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‘Was it my nature to attract death?’ Free will and the representation of Helen in Greek Tragedy

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Abstract

The representation of Helen and her decision to leave for Troy has always attracted keen scholarly interest.¹ Maguire in *Helen of Troy: from Homer to Hollywood* (2009) explores in detail scholarly arguments that blame but also defend Helen. These arguments, much like many others, focus on Helen’s choice. The simple characterisation of Helen in *Troy* (2004) is contrary to the more complex creations within novelisations such as Margaret George’s *Helen of Troy*. Helen ‘cannot think, thanks to Aphrodite’ and is aware of the moral implications of her actions.² ‘Was it my nature to attract death?’ Helen asks herself.³ Authors such as George bring into question the concept of free will. In its absence can Helen be blamed for her actions? The Helen of Homer is repentant and accepts responsibility for her actions wishing that death had taken her, referring to herself as ‘shameless’.⁴ The Helen represented in Greek Tragedy blames the gods, blames Paris but is also blameless. These three different characterisations of Helen are tied together by the theme of choice. This paper will investigate the characterisation of Helen’s free will in Greek Tragedy and argue that due to its absence she had no choice.

Introduction

¹ Lindsey 1974; Austin 1994; Maguire 2009.

² George, *Helen of Troy* 205.

³ George, *Helen of Troy* 242.

⁴ Homer, *Iliad* 3.172-3; Homer, *Odyssey* 4.145.

Helen, mythical queen of Sparta, was abducted by Paris, prince of Troy, and pursued by Menelaus and the Achaean army of a thousand ships in order to reclaim her.⁵ This is the widely known myth of Helen. However, there are variations of the story within Greek mythology that create a number of *different* Helens. Though the stories differ there are themes that run through them such as whether Helen exercised free will in leaving with Paris. The factors that work in opposition to her free will could be considered Paris' act of abduction, the influence of the gods, and fate.

Helen is characterised in a number of extant Athenian dramas such as Euripides' *Orestes* and *Helen*. Other plays in which she may have appeared, such as Sophocles' *Helen's Wedding* and *The Demand for Helen's Return*,⁶ have been lost; the titles and or fragments are indicative of her having been a character. The majority of extant plays that characterise or reference Helen are by Euripides. Only one play by Aeschylus (*Agamemnon*) mentions her; though it must be noted that there is a difference between her as a character and simply being mentioned. The plays provide a number of perspectives of Helen and Paris. However, these are usually from the viewpoint of other characters and represent the opinions of those who have suffered due to Helen and Paris' liaison. In order to address such limitations comparisons will be sought from representations of Helen in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and other myths. The character of Helen could be used by writers to address numerous themes and, with such varied treatments, there is the potential for inconsistencies between representations.

Helen is a defining character within Greek mythology and as such it is important to understand whether she has a choice in her actions or is merely subject to one of the opposing factors. Helen was reportedly the most beautiful woman in the

⁵ Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 178.

⁶ Sophocles, Fr.177L.

world, a fame that drew many suitors⁷. This beauty may have affected Helen's freedom of choice as men may have used any means to possess or marry her.

Beauty and Desire

The motif of abduction and seduction became a central feature within the stories of Greek mythology.⁸ Myths such as the abduction of Phoebe and Hilaira by Castor and Pollux and Antiope by Theseus appear to have been driven by the man's desire for a wife.⁹ The abductors of Helen, Theseus and Paris, appear to desire Helen's beauty.¹⁰ In order to increase their social standing it was important for the Greek aristocracy to have or be the best (καλὸς κάγαθός).¹¹ The term is found in the works of Herodotus and Plato to describe someone who is a good man or well-made or well-bred.¹² The Panhellenic festivals of Olympia and Delphi are examples of occasions where people gathered from across the Greek world to prove themselves as the best in athletics and music. I would propose that this theory might be extended to include the most beautiful of women, particularly as there is a mythological tradition for the most beautiful to be abducted for example Kephalos and Ganymede.¹³

The Phrygian man in *Orestes* describes how the beautiful Helen was born from Leda's encounter with a swan;¹⁴ indicating, but not directly mentioning the involvement of Zeus. The influence of Helen's beauty is demonstrated in two speeches delivered by the character of Helen where she says that Aphrodite 'spoke in rapture of my loveliness' and 'offered my beauty'.¹⁵ This image is reinforced by Hesiod who wrote that one of Helen's suitors came 'for the sake of

⁷ Hesiod, *Catalogues of Women* F.68.72-4.

⁸ Lefkowitz 2007: 54.

⁹ Hyginus, *Fabulae* 80; Diodorus Siculus, 4.28.

¹⁰ Diodorus Siculus, 4.63.2; Apollodorus, *Library* 3.10.7; Euripides, *Helen* 29-30.

¹¹ Austin 1994: 61.

¹² Herodotus, 2.143; Plato, *Lysis* 207a.

¹³ Lindsay 1974: 33.

¹⁴ Euripides, *Orestes* 1386-8.

¹⁵ Euripides, *Trojan Women* 929; Euripides, *Helen* 29.

the Argive maid who had the beauty of golden Aphrodite' and another who sought her hand 'though he had never seen her beauty, but...heard the report of others'.¹⁶ These statements only account for two of the suitors' reasons for wanting to marry Helen as some of the text is lost. Hyginus summarises that the suitors wished to marry Helen due to her 'exceeding beauty'.¹⁷ However, as Hyginus is a much later work it will have been influenced by other accounts.

Tyndareus is described as choosing Menelaus out of all of the suitors who competed for Helen;¹⁸ Hesiod adds that Menelaus gave the most gifts. Euripides and Hyginus contradict this version of the myth writing that Tyndareus allowed Helen to choose.¹⁹ Despite contradictions within versions of the myth the character of Helen has to marry. It is Tyndareus' right as Helen's father (or guardian) as to how her marriage is contracted. In fifth century Athens marriages were contracted in this way with no input from the bride;²⁰ though older women marrying for a second time would more likely have had more control over their own choice.²¹ Within the works of Euripides Helen is described as a 'gift' or 'prize' and as 'worthless'.²² The concept of Helen as an economic asset or commodity has been considered within scholarship.²³ It is suggested that the abduction or exchange of a woman in myth appears as a form of economic transaction in which women are treated as objects.²⁴ In a speech delivered by Helen she refers to herself as having been sold for her beauty.²⁵ Likewise the punishment of Paris is described in economic terms as a conviction for robbery or theft.²⁶ Helen, as a legendary beauty, was likely to be desired by many and it might be suggested that any means might have been used to obtain her including abduction.

¹⁶ Hesiod, *Catalogues of Women* F.68.3-4, 32-3.

¹⁷ Hyginus, *Fabulae* 78.

¹⁸ Apollodorus, *Library* 3.10.9; Hesiod, *Catalogues of Women* F.68.98-100.

¹⁹ Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 66-70; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 78.

²⁰ Pomeroy 1994: 63-4; Foley 2001: 62-3; Blundell 1995: 120.

²¹ Norena 1998: 18.

²² Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 182; Euripides, *Trojan Women* 930; Euripides, *Helen* 43; Euripides, *Cyclops* 281.

²³ Foley 2001: 318; Gumpert 2001: 23.

²⁴ Lyons 2003.

²⁵ Euripides, *Trojan Women* 935.

²⁶ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 533-5.

Marriages by capture or abduction are considered to be situations in which the wishes of the bride were not consulted;²⁷ Hades' abduction of Persephone is one such mythological example of this.²⁸ Theseus' abduction is depicted by a number of authors as occurring when Helen was a child, in order to marry her when she came of age.²⁹ Therefore, it may be assumed that Helen was taken without giving consent. Though this can be considered a different act of abduction to Paris' there are similarities between the portrayals. Paris is described by Euripides as having 'carried off' Helen,³⁰ or to have come 'to Sparta, to have me in marriage'³¹ or by Aeschylus as 'stealing away a wedded wife'.³² The final translation requires further consideration as 'κλοπαῖσι γυναικός' is literally translated as the words 'theft' and 'woman'. This is problematic as it does not transliterate to 'stealing away a wedded wife'. However, to have a child out of wedlock would have been viewed as unacceptable and as such I consider Helen to be married as she had her child Hermione.³³ The act itself is also described as 'the violent rape of Helen' in a fragment of an unknown work of Aeschylus.³⁴ These indicate that the character of Helen may not have left with Paris of her own accord.

It is generally agreed within modern scholarship that the abduction of Helen by Theseus was a violent act.³⁵ However, Paris' abduction is seen differently. Sorum argues that Helen had freedom of choice and Pomeroy considers that she preferred Paris and willingly left with him.³⁶ Whereas Lindsay suggests that Helen had no choice, referring to her as having been 'carried off'.³⁷ In each play the

²⁷ Pomeroy 1994: 19; Evans-Grubbs 1989.

²⁸ Faraone 1990.

²⁹ Hyginus, *Fabulae* 79; Plutarch, *Theseus* 31; Apollodorus, *Library* 3.10.7.

³⁰ Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 179-80.

³¹ Euripides, *Helen* 30.

³² Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 401.

³³ Pomeroy 1994: 64.

³⁴ Aeschylus, Fr.283.3S.

³⁵ Anderson 1997: 100; Austin 1994: 40; Lindsay 1974: 103.

³⁶ Pomeroy 1994: 20-1; Sorum 1992.

³⁷ Lindsay 1974: 14, 25.

character of Helen is used to illustrate different issues. However, I would infer that she may not have left with Paris of her own accord, a view supported by the representations of the myth in vase painting.

Depictions of Theseus' abduction on vases show his hand on Helen's shoulder leading her away, another in pursuit of her and also where she is being taken hold of by the wrist.³⁸ Each image could be seen as representing an act of control. These scenes can be compared with vase representations of Paris' abduction. The Boston Skyphos depicts Helen being led away by Paris, gripped by the wrist.³⁹ In another representation Helen is being led away in a similar fashion but her head is raised to meet Paris' gaze.⁴⁰ However, Timandra can be seen chasing after Helen to help her. The similar action of Paris to Theseus might be considered indicative of a controlling act. However, it must be noted that these scenes are also reminiscent of representations of weddings; for example the bathing vessel from the Boston Museum of Fine Art and Cylindrical Pyxis in the Louvre.⁴¹ Though in these representations it would appear that the male figure is taking the females hand not the wrist.

The departure of Helen with Paris on the Boston Skyphos has been described 'like a bride following a bridegroom'.⁴² It has been argued that this is exactly like a bridal scene and if Helen and Paris were not named you would not be able to tell the difference.⁴³ However, I consider that it might be argued that on the Boston Skyphos' Helen's bowed head, her being gripped by the wrist and lack of eye contact with Paris suggests an unwillingness to leave with him.

³⁸ 180636 Attic Red Figure Stamnos ca. 430-420 BC National Archaeological Museum Athens; G423 Attic Red Figure Bell-krater ca. 440-430 BC Louvre; CA617 Protocorinthian Aryballos ca. 7th B.C. Louvre; Lindsay 1974: 139.

³⁹ 13.186 Attic Red Figure Skyphos ca. 490-480 BC Boston Museum of Fine Art.

⁴⁰ F.2291 Attic Red Figure Kylix ca. 490-480 BC Berlin Antikenmuseum.

⁴¹ 03.802 Red Figure Loutrophoros ca. 450-425 BC Boston Museum of Fine Art (BMFA); L 55 Red-figured Pyxis Ca. 470-460 BC Louvre.

⁴² Anderson 1997: 247.

⁴³ Woodford 2002.

It could be suggested that Helen's beauty and desirability limit her ability to choose and create misfortune for her.⁴⁴ Helen as an object of desire is abducted twice, and is also the subject of an economic exchange for her hand in marriage. Though each of these situations is different there appears to be a similar theme of a lack of choice on Helen's part. Theseus takes her as a child, Tyndareus requires her to marry and Paris is represented as having taken her by force. However, there is a crucial difference between Paris and the other two situations, due to the involvement of the gods.

Influence of the Gods

Apollo declares that Troy and Hellas were joined in battle, 'so that they might draw off from the earth the outrage of unstinting numbers of mortals'.⁴⁵ This same plan is described during the prologue of Euripides' *Helen*. It appears that Helen has intimate knowledge of Zeus' plans and understands the real reason for the Trojan War.⁴⁶ Alternative versions of the myth exist such as Proclus' summary of *The Cypria* where Zeus and Themis are described as planning to bring about the war.⁴⁷ The version provided by Apollodorus suggest Zeus intended that, 'his daughter might be famous for having embroiled Europe and Asia; or...that the race of the demigods might be exalted'.⁴⁸

It would appear that Zeus' plans hinged on two specific events; Helen's birth and Paris' judgement of the goddesses. Zeus is the reported father of Helen, having impregnated Leda whilst in the guise of a swan.⁴⁹ Apollodorus' statement that the abduction of Helen was Zeus' will precedes his description of the goddesses' beauty competition.⁵⁰ Eris (Strife) is usually attested as the instigator of the competition as she 'threw an apple as a prize of beauty to be contended for by

⁴⁴ Euripides, *Helen* 28.

⁴⁵ Euripides, *Orestes* 1639-42.

⁴⁶ Euripides, *Helen* 16-52; Wright 2005: 364.

⁴⁷ Proclus, *Cypria* Fr.1E.

⁴⁸ Apollodorus, *Epitome* 3.1.

⁴⁹ Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 794-6.

⁵⁰ Apollodorus, *Epitome* 3.1.

Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite'.⁵¹ It could be inferred that Eris, acting on Zeus' instruction, brought about the goddesses' beauty competition in order to fulfil his will that Helen be abducted.⁵² Proclus describes Eris' involvement but does not detail the reasons why or at whose behest.⁵³

The events at the start of the *Cypria*, detailed in Proclus' summary, can be read as 'a single, coherent plan of Zeus' who engineered the judgement of Paris.⁵⁴ Unfortunately with few accounts of the mythological traditions it is not possible to conclude either way whether or not there was a generally held belief that Eris acted on Zeus' orders. However, parallels with Zeus' plan can be identified in Euripides *Hippolytus*. Phaedra, like Helen and Paris, becomes an integral part of Aphrodite's plan for revenge against Hippolytus.⁵⁵ It is argued by Lindsay that a war fought solely for Helen was thought inadequate by ancient commentators and a 'grander or more philosophic cause' was needed.⁵⁶ Thus the myth of the divine plan of Zeus was created. Arguably for Zeus' plans to come to fruition in these versions of the myth, Paris needed to make his judgement in order to win Helen.

The judgement is referenced in a number of Euripides' plays and many vase paintings.⁵⁷ This episode could be considered the point at which Helen and Paris' fates intertwine and a 'relentless fate' began;⁵⁸ a concept widely explored in other Athenian dramas. Orestes cannot escape his prophesied fate to murder Clytemnestra,⁵⁹ 'Necessity's fate led to what must be... The deeds were shared, the fates were shared' declare the Dioskouroi.⁶⁰ Likewise Oedipus left the home

⁵¹ Apollodorus, *Epitome* 3.2.

⁵² Apollodorus, *Epitome* 3.1-2.

⁵³ Proclus, *Cypria* F.1E; Lindsay 1974: 89.

⁵⁴ Marks 2002: 8.

⁵⁵ Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1-37.

⁵⁶ Lindsay 1974: 89.

⁵⁷ Euripides, *Trojan Women* 923-31; Euripides, *Helen* 23-30; Euripides, *Hecuba* 644-56.

⁵⁸ Euripides, *Hecuba* 640.

⁵⁹ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1280-90.

⁶⁰ Euripides, *Electra* 1301-5.

of those he believed to be his parents only to fulfil his fate.⁶¹ It appears that the fates of all three dynasties had been fixed for some time. Paris' fate appears to be set when he is chosen to judge the competition and his choice of Aphrodite signals his intention to claim Helen. The Helen in *Trojan Women* assigns responsibility for her conduct to Paris because of this choice.⁶²

The involvement of the gods in the fate of mortals is considered in detail by Sewell-Rutter.⁶³ Sewell-Rutter uses examples from *Philoctetes* to support the claim that fate does not play as important a role in tragedy as is thought, noting that prior to the intercession of Heracles, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus had decided not to return to Troy.⁶⁴ On the other hand, there are alternative interpretations of the importance of the gods as agents of fate as an influence over human action in a divine universe.⁶⁵ Therefore, the gods might be seen as having a central role within Athenian drama, providing explanations for the unfolding of events;⁶⁶ for example in Euripides' *Helen*.⁶⁷ These arguments are persuasive as I consider Paris' fate to be set when he is chosen to judge the competition. It might be considered that this key moment within the myth is driven by the influence of the gods.

Helen's defensive argument in *Trojan Women* lays the blame on anyone but herself.⁶⁸ Helen and Paris could be considered equally guilty due to her self-pride and self-indulgence and his hubris.⁶⁹ Arguably though blame for the Trojan War could rest with Aphrodite and not Helen.⁷⁰ Within a number of Athenian dramas Aphrodite is considered accountable for the transgressions of Helen who had

⁶¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* 791-3, 1183-5.

⁶² Euripides, *Trojan Women* 924; Meridor 2000: 23.

⁶³ Sewell-Rutter 2007.

⁶⁴ Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 1398-1407.

⁶⁵ Hammer 2002: 52-6.

⁶⁶ Wright 2005: 381.

⁶⁷ Euripides, *Helen* 1658-61.

⁶⁸ Euripides, *Trojan Women* 916-65; Gumpert 2001: 78.

⁶⁹ Lindsay 1974: 140.

⁷⁰ Blundell 1995: 38; Lefkowitz 2007: 39.

been 'driven by heaven-sent frenzy to sail...to Ilium'.⁷¹ Although Helen regrets leaving with Paris, she is powerless to resist him, as Aphrodite is too strong.⁷² The greater degree of attention given to the influence of Aphrodite within drama and vase painting would support such an interpretation.

Aphrodite's power over Helen is depicted on vases such as the Boston Skyphos and the Berlin Amphoriskos.⁷³ Aphrodite accompanied by Peitho, goddess of persuasion, is represented alongside Helen and Paris indicating her key role in their union. Helen appears subject to the influence of the goddess and is destined to be the 'unhappy bride...fatally wedded, under the guidance of Aphrodite'.⁷⁴ Peleus reproaches Menelaus for his inability to kill Helen stating, 'when you saw her breasts, you threw away your sword and kissed and fawned on the betraying bitch, proving no match...for Aphrodite's power'.⁷⁵ Menelaus counters that it was his self-control that stayed his hand.⁷⁶ The myth of Aphrodite's intervention may have been widely acknowledged, particularly in vase painting.⁷⁷ Menelaus is about to kill Helen but Aphrodite uses Helen's feminine qualities to stay the execution. Lefkowitz argues that in *Trojan Women* Helen's survival from Menelaus' wrath is not so much the work of Aphrodite but her ability to construct an argument.⁷⁸ This does not take into consideration other examples of mythological godly influence in Athenian drama; for example Artemis saving Iphigenia, Athena appearing to convince Paris that she is Aphrodite and Athena saving Odysseus from Ajax.⁷⁹

⁷¹ Euripides, *Helen* 1120-1; Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 1300-4; Euripides, *Andromache* 680-2; Euripides, *Orestes* 78-9.

⁷² Clader 1976: 15.

⁷³ 13.186 Attic Red Figure Skyphos ca. 490-480 BC Boston Museum of Fine Art; 30036 Attic Red Figure Amphoriskos ca. 430 BC Berlin Antikemuseen.

⁷⁴ Euripides, *Helen* 1120-1.

⁷⁵ Euripides, *Andromache* 628-33.

⁷⁶ Euripides, *Andromache* 685.

⁷⁷ 13.186 Side-B Attic Red Figure Skyphos ca. 490-480 BC Boston Museum of Fine Art.

⁷⁸ Lefkowitz 2007: 190.

⁷⁹ Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 1584; Euripides, *Rhesus* 657; Sophocles, *Ajax* 51-54.

It would appear that Aphrodite, like other gods, would rather persuade mortals to carry out her will than use force.⁸⁰ However, force is used when required as demonstrated by the punishment of Pentheus by Dionysus and Hippolytus by Aphrodite for their failures to acknowledge and worship them.⁸¹ Hippolytus is an example that everyone must face their fate in order to reconfirm the truth that no one can refuse Aphrodite's power.⁸²

If gods such as Apollo can force the hand of a son to murder his mother it might be that there is no degree of freedom of choice.⁸³ Tyndareus questions whether Orestes considered what he was doing before he murdered Clytemnestra.⁸⁴ In *Libation Bearers* before Orestes decides to kill Clytemnestra he turns to Pylades and asks 'what shall I do?'.⁸⁵ This hesitation suggests the notion of freedom of choice and supports Sewell-Rutter's view that within the sphere of godly influence mortals 'are in part architects of their own sorrows'.⁸⁶ However, these instances are superseded by scenes such as Odysseus' declaration to the Cyclops that the excursion to Troy 'was the doing of a god: blame no mortal for it'.⁸⁷

Personal Choice

Hecuba in *Trojan Women* counters Helen's claim that Aphrodite is at fault. Hecuba argues that the beauty contest never happened as Hera and Athena have no need of accolades; Hera is married and Athena has permission to remain unwed. Turning to Aphrodite she suggests that when Helen saw Paris' beauty her 'mind straight became your Aphrodite'.⁸⁸ The logical argument of

⁸⁰ Lefkowitz 2007: 67.

⁸¹ Zelenak 1998: 136.

⁸² Zeitlin 1996: 220-1.

⁸³ Euripides, *Orestes* 1665.

⁸⁴ Euripides, *Orestes* 526-32.

⁸⁵ Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers* 899.

⁸⁶ Sewell-Rutter 2007: 162.

⁸⁷ Euripides, *Cyclops* 285.

⁸⁸ Euripides, *Trojan Women* 971-88.

Hecuba suggests that Helen was not the gift of Aphrodite but instead gave into her lust, willingly leaving with Paris without raising the alarm.⁸⁹ Hecuba attempts to replace Helen's myths with facts that can be verified or rejected,⁹⁰ mocking each of Helen's points with 'rational interpretations, bringing everything down to the human level'.⁹¹ The arguments of Hecuba are echoed by the chorus-leader who berates Helen as a 'traitoress! She saw the parti-colored breeches....and the gold necklace...and went all aflutter'.⁹² Peleus declares that Menelaus was foolish to think he had 'a chaste wife...when in fact she was an utter whore...she...went off...with a young man to another country'.⁹³ Helen's sister Clytemnestra also proclaims her as 'lustful'.⁹⁴ The Helen described by each of these characters supports Hecuba's claim that she had been driven by her personal lust for Paris. The involvement of the gods is rebuked and the blame for the war is placed solely on Helen, 'the cause of many evils to the Hellenes'.⁹⁵ The blaming of Helen for the war at Troy is consistent throughout Athenian drama.⁹⁶ The majority of references made about her are hostile and indicative of her having caused the war.⁹⁷

Helen found some redemption in Gorgias' fifth century work the *Encomium of Helen*. Gorgias observes that Helen's name to the poets had 'become a byword for calamity'.⁹⁸ Gorgias takes a rational approach to arguing against the blame placed upon Helen. If Helen had left through a plan or decree of the gods then they should be held responsible as they are superior beings.⁹⁹ Likewise if it were for love Helen cannot be blamed as love is a god and is therefore stronger than a

⁸⁹ Euripides, *Trojan Women* 998-1000.

⁹⁰ Gumpert 2001: 79.

⁹¹ Lindsay 1974: 144.

⁹² Euripides, *Cyclops* 182-6.

⁹³ Euripides, *Andromache* 594-604.

⁹⁴ Euripides, *Electra* 1026-8.

⁹⁵ Euripides, *Electra* 212-3.

⁹⁶ Zeitlin 1996: 201.

⁹⁷ Wright 2005: 1117-8.

⁹⁸ Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen* 2.

⁹⁹ Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen* 6.

mortal.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, if abducted it is the abductor who committed the injustice and if persuaded it is the persuader did wrong.¹⁰¹ Gorgias' skill of discourse removes Helen's infamy but the work has a wider importance as it is indicative of how a contemporary audience saw her.

Helen might be considered an odious character whose arguments are broken down to 'the cold core of her calculated coquettishness and vanity'.¹⁰² Alternatively it may be suggested that where tragedy blames Helen, Homer presents a 'surpassingly lovely woman, intelligent...deeply concerned for her home and family, very possibly more sinned against than sinning'.¹⁰³

Within Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* Helen accepts responsibility for her transgressions referring to herself as 'shameless'.¹⁰⁴ The chorus in *Iphigenia in Aulis* considers that Helen will reflect on her actions and grieve for having left Menelaus.¹⁰⁵ Helen in the *Odyssey* is thoughtful, lamenting her decision though she refers to the driving force having been Aphrodite.¹⁰⁶ Helen's regret is also expressed by her wish that she had died instead of coming to Troy as her death would have saved many lives.¹⁰⁷

Helen observes that the only option open to her when faced with the choice to leave with Paris was suicide. Deianeira chose suicide after accidentally fatally poisoning Heracles and Jocasta ended her life after discovering she had married her son Oedipus.¹⁰⁸ Neither of them could live with what had happened but Helen chose to live in the knowledge that what she was doing was wrong.¹⁰⁹ It is likely

¹⁰⁰ Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen* 19-20.

¹⁰¹ Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen* 7-15.

¹⁰² Lindsay 1974: 143.

¹⁰³ Graver 1995: 53.

¹⁰⁴ Homer, *Iliad* 3.180, 6.356; Homer, *Odyssey* 4.144.

¹⁰⁵ Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis* 781.

¹⁰⁶ Homer, *Odyssey* 4.259-64.

¹⁰⁷ Homer, *Iliad* 3.173-7, 6.344-6, 24.763-4.

¹⁰⁸ Sophocles, *Trachinia*. 899-952; Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1237-52.

¹⁰⁹ Pomeroy 1994: 101.

when faced with the choice most mortals would choose life over death.¹¹⁰ It is possible that Helen later comes to view suicide as a missed opportunity.¹¹¹ The Helen in Euripides' *Helen* appears willing to sacrifice herself in order to destroy her reputation from Troy.¹¹² On the one hand there is the Helen of Homer who acknowledges responsibility for leaving Menelaus. On the other, there is the Helen represented in a number of dramas who accepts no responsibility and is blamed for leaving Menelaus.

There is an indication through Gorgias that contemporary audiences saw Helen as a figure worthy of blame. Therefore the question might be asked if the sources be interpreted differently by a modern audience. Unfortunately with few character portrayals of Helen in drama the views of other characters have to be relied upon. However, Hecuba, Peleus and Clytemnestra have been affected by Helen's actions and as such conclusions drawn upon the views of these characters must be carefully considered. Despite such limitations I would argue that they may be reinterpreted as it is clear through other sources such as Euripides *Helen* and Stesichorus' *Palinode* that there were other perspectives of Helen.

Helen in Egypt

There is a final version of Helen to consider, the one who did not go to Troy.¹¹³ This version of Helen first appears in Stesichorus' *Palinode* in the sixth century.¹¹⁴ Plato references the story of Stesichorus who, having been blinded for slighting Helen, wrote a poem that is said to have stated a phantom was fought for at Troy in order to repent.¹¹⁵ This version of the myth is also recounted by

¹¹⁰ Lefkowitz 2007: 28-9.

¹¹¹ Sens 2003: 308.

¹¹² Euripides, *Helen* 835-40; Foley 2001: 318.

¹¹³ Euripides, *Electra* 1281-2.

¹¹⁴ Maguire 2009: 7.

¹¹⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus* 243a-b; Plato, *Republic* 9.586c; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 11.40-1 also refers to Stesichorus having written the *Palinode* but he does not reference the phantom.

Herodotus who provides a detailed account of how Helen did not go to Troy.¹¹⁶ Paris abducted Helen, but King Proteus of Egypt reclaimed her for Menelaus. Herodotus does not refer to a phantom suggesting instead that the war was fought because the Greeks did not believe the claims of the Trojans that Proteus had Helen. Euripides attempts to reconcile the multiple mythologies of Helen and combine them into a final retelling, creating a virtuous Helen.¹¹⁷ Helen explains that 'Hera...gave to the son of king Priam...an image...that she fashioned out of the sky' and Hermes, in order to ensure Zeus' plans were fulfilled, brought her to Egypt. Helen's chastity is not at risk as Proteus is the most honourable of men.¹¹⁸ The Helen created by these three authors is contradictory.

Little can be said about the phantom character of Stesichorus as only a few fragments of the work survive. The myth of Helen having blinded Stesichorus possibly reasserts her locally accepted status as a goddess over the Panhellenic view of her as an adulteress.¹¹⁹ It might be argued that Stesichorus' Palinode likely followed a similar storyline to *Helen* where Helen, following Proteus', death remains by his tomb in order to maintain her chastity.¹²⁰ Herodotus provides an alternative version of Helen in Egypt in which she is not redeemed. Proteus declares to Paris that having had his 'guest-friend's hospitality' he had his 'guest-friend's wife. And...got her to fly with' him.¹²¹ It might be inferred that in this version Paris had intercourse with Helen, though it is not explicitly stated. This Helen is not guilt-free, though her role within the story is minimal.¹²² However, the reference to Helen having been 'carried off' in Herodotus might also be considered to assign responsibility solely to Paris.¹²³ Jong argues that this has negative connotations and sets the tone for the story, suggesting criminal

¹¹⁶ Herodotus, 2.112-20.

¹¹⁷ Lindsay 1974: 149; Austin 1994: 137-8; Gumpert, 2001: 54-7.

¹¹⁸ Euripides, *Helen* 24-52.

¹¹⁹ Beecroft 2006: 68.

¹²⁰ Euripides, *Helen* 63-7.

¹²¹ Herodotus, 2.115.4-5.

¹²² Lindsay 1974: 137.

¹²³ Herodotus, 1.3.2.

behaviour on Paris' part.¹²⁴ The character of Helen is again redeemed. Within the account of Herodotus these are the only references to Helen's personal actions. Helen's perspective is not represented and as such any further analysis would be speculative.

If Helen made the choice to travel with Paris then she would have been guilty of the urge to commit adultery, even if it was for a short period.¹²⁵ Stesichorus notes that Helen did not board the ship to Troy, therefore it could be inferred that what subsequently followed was a similar story to that of Euripides.¹²⁶ In these versions of the myth Paris would not then have had the opportunity to attempt to seduce Helen and her chastity is spared. I would suggest that to a greater extent the version of Helen who did not go to Troy would not have given into Aphrodite's persuasive powers as she values her chastity.

Helen corrects herself when she mentions that she was to be the 'Hellenes' spear-prize, to test the courage of the Trojans; or rather not me, but my name'.¹²⁷ The Trojan War is to be fought for her name or phantom and she must remain in Egypt for the duration. It would appear that only when the war is won and Menelaus' eyes are opened could each version of Helen return to Sparta and begin to clear her name. The contradictory nature of the versions of Helen makes it difficult to decide whether or not the character is redeemed, though all three have their name defamed against their will.

Conclusion

The few depictions and contradictory representations of Helen within Athenian drama limit the ability to analyse the character's free will. This necessitates a need to rely on the views of other characters affected by Helen's actions and the

¹²⁴ Jong 2012: 133.

¹²⁵ Beecroft 2006: 66.

¹²⁶ Euripides, *Helen* 31-47.

¹²⁷ Euripides, *Helen* 42-3.

representation of her in other sources. Despite such limitations, I would propose that some broad conclusions can be drawn regarding the extent of Helen's free will in Athenian drama.

There appears to be a similar theme of a lack of choice on Helen's part in the myths of the abduction by Theseus and Paris. Aeschylus refers to Paris' abduction as 'the violent rape of Helen';¹²⁸ though unfortunately as this is only a fragment the full context is lost. In *Trojan Women* Helen is accused of leaving willingly as she did not raise an alarm but there is also the representation in *Helen* who values her chastity and would not have given in to Paris. It could be suggested that Helen's beauty and desirability limit her ability to choose and create misfortune for her.¹²⁹

Fate is a powerful force in mythology that appears to be controlled by the gods. Helen's fate as the spear prize of the Trojan War is decided by Zeus. Arguably Helen had no choice in the war being fought over her, her phantom or her name, depending on the version of the myth. In order to escape her fate Helen could have committed suicide but the gods may have intervened to stop her in order that Zeus' plans could be fulfilled.

Aphrodite's power is referenced on multiple occasions, a claim denounced by characters such as Hecuba. However, the ability of the gods to force a person's hand into bending to their will cannot be ignored. If gods such as Apollo can bring a son to murder his mother or like Hera create a false image of Helen out of air it might be that there is no degree of freedom of choice within Athenian drama.¹³⁰

The Trojan War is a central story within Greek Mythology and Helen a key person. Depending on the perspective the Helen of Athenian drama appears to have limited free will in her choice to leave with Paris. Helen can be considered

¹²⁸ Aeschylus, Fr.283.3S.

¹²⁹ Euripides, *Helen* 28.

¹³⁰ Euripides, *Orestes*. 1665.

the victim of abduction or of fate or alternatively subject to the whim of the gods. In response to the question of Margaret Georges' Helen 'Was it my nature to attract death?' I would reply that there was no choice it was her destiny.¹³¹

¹³¹ George, *Helen of Troy* 242.

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