* the message is all the more

compelling. There is none of the patriotism, self-sacrifice, or sense of duty of *The Oath of*

the Horatii found in *The Loves of Helen and Paris*, which seems quite frivolous and

feminine in contrast.[74] The lack of a cupid figure in David's painting further highlights

personal culpability; these events are driven by *people*, not gods.[75] Through his use of

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[71] Bettina Baumgärtel, *Angelica Kauffmann* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2020), 153.
[72] Yvonne Korshank, "Paris and Helen by Jacques Louis David: Choice and Judgment on the Eve of the French Revolution," *The Art Bulletin* 69, no. 1 (1987): 102.
[73] Korshank, "Paris and Helen", 102.
[74] Korshank, "Paris and Helen," 102, 105.
[75] Korshank, "Paris and Helen," 109.

subtle symbolism, David uses Helen to create a scathing evaluation of French leadership in the late 18th century.

Angelica Kaufmann painted *Venus Persuades Helen to Love Paris* in 1790, towards the end of her career. While her work similarly explored the relationship between Helen and Paris, her take is less political and more an analysis of the connection between love, lust, and personal agency. Kaufmann herself was well educated in the classics, and during her time in Rome most likely saw scenes that influenced the composition of *Venus Persuades Helen to Love Paris.*[76] The treatment of Helen is instantly different from David's slightly earlier work. Whereas his Helen was sexual and feminine, Kauffmann depicts her seated on a throne, giving an implied degree of power. As Baumgärtel states, "Kauffman presents her as a 'beautiful and noble soul' who is not easily persuaded by Venus' coaxing, but on the contrary uncertain how to react."[77] Even more interesting is Cupid all but dragging Paris before the queen, and he looks quite frightened. If she is truly his prize, what cause is there for concern? The body language of both figures suggests that there is at least some struggle against the divine forces present in the painting, but to the informed viewer it is ultimately pointless, as "we know Venus and Cupid will succeed eventually."[78] Helen will still go to Troy, and thousands will still die in battle. Perhaps Kauffmann is suggesting that love, personified through Venus and Cupid, is too powerful for anyone to *truly* resist.

The examples discussed in this section represent merely a drop in the ocean that is Helen of Troy. Established first in ancient texts, the ambiguities in her story, teased out by

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[76] Linda R. Eddy, "An Antique Model for Kauffmann's Venus Persuading Helen to Love Paris," *The Art Bulletin* 58, no. 4 (1976): 569-573.
[77] Baumgärtel, *Angelica Kauffmann,* 153.
[78] Baumgärtel, *Angelica Kauffmann,* 153.

renowned authors such as Euripides, Isocrates, Herodotus, and more, found new life in post-antique western art. Whether used as a tool to assert political power, a critique of loose morality, or an exercise in understanding difficult human emotions, Helen transforms to fit the mold of each intended message. In the next section, this trend continues, however, there is a clear transformation in *how* Helen is portrayed. Starting in the Renaissance and Baroque, artists focus on Helen's abduction. Moving into the Neoclassical, they begin to explore the relationship between Helen and Paris. In the Victorian era, trends shift yet again to focus on Helen by herself, her own thoughts and actions, and, most importantly, her transformation into a popular trope of the 19th century: the femme fatale.

IV. CASE STUDY: EVELYN DE MORGAN

The epic tales of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* at this point in time were cemented as classics, and there is no doubt, especially amongst educated groups, that the stories surrounding Helen still caused much intrigue. However, during the 19th century, the approach to painting Helen of Troy shifted. While earlier movements such as the Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical focused on the ambiguities surrounding Helen's actions, as seen through depictions of her departure from Troy and her relationship with Paris, throughout the 19th century artists began to focus on the ambiguities of Helen herself. Such renditions explored Helen as an individual, and imagined her thoughts and feelings, and, most importantly, her sexuality. In addition to the rapid social, cultural, and political changes of the Victorian era, the rise of such images is due partly to the emerging popularity of a new trope: the *femme fatale*. As the 'ultimate' beauty, Helen perfectly fit the mold to explore the dangers and seductions of the fatal woman. Helen's beauty began to take on a more active role in her nineteenth-century portrayals, as both a tool for destruction and an object of male desire. Furthermore, the artistic challenge of interpreting Helen's physical appearance added to her allure, and thus "in confronting the challenge to depict perfect female beauty, " the resulting artworks "also chart the changing tastes of their times."[79] The effect is that the imagery of Helen began to shift away from the political sphere and more into the moral.

One artist who attempted to unravel the mystery behind Helen of Troy in the Victorian age was painter Evelyn De Morgan. In 1898, she painted *Helen of Troy* (Fig. 8), a work that upon first glance seems fairly surface level: a beautiful rendition of history's most beautiful woman. However, upon further analysis, it is clear that De Morgan

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[79] Alexandra Villing et al., *Troy: Myth and Reality*, 262.

explores ambiguities relevant to Helen and creates a dual meaning within the piece. In *Helen of Troy*, for example, Helen possesses several characteristics typical of the femme fatale, a choice that certainly has moral implications given the time period and context of the painting. The following case study into Evelyn De Morgan's *Helen of Troy* will examine her piece, contextualize it within the late nineteenth-century femme fatale trope and propose it as an excellent example and culmination of the path that began in antiquity: that Helen is, in essence, a vessel artists use to put forth time period-specific messages by exploring and taking advantage of her ambiguity.

In *Helen of Troy,* Helen herself dominates most of the composition, as she stands on a terrace with her body facing the viewer. The painting is quite large, standing at roughly 49 by 29 inches. The pink of Helen's dress stands out amongst the pale blues and yellows of the background, which depicts a mostly barren, rocky landscape split by a winding river flanked by sparse trees and a distant mountain. In the upper left corner, a crescent moon looms over the scene, and the sky is dotted with soft, rounded clouds. Surrounding the lower half of her body and feet are five white doves, as well as a semi-circle of white and pale pink roses. On either side of the bottom corners stand two statues, most likely sirens as they appear to be half woman, half bird. Helen's appearance is lavish, regal, and seemingly innocent. She is dressed in lush, flowing fabric, while delicate gold jewelry adorns her arms and wrists. Her sandals are also delicate, held onto her feet with only a few small straps. A golden tiara sits on top of her wavy coppery blonde hair, which she teasingly holds up between her fingers as she looks into a mirror decorated with the figure of Aphrodite.

The overall tone of the scene seems to be one of naivety and youthfulness, but a closer examination of the finer details and symbolism of the piece may suggest otherwise. Most interesting, perhaps, is the distant walled city peeking out from the upper-right side of the painting. The city is most likely Troy, the land from which Helen receives her title. It is interesting that she is placed so far from the nation she is so closely associated with, and with her back completely turned away. Subtle details such as the roses, the doves, and the mirror Helen holds all contribute to the hidden message expressed in *Helen of Troy*. The question first proposed in antiquity returns in De Morgan's painting: Is she an innocent beauty, or a lethal seductress? Thus there are two threads of ambiguity explored in the painting: The original uncertainty surrounding her culpability in her affair with Paris and the Trojan war, and the dual meaning expressed by De Morgan.

Evelyn De Morgan, born Evelyn Pickering, was a British painter who lived from 1855-1919. From an early age, De Morgan was insistent on her devotion to art, famously writing in her diary at the age of 17 that "Art is eternal, but life is short… I will make up for it now, I have not a moment to lose."[80] Although her parents, especially her mother, did not necessarily support her pursuit of art, De Morgan nevertheless persisted, and in 1873 became one of the first women to enroll in the Slade School of Art.[81] As a third generation Pre-Raphaelite, De Morgan was also influenced by the Symbolist and Aesthetic movements.[82] Although very late in the Pre-Raphaelite movement, De Morgan was a clear master of the style, and her work shows the influence of her teacher, Edward

[80] "Evelyn De Morgan," De Morgan Collection, https://www.demorgan.org.uk/discover/the-de-morgans/evelyn-de-morgan/.
[81] Elise Lawton Smith, "The Art of Evelyn De Morgan," *Women's Art Journal* 18, no. 4 (1998): 4, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1358544.
[82] "Collecting guide: The third generation of Pre-Raphaelites," Christie's, November 28, 2022, https://www.christies.com/en/stories/a-late-pre-raphaelites-collecting-guide-6adc9e156b764e27a0b7df32c426bd5a.

Poynter. A major figure in the Aesthetic movement, Poynter also borrowed stylistic

elements from the PRB. Much of De Morgan's work reflects Poynter's meticulous and

academic approach as well as her close study of Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli. This

was no doubt due to her uncle's influence, as she worked under him while staying in his

villa in Florence.[83] In addition De Morgan was heavily influenced by classical subject

matter, and tended to focus on female characters.[84] In a time where it was not common for

women to paint serious themes from history and religion, De Morgan managed to thrive

producing work of this sort even after she married, and her career spanned several

decades. The combination of Aestheticism, Spiritualism, and the late Pre-Raphaelite

movement, which during De Morgan's time took a more decorative approach (focusing

on 'making art for art's sake'), assisted in creating the ambiguity explored in *Helen of*

Troy.

To understand *Helen of Troy* it is first important to understand the context in

which De Morgan was working. In the late 19th century, the femme fatale was

increasingly popular. While the concept of the fatal woman was not groundbreaking, as

seen in early figures such as biblical Eve or the sirens of ancient myth,[85] it became more

defined in the Victorian age. As Virginia M. Allen explains in her book, *The Femme*

Fatale: Erotic Icon, "The *iconography* of the femme fatale, both verbal and visual, was

new, and conveyed an idea of woman that was more erotic and more evil than in earlier

art."[86] The exact reason for such newfound popularity and 'innovation' of the femme

fatale is somewhat vague. As Allen suggests, perhaps it simply comes down to human

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[83] Smith, "The Art of Evelyn De Morgan," 4.
[84] Smith, "The Art of Evelyn De Morgan," 4.
[85] Tuğçe Özdinç, "FEMME FATALE 101: THE BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FEMME FATALE ARCHETYPE," *The Journal of International Social Research* 13, no. 73 (October 2020): 176-178.
[86] Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (Troy: Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), 12.

nature, and the fact that "evil is always more *fun* than virtue."[87] Helen would certainly

back up this claim, owing to the fact that there are far more stories about her than there

are about Penelope, the famously devout wife of Odysseus who is Helen's opposite in

every way. The alternative reasoning has to do with the relationship between male fears

and fantasies. Extremely evident in the 19th century femme fatale was a "widespread

misogynistic trope in which 'blame' for male desire is projected on to the woman

desired."[88] Given the new attention towards women's rights movements in the Victorian

age, including women's suffrage, calls for access to birth control, and the rise of female

independence, male concerns about women's freedom, both socially and sexually, were

high. Recalling ancient standards of beauty, Helen then encapsulates the ultimate fatal

woman, as the more beautiful she is, the more desirable she becomes, and thus the more

potential there is for her to cause chaos and destruction. The femme fatale trope then is an

avenue of continuation for the ambiguity surrounding the relationship between beauty

and blame from antiquity.

An artist who surely contributed to the 19th century trend of the femme fatale was

Dante Gabriel Rossetti. A founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood,

established in 1848, Rossetti created several paintings of fatal women, including *Lady

Lilith* 1866-1868 (Fig. 9) and his own *Helen of Troy* 1863 (Fig. 10). The femme fatale

trope overlapped greatly with Pre-Raphaelite philosophy, as both "raised questions of

morality and often challenged social norms of the Victorian period, such as the

condemnation of the prostitute or 'fallen woman.'"[89] These women, like Helen, are

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[87] Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, 185.
[88] Villing et al., *Troy: Myth and Reality,* 261.
[89] Jason Rosenfeld, *Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 20.

ambiguous. While on the outside they may seem ordinary, artists reveal their inherent deceitful nature through recognizable motifs.

Lady Lilith, commissioned in 1866 by British shipowner Frederick Leyland shows Lilith sitting while brushing her long, voluminous reddish-blonde hair. As she gazes at herself in a handheld mirror, her thin white dress slips erotically off her shoulder. Rossetti depicts Lilith as an overwhelmingly beautiful young woman. Her skin looks soft and pale, contrasting with the bright red of her lips and making them the focal point of her face. Her features are sharp, and her piercing eyes are half-lidded. Her clothes are simple yet elegant, and a crown of white flowers sits in her lap. White roses crowd the upper right corner of the painting and surround Lilith's head and shoulders. Tucked away in the bottom right corner is a single poppy in a glass jar. The overall scene is extremely sexually charged and intimate, which Rossetti emphasizes through key details. The mirror, the comb, the flowers, and even the luscious red of Lilith's lips all reveal a deeper meaning within the painting.

Lilith was a common inspiration for fatal women in the late nineteenth-century. In Jewish mythology, she was the first wife of Adam, pre-dating Eve. She was created from the same dust as Adam, and thus meant to be equal to him. However, when Adam demands Lilith submit to him, she flees the Garden of Eden and refuses any orders to return. Thus, she becomes a wild, uncontrollable demon woman who causes misery to men and "gets accepted as the mother of all vile in a patriarchal society."[90] Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* does not appear as a dangerous she-devil, but her appearance is very typical of the Victorian femme fatale. Her full, red lips, long hair and "smouldering gaze" add to

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[90] Özdinç, "FEMME FATALE 101," 176.

her allure and erotic nature.[91] The mirror in her hand represents her vanity, which combined with her expressionless face emphasizes her interpretations "as a heartless, narcissistic beauty."[92] The dress slipping to expose her shoulder suggests her teasing and sexual nature. The white roses that surround her represent love and passion, adding to the sensual tone of the scene.[93] The most alarming detail, however, is the single red poppy. The poppy, matching with the red of Lilith's hair and lips, represents death, and stresses the danger behind Lilith's lifeless eyes.[94] As Lisa Tickner states in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Rossetti was interested in displaying the "ancient dualism between beauty of body and beauty of soul."[95]She may be a beauty, but she is certainly a deadly one.

De Morgan adopts similar symbolism in *Helen of Troy*. Comparing the two women, both are dressed quite elegantly, with soft, draping fabrics. They each gaze at themselves in a mirror and have the same fiery red-blonde hair and full lips. The act of each woman playing with her hair is important as a defining characteristic of the femme fatale that branded women's hair as dangerous, capable of ensnaring and entangling men in their soft tresses. The mirror in Helen's hand now seems to emphasize her vanity and narcissism, as she focuses on her own appearance rather than the city of Troy to her back, seemingly unaffected by its fate.[96] The figure of Aphrodite suggests an additional level of eroticism. Most importantly in *Helen of Troy* are the two sirens that, like the poppy in *Lady Lilith,* reveal Helen's sinister nature. The sirens of antiquity were perhaps some of the most famous examples of a femme fatale, and in Greek and Roman myth would use their hypnotic voices to lure men from their ships before violently drowning them.

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[91] Alle, *The Femme Fatale, 2.*
[92] Lisa Tickner, *Dante Gabriel Rossettti,* (London: Tate Gallery Publishers, 2003), 50.
[93] Tickner, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* 50.
[94] Tickner, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* 50.
[95] Tickner, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* 50.
[96] Tickner, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* 50.

In Rossetti and De Morgan's depictions of Lilith and Helen, respectively, their uniting aspect is their destruction of men. Lilith, who "gives birth to countless she-daemons who enjoy hunting the male on earth along with their mother"[97] and Helen, who causes the deaths of thousands of Greek and Trojan soldiers fighting on her behalf. In their paintings, both Rossetti and De Morgan expertly expose the duality of each woman by framing them as "beautiful, enchanting, manipulative, seductive, and destructive, as well as… the embodiment of life and death,"[98] Each masks their danger behind the guise of a harmless, beautiful woman.

Rossetti's own *Helen of Troy* also explores ambiguity. The visual similarities between Rossetti and De Morgan's Helens are again instantly apparent in their facial features, and it is likely that De Morgan may have even drawn inspiration from Rossetti's paintings. In Rossetti's *Helen of Troy,* Helen is "a beauty who looks pensively into the distance while touching the flaming torch that is part of her necklace, prefiguring the burning of Troy."[99] She is every bit the alluring femme fatale, and Rossetti only drives the point further by adding an inscription to the back of his painting, describing Helen as a "destroyer of ships, destroyer of men, [and] destroyer of cities."[100] Interestingly, Rossetti painted his Helen in the likeness of his mistress, who happened to be married to a good friend of his. Perhaps Rossetti attempted to come to terms with the fallout of his affair in *Helen of Troy*, seeking to shift the blame off of himself and onto the beautiful woman who was, in his mind, the source of his turmoil.[101] De Morgan's *Helen of Troy*, similarly

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[97] Özdinç, "FEMME FATALE 101," 176.
[98] Özdinç, "FEMME FATALE 101," 177.
[99] Villing et al., *Troy: Myth and Reality*, 263.
[100] Villing et al., *Troy: Myth and Reality*, 263.
[101] Villing et al., *Troy: Myth and Reality*, 263.

removes Helen from a Trojan setting, but foreshadows her role in the distant image of the city. De Morgan instead focuses solely on Helen's appearance:

> Helen seems to be gazing into her mirror, admiring her flowing blonde tresses. She is apparently self-absorbed, even self-satisfied: a vision in pink drapery against a calm background with white doves. Yet in fact she looks not at but beyond the mirror: into the distance. She shares this elusive gaze with the portrait by Rossetti, indicating the difficulty of knowing a person behind the beautiful face.[102]

Removing Helen from the actual events of the Trojan war allows for both artists to highlight her ambiguity through specific symbols. For Rossetti, that is the torch Helen wears on her necklace, indicating the destruction she will bring about. For De Morgan, it is the city of Troy itself, which serves as a grim reminder of what will happen as a result of Helen's vanity.

Perhaps the most straightforward example of the duality shown in *Helen of Troy* can be seen in its pairing with another of De Morgan's late nineteenth-century works, *Cassandra* (Fig. 11). De Morgan painted both *Helen of Troy* and *Cassandra* in 1898, and they were most likely commissioned as a pair. William Imrie, the patron, was a deeply religious man, but it is uncertain whether the message being portrayed in the paintings belongs to Imrie or De Morgan. What is clear, however, is that when viewed together, there is a clear theme of cause and effect. By looking at *Cassandra*, the dual theme of *Helen of Troy* is all the more apparent.

Cassandra was an extremely tragic figure in Greek myth, and one of the most tragic victims of the Trojan war. A Trojan princess and priestess, she was cursed by the god Apollo to have the gift of foresight, but none would ever believe her. Thus, she knew from the beginning the devastation Helen's presence in Troy would bring, and tried

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[102] Villing et al., *Troy: Myth and Reality*, 265.

desperately on several occasions to warn her people. During the fall of Troy, Cassandra attempted to hide in the temple of Athena for safety, but was found by the Greek warrior Ajax and brutally raped. After the Greeks won, she was given to Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus, as a war prize. Tragically, she was killed along with Agamemnon by his wife, Clytemnestra, upon their arrival in Mycenae.

De Morgan's *Cassandra* is a sharp contrast to the peaceful scene of *Helen of Troy*. Cassandra stands in front of the Trojan city, which burns behind her as thick clouds of smoke rise into the sky. A small Trojan horse can be seen to the left of Cassandra, revealing that the Greeks have already descended upon the city. While Helen and Cassandra have similar features and wavy hair, Cassandra does not admire her own beauty, but rather tears at her tresses in a gesture of immense grief. Her facial expression is much darker and more serious than Helen's peaceful gaze. The roses around Cassandra's feet mimic the ones around Helen's, but here they are colored red instead of white. The duality De Morgan expresses in *Helen of Troy* and *Cassandra* overlaps with the Pre-Raphaelite theme of examining "portrayals of female vice and virtue."[103] When viewed in this context, *Helen of Troy* transforms from an innocent, peaceful scene to one in which Helen displays a complete lack of self-awareness, instead choosing to indulge in her own beauty. Her back is turned not just to Troy, but also her actions that led to its downfall.

Another comparison, a painting by De Morgan titled *Queen Eleanor and the Fair Rosamund* (Fig. 12), dated 1901-1902, bears similar themes to *Helen of Troy* and *Cassandra*. The painting depicts the story of Henry II's mistress, Rosamund, at the

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[103] Jennifer Meagher, "The Pre-Raphaelites," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/praf/hd_praf.htm.

moment she is discovered by Queen Eleanor, presumably to be killed by the latter. The

piece is full of symbolism, and, as Elise Lawton Smith points out in "The Art of Evelyn

de Morgan," there is "an epic conflict between what seems at first glance to be

calculating evil and graceful innocence."[104] The negative imagery surrounding Eleanor

such as the ghastly bats, monkeys, and snakes emphasize her role as the villain, while the

roses, doves, and cherubs that surround Rosamund emphasize her innocence. Thus,

through this imagery, De Morgan creates a visual separation between good and evil. This

comparison aligns quite closely with Helen and Cassandra, representing a similar conflict

between the two women, but much more subtly. Helen, though innocent on the outside, is

the "calculating evil," Cassandra the "graceful innocence" and victim of the Trojan war.

Smith, however, argues that the painting has another deeper, moralizing message. In her

article she offers a brilliant examination of *Queen Eleanor and the Fair Rosamund*:

> Despite the dualistic treatment of the composition there seems to be more intended than a simple contrast between good and evil: We see the fatal consequences that result when humans abandon themselves to love. Physical passion is transient, symbolized in the transparent doves, wilted roses, and weeping putti, the lovers are unable to progress beyond physicality toward spiritual enlightenment.[105]

Taking into account this interpretation De Morgan perhaps makes the same point with

Helen of Troy, that unchecked lust and vanity will cause nothing but death and

destruction. The pairings of both Eleanor and Rosamund and Helen and Cassandra invite

the viewer to contemplate the different interpretations of their conflicts.

It is clear that a defining characteristic of Helen in the nineteenth-century is

duality. This duality culminates by transforming Helen to fit the Victorian femme fatale

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[104] Smith, "The Art of Evelyn De Morgan," 8

[105] Smith, "The Art of Evelyn De Morgan," 9.

trope, as the fatal woman is inherently duplicitous. Helen, like the femme fatale, is both beautiful yet dangerous, desirable yet destructive, victim and villain. The examples from Rossetti and De Morgan discussed above are each connected in this way. In comparing De Morgan's *Helen of Troy* with other images of fatal women, the patterns for creating such ambiguity through symbolism appear. De Morgan expertly draws upon ancient subject matter, exploring the questions surrounding Helen's agency, beauty, and blame. Though De Morgan does not make any one concrete message with *Helen of Troy*, she invites viewers to draw their own conclusions about the complicated subjects she explores, perhaps prompting them to reflect on the social and political changes of the Victorian age. Her *Helen of Troy* thus proves that, yet again, Helen of Troy transforms to become an excellent avenue to explore time-specific messages due to her ambiguous nature.

V. CONCLUSION

As Robert Meagher states in *The Meaning of Helen: In Search of an Ancient Icon*, "The story of Helen in the story of Woman."[106] I would argue that Helen is, in fact, the story of all humankind. Helen's ambiguity is fascinating because it is limitless. She is a goddess, a queen, a villain, a victim, a lover, a seductress, a beauty, a burden, an innocent, and an evil. She is *eros* and *thanatos*. The duality explored in literature and art reflects a deeper desire to understand human nature, to understand ourselves. Her enduring popularity from the ancients to our own modern world is a testament to the vast amount of authors, poets, and artists who perhaps see themselves in parts of her and her story.

Helen also represents potential. In the works of David and Reni, she represents the potential to make a statement on political unrest. In Kauffman and De Morgan's paintings, she becomes a commentary on morality. She transforms time and time again to reflect the messages of those who choose to recreate her. As Meagher states, "Like an ancient wall layered with millennia of graffiti, Helen preserves the human record. She has become what others have said about her, done in her name, suffered in her stead, created in her honor.[107]" If Helen's background were definitive, there would be none of the explorations discussed in this paper. Her ambiguity is as essential as it is confusing to understand. Perhaps the world will never agree on just exactly who Helen of Troy is, but that is exactly what makes her so interesting and important.

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[106] Meagher, *In Search of an Ancient Icon,* 1.
[107] Meagher, *In Search of an Ancient Icon,* 1.

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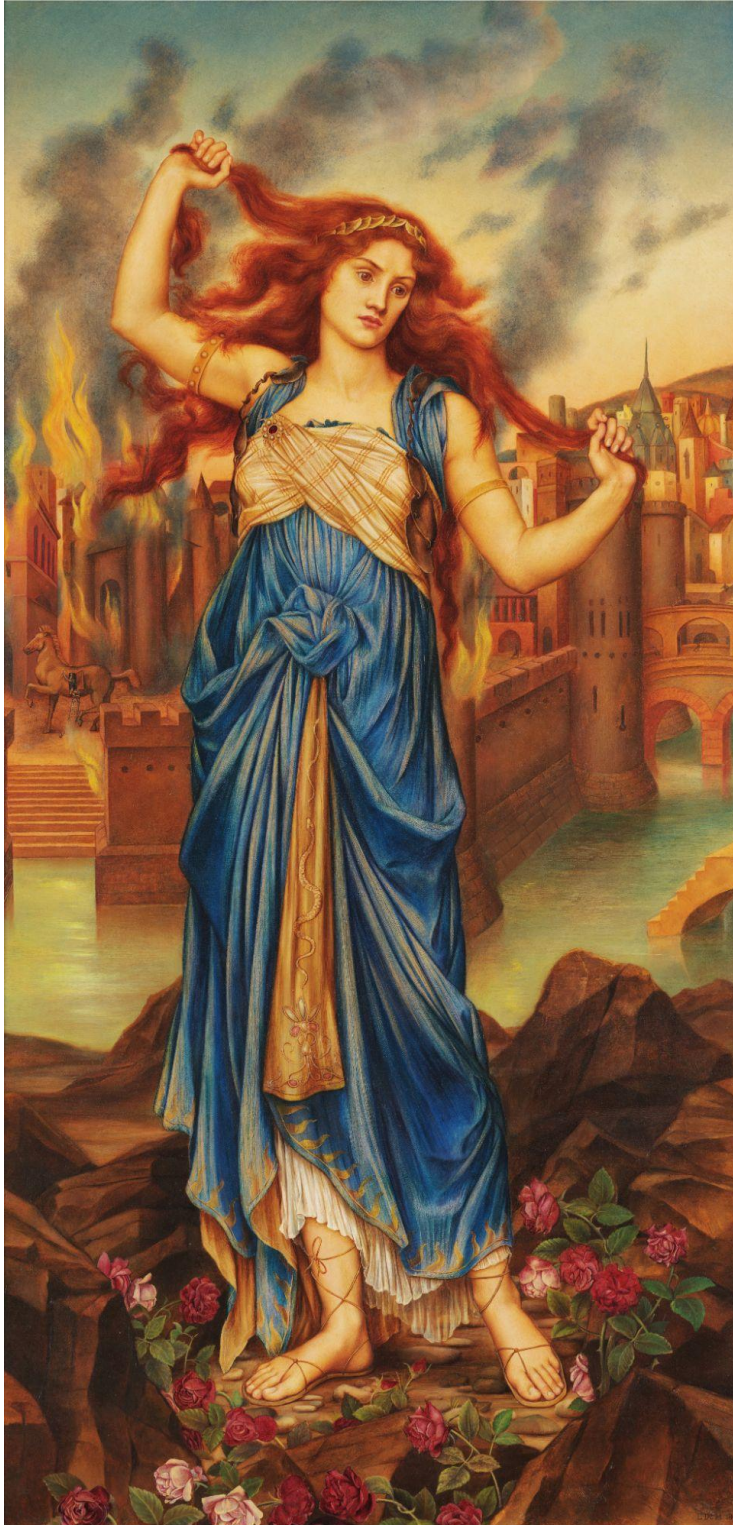Hamburger Kunsthalle.

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