

Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood

Laurie Maguire

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Praise for *Helen of Troy*

In her witty, scholarly and wide-ranging study Laurie Maguire explores the deep contradictions inherent in the myth of Helen of Troy. Though she was held to be the most beautiful woman of antiquity, there is no agreement about the specific details of Helen's beauty. For the majority of writers, whether historical or literary, her appearance is essentially a blank, to be filled in – or not – by the imagination of aftercomers. And though she was celebrated for having triggered major military activity – her face launching those 'thousand ships', a phrase interestingly re-spun in modern times – she is herself essentially passive, a victim of rape and/or abduction. Yet, as Professor Maguire shows in the excellent chapter entitled *Blame*, Helen has often been viewed as culpable even in her passivity. Shakespeare, for instance, linked her closely to the morally wavering Cressida. In addition to the 'Faust' legend in its various renditions, Helen's mysterious presence is also discovered in Victorian and Modernist fiction, as well as in contemporary poetry – above all Derek Walcott's epic *Omeros* – in contemporary fiction, including graphic novels, and in film. Often silent and virtually invisible, Helen reveals herself, in Laurie Maguire's richly original examination, as a potent and enduring figure in Western culture.

Katherine Duncan-Jones, University of Oxford

Laurie Maguire's *Helen of Troy* is a book about a myth. It honours the myth's elusiveness that lies in its recurring, and perhaps obsessive, repetition. The book shuns the temptation to trudge through variations on a theme or impose false teleologies and avoids, above all, any attempt to close the story down by explanation or interpretation. In the process it reveals the mixture of anxiety and desire with which we encounter stories and the different stories we make out of their omissions and absences. This work requires an astonishing depth of learning combined with a pitch-perfect ear for language that embodies in its etymology and associations the linguistic connectedness and half-heard echoes that make up the Helen story. It reveals the resonances of knowing and telling, the shudder that is always both fearful and erotic, along with the truth of all myths that beauty vanishes as soon as hands (or words) are laid upon it. Like Helen herself this story cannot be grabbed at or tied down but Laurie Maguire has achieved the intellectual and literary control that allows us to look at it and understand something of its power – which goes some way to explaining the power of literature itself.

Kate McLuskie, University of Birmingham

– What's her history?
– A blank, my lord.
(Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*)

Imagine that you are hungry for the truth, like everyone always was and is and will be. And imagine that all you have is stories.

(Mark Haddon, *A Thousand Ships*)

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Preface

This is a literary biography of Helen of Troy. It is not a historical life of a Bronze Age princess or a study of mythology; it is not an account of Troy or an exploration of the ancient world. It does not consider whether Helen of Troy had a historical existence or was a mythical figure. My subject is the literary afterlife of the woman we know as Helen of Troy, the beautiful Queen of Sparta whose elopement with (or abduction by) the Trojan prince Paris led not only to a ten-year war and the downfall of the greatest civilization the East then knew (Priam's Troy) but to 28 centuries of poetry, drama, novels, opera, and film.

Helen's story has been told and retold in almost every century. My study begins in the eighth century BCE with Homer's *Iliad*; my most recent texts are plays and novels published in 2006. My interest throughout is not in Helen's life but in literary depictions of that life: how literature deals with her beauty, her personality, how it blames her or tries to rescue her from blame, how it deifies her or burlesques her; in short, how it represents her.

In Goethe's *Faust*, Faust conjures up a simulacrum of Helen for the Emperor, then later, impulsively, reaches out to seize her. Commenting on this episode, Alexander Gillies cautions:

A mere image cannot, however, be imperiously turned into reality as Faust wishes, simply by his laying hold upon it. Other means are required if he is to gain Helen. Egotistic impetuosity will need to be replaced by . . . understanding of her whole environment and historical context, from which she must not be disengaged, as she is disengaged here. (1957: 120)

Gillies's critique applies to any scholar wishing to understand Helen of Troy in literature. Because she appears in so many texts in so many periods, it is tempting to home in on the "Helen episodes." But one cannot

understand women in epic without understanding men (or epic); one cannot understand Helen's story without attempting to understand the techniques of myth or narrative; one cannot understand plot innovations in her story without chronicling their literary precursors. We cannot simply "grab" Helen as Faust attempts to do; in fact the next time we see Faust with Helen, he has gone back to ancient Greece.

Although I cover revisions of Helen's story across many centuries, I have chosen to organize this book thematically rather than chronologically. The same issues recur in each period (Was Helen guilty or not? What is the value of beauty?), and I wanted to avoid repetition. Some repetition is unavoidable, of course, but it is a question of what kind one tolerates; I have preferred to revisit texts rather than repeat arguments. Thus texts such as Homer's *Iliad* and Giraudoux's *Tiger at the Gates* recur in several chapters, but they illustrate different points.

Faust's journey in Goethe is episodic and fragmented. Mine shares some of these features (or faults). Although this book is wide in its coverage, it is not comprehensive. Generally I exclude material in foreign languages (Ronsard's Helen sonnets, for instance, or contemporary Greek poetry) and have little to say about American poetry (such as H. D.'s innovative psychoanalytical *Helen in Egypt*). At times the juxtapositions in chapters and arguments may seem large – moving from Aeschylus to Carol Ann Duffy in one paragraph, for instance – but my focus throughout is on continuity (or difference) in narrative treatment. This literary, specifically narratological, focus avoids (or tries to avoid) the eclecticism common to most studies of Helen to date which tend to mix archaeology, history, literature, and mythology without any sense that they are separate disciplines.

I have chosen to analyze representative texts in detail, rather than offer a breathless overview. My interest is in literary history and context, and this interest is best served through close reading and analysis. To take one obvious example: most readers know Marlowe's famous lines "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?" But were these lines original to Marlowe? Did the Renaissance see them as we do, as a pinnacle of poetry? (Apparently not.) What is the after-life of these lines in quotation by other authors? And although we view them as a transparently awed reaction to beauty, is that how they work in context when addressed not to Helen of Troy but to a devil impersonating Helen of Troy?

The importance of context means that each chapter contains within it mini-chapters on related topics. In chapter 3 the subject of rape leads to an investigation of changing rape law in Elizabethan England and of the period's interest in the rape of another classical heroine, Lucrece; a

Victorian novel about Helen, discussed in chapter 6, leads to an attempt to identify its author; and so on. Helen's story is one of seduction and/or abduction; the structure of each chapter of this book literally demonstrates and embodies abduction (in writing we call it digression). Consequently the chapters are long but each is divided into multiple short sections. The topics of the subdivisions – the relation between beauty and nostalgia, for instance – are designed to translate into seminar topics for anyone who wishes to use this book in university teaching. I have quoted (and used) English translations of Greek and Latin texts since most readers first encounter Euripides or Ovid or medieval Latin poems in English versions. Translations are literary texts in their own right and are amenable to analysis independently. However, I have constantly compared my chosen English translations with the originals, and where there is significant discrepancy (i.e., poetic license) I have noted it: repetitions in the translation but not in the original, Christian vocabulary (e.g., “guilt”) not in a pre-Christian text, expansion of an implication, and so on.

Goethe wrote, “We do not get to know works of nature and art as end-products; we must grasp them as they develop if we are to gain some understanding of them” (Goethe/Luke 1994: xix). This is true not just of revisions of a single author’s work but of revisions of one story across centuries and cultures. I wanted to get to know Helen’s story. However, this is not the same as getting to know Helen herself; indeed one of the arguments of this book is that Helen is strangely absent (emotionally, physically) from the story she has initiated. Although she is the narrative motor, she is an absent center, and literature deals with this absent center in various ways. This is a book about what is not there, what is not said, what defies representation, and what cannot be told.

It is appropriate that a book about absence should begin by thanking the institutions that have facilitated my absence, and the friends and colleagues who have tolerated it. My greatest debt is to the Leverhulme Trust for a Major Research Fellowship from 2006 to 2008, which relieved me of all teaching and administrative duties. The President and Fellows of Magdalen College and the English Faculty of the University of Oxford granted me permission to accept this award, and prefaced it with two terms of sabbatical leave and a term of unpaid leave in 2005–2006. Without such generosity from Leverhulme and Oxford it would have been impossible to engage on a project of this scope. At Magdalen I am grateful especially to Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Simon Horobin, and Emma Rhatigan. In Oxford and Wytham the absence of social life has been tolerated with amazing understanding by Peter Friend, Miranda Stewart, and Martine Stewart.

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the home fires burning; Anne Maguire dug the garden; and Peter Friend never complained. Sharing his life for so many years with the most beautiful woman in literature cannot have been easy. This book is for him: φοιδίμω ἀνδρὶ ὃς μοι μάλα πάντα τά τ' ἔλδεται θυμὸς ἐμεῖο (Quintus of Smyrna, *The War at Troy*).

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Conventions

I have Latinized the spelling of Greek names (e.g., Menelaus not Menelaos) except in quotations from sources that use Greek forms. I use both Greek and Roman forms of gods' names (Aphrodite and Venus) depending on the form used in the source under discussion.

In the interest of readability I have modernized the spelling and punctuation in quotations in texts from Caxton's *Recuyell* (c.1474) onwards. I have also modernized spelling in the titles of all texts. I have retained the original spelling in pre-Caxton texts because to modernize would, in most instances, amount to emendation and interfere with the meter; however, I have provided glosses in square brackets for particularly archaic vocabulary. Terminal punctuation has been added to all indented quotations.

The medieval Troy books are lengthy and most of them are divided, like epic, into multiple books. Some of these texts open a new numbering sequence within each book; others have through-line numbering. The former is more usual; in citations I represent it as 2.3456 (= book 2, line 3456). Where through-line numbering occurs I indicate it with the prefatory acronym TLN (e.g., TLN 12345). All other poems are cited with through-line numbering, but I use the acronym TLN only for medieval texts to distinguish them from other medieval poems that have a separate numbering sequence for each book.

Texts by Homer and Virgil are cited according to the conventions of the translation I have used. The *Iliad*, in Lattimore's poetic translation, gives book and line numbers with the lineation matching that of the Greek. The prose translations of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* do not; for the *Aeneid* I follow the Harvard author–date system (as for critical works) but provide the relevant book number to assist readers who have a different translation to hand, and for the *Odyssey* I give the book number followed by the page number. I quote in English throughout (translations not attributed are mine).

Because of the large number of texts covered and the potential for confusion in their varied formats, I have tried to be as full and unambiguous as possible in references. Thus:

Goethe/Luke 1987: ix	refers to David Luke's introduction to his edition of Goethe's <i>1 Faust</i> (Goethe 1987)
<i>1 Faust</i> 8860	refers to the through-line number
Lindsay 1974: 57	is the page number of a critical work
<i>Iliad</i> 4.790	is Lattimore's translation (Lattimore 1951) by book and line number
<i>Odyssey</i> book 11, p. 20	refers to Rieu's translation (Homer 1991) by book and page number

Expository texts in Greek are often divided into numbered paragraphs; I retain these paragraph numbers for the reader's ease of reference. Other elaborate subdivisions are retained for the same reason; for example, Pausanias vol. 1, 2.22 in 1918: 365–67. I distinguish the titles of individual works within an edition of a single author (e.g., *Catalogues of Women* in Hesiod 1977: 191). Similarly, when various anonymous works are collected in a volume that bears the name of a known author, my citation takes the form *Cypria* in Hesiod 1977: 499. When a Renaissance manuscript poem has been edited and published in a journal, I give the poet's name and that of the author of the article, as well as journal page number and poem line number (e.g., Trussell in Shaaber 1957: 425 [43]).

Introduction: *Ab ovo*

The “facts” of mythology are not fixed. (Malcolm Willcock,
A Companion to the Iliad)

Where shall I begin, where end, my tale? (*Odyssey* book 9)

Beginnings

Homer's *Iliad* begins with the Trojan War in its tenth year. The American cable TV miniseries *Helen of Troy* (2003) begins approximately three decades earlier, with the birth of Paris (and the terrified premonitory scream of his sister, Cassandra: “Kill him!”). We could go back earlier, starting with the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, as does the anonymous medieval poem *Excidium Troiae*, which devotes the first quarter of its narrative to Achilles, beginning with the marriage that produced the Trojan War's hero. Herodotus, writing as an historian in the fifth century BCE, chooses to begin with the abduction of Io (then that of Europa, Medea, and Helen), explaining how East and West, Phoenicians and Greeks “came into conflict” (1965: 13). Dares Phrygius' account (first century CE) begins with the adventures of Jason and the Argonauts (Frazer 1966: 133–4); Dares' contemporary Dictys Cretensis mentions the abducted Europa *en passant*, then begins his central story in the third paragraph with Paris' abduction of Helen (Frazer 1966: 24).¹ Later medieval Troy books, even those that purport to be following or translating Dares or Dictys, take up to three thousand lines to reach the abduction of Helen, chronicling as narrative warm-up the founding of Troy.²

Paintings, on the other hand, regularly depict the “abduction of Helen,” as if there is one decisive moment that causes war. In a sense there is: Helen's abduction is the last in a series of causes, the one that triggers war, the

2 *Helen of Troy*

one that, as Giraudoux's Ulysses says (in a play written on the eve of World War II), gives "permission for war" (1955: 69). But the chain of events that precedes this moment of permission offers a complex sequence of causality.

In this chapter I chronicle the links in the causal chain. Although the Trojan War is one of the most famous stories of classical epic, and Helen of Troy its most (in)famous female, Helen's story is neither easily identifiable nor chronologically related in classical literature. Her narrative, like that of the ten-year war initiated by her flight (or abduction), exists only in disconnected episodes. (Indeed, as we shall see, it is not "her" story, although throughout this book I shall refer to "Helen narratives" as a convenient shorthand for texts in which she features, however marginally.) Here I gather events from various literary sources across many centuries, presenting them sequentially, beginning with the wedding of Peleus and Thetis.

Stories and Contexts

Thetis was a Nereid (a sea-goddess) on whom Zeus had amorous designs. After a thousand years of torture, Prometheus revealed details of a prophecy that Thetis would create a son more powerful than his father,³ whereupon Zeus chose to marry off Thetis to the mortal Peleus. Because it was a semidivine wedding, and because it signaled the end of a thousand years of strife between Zeus and Prometheus, Olympia's gods and goddesses were invited to the nuptial feast, Eris (goddess of strife) excepted. Piqued at her exclusion, Eris disrupted the festivities by throwing onto the table a golden apple inscribed "for the most beautiful." Hera (the wife of Zeus), Pallas Athena (Zeus' daughter) and Aphrodite (for Homer, the daughter of Zeus and Dione⁴) competed for the accolade. Paris was selected to adjudicate the claims of the three goddesses.

Paris was an obvious choice for this task because he was exceptionally handsome (the logic being that the most beautiful of men would himself recognize beauty). George Peele's Venus, in *The Arraignment of Paris* (1584), accepts Juno's nomination of Paris because "it seemeth by his looks, some skill of love he can" (sig. B4r).⁵ But a more compelling reason for choosing Paris was his reputation for impartiality. In a contest between Paris' favorite bull and another (the other being the god Mars in disguise), Paris had unhesitatingly awarded the victory to Mars.

However, Paris proves more partial in judging divine beauty than bovine strength. Each of the goddesses offers him a bribe appropriate to her realm. Hera, goddess of heaven, offers power over many kingdoms; Athena, a war goddess, offers Paris invincibility in war; Aphrodite, goddess of love, offers

Paris the most beautiful woman. Pulchritude wins out over power. Mark Haddon's Paris explains his choice in *A Thousand Ships* (2002):

I was a farmer's son. I had never seen the border of our own kingdom let alone another. Foreign lands were names from poems. War was something that happened on the far side of the myths . . . but the most beautiful woman in the world . . . naturally I chose Aphrodite.

In the sixteenth century Peele's disappointed goddesses Hera and Athena demand a retrial and Paris is accused by Jove "of sentence partial and unjust" (sig. D3r) because he did not take merit into account (Pallas Athena e.g. had been confident in her *internal* beauty). Paris defends himself with the logic later adopted by Haddon's Paris. Wealth means nothing to a swain: running water, modest food, contentment count as wealth. Arms are irrelevant to a foainless herdsman. "And so [I] preferred beauty before them all" (sig. D4r).⁶

Helen's beauty is that of the "immortal goddesses" (*Iliad* 3.158) because she is herself half-divine. Her father was Zeus; her mother was the mortal Leda. In Homer, Helen says Castor and Pollux (the "Dioscuri") are her brothers (*Iliad* 3.238), and Leda is later mentioned as being their mother (*Odyssey* book 11, p. 168). Zeus, disguised as a swan, raped Leda; the product of this union was an egg, or two eggs, from which hatched Helen and a twin sibling. Euripides' *Helen* gives the earliest account of Leda and the Swan. In *Orestes* Euripides' reference to Helen's "swan-winged beauty" is an allusion both to her swan-neck and to her origin (Euripides 1972: 349).

Helen's sibling might have been her sister Clytemnestra or her brother Pollux (Polydeuces). Pollux is more usually said to be the twin of Castor, in which case Leda had two sets of twins: the boys Castor and Pollux, and the girls Clytemnestra and Helen.⁷ Joseph of Exeter's twelfth-century account of the Trojan War poignantly reveals that the only difference between the twin brothers is their different fears: "Castor feared the death of Pollux, Pollux of Castor" (Joseph/Bate 1986: 151). There are many variant accounts of the births of the Dioscuri. For the description of Helen's birth from an egg we are indebted to Sappho (fragment 166; 1955: 100), although for Sappho Leda simply nursed an egg she had discovered.⁸ In Guido delle Colonne (1287), Helen, like her brothers, is the daughter of Zeus and Danæ (book 4, 8–15; delle Colonne / Meek 1974: 32). The *Cypria* tells us that Helen's mother was Nemesis (the goddess of measure or justice).⁹

Throughout Homer, Helen is called the daughter of Zeus or the child of Zeus. In the *Odyssey* Menelaus is told that, because he is the husband

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of Helen, he is “in the eyes of the gods, son-in-law to Zeus” (book 4, p. 61). Even so, Homer shies away from calling Helen a goddess. For that we have to wait until Euripides’ *Orestes*, where Apollo appears at the end of the tragedy to explain why he “snatched her [Helen] up” and “saved her from [Orestes’] sword”:

From Zeus immortal born, immortal she must live,
Reverenced as the goddess who saves seamen’s lives,
Enthroned beside her brothers in the folds of heaven.

(Euripides 1972: 359)

In Euripides’ *Women of Troy* an angry Andromache accuses Helen of having many (symbolic) fathers but denies that Zeus was one:

You were never daughter of Zeus!
You had many fathers; the Avenging Curse was one,
Hate was the next, then Murder, Death, and every plague
That this earth breeds. I’ll swear Zeus never fathered you
To fasten death on tens of thousands east and west!

(Euripides 1973: 115)

In the early modern narrative poem *The First Rape of Fair Helen*, attributed to John Trussell, Helen first hears about her mother’s rape by Zeus when Helen herself is raped by Theseus. Helen was in all versions pre-pubertal when Theseus raped her, although her precise age varies. Classical writers (Hellanicus of Lesbos, Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, Pausanias, Hyginus) make her between seven and twelve years old. Later writers offer a range of nine to fourteen. In *Troia Britannica* (1609) Thomas Heywood says Helen was aged nine (canto 9, marginal note, sig. V4r); Goethe says she was ten years old (2 *Faust* 6530). John Trussell is the most specific: she is almost “eight score moneths” (160 months = thirteen and a third years).¹⁰

In most accounts Theseus’ “rape” is an “abduction” and he gives Helen to his mother for safe keeping. Indeed the TV miniseries *Helen of Troy* makes much of the fact that Helen’s nascent sexuality attracts her, with obvious frustration, to a man who refuses to touch her. Pausanias, who investigates the abduction as rape, further details its result: the birth of Iphigenia, immediately given to her aunt Clytemnestra for a shame-free upbringing.¹¹

Helen is rescued from Theseus by her brothers and returns to Sparta where suitors from all over Greece (with one exception: Achilles) compete for her hand. The suitors take an oath to support the eventual winner.¹² Why Menelaus wins – given literature’s consistent depiction of him as neither

handsome nor clever – is unclear. In Hesiod's account he brings with him the greatest gifts (*Catalogues of Women* in Hesiod 1977: 199); in Bernard Drew's play (1924) he is the only one to declare his love for Helen; in Linda Cargill's novel (1991) Helen is attracted to Menelaus because he seems indifferent to her.

There is no immediate cause-and-effect between the judgment of Paris and his arrival in Sparta. Paris, as a shepherd on Mount Ida, is enamored of the nymph Oenone (with whom, in some versions, he has a son, Corythus). There passes enough time for Paris to be identified as Priam's abandoned son, to return to Troy as a prince, to abandon Oenone (who gets a poem of her own in 1594: Thomas Heywood's *Oenone and Paris*) and then for him to visit Sparta. When Paris is later wounded in the Trojan War, he is brought to Mount Ida for cure by Oenone's herbal skill. She refuses. Distraught at his death she immolates herself on his funeral pyre.¹³

There are various accounts of the reason for Paris' visit to Sparta. According to some writers, Menelaus took him there. In Alcidamas (early fourth-century BCE), a version without the Judgment of Paris, Paris goes to Sparta because he has heard of Helen's beauty (Lindsay 1974: 157). In several medieval Troy books (which also omit the Judgment of Paris) Paris is motivated to visit Sparta because of the fame of Helen's beauty. In other texts, a *quid pro quo* abduction in retaliation for the Greek theft of Hesione is the aim of the expedition to Greece; in the medieval *Gest Hystoriale*, for instance, the Trojans plan to kill the Greeks, to plunder the land, and then seize some lady who may be exchanged for Hesione. Paris is hospitably entertained by Menelaus before his host has to leave (the *Cypria* tells us that Menelaus was called to attend a family funeral in Crete). Dictys stresses that Paris and Helen are related (both are descended from gods) and Menelaus is upset because his relative has wronged him (Frazer 1966: 27, 24).

In almost all texts the question of Helen's departure from Sparta with Paris – willing or forced – is addressed. In several medieval texts Paris and his men land at Cythera during a religious festival. This gives Paris the opportunity to view Helen in the temple. Unprepared for her beauty, he falls instantly in love. Helen, curious to see what the Trojan visitor looks like, seizes the cover of worship to observe him. She flirts / falls in love. In Ovid's *Heroides* 16 and 17 (a letter from Paris to Helen and Helen's reply), we read of an oenological overture of love: Paris spills his wine on the table and writes in the liquid, "Helen I love you." The episode is later depicted in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* 3.9.30.1–9 and in the Hollywood film *Troy* (2004).

Helen leaves with Paris; all texts stress that Paris took Helen and her valuables. Beginning with the *Iliad*, Helen's valuables are inseparable from

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Helen herself. Homer uses the formula “Helen and all her possessions” (*Iliad* 3.70); similar formulae recur in Dictys and in the medieval Troy books. The wittily ironic Helen of John Erskine’s novel *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* denies two allegations of theft: “Paris didn’t steal me . . . I was quite willing. But if he had stolen me, I’d prefer to think he had no margin of interest left for the furniture” (1926: 49).

The *Cypria* (and later Herodotus) tells us that Paris took three days to return to Troy with Helen. Medieval texts present her progress into Troy, where she meets Priam and is married to Paris in a ceremony the following day.

In the *Iliad* Odysseus and Menelaus come on an embassy to Troy for Helen (3.205–8). In Dictys 25 envoys are sent to Troy; the Trojans are unwilling to return Helen because they will also have to relinquish the wealth that accompanied her (Frazer 1966: 26–7). They later suggest giving one of Priam’s daughters – Cassandra or Polyxena – to Menelaus plus a dowry “to take Helen’s place” (52). In 2002 Haddon’s King Priam explains his dilemma (or rather the only possible solution, which therefore makes it *not* a dilemma) in a series of rhetorical questions: “What was I meant to do? Send her back? Rebuke my son and broadcast his humiliation to the world?” Giraudoux’s Hector is determined to “giv[e] Helen back,” but as Ulysses explains, “the insult to destiny can’t be taken back” (1955: 70).

Preparations for war are made. In Dictys these preparations are itemized: the forging of weapons and preparing of horses takes two years; equipping the ships takes five years (Frazer 1966: 33). As in most accounts, the total preparations take ten years. In the ninth year of preparation the Greeks send a second envoy (Dictys in Frazer 1966: 42, 48). When Agamemnon gathers the troops of the pan-Hellenic alliance in the bay at Aulis, the favorable wind changes, and the men are forced to stay in Aulis for months; plague breaks out. The seer Calchas reveals that Artemis (Diana) is angry; in the *Cypria* her anger is because Agamemnon killed a stag sacred to her and “boasted that he surpassed even Artemis” (in Hesiod 1977: 493). Calchas counsels that Artemis’ anger will be appeased by the sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter Iphigenia. Consequently Agamemnon sends a letter to his wife, Clytemnestra, at Mycenae requesting that Iphigenia come to Aulis to be married to Achilles. The ruse works, Iphigenia arrives, and her throat is cut. In some versions Artemis snatches Iphigenia and substitutes a stag for her at the last moment, taking Iphigenia to the land of the Taurians on the shores of the Black Sea (*Cypria* in Hesiod 1977: 495; Dictys in Frazer 1966: 35).¹⁴ The wind changes, and the Greeks sail for Troy.

The ten-year Trojan “war” is a siege. In Dictys no battles take place in winter; there are truces of weeks and months to bury the dead and perform

funeral games; the Greeks even cultivate the soil, grow crops, and plunder the Phrygian settlements for supplies (Frazer 1966: 62). Given ten years of preparation and ten years of siege, Helen is middle-aged by the time Troy falls. In her final speech in the *Iliad* she says “now is the twentieth year upon me since I came / from the place where I was” (24.765–6).

Stesichorus reports that Aphrodite was angry with Tyndareus (Helen’s father) because Tyndareus forgot to sacrifice to her, so she made his daughters “deserters of their husbands” (scholiast on Euripides’ *Orestes*, 249, in Hesiod 1977: 191). That is the short version. A longer version concerns the house of Atreus. Atreus (father of Agamemnon) was the brother of Thyestes; both brothers competed over who should inherit the throne of Argos. Independently (but no doubt exacerbating the competition), Thyestes seduced Atreus’ wife; Atreus (now King of Argos) banished him, only to recall him to a banquet prepared from the flesh of two of Thyestes’ sons. Horrified, Thyestes cursed the house of Atreus. Atreus’ sons were Agamemnon and Menelaus, each married to one of Tyndareus’ daughters: Clytemnestra and Helen. Clytemnestra was unfaithful to Agamemnon (during the Trojan War) with Aegisthus (son of Thyestes) and both she and Aegisthus killed Agamemnon when he returned victorious from Troy – evidence of the family curse. (Homer knows of the death of Agamemnon but seems not to know about the legend of the house of Atreus.)

Helen spends ten years in Troy while war wages. Later tradition, inaugurated by Stesichorus in the sixth century BCE, says that the gods sent an *eidolon* (a phantom) to Troy, and Helen spent the war in Egypt (the Trojan Helen is thus the original Stepford wife).¹⁵ We do not possess Stesichorus’ palinode, although we can access its contents indirectly from references in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (§243a–b) and *The Republic* (§586c). In the *Phaedrus* Plato tells us that Stesichorus slandered Helen in an acidulous minor epic, for which he was struck blind. His recantatory palinode resulted in his regaining his sight:

When he lost his sight for speaking ill of Helen, Stesichorus . . . was sagacious enough to understand the reason; he immediately composed the poem which begins: / False is this tale. You never / Went in a ship to sea, / Nor saw the towers of Troy. (§243; 1973: 44–5)

In the fifth century BCE Herodotus recorded an Egyptian variant without the *eidolon* story:

Within the enclosure there is a temple dedicated to Aphrodite the Stranger. I should guess, myself, that it was built in honour of Helen the daughter of