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## Whore or Hero?: Helen of Troy's Agency and Responsibility from Antiquity to Modern Young Adult Fiction

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WHORE OR HERO?  
HELEN OF TROY'S AGENCY AND RESPONSIBILITY FROM ANTIQUITY TO MODERN  
YOUNG ADULT FICTION

by  
Alicia Michelle Dixon

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2017

Approved by

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Advisor: Dr. Molly Pasco-Pranger

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Reader: Dr. Brad Cook

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Reader: Dr. Steven Skultety

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated, *in memoriam*, to my father, Daniel Dixon.

Daddy,

I wouldn't be here without you. You would have sent me to college on the moon, if that was what I wanted, and because of that, you set me up to shoot for the stars. For the past four years, Ole Miss has been exactly where I belong, and much of my work has culminated in this thesis. I know that, if you were here, you would be so proud to own a copy of it, and you would read every word. It may not be my book, but it's a start. Your pride in me and your devout belief that I can do absolutely anything that

I set my mind to have let me believe that nothing is impossible, and your never ending cheer and kindness are what I aspire to be.

Thank you for giving me something to live up to.

You are missed every day.

Love,  
Alicia

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I know that I have left out so many invaluable people and organizations, and I wish that I could name you all. I couldn't have done it without you.

## ABSTRACT

ALICIA MICHELLE DIXON: *Whore or Hero?: Helen of Troy's Agency and Responsibility from Antiquity to Modern Young Adult Fiction*  
(Under the direction of Dr. Molly Pasco-Pranger)

The purpose of this research is to explore the use of Helen of Troy spanning literature from Homer to the modern *Starcrossed* series by Josephine Angelini, and to discuss how Helen's agency is both stripped from her and granted to her through the use of desire, death, and the connotations associated with her face and name. Specifically, the differences between ancient works and Angelini's novels in how these three categories are treated concerning Helen are used to show how a Helen with very similar characteristics to those Helens in ancient literature, who generally possess little or no agency, can go from being an object and a scapegoat to being a heroine. Ultimately, the research discusses the idea that, while the Helen of antiquity could not be at once blameless, willing, and rational in her involvement in the Trojan War, a modern interpretation of Helen possesses all three of these traits, and displays compassion, bravery, and self-sacrifice as a result of the agency that is granted to her in this modern, young adult series.

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## **Introduction**

Part of the delight, therefore, in reading renditions of Greek myth, both ancient and modern, lies not in labeling departures as “wrong,” but in comparing them with other versions, and investigating why a particular detail was included or why a particular change was made....

–Thomas D. Kohn, “Tartarus and the Curses of Percy Jackson (or Annabeth’s Adventures in the Underworld),” 2015

When I started thinking about my honors thesis, I intended to write a collection of short stories from the perspectives of the women in ancient myth. The topic appealed to me because myth has been one of my favorite parts of being a Classics major, but the women in the myths are often given flat roles as side characters in the story, or worse, are turned into cautionary tales against being nontraditional. My goal was to give voice and depth to characters who were historically overlooked, objectified, or made into villains. With retellings like the *Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood and the *Starcrossed* series in mind, I began to think about which women I would include in my writing.

Around the time when I would have started planning the thesis, I decided to drop my English major to a minor, and that led me to rethink writing a creative writing thesis. Enter Helen. Of course, Helen was one of the women who I had already considered featuring in my thesis stories. When I started thinking about writing a nonfiction thesis, Helen became an obvious choice, since researching Helen would allow me to stay true to the underlying idea of my original thesis. I began to think about Helen and how she has been used in some of the modern fiction that I



have read. I considered using whatever portrayals of Helen I could find before I finally settled on focusing in on the portrayal of Helen in Angelini's *Starcrossed* series versus her varied roles in ancient literature.

I settled on a young adult series because, in my lifetime, I have seen a rise in the use of Classical themes in young adult literature. There are obvious adaptations like the *Starcrossed* series, Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, and Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series and its spin-offs. These novels take ancient literature and adapt them to modern storylines and mores, using ancient characters to instill the ideals of courage and friendship and to take young (and old) readers on mythical adventures. Still, it is not only the overt adaptations of Classical myth that have taken inspiration from the ancients. Many other popular series, most notably J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, have drawn inspiration from ancient languages and themes, incorporating them seamlessly into modern worlds. For example, many of the spells in Harry Potter's world are simply Latin for their intended effect, such as *crucio*, literally "I torture" in Latin. In addition to Latin influence, many of the characters in the books (Hermione and Minerva are two very prominent examples) take their names directly from characters in ancient myth.

With so much influence on modern young adult fiction coming from ancient literature and culture, it is something that deserves to be treated, and the character of Helen has been written on in the context of ancient literature versus modern young adult literature before. Krishni Burns notes that retelling ancient myth from the point of a female character gives authors the opportunities to write exciting

literature for young people that has inherent feminine themes.<sup>1</sup> She discusses the fact that Helen is an unlikely choice to become a feminist character in the retelling of ancient myth, especially when compared to women like Penelope and Ariadne.<sup>2</sup> Burns comes to the conclusion that, by giving female characters like Helen agency, modern authors are reinventing the narrative of an originally androcentric literature. This method of retelling both creates interest among young readers in Classical literature and gives power to the female characters in the original stories.

It is this power that I decided to investigate. Helen is arguably one of the most powerful women in all of literature. Remembered, colloquially, as the “Face that Launched a Thousand Ships,” Helen was a single woman who managed to lead two nations into a ten year war, ultimately leading to the downfall of Troy. Still, Helen’s agency is constantly in question in the ancient sources. Whether she chose to go to Troy or was taken there, or even whether she was there at all are unclear when one reads through the major ancient works on Helen of Troy. Meanwhile, in modern retellings, Helen is not just present, she even has the potential to be the hero. Still ancient Helens and modern Helens manage to have many things in common. In this thesis, I discuss those similarities, and how they create a powerful, modern Helen who is a brave and heroic agent in the *Starcrossed* series, while at once managing to overlap with and contradict ancient authors’ ideas of Helen of Troy.

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<sup>1</sup> Burns, Krishni. “Helen, Warrior Princess: Reimagining Helen as a Feminist Role Model in Young Adult Literature” in *Ancient Women in Modern Media*. Krishni Burns and W.S.S. Duffy, eds. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. 66-101.

<sup>2</sup> Burns, 69.

## **Prolegomenon of the *Starcrossed* Series**

In order to follow much of the following thesis, the reader must have a basic grasp of the modern young adult fiction series which I treated in my analysis of modern sources. As such, I have chosen to include this brief summary of the three books in Josephine Angelini's *Starcrossed* series. Each summary is only a brief overview, just enough that the reader goes into the thesis with a basic gist of the order of events in the series, in order that they may more easily follow the comparisons and analysis of *Starcrossed*, *Dreamless*, and *Goddess* with the ancient sources that I have used.

### ***Starcrossed***

In *Starcrossed*, we meet our protagonist, Helen Hamilton, who lives on Nantucket with her single father, Jerry. With the arrival of a new family on the island, Helen's world is turned on its side. It is gradually revealed that Helen (like most members of the Delos family) is a "scion," descended from a long line of demigods, going all the way back to before the Trojan War. Plagued by Furies who still seek justice in the form of blood debts for all of the lives taken in the Trojan War, the four Houses of scions remain in perpetual conflict with one another. The House of Thebes, in particular, is on a mission (nearly complete) to destroy all of the

other houses and thereby raise Atlantis, giving the scions immortal life, but also releasing the Olympians and plunging the human world into a second Trojan War. An incident in which Helen and one of the teenage Delos boys, Lucas, accidentally save one another's lives allows them to be released from the inter-house antagonism caused by the Furies. The Delos family (a resistant offshoot of the House of Thebes) help Helen (who belongs to the House of Atreus) hone her talents (super-speed, super-strength, flight, electric bolts) in order to protect herself from the rest of the "Thousand Cousins" of the House of Thebes. Lucas takes focus as a love-interest for Helen, clearly attracted to her, but mysteriously resisting.

The appearance of Helen's mother, Daphne, an (older) physical double of Helen with shape-shifting abilities, clarifies Helen Hamilton's descent from Helen of Troy, whose face she bears, and her unique connection to Aphrodite, a portion of whose girdle she wears as a protective amulet. Daphne also tells Helen that her father was not the man who raised her, but a scion, Ajax, Lucas' uncle, who was killed by the head of the House of Thebes, Tantalus, before Helen was born. Lucas and Helen, then, are first cousins. The book ends with the capture of Helen and Daphne by Tantalus' son, Creon, and their rescue by the Delos family. In the showdown, Lucas' cousin, Hector, kills Creon and is made an Outcast from his own family by this new blood-debt.

### ***Dreamless***

*Dreamless* picks up where *Starcrossed* leaves off, with the issues of Hector's having become an Outcast and the attraction between Helen and Lucas, who now

believe themselves to be first cousins. A self-enforced separation takes a toll on their moods, which is added to when the Delos family comes to realize that Helen is “descending” to the Underworld in her dreams, meaning that she physically enters the realm of the dead while she sleeps. Lucas’ little sister, Cassandra, begins looking into ways to free the scions from the curse of the Furies by finding them in the Underworld. In the meantime, Helen begins to suffer, as she goes through days and weeks of torture in the Underworld in the time of a single night’s sleep and gets very little true rest.

To help her on her quest in the Underworld, Daphne sends a new friend Helen’s way: Orion, a scion belonging to the Houses of both Rome and Athens. Together with Cassandra, they eventually find a solution to the problem of the Furies and free the scions from the endless cycle of blood debt by bringing the Furies water from Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness. This allows the Furies to forget their curse and become the Eumenides.

Meanwhile, in the background of Helen’s and Orion’s quest in the Underworld, the Thousand Cousins become a larger problem. Tantalus sends a Myrmidon, one of the ancient ant-like attendants of Achilles, to spy on Helen and track her progress in the Underworld. Knowing that Helen’s life is in danger, Castor Delos calls a council of the whole of the Thousand Cousins in an attempt to expose Tantalus as a kin-killer and to hold him accountable for hiring Automedon, the Myrmidon. Meanwhile, no one realizes that Automedon actually answers to another master: Ares. Helen is captured and tortured by Ares in an attempt to force Lucas and Orion to come to her rescue, force the scions to share blood, and combine three

of the four houses in one fell swoop, and freeing the Olympians from Olympus by breaking the truce that ended the Trojan War.

Though Ares is ultimately defeated when Helen casts him to Tartarus, and Automedon is killed in the battle, the victory comes too late to stop the sharing of blood between Helen, Orion, and Lucas during the battle. The three scions become blood brothers, uniting the four houses, and causing fear that war, and the prophesied "Tyrant," are on the horizon. The Delos family prepares to call a summit of all of the house, making history by hosting one of the first peaceful meetings of all four houses since before the Trojan War.

### ***Goddess***

In the third and final installation of the series, the scions prepare for war, as the Olympians, newly released by the joining of the Houses, wreak havoc on the human world. While Castor Delos works on gathering the heads of all four houses for a summit, Helen begins having dreams of the women who wore the Face of Helen before her and her mother, and contemporary visions of the Olympians attacking humans.

Meanwhile, tensions begin to rise as Helen and Lucas struggle to stay away from one another, people begin to suspect Orion of being the Tyrant of prophecy, and Helen begins to develop new powers that are not common to the House of Atreus. Helen receives instruction from Hades on her talents. He informs her that she is not a Descender, as the Delos family had thought, but a Worldbuilder. He says

that she will one day build a world of her own, just as he built the Underworld, and Zeus built Olympus. He also warns that as soon as her world is created, the Olympians will challenge her for it. If the gods should win the challenge, he warns, it would mean an apocalypse for the human world.

Ultimately, Helen builds her world and calls it Everyland. She saves Lucas from fatal injuries and is sorely tempted to stay there with him forever. However, ultimately, Helen makes the choice that none of the other Worldbuilders were able to make. She goes back to the scions, who are preparing for battle, and challenges Zeus. She is able to convince Zeus that she wants to bargain. She offers Zeus Everyland in exchange for the promise that he and the other gods will leave the human world alone. He agrees, and she tricks him, giving Everyland to him but not its borders, trapping him for eternity. She goes back to the battle just in time to stop the carnage. When they see that Helen has defeated Zeus, the Olympians retreat. The scions are left with peace, and the Olympians are left with the threat that Helen is watching, and will happily send them to join Ares in Tartarus if they continue to harm humans.

## **Chapter One**

### **Mover or Moved?**

### **Helen in Antiquity**

To this day, Helen of Troy captivates audiences, but perhaps she has never enraptured any audience more than her original one. The depiction of Helen in ancient works is complicated and diverse. From Homer to Isocrates, the way that ancient authors talk about Helen in their works raises many questions about how she was viewed, and it is difficult to come to a fast and hard conclusion on the attitudes that ancient authors held toward her. Was she supposed to be a warning or a victim? An agent or a captive? A whore or a hero? The answers to these questions seem to vary from work to work, and especially from works like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to apologies and retellings from the likes of Gorgias and Euripides, among others. Still, Helen's image does not only change from work to work. It also seems to morph at times within a single narrative. This evolution of Helen within the ancient narrative makes for a complex, and sometimes contradictory, painting of the woman at the heart of the Trojan War. There is always something that Helen is lacking. Helen's mentions in antiquity consistently create the idea that Helen can be many things, but that something must always be sacrificed: she can be blameless and have agency, but be lacking reason; or she can be a purposeful and knowing actor, but blame comes with the package; or, most tragically, she can be blameless, and have understood the consequences of being in Troy, but have had no agency at all. The



interplay of this set of characteristics is constantly taut with questions and contradictions about the kind of character that Helen truly is. Still, she is never whole in ancient literature. With Helen in antiquity, there is always something missing.

In evaluating Helen's archetype, it is best to start with the beginning and read Helen in Homer, as his narrative is the one from which all the others flow, or, in some cases, the one that they attempt to refute. In Homer, Helen is sometimes a very sympathetic figure. Snatched from her home, overcome by love kindled by a meddling Aphrodite, it is easy to understand Helen to be the victim in Homer's work (Hom. *Il.* 3.45-55, 3.161-171).<sup>3</sup> In fact, it sometimes seems as though no one except Helen blames Helen for the events leading up to the Trojan War. Many of the other characters in the *Iliad* tend to excuse Helen, especially male characters, saying that her beauty would drive any man to fight for her, and that no one except the gods could be blamed for the events following Helen's leaving Greece (Hom. *Il.* 3.156). However, this innocent image of Helen is complicated by Priam when he echoes the sentiment of blamelessness, then immediately voices his wish that she would leave and stop causing grief to his family (Hom. *Il.* 3.164).

These seemingly contradictory ideas call into question Helen's agency in the whole situation, and through her agency, her character. In order to consider whether Helen is supposed to be admired or despised, it must be established whether she chose the actions that instigated the Trojan War, or whether the entire situation was out of her control. Even if she did choose her actions, one might look

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<sup>3</sup> My line numbers for the *Iliad* correspond to the Lattimore translation.

to her intentions for something of an apology. If Helen chose to run away, but simply did not have the foresight to predict the trouble that she would cause, it is possible that she is simply controlled by desire, or that she is selfish, but that doesn't make her entirely malicious in the way that believing that Helen intentionally ran away, knowing she would leave a trail of destruction in her wake, does.

So, did Helen choose to go with Paris to Troy or did she never have a choice in the matter because it was what Aphrodite wished to happen? The answer is murky at best, and Helen further complicates the matter with self-deprecating language. Even if no one else blames her, at several points in the story, Helen certainly seems to blame herself. With the use of phrases such as, "slut that I am,"<sup>4</sup> Helen paints the very clear picture that she caused the war, perhaps not intentionally, but at least because some flaw in her character did not allow her to predict the consequences of her eloping with Paris (Hom. *Il.* 3.180). In fact, as Helen approaches Priam on the wall of Troy, the old men on the wall comment on the fact that no one could blame the men involved in the war for fighting over a woman as beautiful as Helen (Hom. *Il.* 3.156) This seems to at once overtly excuse the men from blame for the war and acknowledge that Helen really has no choices in her situation. When coupled with comments stating that whoever wins the war will also

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<sup>4</sup> The original Greek *κυνῶπις* translates to "dog-faced." For arguments sake, and to stay true to the Lattimore translation that I have used, I have chosen to use the translation of "slut" here, but it deserves acknowledging that dog-faced could have slightly different connotations than the modern word slut. Helen could be announcing her shame, in behaving like a dog and acting on animal instincts rather than reason and caution, which is the interpretation that my argument is based on. Alternatively, Helen could be announcing her shamelessness. After all, a dog will have sex in the street. To compare herself to such an animal could mean that Helen is not ashamed of what she has done in following Paris to Troy and that she does not care who knows of her actions.

be “winning the woman,” Homer seems to be obliterating Helen’s freedom to choose where she belongs throughout the *Iliad* (Hom. *Il.* 3.73, 3.91). Furthermore, Priam himself seems to blame the gods more than his daughter-in-law for what has befallen his city, though he acknowledges her at least as a vessel for misery (Hom. *Il.* 3.161-170).

However, though a clear narrative of stolen agency is evident at some points in the epic, there are moments when Homer seems to be hinting at a more incriminating picture of Helen. For instance, she mentions that her name will be made into song, though she doesn’t elaborate on whether that is a good thing or a bad thing (Hom. *Il.* 6.358). At times, she does not seem explicitly enthralled with the idea of being a subject of such fame, since Helen loudly paints a picture of herself, as a slut, as a selfish, unworthy woman, perhaps even as a destroyer. However, this loud vocalization could go either way, and it does not seem like a huge leap to assume that she might enjoy the renown, nearly akin to heroic *κλέος*, that would come with being immortalized in song.<sup>5</sup> Her remorse can sometimes seem more like an attention grab than an apologetic attitude. The idea that Helen might bask in the immortalization of a war fought over her is at least hinted at elsewhere in the *Iliad*, too. When we see Helen first in book three, a messenger has arrived to take her to the wall and finds her weaving (Hom. *Il.* 3.125-130). To be exact, the messenger finds Helen weaving a scene of the Trojan War—a war being fought over possession of *her*. Wouldn’t someone who truly felt remorse for starting such a devastating war

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<sup>5</sup> Naddaff, Ramona. “No Second Troy: Imagining Helen in Greek antiquity.” in William Robert, ed., *Logos and Muthos: Philosophical Essays in Greek Literature*. SUNY Press: Albany, NY. 2010. 76.

want to distance herself from it as much as possible? Instead, Helen is literally weaving the threads of a battle, both immortalizing her presence in the war and, metaphorically, underscoring her hand in it. This image speaks to the idea that at least some part of Helen likes being the center of such a conflict, and that she is making an effort for her part in it to be preserved, if only in a tapestry or a song. In addition, there is something about the very imagery of Helen herself weaving the battle that is telling. In the context of the tapestry, she is in control of the battle. She can create and destroy at will, and the war answers to her, so long as it is contained in her web.

Still, there is no denying that Helen degrades herself, that she constantly points herself out as the cause of the war, and that she does at times seem remorseful. If such actions are an attempt to highlight the fact that the war is being fought over her, then she is playing a dangerous game. This is where the complicated nature of Helen is so often at play: she is nearly impossible to take at face value in Homer, even when she is talking about herself. One moment, Helen is slut shaming herself, the next she is saying that she will be remembered in song. One minute, she is cursing Paris' name, the next she is going to his bed (Hom. *Il.* 6.315-368). At times remorseful, at times fickle, and at times potentially manipulative, Helen's comments about herself often imply that she believes herself to be an evil woman of little moral fiber. If the evil woman portrait that Helen sometimes paints of herself is the one that the reader should take to heart, then her remorse seems very out of place. After all, a truly manipulative person with no care for what harm

her actions create would surely feel no true remorse for those actions in their aftermath.

Yet, Helen does seem honestly remorseful in passages throughout the *Iliad*, and especially at the very end of the epic, when she speaks at Hector's funeral (Hom. *Il.* 24.760-776). Her relationship with Hector is another rather strange part of the complex character of Helen that Homer creates. At times, she seems almost seductive with her brother-in-law ("...Helen spoke to him in terms of endearment," "But come now, come in and rest on this chair, my brother..." (Hom. *Il.* 6.433, 6.354)) though he is married and has a young son (Hom. *Il.* 6.360). Still, he always seems friendly, perhaps even protective toward her. The complication is that Hector is a picture of honor in the *Iliad*, especially when compared with Paris, too cowardly to fight his own battles (Hom. *Il.* 6.350-360). The fact that the noble Hector deems Helen, the downfall of Troy, worthy of affection seems to speak in her favor, despite many of the negatives about her that run through the narrative of the epic. This is powerfully brought to light when she speaks at the funeral. Not only is she the last woman to speak, giving a distraught eulogy over Hector's body about how she "should have died" before coming to Troy, she is also the second-to-last person to speak in the entire poem, followed only by a handful of closing lines from Priam (Hom. *Il.* 24.776-780). In both a literal and a figurative sense, Homer gives Helen the last word on the situation. For a woman who arguably has no agency, this is a strange scenario. Her leaving Greece started the war, and her soliloquy is the final nail in Hector's, and in many ways Troy's, coffin. Yet, despite her central role in the war, she is one of very few people who escape mostly unscathed. If Helen is a victim

here, then she holds the tenuous position of both the most and the least powerful character in the *Iliad*.

On the other hand, if Helen is not the victim, then she is something much darker. Helen mentions wanting to go back to Menelaus in Hom. *Il.* 3.140, so not only does she see the end of the war unharmed, if much of what she says throughout the *Iliad* is to be trusted, she even gets what she wants out of the deal. She gets to go back home with Menelaus and start over, leaving Troy smoldering behind her. The death of Hector seems to be the one exception in this reading of Helen in Homer. Even if there is some question about Helen's remorse for coming to Troy in the first place, even if we are not sure whether she truly feels that she has done something horrible, or if she is simply trying to manipulate a bad situation, Hector and Helen seem to share a bond, and she highlights that in her eulogy for him. She seems genuine in her affection for Hector, and she seems genuine in her regret for her actions leading to her friend's demise (Hom. *Il.* 24.760-776). Helen gets the last word. It is hard to say what, exactly, that word is. Perhaps Helen's last word is fickle. Perhaps it is even responsible or blameworthy. These all seem like possible interpretations of Helen's character, as she stands over Hector's dead body in Book 24. However, as her last words seem to be spoken from true brokenness and regret that her actions have caused Hector harm, the reader may be intended to believe that Helen is at least redeemable. Even if she was selfish enough to choose to leave Menelaus with no concern for the harm that her actions would cause, it is hard to believe that the Helen of Book 24 of the *Iliad* is at her core a manipulative vixen with only her own best interests at heart. It seems that such a person would be incapable

of the affection and grief that Helen shows at Hector's funeral, but perhaps this seed of doubt raises the question: What if remorseful Helen is all an elaborate act?

Naddaff says, "Helen's willingness to shroud herself in the language of blame might be a strategic ploy worthy of the most dangerous and seductive of all women."<sup>6</sup> Regardless, remorse only befits those who are to blame, and as mentioned previously, Helen's agency in the situation is often called into question. Several comments about Helen being given to the winner of the Trojan War imply that she has no choice in the matter of whether she stays or goes (Hom. *Il.* 3.73, 3.255, 3.280-285). In addition, the presence of Aphrodite calls into question whether Helen ever had a choice in any of the events in the *Iliad*, while simultaneously potentially giving her advantages of manipulation and deceit that other women do not have. After all, if Helen is the "most dangerous and seductive of all women," then Aphrodite is that and more. What human, man or woman, would dare tell the goddess of love, beauty, and seduction "no"? This possible revocation of Helen's agency is especially apparent in a disguised Aphrodite's visit to Helen on the walls of Troy, when the goddess demands that Helen follow her to Paris' side, as Aphrodite has just rescued the Trojan prince from certain death on the battlefield (Hom. *Il.* 3.395-415). Helen seems irate at Aphrodite, and she cries out:

Strange divinity! Why are you still so stubborn to beguile me?  
Will you carry me further yet somewhere among cities  
fairly settled? In Phrygia or Maionia?  
Is there some mortal man there also who is dear to you? (Hom.*Il.*  
3.399-402)

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<sup>6</sup> Naddaff, 78.

This exclamation speaks directly to Helen's feeling that she has been tricked, and potentially coerced, by Aphrodite coming to Troy. Despite trying to send the goddess away, however, Helen ends up going with her to Paris, hinting that when the goddess is involved, Helen has no autonomy. Helen also berates Paris, but she ultimately ends up going to bed with him (Hom. *Il.* 3.426-447). These details further call into question Helen's agency, especially in her ability to say "no".

However, this assumption of lack of agency is just as questionable in some parts of the *Iliad* as it seems to be clear in others. In fact, Helen's association with Aphrodite seems to work both for and against the idea that Helen has no say in her circumstances. Helen is, in some ways, made out to be Aphrodite's mortal counterpart. Indeed, the old men on the wall of Troy compare Helen's beauty to that of a goddess (Hom. *Il.* 3.158). There are also epithets throughout the *Iliad* that draw attention to Helen's divine father Zeus, such as "Helen, the daughter descended of Zeus" and "gloriously descended Helen" (Hom. *Il.* 3.199, 3.426, 6.293). These descriptions indirectly acknowledge Helen as Aphrodite's half-sister, especially at 3.426, where Helen and Aphrodite are together at the time that the epithet is used. The physical closeness of the two females in the passage brings to mind quite clearly the connection that such epithets create between woman and goddess.

Still, perhaps the most direct connection between Helen and Aphrodite comes to us from another source. At the very beginning of the conflict caused by Helen and Paris, before anyone ever sailed to Troy, Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera were subjected to Paris' judgment. Each of the goddesses offered Paris a prize, should he choose its giver as the most beautiful of the three. Aphrodite offered



Helen. This implies that Helen and Aphrodite were already acquainted in some way. Helen, the most beautiful woman on earth, was the winning bribe in a rigged Miss Immortal contest (Apollod. *Epit.* E.3.2). Aphrodite is offering more than Helen here. She is offering desire, and she is using all of the sexual manipulation that is synonymous with her position as the goddess of sexual love, in her offer. Only briefly mentioned in the *Iliad*, at 24.762-764, the story of Paris is nonetheless essential to the events of Homeric epic. Without the judgment of Paris, Helen would never have left, and there would have been no Trojan War. As Helen is often closely associated with Aphrodite in Homer, it seems fair to assume that she also possesses some of this manipulative power. This connection makes it easy to believe that Helen might use her beauty to her advantage, to bend those around her to her will, just as Aphrodite manipulates both gods and humans.

At the beginning of this analysis of Helen, we saw that, in Book 3, she seems to be excused of some of her culpability by the Trojan elders' sentiment that the men in the war could certainly not be blamed for fighting over a woman as beautiful as Helen (Hom. *Il.* 3.156). I suggested that this is one way that Homer strips Helen of her agency: she is an object of conflict, rather than an actor herself. However, one could also argue that it is an implicit nod to the idea that Helen has simply been manipulating everyone, and especially the warring Greek and Trojan men, all along. Instead of excusing Helen, this interpretation of the Trojan elders' awestruck admiration places the blame squarely on her shoulders, through her explicit association with Aphrodite, and thus, her implicit associations with manipulation and desire. Helen's connection to Aphrodite could point to her influence over men

through desire as surely as Odysseus is connected to Athena through shared cunning. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus lies to Athena, and rather than being irate at his attempt to deceive her, Athena seems all the fonder of her hero for his lie. She says, “... you are far the best of all mortal men for counsel and stories, and I among all the divinities am famous for wit and sharpness ...” (Hom. *Od.* 13.297-299). In Homer, like seeks like, heroes and gods align because of shared traits, and Helen, the most beautiful woman alive, surely possesses the ability to manipulate by means of her beauty, just like her half-sister does.

There is a narrative that suggests such underlying manipulation in Homer’s *Odyssey*. As Naddaff puts it, “...this is the Helen whom we learn in *Odyssey* 4.266-89<sup>7</sup> is an accomplished mistress of imitation.”<sup>8</sup> Helen is credited with having nearly tricked the Achaeans into revealing the Trojan Horse as a trick, and subsequently foiling the fall of Troy (Hom. *Od.* 4.310-313). Menelaus himself recounts this story, and yet he excuses Helen, saying, “... when you came along, Helen—roused, no doubt, by a dark power bent on giving Troy some glory, ...” (Hom. *Od.* 4.307-308). However, this seems to fall right into line with a Helen who has direct ties to Aphrodite, and, through the goddess, the powers of desire and manipulation. Nothing would be more tempting to a soldier, separated from home for ten years without seeing his wife or family and stuck in what must have been the cramped and uncomfortable quarters of the Trojan horse, than hearing his beloved and absent wife’s voice calling out for him to show himself. This betrayal is excused by Menelaus, but it is exactly the kind of thing that the powerful, manipulative Helen of

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<sup>7</sup> My line numbers for the *Odyssey* correspond to the Fagles translation.

<sup>8</sup> Naddaff, 78.

Homer's epics might do. Plus, having seen Helen twist words to avoid the wrath of the Trojans, and knowing that she did at one point elope from Greece with her lover, is it so hard to believe that she may have simply preferred Troy to life with Menelaus, or even have been afraid of returning to Greece and what might await her there, and have acted accordingly? Her husband defends her, but this anecdote seems to implicate Helen more overtly than the *Iliad* is prone to do. Helen counters this story with the claim that she was secretly helping the Greeks from the inside all along (Hom. *Od.* 4.246-264), but we see no evidence of that in the *Iliad*.

In addition, the *Odyssey* further calls into question Helen's trustworthiness through her association with witchcraft and spirits. Not only does she manipulate her voice to sound exactly like the wives of the men inside the Trojan horse, she also provides the men whom she entertains during Telemachus' visit with a mind-numbing drug (Hom. *Od.* 4.220-223, 4.278). The use of such a substance requires that the reader question Helen's motives. Is the drug necessary to block the pain of so many lives lost, or to block the idea that Helen may not have had the Achaeans' best interests at heart until going home with them was the only option left to her. A harsher reading of the use of such potent tonics might create a direct line to Aphrodite's habit of emotional manipulation, as the tonic twists and dulls the emotions of those who partake of it.

As tempting as it can be for a reader to dislike Helen, there seems to be at least one ancient writer who admired her for her decisions. Sappho's Fragment 16<sup>9</sup> paints a complicated picture of the line where desire meets right and wrong. In the

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<sup>9</sup> I use the Balmer translation line numbers.

first six lines, of the existing fragment, the poet makes the claim that the most beautiful thing that anyone can see is that which she desires (Sapph. 16.3-4). She then goes on to use the example of Helen, who left her husband to sail to Troy, leaving all of her family behind for one man (Sapph. 16.7-10). Because of the idea of leaving behind her child and husband without thought, if one reads only the beginning of the poem, it is easy to interpret it as something of a warning against desire. This would not be surprising, as even the Trojan elders and Menelaus, who seem to blame soldiers and gods for the war rather than Helen, are able to shift that blame only because of desire for Helen (Hom. *Il.* 3.156-158). Desire is, without a doubt, what caused the Trojan War. Whether that desire is directed toward Helen, glory, fame, or retribution, every man in the *Iliad* is fighting at Troy because he desires something, and that desire is ultimately what led to an entire city's downfall. It is certainly possible the Sappho is warning that to follow the thing that you desire most, even if that means deserting your responsibilities, often leads to trouble and heartache, if not for yourself, then for the people that you have abandoned.

Still, the end of the poem adopts a much more wistful tone. Sappho brings up Anactoria, who the reader can infer is a love interest, and the person whom Sappho desires, making this Anactoria the most beautiful thing in the world to the narrator. Here, Sappho is, in some ways, comparing Anactoria to both Helen and Paris. With the mention of Anactoria as an object of desire, the poet seems to be identifying herself with Helen as a person who desires something taboo and who would give up everything she knows for it: Anactoria is Sappho's Paris. Nonetheless, Anactoria is also given her own comparison to Helen through the themes of the poem. All-

surpassing beauty and all-encompassing desire are two things that seem to characterize Helen consistently throughout antiquity. Sappho is almost certainly implying that Anactoria inspires in her the same kinds of feelings that Helen inspired in countless men. The poet seems almost jealous of Helen here. Helen left everything and went with Paris to Troy—consequences be damned. Though some aspects of the poem could be read as condemning Helen, the wistful air with which the narrator describes Anactoria’s “long-desired footstep”<sup>10</sup> and “radiant, sparkling face” seem to imply that there is also a level of admiration for Helen, a beautiful woman who abandoned her assigned role and chased her desire while the narrator for some reason seems to be incapable of doing the same. As such, Helen serves as both the subject and the object of desire (Sapph. 16.16).

The poem closes with the lines:  
I would rather see before me than the chariots  
of Lydia or the armour of men  
who fight wars on foot...(Sapph. 16.21-24).

These last sentiments create contrast with the opening lines, where Sappho has acknowledged that some claim armies, cavalries, or fleets of ships to be “the loveliest sight on this dark earth” (Sapph. 16.2-3). They seem to come full circle to seal the poem’s original claim that the most beautiful thing is whatever you desire. Because of the tone of the section of the poem that describes what the narrator desires, it is plausible that the poem also asserts an underlying claim that such beauty as can be found in desire might be worth giving up anything for.

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<sup>10</sup> According to David A. Campbell’s notes on Fragment 16’s description of Lesbia’s step is nearly directly invoked by this line, a correlation which implies romantic involvement even further (Notes on Sappho, note 17).

This is certainly relevant in the case of Homeric epic, where both military desire and romantic desire are so intrinsically involved in the events of the Trojan War. Perhaps Menelaus and Paris, even Hector, fought for Helen, but how many of the other men involved in the war fought for exactly the kind of military beauty that Sappho references both at the beginning and the end of Fragment 16? Sappho's contrast of these two kinds of beauty and desire puts a value on the desires of the heart rather than those of the blade, and could even imply that Helen did leave for Troy simply because it was what her heart desired.

But what exactly did Helen desire? Was it even Paris that she was chasing? Helen seems to desire something else, as well, in the Homeric version of things. Indeed, it could be likened to the military desires that Sappho mentions at the beginning of Fragment 16. In the *Iliad*, when we first see Helen, she is weaving a tapestry of the men who fight over her (Hom. *Il.* 3.125-128). So, she is creating a work that glorifies the exact kinds of desires that Sappho talks about at the beginning of her poem. We have also seen Helen's mention of being immortalized in song (Hom. *Il.* 6.358). At times, it almost seems as though Helen herself is seeking heroic κλέος—the very type of honor that accompanies the types of desires that begin Fragment 16. Indeed, Naddaff claims that Helen is trying to convince Hector, the golden warrior of the Trojans, that “a reward exists for war and suffering” when the two Homeric characters speak in Book 6 of the *Iliad* (Hom. *Il.* 6.315.368).<sup>11</sup> If this is true, then Helen could potentially have been seeking immortalization in the same way that Odysseus, Achilles, or Ajax were—through the fame of war. It is possible

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<sup>11</sup> Naddaff, 76.

that, at least by the time she is depicted in Homer, Helen's desires have nothing do with *ἔρως* or Paris at all, but rather with a lust for glory through the remembrance of the men who fought for her and the city that fell for her.

Whatever Helen's true desire, Sappho's distinction between military and erotic desire underscores her own desire: to drop everything and be with Anactoria. For whatever reason, the poet seems to be unable to do so, but it is fairly clear that at least some part of her believes that Helen should be admired for following her heart rather than remaining trapped in her life in Greece, and she is clearly interpreting Helen's escaping to Troy as an effect of her desire for Paris. Sappho seems to yearn for the freedom, or perhaps the bravery, to follow the path of the face that launched a thousand ships, and it seems that she would rally an armada herself to be with her lover, if only she could.

There are many ancient authors who apologize for Helen, but only Sappho seems to respect and admire Helen herself. All of the later apologies have one thing in common: in one way or another, they take away Helen's agency in her situation. Whether this is achieved through Helen being snatched away and never going to Troy at all, or through only being able to praise Helen on account of the many men who desired her over the course of her life, these authors can only allow for Helen's praise either by completely changing her story or by attributing her actions to her beauty, the gods, or some other force besides her own will.

The first category of apologies is founded in a story that exists to modernity only as a passage in another work. Stesichorus' *Palinode* is mentioned briefly in Plato's *Phaedrus*, and it makes the claim that Helen never boarded any ship to Troy:

“That saying is not true / thou didst not go within the well-oared ships / nor didst thou come to the walls of Troy” (Plat. *Phaedrus*, 243a).<sup>12</sup> Only three lines of the original work exist to modernity, but we do know something of the mythic backstory of its author. Isocrates includes a bit of the story of Stesichorus in his *Encomium of Helen* (Isoc. *Hel.* 64)<sup>13</sup>. According to his telling, Stesichorus was originally not so forgiving of Helen. The fragment that we have today is supposed to be part of a poem written in repentance for writing blasphemous words against Helen. Indeed, the Isocrates story speaks to the idea that Helen was deified when she died, as it asserts that she herself blinded Stesichorus for his wrongdoing and restored his sight upon his writing of the *Palinode*. This is important, as it lends divine truth to Stesichorus’ alternate version of events. It even asserts, implicitly, that those who would believe Homer’s version of Helen’s story are blind, just as a deified Helen blinded Stesichorus until he wrote the “true” version of events (Isoc. *Hel.* 64). The Platonic discussion of the fragment asserts the same story of Stesichorus’ lies and restoration, both in the *Phaedrus* and in a brief section of the *Republic* (Plat. *Phaedrus*, 243a, and Plat. *Republic*, 9.586c). Whenever Helen appears, spectacular stories follow, and that is equally true whether the writer is condemning or clearing Helen, or both, as in the case of Stesichorus.

Since only a fragment of the Stesichorus apology survives, the best example of apology claiming that Helen never went to Troy comes from Euripides. Euripides’ *Helen* offers us an alternative to Homer’s narrative of Helen’s role in the Trojan War.

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<sup>12</sup> Stesichorus, “Fragment 32,” as quoted in the *Phaedrus*.

<sup>13</sup> This footnote refers to Isocrates 10. I will be referring to it as Isocrates’ *Encomium of Helen* throughout, as this is the title that most scholars attribute to Isocrates 10. I will abbreviate this (Isoc. *Hel.*) in in-text citations.



Plato writes that, "...just as Helen's phantom, according to Stesichorus, was fought over by the warriors at Troy in ignorance of the truth (Plat. *Republic*, 9.58c)."

Euripides also posits throughout *Helen* that Helen of Troy never went to Troy at all—only her face did, as a wraith Helen was sent by Hera with the purpose of meddling in human affairs and inciting the Trojan War (Eur. *Hel.* 670-685). This may be an attractive option, as not only does Euripides remove all blame from Helen in this way, but he also, for apology, creates a new interpretation of Helen who is worthy of praise. Faithful, chaste, and loving, the Helen of Euripides is a Helen deserving of her later deified status. The eidolon of Helen that is actually present at Troy becomes the bearer of blame in Euripides' rhetoric, though not necessarily in Helen's life following the events of *Helen*, which I will discuss later. However, the idea of removal from the Trojan conflict is, in its own way, just as problematic as believing that Helen was forced to or chose to go to Troy with Paris. In Euripides' *Helen*, the only way to clear Helen's name in regards to Troy is to completely remove her from the situation. By doing so, he takes away any agency that she may have had and makes her a prisoner of the desires of others just as surely as Helen may have been a prisoner of Paris' desire and Aphrodite's manipulation in Homer's version of the story.

The opening of Euripides' *Helen* finds her in exile in Egypt and forced to hide away in a tomb because of another man's desire for her: the Egyptian king, Theoclymenus, who wishes to marry her (Eur. *Hel.* 797). Indeed, Menelaus is reunited with his wife only to find that he is, yet again, at risk of being killed for the sake of another man's desire for his wife (Eur. *Hel.* 782-810). Helen has no say in her

situation other than through her voluntary sequestration in the tombs beneath the palace, where she interacts with the king's sister, a prophetess called Theonoë (Eur. *Hel.* 797-821). This self-imposed separation is the only thing keeping her safe from being forced to marry without even knowing whether her current husband is dead, which, in a way, makes her situation in *Helen* even more suffocating than her position in the *Iliad*. Sure, in Homer's epic, hordes of men are fighting over who gets to claim Helen as a prize, but at least she has the freedom to walk the walls of Troy rather than being forced to live alone for years with no one to keep her company aside from Theonoë, her servants, and hordes of the dead. The only redeeming quality of Helen's situation in Egypt is her friendship with Theonoë, who seems to have offered Helen a sort of sanctuary by allowing her to reside in the prophetess' domain and thereby to remain out of the reach of the king. This gives Helen the ability to refuse the advances of her suitor, a capacity that Helen often seems to lack in her interactions with Paris and Aphrodite in the *Iliad* (Eur. *Hel.* 794-801, Hom. *Il.* 3.426-447).

Meanwhile, Helen is being blamed for the Trojan War and all of the death and destruction that surround it because of Paris' desire for her and Hera's continued resentment because of his former judgment. In Homer, we can at least question whether Helen's choices are being dictated for her and, if not, what motivations drive her choices. In the *Helen*, so many people's desires are controlling Helen that anything she might desire herself is reduced to repetitive outcries of wifely concern and loyalty for Menelaus. She does eventually escape with Menelaus, but she cannot simply leave. Instead, she must resort to an elaborate scheme because of a king who

does not care what she might want to, or even be bound by her marriage to do (Eur. *Hel.* 1053-1106). Once she does escape, Theoclymenus still seems to think that he has some claim to her, simply because he wanted her (Eur. *Hel.* 1623). While Euripides certainly makes Helen out to be a better and trustworthier character than Homer does, he arguably treats her worse. He sequesters her to keep her safe, and despite the fact that Helen speaks exponentially more in *Helen* than she did in Homer's two epics put together, Euripides' interpretation of Helen silences any side of her that is not a loyal wife and mother for Menelaus and Hermione.

Euripides also briefly discusses Helen again in the *Troades*, where he supplies a different interpretation of Helen—one much more akin to the Helen we saw in Homer. In the play, there is a scene of dialogue in which Hecuba and Menelaus are discussing the fate of Helen, and Hecuba is openly angry at the other woman, encouraging Menelaus to kill her (Eur. *Tro.* 890). Hecuba argues for the worst possible version of Helen, the one whose manipulations ruin the lives of others. "Her eyes! Her eyes enslave the eyes of all men, enslave their cities and set their houses on fire (Eur. *Tro.* 893)." Here, Euripides depicts a Helen entirely unlike the woman described in *Helen*. Instead, he reasserts the ideas of Helen that we saw previously, in Homer. She is manipulative and destructive, and Hecuba believes that she should be destroyed. This extreme departure from the attitude of *Helen* illustrates just how complicated the character of Helen can be. It also illustrates the difference between a Helen with no responsibility for the Trojan War, who still feels the blame of those who think she was the cause of the conflict and a Helen who, according to Hecuba, deserves all of the blame, but is not being punished for her

part in the carnage. After all, neither reading of Helen is necessarily wrong. Her motivations can only be guessed at in any Helen myth, and there is certainly evidence in Homer that she could be either a victim with no agency or a powerful agent in her narrative who uses her beauty to manipulate those around her and bend them to her will. Euripides shows us both of the sides of Helen that are present in Homer. He simply creates two very defined, flat Helens, rather than the more dynamic and ambiguous Helen of Homer. The fact that Euripides spends a whole tragedy expunging the actions of Helen at Troy only to use the Hecuba character in the *Troades* to demand her death could mean that he is conflicted on the character of Helen, himself, just as any reader of Homer might be.

Euripides' depiction of Helen in the *Troades* could also be used as an illustration of the natural opinions on "Helen" of the other characters in the Trojan War, whether that means Helen herself or the eidolon that stood in her place, rather than an expression of Euripides' own opinion. It is entirely possible that Hecuba is calling for the death of a woman that she has never even seen, if we assume that *Helen* and the *Troades* occur in the same universe. If this is the case, then Hecuba is truly calling for the head of the eidolon, not the real Helen, who was never at Troy at all. In this case, Hecuba's condemnation of Helen is an unfortunate case of mistaken identity, and it illustrates the fact that Helen will never overcome the reputation that Hera's eidolon created for her. *Helen* can be read as a (somewhat problematic, by modern standards) apology for Helen: there is no doubt about that. However, the *Troades* could either contain a condemnation of Helen, or it might be highlighting the circumstances that Helen herself laments in *Helen*—the curse that her beauty

has brought her (Eur. *Hel.* 304-305). If Hecuba only ever saw the eidolon and is harboring such feelings toward that misrepresentation of the real Helen, then it is entirely plausible that others also continue to call for Helen to be punished for crimes not her own. In this case, Helen is trapped in the shadow of a shadow, once again stripped of the ability to better her own circumstances.

Meanwhile, there is another form of apology for Helen, with an approach different from that of Euripides' *Helen*. Gorgias and Isocrates both wrote apologies for Helen as rhetorical exercises. Though neither claims that Helen was never at Troy, the apologies are similar to Euripides' *Helen* in that Gorgias and Isocrates only propose situations in which Helen is blameless or worthy of praise because she lacks all agency or she inspires desire in some noteworthy man. In Gorgias' *Encomium*, we find that he has found four different reasons to excuse Helen's actions. However, when you inspect these reasons closely, they are all exactly the same thing—some force, whether it be the gods, love, men, or fate, has taken away Helen's ability to choose (Gorg. *Hel.* 6).

The gods cause things to happen in the human world with no regard to how their meddling might affect their human counterparts, and in Gorgias' narrative, love and divine interference, though they are designated as two separate reasons for Helen's choices, are essentially the same thing. Both of these options for excusing Helen imply that some higher power took over Helen, stole her ability to reason, and, in effect, forced her to choose to run away with Paris while she was not in her right mind (Gorg. *Hel.* 6, 19). The men in Gorgias' *Encomium*—most notably Paris and Menelaus—take a more brutish route. They also take away Helen's ability to

choose her path, but by means of brute force and coercion (*Gorg. Hel. 7*). To apologize for Helen this way, one must accept that whoever wanted her simply took her, from gods to men to desire itself, pulling Helen this way and that, like greedy children fighting over a favorite toy.

The implicit sexualization and objectification of this strain of apology continues with Isocrates, whose main claim is that, since so many great men desired Helen, she must be worthy of praise (*Isoc. Hel. 21-22*). This argument is somewhat similar to the one that I made briefly above in regards to Helen's relationship with Hector, except that it applies explicitly to sexual desire, rather than to friendship. Isocrates' *Encomium* is just as problematic as robbing Helen of agency for two reasons. First, it completely ignores the fact that the Trojan War—the reason that Helen needs to be apologized for in the first place—ever happened. Second, through this means of apology, Isocrates is implying that there is nothing praiseworthy in Helen herself except for her ability to inspire lust in the men who see her. And these two reasons do not even include the fact that Isocrates praises Helen based on the fact that she was kidnapped by Theseus while she was still an unmarriageable girl because of his desire for her (*Isoc. Hel. 19*). Not to mention, Helen's ability to inspire desire could be considered a terrible trait, rather than a praiseworthy one. In fact, as I mentioned in my discussion of Homer, Helen's ability, as an object of intense desire, to potentially manipulate situations to her advantage and use the people around her as they fall victim to her wiles, directly connects Helen to Aphrodite in rather unflattering ways. In Homer, Helen's extreme sexuality could be pointed to as a cause of others' suspicion of her. Therefore, it seems counterintuitive that

Isocrates would essentially name it as the only trait which makes her worthy of praise or renown. Throughout both types of apologies, Helen can only be redeemed by the actions of others, especially men, who perpetuate the loss of her agency, desire her to the point of kidnap and coercion because of her beauty, or both. These issues hint at an underlying theme that runs through the entirety of Helen's narrative: that the only good woman is a controlled one.

The Helen archetype is as complicated as it is unsettling. There's something about Helen's story that may not sit well with a modern audience, no matter what reading it chooses to accept. Still, Helen gives us important insight into the ways in which beautiful women may have been both feared and revered in the ancient world. It shows that even someone who could influence the men around her with a mere look might still lack control over her choices and her life as a whole. To read Isocrates' *Helen* against Homer's work might even suggest a stark line concerning desire. In Isocrates' work, desire for Helen is lauded as a reason to praise her. Yet, in the *Iliad*, if one accepts that desire is what took Helen to Troy, it causes the suffering of many to be attributed to her. When Helen is the subject of desire, she is to be feared. When she is the object of desire, she is to be praised. And this idea carries over into the apologies that purport that she was never at Troy at all. Even when only a false image of Helen is present at Troy to fuel the Trojan War, Helen comes to be seen as something of an arbiter of grief. Yes, the Helen of antiquity is complex, but there is no way to escape the fact that, one way or another, whether because she was robbed of agency or because her agency caused her to be feared, she is a prisoner of her circumstances.

The only exception is the Sappho reading, where Helen's choices to follow her heart rather than her responsibilities cause her to be an object of a different kind of desire: a desire to be able to make the same choices that Helen did. This is important because Sappho is the only female reading of Helen that we have from antiquity. If Sappho envied Helen's freedom, perhaps other women did, too. This underlying desire for autonomy could be what the male authors of Helen's many, ancient narratives sensed and what they seem so wary of when discussing Helen of Troy. Some of Sappho's reading of Helen may seem closer to the modern adaptations of her character: modern Helen is certainly supposed to be an agent for change in her circumstances. However, I posit that modern Helen is actually something of a conglomeration of the autonomous ideas in Sappho's fragment and Euripides' invention of a Helen of high moral fiber. In ancient literature, Helen could be good, free, and rational, but never all three at the same time. I believe that we will find that a modern audience desires a Helen who is able to be all three.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Helen's Destructive Identity: The Name and Face of Helen**

Helen Hamilton finds herself in a unique position in Josephine Angelini's *Starcrossed* series. She is the first woman of the House of Atreus to bear the name "Helen" since her ancestor, Helen of Troy. It is easy to understand why a clan of demigods might avoid the name. After all, many ancient authors seem to attribute the brutal Trojan War to Helen of Troy. That is quite a burden to pass down to one's child. Still, avoiding Helen's name might bear a bit more significance than refusing to pass down the name of a standard, crazy relative. There seems to be something about the name "Helen" itself that bodes ill for those who bear it, and Helen's face, her beauty, often brings her just as much grief. The combination simply refuses to let its bearers live in peace.

The inherent malevolence of Helen's name is hinted at in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.<sup>14</sup> In a section of back-and-forth between the Herald and the Chorus, Aeschylus writes:

Who is he that named you so  
fatally in every way?  
Could it be some mind unseen  
in divination of your destiny  
shaping to the lips that name  
for the bride of spears and blood,  
Helen, which is death? Appropriately  
death of ships, death of men and cities (Aesch. *Agam.* 681-688).

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<sup>14</sup> I use Lattimore's line numbers.

This passage overtly implies that there is something about Helen's name that destined her to be a destroyer. After all, the idea that Helen was the ruin of the great city of Troy has lasted two millennia, and the implication that such destruction is in Helen's nature is present in this passage of *Agamemnon*, when the Chorus discusses the etymology of her name. Indeed, the phrase used in *Agamemnon* to describe Helen's wake of destruction seems almost a beckoning to the woman in the original Greek: ἑλένας ἑλανδρος ἐλέπτολις<sup>15</sup> (Aesch. *Agam.* 689-690), taken from the Greek verb ἐλεῖν, meaning to "take," "capture," or "kill."<sup>16</sup> Said aloud, a person may as well be calling, "Helen, Helen, Helen!" In addition, the use of names and the number three both have classical connections to magic and incantations, essentially making this passage in *Agamemnon* an invocation of the "superhuman" destructive force of Helen, embodied in her capturing and killing name.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Euripides' *Troades* contains a line of similar sentiment, which could easily be connected with the Aeschylean line above. Hecuba advises Menelaus, "Flee her sight or she will capture (ἔλη) you with the longing she arouses. For she captures (αἰρεῖ) the eyes of men, she captures (ἔξαυρεῖ) and destroys towns and burns their houses" (Eur. *Tro.* 892).<sup>18</sup> In the Greek, this line uses a third person conjugation of the aorist infinitive ἐλεῖν: ἔλη. Between *Agamemnon* and the *Troades*, the sounds of Helen's name are used in a

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<sup>15</sup> Pronounced: *helenas* (for *helenaus*), *helandros*, *heleptolis*.

<sup>16</sup> Blondell, Ruby. *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.130.

<sup>17</sup> Blondell, 130.

<sup>18</sup> Translation from Skutsch, Otto. "Helen, Her Name and Nature." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 107 (1987): 192.

chorus of destruction. The Chorus reads Helen's name as a harbinger of death and destruction, not just for men, but for fleets and cities.

Helen, destroyer of everything in her path makes great fodder for tragedy, and that trend continues throughout most of Angelini's series, as it often seems that there can be no ending for Helen Hamilton other than a tragic and destructive one. This idea certainly feeds into the attitude toward the name "Helen" which we find in Angelini's books. In the midst of telling Helen the "true" story of the fall of Troy (in which the claim is made that there was no horse, that Odysseus simply convinced Helen to use her beauty to manipulate the guards of Troy to open the gates), Ariadne says, "For us, naming your daughter Helen is like a Christian naming their child Judas."<sup>19</sup> Such vivid imagery, that the name "Helen" would be the equivalent of the name of the man who betrayed Jesus Christ to his brutal execution on the cross, is telling. Helen comes away from the conversation wondering "...how much her mother must have hated her to give her such a cursed name."<sup>20</sup>

The very idea that descendants of the original Helen would avoid her name countless generations later perhaps speaks most clearly to its cursed nature. In the universe laid out by the *Starcrossed* books, the importance of names is mentioned over and over again. The names of many of the characters featured in the series are deeply connected to their fates and their roles in Angelini's narrative. In fact, while Daphne gave Helen a taboo name, Lucas' parents were hubristic enough to attempt to avoid his fate by assigning him a traditionally "wrong" name: he should have had

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<sup>19</sup> Angelini, Josephine. *Starcrossed*. New York: HarperTeen, 2011. 192.

<sup>20</sup> *Starcrossed*, 192.

his grandfather's name—Paris.<sup>21</sup> The names of Helen, Hector, Cassandra, Ariadne, Andy (Andromache) and Jason all directly link them to their roles as characters in Helen Hamilton's world as well as characters who were involved in the life of Helen of Troy (at least in Angelini's version of things). Therefore, the fact that Daphne chose to give Helen the cursed name of Helen of Troy has huge implications as to how the other scions expect Helen's story to play out. Many of the other scions expect her to be a traitor and a destroyer, whether she means to or not. They expect Helen Hamilton to live up to her name, just as the Chorus in *Agamemnon* says that Helen of Troy did during the Trojan War.

Helen Hamilton's name is not the only thing about her that is cursed. In fact, she might be the most diversely cursed character in young adult literary history, which is quite a feat. Helen is cursed by the Furies until she and Lucas save each other in the first book.<sup>22</sup> We learn in the last book of the trilogy that she and all of the Helens before her are cursed by Aphrodite to bear a daughter.<sup>23</sup> She is cursed by her own mother in order to prevent her from drawing attention to herself and her abilities.<sup>24</sup> She bears a cursed name, one which has not been given to any scion until Helen herself because of the severity of the negative connotation connected with it.<sup>25</sup> Even her face is cursed, and it is perhaps the most inescapable curse of all.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Starcrossed*, 369-370.

<sup>22</sup> *Starcrossed*, 140.

<sup>23</sup> Angelini, Josephine. *Goddess*. New York: HarperTeen, 2013. 27.

\*Interestingly, in this same passage, Aphrodite also curses Menelaus and his city to infertility.

<sup>24</sup> *Starcrossed*, 218.

<sup>25</sup> *Starcrossed*, 192.

<sup>26</sup> *Starcrossed*, 418 and Angelini, Josephine. *Dreamless*. New York: HarperTeen, 2012. 284.

Indeed, the face of Helen has, since the very first mention of her, been all that was needed to spawn war and chaos. According to Stesichorus and Euripides, Helen was never even present at Troy, but the mere appearance of her was enough to convince the men of Greece and Troy to take up arms and fight a ten year war. The eidolon was nothing more than a vapor, a wraith conjured by a jealous Hera, but while the wraith evaporated when Menelaus was reunited with the real Helen in *Helen*, the trouble that it caused was left behind. The eidolon was a temporary phantom of Helen with lasting consequences for everyone involved in the Trojan War (Eur. *Hel.* 605-606). Helen even decries her beauty in Euripides' play, claiming that it is a curse that has brought her nothing but ruin (Eur. *Hel.* 304-305).

This idea of the face of Helen as a curse is certainly at play in Angelini's trilogy, as well. After all, Daphne says that "The Face that Launched a Thousand Ships" is the curse of all of the women who wear it—the curse of the female descendants of Helen of Troy.<sup>27</sup> And it is clear, even in the beginning of the series, before Helen knows what she is, that there is something about Helen Hamilton that inspires extreme reactions from both men and women. In fact, Helen is self-conscious of her appearance and the reactions that it inspires.<sup>28</sup> Creepy men follow Helen on the ferry.<sup>29</sup> Later, Creon, one of Lucas' cousins, whose only goal is to exterminate the other houses and raise Atlantis, is so enraptured with Helen's face

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<sup>27</sup> *Starcrossed*, 418.

<sup>28</sup> *Starcrossed*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Starcrossed*, 8.

that he considers giving up honor and a Triumph<sup>30</sup> to have her.<sup>31</sup> This is only intensified when the Delos family shows up on Nantucket, and Helen and Lucas nearly cannot control the Furies-inspired rage that overcomes each of them in the other's presence. Yet, the two cannot stay away from each other, almost as though Fate is continually dragging the reborn Helen archetype and the reborn Paris archetype toward each other. Of course, this is only fitting, as all of the characters in Angelini's story have something of a part to play based on their faces, just as many of their names play a role in their fates. Castor explains to Helen that they cannot be sure of her ancestry because of the fact that physical attributes do not pass from parent to child with scions like they normally do with mortals: "We Scions are half human, half archetype, and every now and again the way one of us looks has more to do with the historical figure the Fates destined that Scion to model his or her life after than who the parents were."<sup>32</sup> Though Castor's comment is meant explicitly to explain scion heritage to Helen, it has much deeper implications, and all of the Delos clan knows that, though Helen does not yet.

War and tragedy follow those who bear the Helen archetype. Both in antiquity and in Angelini's retelling, Helen has been seen as a prize, as something to claim, or more honorably in the case of the Delos clan, to protect, but she is rarely recognized as the catalyst of action that she is. And it goes unnoticed for generations that when Helen is put into a situation that robs her of her agency, people die. This is

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<sup>30</sup> This is the honorary ceremony that is given to a scion of the House of Thebes when he or she kills a scion of another House. It is capitalized in order to stay true to Angelini's use of the word.

<sup>31</sup> *Starcrossed*, 277-278.

<sup>32</sup> *Starcrossed*, 141.

exemplified in the previous carriers of the Face that Angelini gives the reader glimpses of through Helen's flashbacks to previous lives in the last volume of the series when Helen touches the waters of the River Lethe and (oddly enough) gains memory.<sup>33</sup> In Angelini's version, after the discovery of her affair with Paris, Helen of Troy attempted to stay in Sparta with Menelaus in hopes of sacrificing herself by allowing Menelaus or the crowd to beat her to death, since she feared that she was pregnant with the child that would grow to become the prophesied Tyrant. She would have sacrificed herself, and the Trojan War would never have happened if not for the actions of Aphrodite who stole her away and took her to Paris because the goddess could not stand the idea of her sister being killed.<sup>34</sup>

The next bearer of the face of Helen, Atlanta, is nearly passed over entirely, but we do know the ending to her story. A Worldbuilder like Helen Hamilton, Atlanta lost her challenge to the gods, and she and her world were destroyed, though the stakes for scions and humankind were not as high in the case of Atlanta, since at that time the treaty keeping the gods on Olympus was still in place.<sup>35</sup> Knowing this gives us the background that the mystical land that the Thousand Cousins of the House of Thebes have been murdering other scions for generations to raise has not existed for thousands of years. Because these scions do not understand the histories of the people to whom the Face has belonged, they have nearly eliminated themselves, despite the fact that Atlantis disappeared into the mists of lost worlds centuries before the house became obsessed with acquiring it.

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<sup>33</sup> *Goddess*, 141-142.

<sup>34</sup> *Goddess*, 19-22.

<sup>35</sup> *Goddess*, 134.

Next, Guinevere wore the fated Face. Again, the most beautiful woman in the world was met with ruin, both for herself and for those she loved. Offered up by her father as a prize to King Arthur, Guinevere was sent away from her family and her people in a prison, and before she even makes it to Arthur's court, most of the party escorting her is murdered by another clan.<sup>36</sup> She was forced into the marriage with Arthur for the sake of saving lives of both her people and Arthur's people. Still, fate found a way to slay most of the clan that Guinevere was forced to leave behind.<sup>37</sup> With a history like this, it is easy to see that the curse of Helen's face is a prevalent factor in Helen Hamilton's life; especially once these memories of past Helens start intruding on her thoughts. Despite being kind and brave, and despite a history of self-sacrifice, those who bear the Face are rewarded with nothing except lost love, sorrow, and death.

"She [Helen] is not heard; she is first and foremost, seen."<sup>38</sup> Nadoff's statement, intended to describe the Helen of Homer, holds true for the Helen archetype as a whole, both in Angelini's line of those who carried the Face and in many of the Classical authors for whom Helen was a muse. In the classical works especially, Helen is often nothing more than a static façade, an idol that could be replaced by any woman with enough beauty. Among all forty-eight books of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Helen speaks in only five. Across those five books, Helen actually speaks only seven times.<sup>39</sup> In *Helen*, Helen is a main speaker, but she is still not always heard. Though Helen tells Theoclymenus her wishes, and though she

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<sup>36</sup> *Goddess*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> *Goddess*, 175.

<sup>38</sup> Ramona Naddaff. "No Second Troy," 74.

<sup>39</sup> Naddaff, 74.



expresses to him that she is married, Theoclymenus is only concerned with her beauty, and not with her words. He wants to marry Helen, and throughout the play it is made clear that he does not intend to let anything stand in the way of acquiring her. The drive to own the most beautiful woman in the world is ever-present in Helen's narrative. This is perhaps the most obvious in Isocrates' work, where Helen is hardly mentioned at all, outside her beauty, despite the fact that the work is supposed to be an apology for her. In antiquity, Helen's looks so overpower her voice that it is almost as though she does not have one.

Helen is muted by her looks in Angelini's novels, as well, though in a slightly different way. "The Tyrant shall rise up with power unlimited. On one choice will the fate of all be decided."<sup>40</sup> This line is spoken by Cassandra when she is overtaken by the Fates, and in that moment, the Trojan War cycle comes full circle, though the characters in the room do not realize it at the time. It is not until Helen's school friend, Matt, having taken on the character of Achilles, shows up at the last battle and points Helen out that the scions realize that the "Tyrant" that they have been worried about for generations has been hidden behind the most beautiful face in the world. In that moment it becomes clear that, not only does one character decide the fate of all, but that the fate of all has hinged on a Helen throughout scion history. Helen being taken to Troy, Guinevere being taken to Arthur, and now Helen Hamilton being forced to battle the gods on the beach of Nantucket—they have all come down to the movements of the face of Helen, whether she made the choice to move or not.

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<sup>40</sup> *Goddess*, 148.

The difference for Helen Hamilton is that she does have a say in her circumstances. The ultimate fate of the scions hangs on her choice, not on her kidnap or her marriage. She must make the choice that decides whether or not the gods destroy the world, and despite the fact that most of the demigods of Helen and Lucas' generation stand on a beach ready to go to war with the gods and, in many cases with their parents, uncles, and cousins, no one realizes how much Helen's voice matters until a pointed look from her childhood friend gives Helen away as the famed Tyrant to everyone, including herself.<sup>41</sup> It also becomes clear that several of her friends, especially Matt, do not trust Helen to make the crucial decision. They expect Helen Hamilton to make decisions based on short-sighted or selfish motivations, blinded to what is actually the best for the world because she cannot see past her own life and the lives of those she loves. Just like Helen of Troy, if indeed she had a choice to follow Paris to Troy and start a war, many of the scions in Helen Hamilton's life expect her to make a choice that destroys them all.<sup>42</sup> Because of this mindset, the scions of Angelini's world, led by Matt as Achilles, come perilously close to completing the cycle and taking the choice away from Helen, fulfilling the fate of the Helen archetype and repeating the curse that has followed those bearing the Face for millennia—that all of the Helens should have their choices stripped away, only to watch the world suffer for it.

In this way, Helen's appearance is almost an eidolon of herself. There is a Helen that exists in everyone's mind who bears her face, and who is doomed to make the same mistakes, always choosing her own desires (even if those desires are

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<sup>41</sup> *Goddess*, 306

<sup>42</sup> *Goddess*, 188-189.

pure, like love) over the well-being of others, and always causing tragedy and death. Helen Hamilton shatters this perception when she chooses to give up and eternal life with her beloved in Everyland for the sake of imprisoning Zeus and ensuring that the gods are not allowed the free rein to wreak havoc on earth after having been trapped on Olympus for two thousand years.<sup>43</sup>

But Helen is not the only bearer of the Face in Angelini's trilogy. Daphne, Helen's mother, and her physical double, has the agency that the Helens before her did not, just as her daughter does, yet she lets an obsession with her love for a dead man make her decisions for her, and so the controlling agent in her life is desire, and it often guides her to make all of the wrong decisions. Daphne is an incarnation of the worst possible reading of the original Helen of Troy: a woman so overcome by love that she would sacrifice anything, even the trust and happiness of her only daughter, to be with the man she loves.<sup>44</sup> Over the course of the series, we see Daphne help many scions, including Orion, but even when she does good, the reader finds that Daphne Atreus always has an ulterior motive, whether that be revenge and the death of Tantalus or seeking a method of dragging her beloved Ajax from the grip of nineteen years in the Underworld.<sup>45</sup> A startling example of these selfish motivations is convincing Helen and all of the Delos family that Helen and Lucas are cousins, even though they are not related in any way.<sup>46</sup> This occurrence helps to create an image of Daphne that is almost crazed, and obsessed beyond the point of

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<sup>43</sup> *Goddess*, 407.

<sup>44</sup> *Goddess*, 337.

<sup>45</sup> *Starcrossed*, 457.

<sup>46</sup> *Starcrossed*, 438-441, 460-463.

true logic, even though she is constantly manipulative and calculating to get her way.

To the end, Daphne fights for herself as much as she fights for Helen. She knows that she must die a warrior's death in order to be sent to the same region of the Underworld as Ajax, who died protecting her from Tantalus.<sup>47</sup> Throughout most of *Dreamless* and *Goddess*, we see that Daphne is searching for a way to bring Ajax back to life. In the very end, though, in what looks on its surface like an act of self-sacrifice, Daphne finds a way to (hopefully) send herself to the correct region of the Underworld to continue her search, potentially for eternity. Even Daphne's final act, taking the younger face of her daughter in order to protect Helen, had underlying, selfish motivations: to kill Tantalus and to be reunited with Ajax.<sup>48</sup> Luckily, Daphne is not the daughter of Aphrodite who is directing the narrative in Angelini's novels, as it is at least feasible that she would have gladly watched the world burn, if she could only have her Ajax.

This dichotomy between Helen and Daphne creates a distinct distance between the old and the new, and especially between Helens like the one depicted in Homer, where her motivations are at best questionable, and Helen Hamilton, who ultimately acts for the good of all, despite the temptation of just living out her life with Lucas, carefree, in Everyland. While Daphne embodies the very worst of the Helen archetype, Helen Hamilton embodies the kind of Helen who deserves an encomium. Daphne represents the kind of Helen presented in Homer, Gorgias, and Isocrates. She is the kind of woman who can be praised for her outstanding beauty,

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<sup>47</sup> *Goddess*, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> *Goddess*, p. 383, 418.

but who cannot truly be excused for her actions. Even if Helen of Troy was not entirely self-serving, then she was, at best, stripped of her agency, just an object being tossed from place to place and man to man, just as Daphne's entire being is consumed with Ajax Delos.

Though Daphne makes her own choices, her life is entirely ruled by the man whom she lost. The Helen of Homer is either manipulative and seeking her own desires or entirely subject to the will of others with no voice of her own. In Daphne, because of her obsession with getting Ajax back, these two forms of the ancient Helen collide. She is both self-serving at the sake of others and entirely controlled by a man. Even worse, she is controlled by the mere memory of a dead man, and one who would never have wanted her to commit such acts in his name, from what we glean of Ajax's character. Daphne certainly bears the curse of sorrow that the face of Helen carries with it, but she carries it differently than any of the other women whose histories Helen learns. Daphne is subject to a tragedy beyond her control, and she lets it turn her into exactly what Helen Hamilton is trying not to be.

Though Helen is trying to be the opposite of her mother, there is an inherent danger to Helen's beauty, almost as though it is an entity of itself—yet another eidolon, representing Helen in appearance, but not necessarily in motivation. The idea of the eidolon, present in the Stesichorus' *Palinode* and in Euripides' *Helen* in antiquity, symbolically makes many appearances in Angelini's novels, from Helen being an eidolon of herself because of people's expectations for her behavior, to Daphne symbolically creating a divide between Helen Hamilton and the ideas of Helen that existed in antiquity. Yet Aphrodite's appearances in *Goddess* most starkly

illuminate the amount of power that Helen's mere appearance can hold. Aphrodite curses an entire town to be impotent because of her love for Helen.<sup>49</sup> More importantly, she curses the world to make sure that Helen's face remains in it.<sup>50</sup> Aphrodite so loves the face of Helen that she would curse the world to be empty of love if Helen's face should disappear from it. Lucas, at a crucial moment, realizes the powerful danger of Helen's godlike beauty: "She inspired such love in him, in Orion, even in a goddess. There was no hate without love, and Lucas couldn't help but think that they would all soon be facing a desperate fight because of the pure love they all felt in that moment."<sup>51</sup> Helen is so beautiful that she inspires extreme feelings in all those who set eyes on her. Even the very goddess of love is moved to extreme action by her love for Helen of Troy, and that is still apparent in her interaction with Helen Hamilton and the love felt by all who are present in that moment. Indeed, Aphrodite herself perhaps best exemplifies Lucas' fear with her words when she visits Helen in the *Iliad*: "Wretched girl, do not tease me lest in anger I forsake you and grow to hate you as much as now I terribly love you" (Hom. *Il.* 3.414-415). Aphrodite acknowledges that extreme love can morph into extreme hate, given the right circumstances, and that is what Lucas feels happening on the battlefield. He fears that one intense emotion will drive the development of another. More than that, he fears that with Helen at the center of the conflict, such a conflagration of emotion is unavoidable.

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<sup>49</sup> *Goddess*, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> *Goddess*, p. 27.

<sup>51</sup> *Goddess*, p. 300.

It is for this reason, though, that Helen is unforgettable. Just a glimpse of her face can inspire devotion and emotion, even among the gods. It can also inspire hate. Regardless, it inspires. As Naddaff says, "Helen cannot be left behind. Once seen, she is heard about repeatedly, no matter how little she speaks."<sup>52</sup> Helen of Troy possesses the beauty of a goddess, and in Angelini's world, that beauty is passed down in carbon copy to her daughters. Naddaff identifies why such beauty is so unavoidably dangerous: "She does not possess the ability, like divine beings, to disguise her beauty, reserve and diminish the dazzling glory she emanates."<sup>53</sup> This is the reason that the old men on the wall call her likeness to a goddess "terrible," and it is why they understand why an entire army of men would cross the sea to reclaim her (*Il.* 3.158-160). "Only the tiniest bit of the god's size, stature, beauty, and radiance can be allowed to filter through, and this is already enough to strike the spectator with *thambos*, stupefaction..."<sup>54</sup> Since Helen has godlike beauty and no means by which to reduce the effect that such beauty has, she, even unintentionally has a nearly physical effect on those around her. We can see this with the mindless intensity with which Tantalus pursues Daphne, even killing his own kin and becoming an Outcast, pursued by the Furies for spilling the blood of his own house.<sup>55</sup> We see it in Theseus' kidnapping of a young Helen, too young even to marry, out of an overwhelming sexual desire for her, despite her still being a girl (*Isoc. Hel.* 20).

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<sup>52</sup> Naddaff, 75.

<sup>53</sup> Naddaff, 75.

<sup>54</sup> Vernant, Jean-Pierre. "Dim Body, Dazzling Body," in Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi, eds., *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, Vol 1. New York: Zone Books, 1989. 39.

<sup>55</sup> *Dreamless*, p. 114.

In this way, the face of Helen of Troy is a curse not only to those who bear it, but to those who look upon it. Helen Hamilton comes to this conclusion in *Dreamless*, when Orion offers to give up their quest to locate the Furies, for Helen's sake, as her health deteriorates with every night that she does not dream. Though she is initially touched by the sacrifice that Orion would be making—giving up the hope of having a family or a stable life, since he is hunted by several factions who wish him ill—Helen cannot help but wonder if Orion is willing to sacrifice for her, or if he is just under the spell of her face.<sup>56</sup> This idea is implied in the *Iliad*, as well, in the instances of Helen berating her own character with slurs such as, “slut that I am,” and in the moments, such as standing before Hector's funeral pyre, when she wishes she had died, rather than coming to Troy and being the cause of such carnage (*Il.* 3.180, 24.764). It is even present in *Helen*, such as when Helen cries, “Helen ill-starred, for thee the Phrygians died!” and Teucer responds, “Yea, and Achaeans: bitter bale she hath wrought (*Helen*, 108-109).” In fact the undertone that Helen's face is cursed is only strengthened by the fact that, though Teucer does not know that the war was actually fought over an eidolon, Helen knows that she is not to blame. She knows that just the presence of a being, not even flesh and blood, which looked like her was enough to cause a ten year war and the ruin of Troy.

“Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships, / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?”<sup>57</sup> This line is uttered when Dr. Faustus commits the sin that loses him his immortal soul in Marlowe's classic. Always, Helen bears a legacy of death,

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<sup>56</sup> *Dreamless*, p. 285.

<sup>57</sup> Marlowe, Christopher. *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*. Vol. XIX, Part 2. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14. Scene XIII, l. 88-89.



deceit, and unbridled desire that is difficult to escape. How could she not when she is eternally remembered as being a woman whose beauty caused a ten-year war? Or when a man would willingly lose his soul for her kiss? In Angelini's *Starcrossed* series, Helen Hamilton struggles with this legacy, of being the first woman since Helen herself to bear both the face and the name of the original Helen of Troy. However, Helen Hamilton is not alone in carrying the burden of shame, blame, and stigma that is attached to the idea of Helen. It is inescapable throughout two thousand years of scions, as we see in *Goddess*, when Helen starts having flashbacks from the lives of the women who carried the Face before it was passed down to her, even back to the Helen of Trojan War fame. Helen of Troy's identity is both shaped and destroyed by the negative connotations that are unavoidably connected to her beautiful face. Helen Hamilton inherits that legacy, along with a cursed name, illustrating that Helen of Troy and Helen Hamilton are eternally connected in their inability to escape their curse, at least until Helen Hamilton finally manages to break the cycle and ensure, for the first time in the history of her face, that war and death are not the outcome of her circumstances.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Destroyer to Descender: Helen and Death**

Death is not necessarily the first thing that a person thinks of when he imagines Helen of Troy, but death is undeniably an integral part of Helen's narrative. Greeks and Trojans alike died in a war fought in her name: Paris, Hector, Achilles, Patrocles, Ajax, and these are only the most famous fatalities of the Trojan War. Not to mention that the entirety of Troy was burned to the ground. It wasn't just the fighting men who suffered and died because of the events in which Helen finds herself wrapped up. Women and children, old men and babies, they all bore the consequences of the war and its eventual resolution. Still, on close inspection, Helen's connection to death seems to go deeper than her causing a war. In fact, in Josephine Angelini's *Starcrossed* trilogy, Helen's connection to death and the Underworld is extremely overt. As discussed in Chapter One, Helen's agency is constantly called into question, and even discredited, in ancient sources. Yet, in both Euripides' *Helen* and Angelini's trilogy, different forms of death grant Helen agency.

Euripides more overtly connects Helen to the idea of death than do any of the other ancient sources. Within the first 100 lines of his *Helen*, it is made known to the reader that Helen is depending upon the protection of Proteus' tomb to keep her safe from the affections of Theoclymenus, when Helen says "...and the dead king's son / Pursues me. Honouring more mine ancient spouse, / At Proteus' tomb I cast

me, suppliant / That he may keep me unsullied for my lord...." (*Helen*. 62-67). Helen waits in this sacred space, with the dead Egyptian king as her only company aside from the new king, Theoclymenus', sister, Theonoë. Though choosing to reside with the dead protects Helen's honor, one can only assume that to live in a tomb, unsure of whether her husband would survive a war being fought an ocean away, and being aggressively pursued by a foreign king whose only stay is respect for his dead father would be its own sort of Hell. This sanctuary of Helen's is a double-edged sword, a place of both relief and torture while she seeks to do her duty and remain true to Menelaus.

This is a dour picture, but it is strikingly similar to Helen Hamilton's relationship with the Underworld in Angelini's novels in many ways. In the series, Helen is a "Descender,"<sup>58</sup> which means that she physically accesses the Underworld at night in her dreams.<sup>59</sup> In the first book, she does not realize what she is doing—her dreams of the Underworld seem like just terrible nightmares, despite awakening to muddied, bloodied bedsheets every morning after walking through the terrain of Hades' domain. However, when the rest of the scions find out that Helen is entering the Underworld when she sleeps, the Fates deliver a prophecy through young Cassandra, the modern oracle, dictating that she is meant to free the descendants of the Trojan War from the curse that allows the Furies to haunt them.<sup>60</sup> And so Helen is sent on a mission into death to settle the blood debt of all of the deaths of the

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<sup>58</sup> Though in the last book, we actually discover that Helen is a Worldbuilder, and her ability simply allows her to pass through the borders of the Underworld because Hades opens them to her.

<sup>59</sup> *Starcrossed*, p. 476.

<sup>60</sup> *Starcrossed*, p. 435.

Trojan War. If one accepts the narrative of blame that is present in the ancient sources, then it is almost as though the modern incarnation of Helen is conquering Death to rectify the mistakes of the original Helen of Troy, who caused the deaths of so many.

When Helen is told that Lucas is her cousin and their relationship is suddenly ended, the Underworld becomes, if not a sanctuary for Helen, then at least a place of rote horror, rather than the fresh pain that she feels every time that she runs into her forbidden Paris. And when she meets Orion, Helen even comes to look forward to her descents. Her journey through the Underworld is a constant torture, physically, mentally, and emotionally, but it becomes something of a twisted respite from life.<sup>61</sup> At the very least, her mission to free the scions from the Furies gives Helen a goal, something that she can immerse herself in to escape her relationship with Lucas, brutally cut short. She is constantly aware that she is in the land of the dead, of course, and she occasionally even finds herself stuck in the very worst parts of the place, tortured sadistically by places where the living don't belong, but as she and Orion rendezvous in the land of the dead, Helen begins to work out how to control the Underworld, drawing her closer to the completion of her mission, and allowing her more and more agency as time goes on.

Like Euripides' Helen, Helen Hamilton is doing her duty by surrounding herself by death. She, too, is escaping a forbidden, painful, and shameful relationship, though the surrounding circumstances are very different. And ultimately, it is Helen of Troy's presence in the tomb, and Helen Hamilton's presence

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<sup>61</sup> *Starcrossed*, 438 and *Dreamless*, 86.

in the Underworld that frees each of them from the curses that they bear, whether that be the unwanted advances of an Egyptian king, or the forbidden but desperately desired affections of a Paris whom Helen has been wrongly led to believe is her cousin.

Both Helens also find protectors within the boundaries of their respective sanctuaries. Within the broad protection that the tomb of Proteus brings, there is the protection of king's sister, Theonoë, who has allowed Helen to reside in what seems to be her domain (Eur. *Hel.* 865-872). The fact that Helen is residing underground, in a tomb, with only an oracle priestess and her attendants for company is almost reminiscent of Persephone, Queen of the Underworld. Both are snatched away against their will and taken to an alien place, then forced to endure the attentions of a man who would coerce them to marry him. Both Helen and Persephone lose hope of ever seeing home again. Helen and Persephone are both trapped in a type of exile, both surrounded by the remnants of the dead (Homer. *HH* 13.1-35). This becomes even more interesting when the connection to Persephone is realized in Angelini's books. Helen Hamilton and her protector, Orion (called her "Shield" in Cassandra's prophecy<sup>62</sup>), actually go to Persephone's garden once Helen finally understands that she can control the Underworld if she only tells it what to do. Persephone becomes something of a guide to Helen and Orion, as she advises them on how to complete their mission.<sup>63</sup>

Yet, there is an aspect to Euripides' Helen's sequestration that separates her from Persephone: Helen has chosen to take up residence in the tomb to save her

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<sup>62</sup> *Starcrossed*, 435.

<sup>63</sup> *Dreamless*, 273.

virtue, whereas Persephone is trapped in a castle of the dead with no way out. Helen Hamilton feels kinship with and compassion for the woman for the same reasons that Euripides' Helen might be compared to her—she is forced into a fate that she didn't ask for by powers beyond her control. Persephone, too, is tortured by the Underworld, and she and Helen Hamilton are both bound to the Underworld in a way that Euripides' Helen is not bound to the tomb. For Euripides' Helen, marriage is a way out, but one that she is not willing to take. For Persephone, marriage itself is the confinement. Though Demeter does eventually find Persephone, Hades makes sure that she may never leave him for good (Hom. Homeric Hymn 13. 445-448). For Persephone, there is only the brief respite of her seasonal visits. She is eternally bound to the Underworld. And for Persephone, there is no Menelaus coming to free her, only an unwanted king waiting in the wings for her return. Helen Hamilton is similarly bound to the Underworld, if not eternally. She must descend until the prophecy is fulfilled and she has freed the scions from the Furies, and while she does have Orion, it is ultimately her task, not his. Helen Hamilton must free herself. Still, both Helens have an agency that Persephone does not. Euripides' Helen chooses to sequester herself with death in order to maintain some control of her situation, and Helen Hamilton enters, and even controls, the land of death in order to find a way to make sure that all scions have the freedom to be near each other without the madness-inducing furies. Once this mission is complete, though, Helen does end up bound to the Underworld in a way even more like Persephone's situation. Lucas pledges to take Hades' place as the Lord of the Underworld someday, and Helen

finds herself wondering whether she will end up just like Persephone—trapped in the Underworld by her love for Lucas.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to being bound to the space of the dead, physical death is used as a means of escape for both Euripides' Helen of Troy and Helen Hamilton. It is only by faking Menelaus' death and convincing the Egyptian king to send his body home to Greece, aided by Theōnoe, that the couple is able to attain a ship on which to make their escape (Eur. *Hel.* 1247-1287). So, in the Euripides, some form of death provides both Helen's sanctuary (the tomb) and her escape (the ship).

In both Euripides' and Homer's version of events, Helen considers her own death, further connecting her agency to death and dying. Euripides' Helen even considers which form of suicide would be most worthy, referencing hanging<sup>65</sup> versus death by knife (Eur. *Hel.* 298-300). In Egypt, death is Helen's only way out of her situation, aside from marrying Theoclymenus, which the loyal wife in Euripides' *Helen* will not do.<sup>66</sup> Naddaff explains Helen's plan in this way: "Only in the realm of death, where she would be other than she is by ceasing to have been altogether, can Helen imagine herself free of blame, acting outside and independently of divine powers."<sup>67</sup> Homer's Helen sees death as a way to reclaim her agency and counteract the divine will that has caused so much death and carnage in her life (Hom. *Il.* 3.173, 6.345-349).<sup>68</sup> Though this is a morbid and distressing way to consider seizing control of one's life, Helen's characters in both the *Iliad* and *Helen* recognize that

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<sup>64</sup> *Goddess*, 366-367.

<sup>65</sup> Incidentally, how Helen's mother, Leda, took her own life. Helen deems hanging an unworthy death.

<sup>66</sup> Naddaff, 91.

<sup>67</sup> Naddaff, 77.

<sup>68</sup> Naddaff, 78.

they do not have many options. They see death as a way to escape their situations, and in that way, they are claiming some semblance of agency and responsibility, Homer's Helen through the desire to have died before going to Troy, and Euripides' Helen in her consideration of suicide.

Similarly, Helen Hamilton must come into close proximity with physical death in order to escape from her nightly descents into the Underworld before she learns that she has the power to control them. However, the modern Helen's death as escape is much more graphic, as she must find a way to injure herself, right to the border of actually killing herself, so that the intense pain forces her back into her waking world, where she suffers through healing of whatever self-inflicted wound she used to escape her torture.<sup>69</sup> This is almost an inverted form of the traditional idea of death. Normally, a person dies, and they go to whatever afterlife that they believe in; Helen Hamilton goes to the afterlife, and she must nearly die in order to leave it. Still, gruesome though it may be, this reversed death gives Helen power over her escape, just as Menelaus' fake death did for Euripides' Helen.

Helen's experiences with the Underworld rob her of sleep and drive her to the very brink of death in her waking life, as well.<sup>70</sup> Though she is physically and mentally wasting away because of her nightly trips to the Underworld, Helen cannot choose to stop descending, as she does not have control over her ability at that point. Nor would she choose to stop, if given the chance. Helen may be physically dying because of her time in death, but she knows that her quest through the Underworld is the only hope that the scions have to stop the endless cycle of death

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<sup>69</sup> *Dreamless*, 232.

<sup>70</sup> *Dreamless*, 254-255.



and blood-debt that is forced on them by the Furies.<sup>71</sup> In addition, it is not until Helen is nearly tortured to death by Ares that she realizes the true extent of her power, when she opens a portal to the Underworld and throws Ares to Tartarus.<sup>72</sup> For both Helens, death is in many ways what empowers her to control her own fate, which is both unusual and telling. In the ancient works, this use of death as an escape paints of the golden, shining Helen a darker picture, perhaps because, even in an apology, she is connected somehow with destruction, or perhaps because a woman who chooses her own path is something to be suspicious of. However, in the modern retelling, Helen's bearing the weight of her roles in death is what allows her to be a hero and the most important decision-maker in the series. Her ability to walk through death is what leads to her eventually mastering the skills that she needs to save the world.<sup>73</sup>

This trend of connecting Helen to chthonic traits is more subtly apparent in other pieces of ancient literature, and especially in the *Odyssey*. The very fact that Helen was replaced with a wraith of sorts connects her to Hecate in a roundabout way, though Hera is the one who is actually responsible for the construction of the faux Helen, as "spectres and phantoms are the attendants to Hecate" (Eur. *Hel.* 32-36).<sup>74</sup> This connection to the chthonic goddess of magic is especially interesting since, in the *Odyssey*, Helen does several things that seem very witch-like. First, there is the potion which she gives to Telemachus, Menelaus, and the other men. This potion is a memento from Egypt, perhaps inspiring Euripides' version of

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<sup>71</sup> *Dreamless*, 269.

<sup>72</sup> *Dreamless*, 494-495.

<sup>73</sup> *Goddess*, 132-136.

<sup>74</sup> Eur. *Hel.* Footnote 4.

events, that Helen spent time in Egypt rather than Troy (*Od.* 4.220-223, 4.278). Still, potion-making, magic, and deception are all intimately connected, especially in the case of a potion whose purpose is to deceive your mind. Such a potion would grant enormous power over others to anyone who possessed it. Not for the first time, Helen is connected to something supernatural and suspicious when she passes around this mind-altering drug. This dark association makes Helen seem like something of a meddler in magic, a chthonic force, which again connects her to Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft—not a favorable association at all for someone who already has a reputation for being the cause of the ruin of an entire city.

This association is taken even further when Menelaus relates his story of the events while the Greek men were inside the Trojan Horse (*Od.* 4.274-289). He claims that Helen called out to the men inside the Horse in the voices of their wives. Take note that he does not claim that she was simply impersonating the wives, or using their names. She is purported have been imitating their voices perfectly(*Od.* 4.279). Menelaus even goes so far as to claim that she must have been possessed by some dark spirit to have done such a thing. It is implied that he means she must not have been herself to have tried to sabotage the Greeks' efforts in such a way, but Menelaus' words could also be an indication of the strangeness of Helen's being able to mimic other women. This ability almost gave Helen the power to ensure the death of every man inside the Trojan Horse. That surely would have been the result if the men of Troy had caught on to the Greeks' ruse, after all. And even if Helen was possessed by something, or if there is some other explanation for her actions, there is always a connection to something dark and malignant that exerts an unusual

amount of control on those around her, even, sometimes, over whether they live or die.<sup>75</sup>

These occasions manifest a much darker sort of power than the agency that Helen draws from situations involving death in *Helen*. This could arise from the difference in the two works' attitudes towards Helen, or it could just be a disconnect arising from the very different versions of Helen's story. Still, in both cases, a connection to death and chthonic power contributes to Helen's agency in her situation. Angelini's Helen is related to power and death in a similar way, especially to Euripides' *Helen*. Helen's power of Descending allows her to control the landscape of the Underworld (though she doesn't know that at first), and it makes her unique, even among a cast of demigods.<sup>76</sup> Still, the scary aspect of her power is there. The scions around her, even those who love her, begin to fear her as the series moves forward.<sup>77</sup> Her ability is both a blessing and a curse: a blessing because it grants her the power to free the Fates and save the scions from the never-ending cycle of murder in which they are trapped, but a curse in that it makes her life a living Hell until she finally learns to control her descents and Hades tells her what her power truly means<sup>78</sup>. For a large portion of the series, she is simultaneously the character with the most control over everyone in the series' lives and the character with the

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<sup>75</sup> If we are going by Steisichorus' and Euripides' version of events, Helen's presence at Troy would actually be eidolon Helen, a figment created by Hera, which would exonerate the real Helen from any association with magical mimicry, but would still connect her to the shadowy phantom Helen, which creates the connection to Hecate.

<sup>76</sup> Angelini, *Dreamless*, 272.

<sup>77</sup> *Goddess*, 306.

<sup>78</sup> *Goddess*, 133-134.

least control over her own as she is forced by her nightly descents to search for the answer to Cassie's prophecy and she is forced apart from Lucas in her waking life.

When Hades finally reveals to Helen that her ability is not the power to Descend at all, but the gift of Worldbuilding, the reader comes to understand the true breadth of Helen's power over her fate<sup>79</sup>. Not only can this modern incarnation of Helen control some aspects of Hades' world, she can actually create a world of her own. In this way, Helen Hamilton is granted more agency than Helen of Troy was ever granted, even in Euripides' work, where Helen seems to have at least some choice in what happens to her, and Helen Hamilton's trials in the Underworld are ultimately to thank for her final, overwhelming ability to be an agent rather than an object. Her suffering in the realm of the dead is what allows her to learn to control her ability, even before she knows the kind of power that she holds. It also allows her to free the Furies, enabling them to become the Eumenides (the defense attorneys of the Underworld, as Angelini makes them out to be). Even long before she fully understands her power, Helen takes the Furies' endless cycle of death, rage, and retribution and gives their lives meaning by allowing them to seek justice rather than revenge, and it is all because of her unusual connection to the Underworld that she is able to free her friends and family from the curse that has plagued their kind for millennia.<sup>80</sup>

Beyond just freeing the scions from the curse, Helen's connection to the Underworld eventually allows her to free both scions and humans from the destruction of a war with the gods. Starting with her casting Ares into Tartarus and

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<sup>79</sup> *Goddess*, 133-134.

<sup>80</sup> *Dreamless*, p. 437-438.

ending with her trapping Zeus, with the help of Hecate (another interesting connection to the goddess of magic and thresholds), in Everyland,<sup>81</sup> Helen's abilities and her learning to control them during her time in the Underworld ultimately allow her to save not just those who she loves, but to save the entire world from what would essentially have amounted to Armageddon.<sup>82</sup>

In Angelini's series, Helen also has a complex relationship with Hades, who takes on the roles of several minor gods of Greek myth as well as his understood role as Lord of the Underworld. He becomes judge as well as master in the *Starcrossed* books, lending him essentially complete control over death<sup>83</sup> and the afterlife.<sup>84</sup> Helen is on very familiar, even friendly, terms with this ruler of death, to the point that he even seems to side with Helen and her allies against his own brethren, the gods, in the ultimate battle between the two factions. His training of and advice to Helen create almost a mentoring relationship between the god and his many-greats niece. Perhaps this is out of the compassion that a judge of the dead would inevitably possess—as to be fair, one must also be understanding, a test that Lucas is put to when he makes a deal to take Hades' place<sup>85</sup>—perhaps the god who must eventually judge all souls recognizes the injustice in the actions of his fellow gods, or perhaps Hades just has a soft spot for the scions who have inherited his

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<sup>81</sup> Everyland is the world that Helen uses her Worldbuilding ability to create. She traps Zeus there by giving the world to him, but tricking him by keeping its boundaries as her own, therefore never allowing him to leave the world that he took.

<sup>82</sup> *Goddess*, 407.

<sup>83</sup> Despite the fact that a very simplified version of Thanatos, god of the dead, is briefly mentioned (*Dreamless*, 362).

<sup>84</sup> *Dreamless*, 137 and *Goddess*, 365.

<sup>85</sup> *Goddess*, 364-366.

ability to create worlds and wishes to give them the tools to properly use that ability.

Regardless, the connection between Helen and Hades becomes even more overt when, at the very beginning of the final book in the series, the Lord of the Underworld's face is revealed—and it is the face of Lucas, Helen Hamilton's version of Paris. The connection is undeniable and intrinsic to Helen's ultimate accomplishment of defeating the gods before they can wreak havoc after being freed from Olympus. Once again, Helen's connection to death and those with some power over it enables her to forge a path that would not have otherwise been possible, and which none of the other characters in the series are even remotely capable of achieving. Helen Hamilton dictates her own story through her choices, and Euripides' Helen is able to escape marriage to Theoclymenus and return to Greece, exercising more freedom of action than any of the other ancient versions of Helen seemed to have. In both cases it is because Helen's connection with death lends her an agency that is otherwise absent.

In *Helen*, in the *Odyssey*, and in the *Starcrossed* series, Helen repeatedly finds agency, in different forms, through connections to death and chthonic forces. In *Helen*, death saves Helen from the fate of having to marry Theoclymenus, even after Menelaus finds her, hidden away in a tomb in Egypt. In the *Odyssey*, the reader finds that Helen seems to use magic, bordering on witchcraft, to control those around her in a much darker way. In the *Starcrossed* trilogy, those two ideas of Helen's connection to death seem to collide, in that her unique abilities to Descend and Worldbuild are eventually what allow her to take control of her situation and save

herself and those she loves, much like Euripides' Helen, and in that while she is learning about those abilities, her connection with death makes her a frightening, withdrawn, and almost suspicious character, even to her friends, as the Helen of the *Odyssey* could be read to be. Angelini's blending of attitudes toward Helen and her connection to death is perhaps the most intense, as it combines metaphorical and physical death in a way that the other two Helens' encounters with death do not.

**Chapter Four**  
Vixen or Victim?  
Helen and Desire

Throughout literary history, Helen is both the agent and the object of desire, and desire is one of the main ways in which she is characterized. Whether she is manipulating others because of their desire for her, chasing after her own desires, or simply to escape the desires of others, there is no denying that Helen's interactions with desire weave a complicated tapestry—one which showcases many different sides of Helen in a very complex way. Still, at times, even such a complicated character as Helen can be portrayed as flat, simply a generic role that could be filled by any pretty woman who happens to be on hand. This happens when desire, though complex, is used to rob Helen of her ability to define her own circumstances. This becomes a problem not only in the way that Helen is viewed, but by extension, in the way that women as a whole are thought about.

This kind of mindset is reflective of the trend of finding worth in Helen only through the ever-present desire of others that flows throughout ancient authors' writings on her. Indeed, even those who would apologize for or praise Helen only do so by tearing away her agency and making her a choiceless, less-than-human object of desire for the men, whose stories are given much more importance than hers. Helen is forced to be something of a supporting character in a story which revolves around her. She is purposefully placed at the center of things to be an object of



desire and blame and simultaneously kept apart so that her feelings and motivations become secondary or irrelevant when compared to the male characters in the story.

This is especially relevant when one considers the differences in how desire is treated between ancient sources and a modern interpretation like Josephine Angelini's *Starcrossed* series. Though Helen is recognized as both an object of desire and an agent of it in her Greek tradition, the attitude toward Helen and her interplay with desire noticeably shifts as one moves from the ancient works to the modern, with the narrative slowly evolving from an oppressive one, in which Helen's worth is both positively and negatively dependent on how the men around her perceive her, to one more reflective of modern attitudes toward women, where Helen (for the most part) draws her worth from herself, in spite of, rather than because of, the environment of desire swirling around her. I have introduced the idea that Helen is altered to suit the needs of the literature in which she is placed. Accordingly, the way that desire is used and depicted reflects different attitudes toward Helen, depending on when each work was written.

Consider how Helen is treated in ancient sources. Desire is always at play in the design of the story. No matter which version of the story is told—whether Helen went willingly with Paris, whether he took her, or whether she was never in Troy at all—desire is implied as the cause of the Trojan War. This is very convenient for the ancient authors, as it promotes the idea that a woman as beautiful as Helen is something to be sought and owned, but also something to be wary of, perhaps even feared. Whether you are Homer, writing about an entire nation of men who chased Helen across the sea; Euripides, claiming that just an eidolon of Helen and the

interference of a jealous god (notably, also a beautiful woman) could make for one of the most famous wars of all time; Isocrates, promoting the notion that Helen must be praiseworthy because so many men have desired her; Gorgias, excusing Helen's actions on the grounds of others' desire stripping her of her agency; or Sappho, proclaiming a forbidden love, Helen and desire make for a good story.

Of course, Homer sets the tone. However, since I have already treated Helen's roles in Homer and Euripides in great detail, in this chapter, I will focus instead on Isocrates', Gorgias', and Sappho's work on Helen, with one exception: Helen's connection to Aphrodite in Homer. In Homer, Helen is simply too much like Aphrodite. She is desire embodied, and that almost seems a type of poison in the *Illiad*. This is even apparent in the way that Helen interacts with Aphrodite in the epic. When the goddess appears on the wall and speaks to her half-sister, there is an unsettling familiarity between the two, as though they know each other (Hom. *Il.* 3.395-400). Aphrodite's desires are in play in this scene as well, but rather than take some of the blame off of Helen for her situation, Helen's proximity to Aphrodite reinforces the idea that she is not a woman to be trusted. She is so closely associated with the goddess of lust, of beauty, of erotic, all-consuming desire, that she is in some ways terrifying. She is, after all, the kind of woman whom wars are waged over. She is the manipulator of men, the downfall of nations—she IS the face that launched a thousand ships. The scariest thing about this description is that it could apply to either woman. After all, when conflict arises, Aphrodite is so often nearby. If one reads far enough back on the mythical timeline, the whole war can be traced

back to Aphrodite offering Helen to Paris as a prize, if he should only choose her as the most beautiful of three goddesses (Apollod. Epit. E.3.2).

This introduces a whole new kind of desire. Rather than sexual desire or romantic desire, Aphrodite harbors a desire for adoration. So much so, that she was willing to offer Helen to Paris in exchange for the title of “Most Beautiful,” giving Helen no choice, despite the fact that she was already married. Since Helen and Aphrodite are so familiar, one might assume that Helen harbors a similar desire for adoration. And to an extent, that belief can be backed up by Homer’s text. When we first see Helen in the *Iliad*, she is in her room weaving (Hom. *Il.* 3.125-129). This is unremarkable until the reader thinks closely about what it is that her tapestry will depict. Helen is weaving a tapestry of the war happening right outside her bedroom door. She is making a concentrated effort, in real time, to immortalize a war that is being fought about her. Though this alone is not enough to claim that Helen actually is a selfish, manipulative woman who, like Aphrodite, would sacrifice the lives and futures of those around her for the sake of being remembered as the most beautiful, the most moving, the most desirable woman alive, it certainly has troubling connotations. Perhaps Helen is weaving the tapestry as a warning to future generations. Still, anyone who should see her work for the rest of its existence would know that she was the artist. It has the implication that she might be the artist behind both the tapestry and the war it depicts. Her desire for immortalization, or even a twisted version of heroic κλέος, could be so overwhelming that she is knowingly embracing an event caused by her beauty. This idea is furthered when she mentions being remembered in song in Book 6 (Hom. *Il.*

6.368). For a woman who expresses so much remorse over her involvement in the war, she seems a bit preoccupied with it being remembered, and her association with Aphrodite only makes the hint that she might have a fixation with being immortalized as the most beautiful woman who ever lived even more suspicious.

This connection to Aphrodite is carried over into Angelini's novels in several very distinct ways. First, the connection between Paris and Helen seems to be an inherent part of the cycle that the scions are stuck in. Helen's vitriolic reaction to the Furies is especially intense in the presence of Lucas, the character who we later learn should have been named Paris. When Helen and Lucas save each other's lives, the feelings between them shift from Fury-inspired rage to an equally intense, if less overtly expressed, desire.<sup>86</sup> The overwhelming reactions that Helen and Lucas have to each other, even when it is hate and not desire, hint at the underlying idea that comes out later in the book that the two are deeply connected and that Fate has bound them together, just as Aphrodite bound Helen to Paris in Greek myth (Apollod. *Epit.* E.3.2).

The idea is also present throughout Helen's history that desire, and especially feminine desire, can be dangerous, which we see clearly in the connection of Helen to Aphrodite, in both ancient and modern works. Though there are other arcs for the characters in the rest of book one, one of the strongest ones is Helen and Lucas working out how to deal with their desire for each other in a reality where they are not allowed to be together because acting on it would result in a second Trojan

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<sup>86</sup> *Starcrossed*, 127.

War.<sup>87</sup> This echoes the attitudes of desire being dangerous that we see in Homer when Helen and Aphrodite are connected, and there are several times in the books when Helen, before she understands what is keeping her and Lucas apart, tries to convince him to stop holding himself away from her and just give in, which in some ways reinforces the ancient sense that feminine desire can be treacherous.<sup>88</sup>

Perhaps the strongest connection between Helen and Aphrodite in Angelini's series is Helen Hamilton's lineage, which can be traced directly to Helen of Troy. We find in the first book that Helen and her mother share the original Helen's Face. However, Daphne is connected to Aphrodite in a way that Helen of Troy is not, in that she and her daughter each wear a different part of Aphrodite's cestus.<sup>89</sup> Helen's half, the girdle of Aphrodite, makes her impervious to harm caused by weapons, so she is, in a way, protected by Aphrodite. Meanwhile, Daphne's half, the girdle's adornments, make her sexually irresistible to any man (or woman, potentially) whom she wishes to charm. In this way, Daphne comes across as a more traditional Helen archetype, one who uses others' desire for her to manipulate the people and events in her life, and one who is nearly an Aphrodite herself. After all, we see Aphrodite change her appearance when she approaches Helen on the wall of Troy, and the goddess is known throughout ancient myth for using people's desire against them and using her influence over love and desire to get her way (Hom. *Il.* 3.395-415). Daphne is also like Helen of Troy and Aphrodite in that desire for her can drive a man mad, as seems to be the case with Tantalus, who killed her husband, his own

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<sup>87</sup> *Starcrossed*, 366.

<sup>88</sup> *Starcrossed*, 305, 334.

<sup>89</sup> *Starcrossed*, 410.

nephew, out of desire for her, making him an Outcast, and forcing him to rule his entire house from behind closed doors, bodyguards, and his human wife.<sup>90</sup> Plus, Daphne is willing to risk nearly anything to attain her desires: revenge on Tantalus and reunion with her dead husband, Ajax.

Ultimately, Helen Hamilton and Daphne become completely different characters, though they are the same in so many ways (including their nearly identical faces), and no scene in the series highlights that difference more than the final fight between the gods and the scions, in which some of the demigods turn on Helen out of fear of her becoming the foretold “Tyrant.”<sup>91</sup> Helen discovers her ability as a Worldbuilder, a demigod who has the power to create a completely new world and bend it to her will, just as Hades has done in the Underworld and Zeus has done on Olympus.<sup>92</sup> Throughout *Goddess*, she has flashbacks, memories from other Helens’ lives. She is able to see firsthand the mistakes that her predecessors made and the consequences that followed.<sup>93</sup> And so, she builds Everyland, a world in which she can have everything she possibly desires. She can keep Lucas and her friends and family safe. She can love Lucas with no guilt or shame. Everything about her world is up to her control, and Helen gives that up to trap Zeus and prevent him from wreaking havoc on Earth.<sup>94</sup> She does not make the mistakes of the past Helens because, when the stakes are at their highest, Helen’s desire to save the people whom she would have to leave behind overrides her desire to live an idyllic life in

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<sup>90</sup> *Starcrossed*, 432.

<sup>91</sup> *Goddess*, 307.

<sup>92</sup> *Goddess*, 133.

<sup>93</sup> *Goddess*, 263.

<sup>94</sup> *Goddess*, 401.

Everyland. Meanwhile, Daphne, the archetypal Helen who possesses so many of Aphrodite's traits, follows her obsessive desires for revenge and Ajax's resurrection right to her own death.<sup>95</sup>

Still, despite these negative connotations connected to Aphrodite, Helen Hamilton is also connected to the goddess in the sisterly bond that the two feel for each other. We see this both in the very curse that led all of Helen's descendants to bear her face and in the brief interaction between Helen and Aphrodite in *Goddess*.<sup>96</sup> Helen acknowledges that Aphrodite can be infuriating, but she feels a love for her that the scions don't have for most of the other Olympians. Aphrodite even seems happy that Helen defeats Zeus.<sup>97</sup> While Homer focuses on the connection between Helen and Aphrodite to highlight the manipulation of desire and the danger that he thinks arises from a woman holding the kind of power over men that Helen does, Angelini uses the connection between the two to simultaneously acknowledge that desire can drive people to do things that seem crazy and that they regret, but that it can also be a beautiful relationship, like the one that drives Helen Hamilton to protect her loved ones and to forgive her deified half-sister, even though the goddess caused the humans as much trouble as Zeus out of her own love for Helen of Troy.<sup>98</sup>

If Helen is intrinsically connected to desire through Aphrodite in the *Iliad*, then she is trapped in it in Gorgias' and Isocrates' apologies. One might expect that in a work that seeks to excuse or exalt Helen, you would find a Helen with more

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<sup>95</sup> *Goddess*, 383.

<sup>96</sup> *Goddess*, 26-27, 411-412.

<sup>97</sup> *Goddess*, 409.

<sup>98</sup> *Goddess*, 412.

agency. Instead, the ways in which Gorgias and Isocrates use desire actually seem to grant Helen even less agency that she had in the *Iliad* and in *Helen*, though Gorgias does at least seem to shift the blame somewhat off of Helen. Still, though he might try to alleviate the weight of Helen's culpability for the Trojan War, the only way that Gorgias seems to be able to excuse Helen is to make her an object, completely dependent on the whims and desires of other forces. Gorgias even nearly personifies desire itself by claiming that Helen is so controlled by love that she had no choice except to follow it (Gorg. *Hel.* 6). This is certainly a step forward, in that Gorgias allows that, if Helen was snatched away, then a wrong was committed against her, saying, "He did the dread deeds; she suffered them. It is just, therefore, to pity her, but to hate him (Gorg. *Hel.* 7)." Gorgias says that Paris is not only to blame, in this case, but he is to be hated, while Helen should be pitied for having done nothing except drawn the lot of being beautiful (Gorg, *Hel.* 7). If Paris stole Helen, then his desire for her created a vice grip, which pulled Helen to Troy against her will and dragged her name through the mud for generations to come. In this case, Helen could not overcome desire because Paris chose his desire for her over all else, even, ultimately, the well-being of his family and his city.

In *Starcrossed*, the desire of the men around Helen is a bit more complex than it is in Gorgias, as she has some level of choice in most of her interactions with the men in her story. Obviously, Lucas and Orion, her two love interests, often either express or repress their desire for her, just as she often embraces or denies her desire for them, but there is another character whose desire for Helen brings out a dark and frightening side of desire that stops at nothing to get what it wants, much



like the Paris that Gorgias talks about here. Creon is the embodiment of the lustful desire that everyone seems to have for Helen in ancient literature—that desire which would lead men to snatch her from her home and her husband, even at the risk of starting a war. Creon is characterized as dark, obsessive, and evil, the very incarnation of the danger that a woman like Helen can inspire in men. Creon's desires lead him to his death, just like those who desired Helen in the *Iliad* followed that desire to war and destruction. Indeed, if Creon had managed to kill Helen and fulfill the prophecy as he thought he would, he would have started a second Trojan War, and just as Paris before him, and there was a part of him that simply did not care.

Similarly, there is a constant back-and-forth in the second book between Helen's mother, Daphne, and Creon's father, Tantalus, who is similarly obsessed with Daphne, to his own detriment. The juxtaposition of Helen and Daphne and Creon and Tantalus showcases both two different ways to interpret Helen and desire and the fact that, whether the Helen character is using desire to manipulate others or trying to keep her desires in check and do what is best for everyone, there is always some man who will stop at nothing to have her.

Perhaps the most interesting of Gorgias' arguments is that love caused Helen to leave Menelaus (Gorg. *Hel.* 18-20). Gorgias speaks of the type of Love that is, itself, a god, but that is still somewhat separate from the gods and the fate that he mentions at the beginning of his *Encomium*. Earlier, Gorgias apologizes for Helen by claiming that if the gods and Fate desired for Helen to be in Troy, then she never had a choice (Gorg. *Hel.* 6). Here, in his defense by means of Love, Gorgias makes the argument

that the desire that Helen had for Paris was something that simply could not be denied (Gorg. *Hel.* 19). It is almost as though he is making a case for her insanity, rather than truly excusing her actions. Basically, Gorgias is saying that Helen could never have denied love, and that it would have been an entirely impossible thing for anyone to have expected her to do. He is claiming that she lacked intention, and therefore, she cannot bear blame. This makes the assertion that, yes, Helen went to Troy because she wanted to, but desire, in this case, is unconquerable. Gorgias has built an impenetrable cage of desire around Helen here, one which leaves her no chance of escape, allowing people to talk about and gape at her, but not to think worse of her, since she is less than rational, a being guided by this desire beyond its control. Between this and his argument about gods and fate, Gorgias almost reduces Helen to the level of an animal in a zoo, only acknowledging her humanity and reason in the situation where he claims she may have been kidnapped. According to Gorgias, there is no way that Helen was willing, rational, and blameless. If Helen understands the choice that she makes and still makes it willingly, then she must be to blame for the Trojan War. If she understands and is unworthy of blame, then she must not be willing (like in the case of being stolen by men). If Helen is willing and unworthy of blame, then she must be too dense or too taken with desire to understand what she is doing. In this way, Helen is constantly stripped of any agency. For Gorgias, Helen's choice must always have been the only choice she could possibly have made. Otherwise, there is nothing left of her that Gorgias seems to think it worth defending.

Isocrates, on the other hand, does not truly manage to apologize for Helen at all. Instead, he looks for a way to praise Helen in spite of her actions, which only leads to further subjecting her to the desires of the men who have had roles in her life, even since a time when she was so young that she should have been off-limits to such desire (Isoc. *Hel.* 19). Indeed, while the other authors' attitudes toward Helen, while at times backward or unfair, are at least understandable to a modern audience, most people would now find Isocrates' praise of Helen to be somewhat repugnant. He opens with the idea that Helen must be the most beloved child of Zeus, as:

...although he conferred upon his son [Heracles] strength of body, which is able to overpower all others by force, yet to her he gave the gift of beauty, which by its nature brings even strength itself into subjection to it (Isoc. *Hel.* 16).

This idea sets the stage for desire to be Isocrates' focus in praising Helen, since the way that beauty "subjects others to it" is through the feeling and manipulation of desire. He then goes on to recount a story in which Theseus kidnaps Helen because the demigod, "...thought life was not worth living amid the blessings he already had unless he could enjoy intimacy with her (Isoc. *Hel.* 18)." Now, this is unsettling, as is. But it is made even more disturbing when we learn that Helen was essentially still a child, held by guardians and awaiting maturity (Isoc. *Hel.* 19).

Yet, Theseus' desire is what Isocrates finds in Helen that is worthy of praise. He claims that, "[Theseus] alone was lacking in naught, but had achieved consummate virtue (Isoc. *Hel.* 21)." As such, since Theseus was moved by such desire for Helen, then Helen must be worthy of desire, and therefore, she must be worthy of praise. Now, most people could immediately point out the flaw in that

logic: Theseus kidnapped a child because he wanted to have sex with her. He obviously was not the picture of consummate virtue, if this is true. Still, Isocrates claims that there is no better way to argue that Helen is in some way worthy of praise than to show that the men who loved and admired her were heroes (Isoc. *Hel.* 22). Truly, Isocrates' work is more an encomium of Theseus than it is one of Helen, as he spends much of the piece proving that Theseus is the type of man whose desire deserves praise. Throughout all of these ancient works, Helen finds herself swaddled in a veil of desire, one which limits her ability to choose her own way or defend herself. With his praise of Helen, Isocrates knots the ends of the veil so tightly that Helen begins to suffocate inside. He so fully makes her an object of desire that she has no chance of being worthy of praise for anything other than the kinds of men who wanted to sleep with her.

Of all of the ancient authors, Sappho is the most different. This may be because she is the only woman in the bunch, but even her work has an interesting interplay with the idea of desire, as it sits at the very heart of her Fragment 16. Of course, as Sappho's poem is a fragment, some interpretation is required, but she is pretty clearly writing a poem to her own, personal Helen. This is rather interesting, as the kind of desire that Helen inspired is being transposed onto a same-sex relationship between two women. Still, the more relevant aspect of Sappho's work on Helen is that she has found a way to praise exactly the things that Homer hinted at and maligned. In Sappho's mind, Helen chose to go to Troy, understanding what she was doing, and that is what made her worthy of praise (Sapph. Fragment 16, 5-8). She chose to leave behind her family, her life, her child, and her home (Sapph.

Fragment 16, 9-10). This is not to say that the idea that Aphrodite led her astray is not there (Sapph. Fragment 16, 10-11). In a way, this reflects the idea in Gorgias that Helen never had any choice beyond love. Nonetheless, the wistful tone that Sappho takes implies that she wishes she had such an excuse to chase her own desire (Sapph. Fragment 16, 9-19). She claims that the “loveliest sight on this dark earth” is “whatever you desire” (Sapph. Fragment 16, 2-4). She seems to wish that she could emulate Helen and chase her desire, rather than being a slave to responsibility and ties that keep her where she is. In this way, Sappho implies that Helen’s desire has made her free, the exact opposite of what all of the other ancient authors seem to be saying in their writings on Helen. While Homer, Stesichorus, Euripides, Gorgias, and Isocrates put Helen in a cage of desire, Sappho places Helen on desire’s wings, and Sappho herself seems jealous of that freedom.

In Sappho’s Fragment 16, there is a certain level of stress between respected military desire and the desires and actions of Helen, which Sappho seems to envy. In the *Starcrossed* series, we see a similar tension between accepted and taboo desire. However, Helen Hamilton attempts to choose a different path than Helen of Troy does in Sappho’s writing. Indeed, if Sappho is claiming that the most beautiful thing you can set eyes on is whatever you desire most, then Helen Hamilton proves that, while her desire for Lucas is nearly irresistible, her ultimate desire is to protect her loved ones, including but not limited to the Delos family. For much of the series, Helen and Lucas struggle against their feelings for each other in contrast to their conceptions of the original Helen and Paris as having chosen their desire for each other, despite the fact that they started a war in doing so. However, this is where

Angelini's narrative diverges from the ancient attitudes. Rather than allow her desire to overtake her reason and potentially doom the rest of the scions as Helen of Troy did, Helen Hamilton uses her desire for Lucas to drive her in a physically and mentally devastating search for a way to break the curse of the Furies and the sway that they hold over all of the demigod houses. In addition, this new Helen has many desires, not just those of a sexual nature. As the story follows Helen, rather than the men in her life, we see that she is just as driven by her desires as the men are. Her desire for Lucas motivates her, as does her desire to protect her family and her friends. She is also torn between romantic desire for two men, much as Helen of Troy was, but rather than being seized by one or the other, or simply running off with Lucas, consequences be damned, Helen Hamilton thinks constantly about how her actions will affect those around her, even refusing to cry out when Ares tortures her with the intent of using her screams to summon the men whom she loves.<sup>99</sup> This is in direct contrast to her mother, whose ultimate desire is Ajax, and who will stop at nothing to get him back. In this way, Helen both supports and contradicts Sappho, and Angelini showcases the fact that one's ultimate desire can lead her to be both self-sacrificing and selfish, clever and manipulative. While her mother is motivated by self-interest, Helen shows immense strength to protect her loved ones from harm and proves that sexual and romantic desire are not the only kinds of desire that love can inspire. Helen would gladly sacrifice herself out of her deepest desire—to keep not just Lucas and Orion but all of her friends and family safe.

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<sup>99</sup> *Dreamless*, 475

Angelini uses desire as surely as the ancient authors did, but she gives it new facets. Alongside the romantic desire that Lucas and Helen feel for one another, the desire for Orion that confuses Helen in the last two books, and the twisted desires of Creon and Tantalus, there are other kinds of desire that play just as much of a role in Helen Hamilton's story. Angelini's narrative showcases that love and desire can be more than just romantic and sexual. Helen acts out of a desire to keep the people she loves safe, even if that requires her to act counter to her romantic desires. She ultimately gives up a piece of herself, Everyland, in which she could have anything that she would possibly desire, for the sake of the world. For Helen Hamilton, personal desire takes a backseat to honor, bravery, and loyalty. In this way, Helen becomes the hero of her story, rather than being used simply as an object through which desire flows. Helen of Troy and Daphne, on the other hand, are much more similar in that their desires seem to override their concern for others, even those who they should love most—their daughters. And so, by creating such a contrast between Helen and her mother, Angelini draws a line between the new and the old. While she acknowledges that desire will always be a part of Helen of Troy's story, Angelini creates a new narrative in which desire is simply a player and Helen has the control, rather than the other way around.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this examination of Helen, I discussed several apologies for Helen. In the end, Angelini was writing a sort of apology of her own. In the use of Helen Hamilton's flashbacks to the lives of Helen of Troy and Guinevere, the *Starcrossed* series simultaneously creates a richer background for the characters on Nantucket and gives a voice to Helen, allowing for a new and different version of events leading up to the Trojan War. In Angelini's version of Helen of Troy's story, Helen is giving and kind. She loves Paris and fears Menelaus, and she tries to sacrifice herself when she discovers that she is pregnant with Paris' child because of the chilling weight of the prophecy of the coming Tyrant that hangs over all of the scions, even in Ancient Greece.<sup>100</sup> Through the Helen of Troy flashbacks, we see a side of Helen that is impossible in the ancient literature. She becomes a woman who has the power to make choices, and does, but who also finds herself falling victim to the whims of the gods and the anger of other scions. She is a woman who both cheats on her husband with Paris and chooses to stay with Menelaus, knowing that it may result in her death.

In Angelini's novels, Helen of Troy becomes a complex character who is neither the perfect, faithful wife of Euripides nor the manipulative maven of Homer. She makes mistakes, and those mistakes have staggering consequences, which both

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<sup>100</sup> *Goddess*, 12-14, 19-22.



Helen of Troy and Helen Hamilton reflect on, especially throughout *Goddess*. In Helen of Troy, Angelini creates a woman who tried and failed to heroically sacrifice herself for the sake of others, and whose love, both given and received, has costs that she never could have anticipated. Guinevere's story, as an incarnation of Helen, is much the same. Helen of Troy's and Guinevere's stories are stories of forbidden love, familial love, sacrifice, and extremely unfortunate circumstances. They are neither perfect nor evil. In Angelini's apology for Helen, Helen of Troy and Guinevere are simply humans doing their best to protect their loved ones.

As I have previously pointed out, in the ancient sources, Helen could not at the same time be blameless, rational, and an agent. The only way to apologize for her was to take away her reason or her agency, or to ascribe the weight of the Trojan War to her selfishness or her manipulative desire. In Angelini's novels, the Helens presented may not be entirely blameless, but they are at least, in many ways, good. They are selfless and loving and brave. They are all dangerously rational, and their reason is often what drives them to put themselves at risk to save others. Most of all, they have the power to control at least some aspects of their circumstances, and none more than Helen Hamilton.

Helen Hamilton is not an apology, but a true reinvention of the Helen of Troy archetype. In the modern Helen, the reader finds the same complex character as in Angelini's ancient Helens. However, the modern Helen does more than simply make the best of a bad situation. Helen Hamilton literally builds the world that she needs to save herself, her loved ones, and the world from the wrath of the Olympians. In Helen Hamilton, the reader truly gets a picture of a Helen who not only tries to do

the best by those around her, but who succeeds in being not just an agent but also a hero. She defies both odds and expectations and saves many of the men in the story whose archetypes historically control her narrative. She is constantly the focal point of the events leading up to the final battle in *Goddess*, just as Helen was the epicenter of the Trojan War, but unlike Helen of Troy, Helen of Hamilton is not forced to be a viewer watching from a wall. Instead, she is the ultimate warrior, the only scion who has the power to influence the outcome of the meeting between gods and demigods. In the many similarities that I have mentioned throughout this thesis, Angelini stays true to Helen of Troy. However, the *Starcrossed* series allows Helen Hamilton to both rely on the love and aid of her friends and family and to possess the power to change the world through her unique abilities. In this way, Helen Hamilton takes the archetype of ancient whore and molds her into a modern hero.

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