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Narrating Myth

When Paris came, I let him in. What happened afterwards we all know – at least, we know the events, but some of us are at a loss to interpret them (Helen in John Erskine, *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*)

To tell a story is to try to understand it (H. Porter Abbott, *Narrative*)

Stories never live alone. They are branches of a family that we have to trace back and forward (Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*)

Whose Story?

In her wide-ranging account of Helen of Troy as “goddess, princess, whore,” Bettany Hughes writes that “Helen found in Homer the most brilliant of biographers,” a sentiment expressed more specifically elsewhere when she describes the *Iliad* as “Homer’s account of Helen” (2005: 343, xxxv). Hughes is but the most recent of many commentators who hold that the Trojan War is Helen’s story and that the *Iliad* is “about” Helen (e.g., West 1975: 3; Pollard 1965: 22). In fact what is noticeable about the *Iliad* is how little it has to do with Helen, or rather how little it has to *say* about Helen, who is confined to three episodes in books 3, 6, and 24. In book 3 she appears on the battlements with Priam, identifying the Greek warriors for the Trojan king. In book 6 she criticizes Paris. In book 24 she is the third of the three female voices mourning Hector.¹ But in another sense Helen is everywhere in the *Iliad*, for without Helen there would be no war; no war, no story. In narratological terms Helen functions as a nucleus or kernel (the terms are those of Roland Barthes [1982: 295–6] and Seymour

Chatman [1978: 53–6] respectively). Take Helen away, untune that string, and hark what narrative discord follows.

And yet Homer did take Helen away. The *Iliad* announces its subject in line 1: “The anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus.” It is left to Helen to present her own narrative, becoming the rival poet to Homer. In her tapestry in book 3 we are reminded of her role in the events she depicts:

she was weaving a great web,
 . . . and working into it the numerous struggles
 of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians,
 struggles that they endured for her sake.

(3.125–8)

To whom does the epexegetic phrase (“struggles that they endured for her sake”) belong, Homer or Helen? There is competition here between Helen and Homer for choice and control of narrative subject. A character in a modern novel observes, “I’d always assumed that I was the central character in my own story but now it occurred to me that I might in fact be only a minor character in someone else’s” (Hoban 1975: 186). Helen’s tapestry shows her refusal to become a minor character in Achilles’ story.² In book 3 she answers Priam’s question about Agamemnon with a biography of her own life (3.166–80) “as if hers were the story most central to the warrior’s life – which is in some sense the case” (Worman 1997: 160). Helen later assumes that she and Paris will take narrative centre stage, “made into things of song for the men of the future” (*Iliad* 6.358), and literary history proves her correct.³

The question then becomes What has Helen to do with the anger of Achilles? (Clader 1976: 6). How does one suggest the other? Critics have proposed several answers to these questions, of which the most convincing (in narratological terms) are based on the parallels between Helen’s origins and attributes and those of Achilles. The hero and heroine of the Trojan War are each the offspring of a mortal and an immortal: the god Zeus and the human Leda created Helen; the mortal Peleus and the goddess Thetis created Achilles (Lindsay 1974: 92). The poem begins with the cause of Achilles’ anger; it ends with the cause of the war, Helen herself (Clader 1976: 11). But more general thematic explanations for Helen’s relevance to Achilles also have narrative logic: Helen and beauty make men act; Helen leads men to honor; the poem represents the birth of (oral) poetry and the immortality it confers, an immortality enjoyed by Achilles. Helen, in other words, enables Achilles’ fame. Yet none of these answers is entirely satisfactory, for they concern Achilles’ fighting, not his anger. His anger leads him to *withdraw* from fighting.⁴

The story of Helen is a story of withdrawal. The infant Paris is withdrawn from Troy to Mount Ida; Menelaus is withdrawn from Sparta to Crete; his absence enables Helen to be withdrawn from Sparta to Troy; Achilles withdraws from fighting; Aphrodite threatens to withdraw from Helen. In a narrative of absence and withdrawal, even passivity (absence of agency) becomes narratologically crucial: “the most important thing Menelaos ever did for epic was to lose Helen” (Clader 1976: 32). Thus this book, like the Trojan narratives that it explores, is a study of absence, lack, gaps, ambiguity, aporia, and the narrative impulse to completion and closure.

Absence

The *Iliad* is conspicuous for what it leaves out. Listeners and readers have long realized that the poem fails to present key events associated with the Trojan War, not least of which are the beauty contest on Mount Ida (the Judgment of Paris, in which Venus bribed Paris with the promise of a beautiful woman); the oath of Helen’s suitors to support the successful suitor in the event of future trouble; the sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter Iphigenia to secure a favorable wind for Troy and to alleviate plague; information about Achilles’ heel, which makes him vulnerable; and the trick of the wooden horse, which enables the Greeks to infiltrate and destroy Troy.⁵ Within a century of Homer’s *Iliad* other epics arose to fill in the gaps.⁶ Collectively, these works, known as the epic cycle, form an overarching narrative from the gods’ decision to cause the Trojan War to Odysseus’ death. The narrative sequence, including Homer’s works, runs as follows: the *Cypria*; the *Iliad*; the *Aethiopis*; the *Little Iliad*; the *Sack of Troy*; the *Nostoi (Returns)*; the *Odyssey*; the *Telegony*.⁷ In the fourth century CE Quintus of Smyrna wrote a 14-book epic which begins with the death of Hector (Combella 1968: 3). At every stage Quintus’ text stresses its continuity from Homer. It picks up where the *Iliad* leaves off. The author’s nomination of himself as “of Smyrna” links him with Homer’s alleged birthplace.⁸ And its title, the *Post-Homerica*, highlights its status as sequel, “the things after Homer.”

One of the text’s English translators, Frederick Combella in 1968, offers a telling translation of the title: “What Homer Didn’t Tell.” Combella’s title foregrounds not Quintus’ continuity but Homer’s omissions. In so doing, it also highlights the paradox in Quintus’ title where the very act of asserting completion reveals the threatening absence in the original. The *Iliad* closes with Achilles alive and Troy unsacked, but absence is pervasive from the beginning of the poem. Achilles is absent from the fighting in book 1; Helen notes the absence of her brothers, Castor and Pollux in book 3;

Aphrodite absents Paris from combat in book 3 and threatens to absent herself from Helen; even the poet absents himself from description of battle: “it were too much toil for me, as if I were a god, to tell all this” (12.176). Homer’s next poem, the *Odyssey*, is an acephalous epic, a chronicle of the problems that ensue when the patriarchal head is absent. And absence continues to be a feature of all Trojan War accounts, a stylistic quiddity and a thematic principle rather than a structural failing. From the loss of Helen, the absence of wind in the bay at Aulis, and the loss of Iphigenia, to the consequences of war: absent kings and leaders, thrones unfilled, homes unfathered and emptied, widowed beds (*Agamemnon* in Aeschylus 1968: 52, 58, 65), what a twentieth-century musical hauntingly depicts as “empty chairs and empty tables” (Claude-Michel Schönberg, *Les Misérables*). Absence, like Helen, gets passed around the texts. Absence comes to stand for Helen; she is both absent and absence itself.

Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* is centred on absence and loss. A grief-stricken Menelaus (who is himself absent from the play) loses speech and loses his appetite. Only his eyes are hungry: to see his missing wife. He is, the Chorus tells us, haunted by present reminders of absence:

O pillow softly printed
 Where her loved head had rested! . . .
 A ghost will rule the palace
 A home become a tomb!
 Her statue’s sweet perfection
 Torments his desolation; . . .
 Visions of her beset him
 With false and fleeting pleasure.
 (Aeschylus 1968: 57)

Within a few lines comes war, and with it the cruellest manifestation of absent presence: “ashes in an urn.” Carol Ann Duffy’s twenty-first-century Menelaus is as tormented as Aeschylus’:

her side of the bed unslept in cold,
 the small coin of her wedding ring
 left on the bedside table like a tip,
 the wardrobe empty
 of the drama of her clothes.
 (Duffy 2002: 8)

Alongside these human and thematic vacuums are linguistic vacancies: what one avoids saying, is reluctant to voice or cannot utter. The grieving

Penelope talks of “that city, evil Ilium, which I loathe to name” (*Odyssey* book 19, p. 303). Euripides’ Menelaus comes to fetch “the Spartan woman, once my wife – even to speak / Her name I find distasteful” (*Women of Troy* in Euripides 1973: 118). In *Orestes* Pylades cannot bring himself to name Helen, calling her “that woman” (Euripides 1972: 340). In book 3 of the *Aeneid* Andromache talks of “Hermione, the granddaughter of Leda” (Virgil 1981: 85), bypassing Hermione’s mother, Helen, altogether.

This is not an aversion confined to classical texts. C. S. Lewis’s Menelaus thinks of his estranged wife as “the Woman” (1966: 129). In George Peele’s *Tale of Troy* (1589, rev. ed. 1604) Helen enters the poem as a pronoun not a proper name: “She” (line 137). Shakespeare’s Lucentio, neither a classical character nor one emotionally involved with Troy, also omits Helen’s name: “fair Leda’s daughter had a thousand wooers” (*Taming of the Shrew* 1.2.234).

Helen, the cause of war, is systematically linguistically suppressed from its literature. Although Caxton’s *Recuyell* (c.1474), his prose account of the Trojan War, lacks a title page (because it is designed to look like a manuscript), it mentions Helen’s “ravishing” in its prologue (1894, vol. 1: 7); by 1597 it has developed a title page but omits to mention Helen. Thomas Heywood’s drama on the same subject, *2 The Iron Age* (1632) includes Helen on the title page but omits her from the list of dramatis personae. In Shakespeare’s “Rape of Lucrece” Helen is referred to only as “the strumpet that began this stir” (1471); not only is she linguistically absent but Lucrece cannot find her in the painting. The most surprising suppression of Helen comes on the DVD cover of Wolfgang Petersen’s film *Troy* (2004) where Diane Kruger’s name does not appear at all. (The names of Brad Pitt, Eric Banna, and Orlando Bloom – Achilles, Hector, and Paris respectively – are the three advertised.) Although this makes sense in terms of film narrative – Kruger is little involved in the plot – it does not make sense in terms of PR where the search for Helen of Troy / Diane Kruger was publicized internationally, nor does it make sense in terms of film prominence where Kruger occupies large amounts of screen time.

If Helen narratives give us structural and linguistic absences, they also give us emotion caused by absence. The loss of Iphigenia haunts both Clytemnestra and Agamemnon in the USA TV series *Helen of Troy* (Clytemnestra takes revenge on Agamemnon for the loss of their daughter; Agamemnon, in a brutal concluding sequence, takes revenge on Helen). So important is the loss of Iphigenia in Troy narratives that legend emphasizes it through repetition. A variant tradition holds that Iphigenia was the daughter of Helen by Theseus; the illegitimate baby was given to Clytemnestra to be brought up as her own. Iphigenia is thus lost

twice. It is this variant legend that structures Mark Haddon's radio play *A Thousand Ships* (2002), where Helen is haunted by the loss of her first daughter: at the birth of Hermione all she can feel is the absence of Iphigenia.

Narrative duplication is a feature of myth – we see it most overtly in the *eidōlon* (double) of Helen's story – but in Helen narratives it works as a constant reinforcer of (narrative) lack, an analogue for what is omitted. Narrative gaps must be filled, if only with substitutes. In the *Odyssey* Penelope's suitors remind us of the suitors for Helen; Odysseus' battle for his wife is a replay of Menelaus' battle for his. Whenever Clytemnestra is referred to as “Tyndareid” (“daughter of Tyndareus”) in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* or Euripides' *Electra*, we think of Helen to whom the description equally applies. By the Middle Ages, when the character of Criseyde is invented, a character whose situation parallels Helen's (she is half-Greek, half-Trojan in allegiance, transferred from one camp to another, sexually associated with men on both sides) Helen gains her most complex literary double. Shakespeare's decision in *Troilus and Cressida* to stage the moment at which Cressida is transferred to the enemy camp – a scene in which emotional loyalty conflicts with the pragmatic need for survival – depicts the female interiority omitted from most Troy narratives to date. Shakespeare stages Cressida's situation as a replay of Helen's. Helen thus haunts the texts from which she is excluded; she is both written out and written in, present by implication.⁹

Fragments and Narrative

To reception theorists from Hans Jauss to Wolfgang Iser, literature is a system of exclusion. It is about the relationship between what is present in the text and what is absent from it, a relationship that it is the responsibility of the reader to negotiate, providing continuity and connection (at the most basic level: of character), coordinating viewpoints, and bridging gaps. In a process of literary entelechy, tangents and diversions are transformed, fragments joined, blanks filled in.¹⁰ This readerly activity of turning parts into wholes is even more applicable to classical epic, which is, by definition, a fragment. (I am using fragment as the generic term it became in the Romantic period, not as a label for something accidentally incomplete.) Epic is selective, episodic, unconcerned with chronology or completeness. The *Iliad* concerns only one episode in a decade-long siege (the implication being that this episode could happen only because Achilles had withdrawn from fighting). Homer begins the *Odyssey* with the traditional

invocation to the muse: “tell us this story, goddess daughter of Zeus, *beginning at whatever point you will*” (book 1, p. 3, my italics). In book 8 of the *Odyssey* the bard, Demodocus, begins his story “at whatever point he chooses to begin” (p. 107). When King Alcinous asks Odysseus for a narrative of his adventures, Odysseus wonders “where shall I begin, where end, my tale?” (book 9, p. 124). As epics, classical Helen texts are inevitably fragments.

It is customary to view epic as the genre of completeness, a form striving for wholeness and panoptic vision. This is Michael O’Neill’s view. He contrasts epic with fragment, which “celebrates incompleteness” and stresses “infinite possibility” (O’Neill 2005: 278). But fragment is embedded in epic and there seems to me a productive tension at the heart of Troy literature where episodic fragment plays against and with the host genre of epic. Fragments, as Sophie Thomas explains, “play explicitly on a dynamic of complete incompleteness” (2005: 511). This is a topic I shall explore in chapter 2 in relation to Helen’s beauty, but for now we may simply note the parallels between the fragment and the absolute nature of Helen’s pulchritude: both complete in themselves, yet creating a longing for something more. The tension between fragment and completion, desire and satisfaction, part and whole, longing and cessation of longing is both a narrative and an erotic dynamic.

The function of the fragment-in-epic is thus analogous to the role of Helen-in-narrative. Narrative suspense and erotic longing are parallel; both seek conclusion/satisfaction yet can never attain it. Conclusion would redefine their essence, for, once satisfaction is gained, narrative tension or sexual desire cease to exist, at least *qua* tension and desire. Thus their permanent state is suspension, their ontology is paradoxically liminality (between two ontologies). Helen is their representative – pulled between Sparta and Troy, between husbands, between goddess and woman – in constant circulation. The story of Helen is the story of narrative itself.¹¹

If there is tension between fragment and epic, there is also tension between fragment and story. Fragment “interrupts meaning” because it frustrates the boundaries of texts on which interpretation depends (Thomas 2005: 212). But if Trojan texts are stories (“tell us this story, goddess daughter of Zeus, beginning at whatever point you will”), they are not fragments. All stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end; they are not fragments except inasmuch as all literary forms are fragments, since “no story can ever be told in its entirety” (Iser 2006: 64). And if the poet does not provide this tripartite structure, readers will. This is the view of Iser on reading generally where “discontinuities of textual segments trigger synthesizing operations in the reader’s mind” (Iser 2006: 66). And it is the view of Marjorie

Levinson on reading Romantic fragments where fragment invites interactive readerly involvement: “readers want an experience of resolution from poetry, and where this is withheld . . . they will develop a closural effect from the materials and principles at hand” (Levinson 1986: 25).

Attempts to close the gaps in classical epic begin early, as we saw above in the case of the epic cycle, which fills in large narrative gaps. Other, later versions tackle local details. In the sixth century CE Dares tells us that Castor and Pollux were drowned en route to Troy (Frazer 1966: 142). This was probably a detail invented by Dares to explain why the brothers were not involved in the Trojan War. Their absence from Troy is striking given their previous role as Helen’s rescuers during her incarceration by Theseus, a role one expects them to reprise given mythology’s fondness for repetition. Dares’ invention clearly met with approval: it is reproduced in the later *Gest Hystoriale* (anon c.1400).

In every century Helen’s story, simply put, is an attempt to fill in gaps. Was she abducted or did she go willingly? What did she feel in Sparta for Menelaus and how did she feel in Troy among Trojans? What did the most beautiful woman in the world look like? The most glaring gap relates to her life in Sparta after the sack of Troy, what Rupert Brooke calls, disparagingly, “the long connubial years” (1918: 93). This raises the question of narrative conclusions and thematic closure.

Closure

The *Iliad* ends with Hector dead, but Achilles lives, Troy is unsacked, and Helen remains in Trojan hands. What is remarkable about Helen’s story is the way in which it consistently strives for but eludes closure. The simplest means of closure is death. In the fifth century BCE Helen’s death is the unspoken aim of the Trojan War: it is assumed that Menelaus will kill his wife when he regains her.¹² In Euripides’ *Women of Troy*, for instance, Menelaus plans to kill Helen on the spot, relents, and says he will kill her in Sparta. The gentleman doth protest too much, as Hecuba realizes: she advises him against seeing Helen or traveling on the same ship, knowing that desire will eclipse revenge. In Euripides’ *Orestes* Orestes plots (unsuccessfully) to remedy his uncle’s omission. His attempt is thwarted by the gods (who rescue Helen) just as Menelaus’ attempt was thwarted by Helen herself (who deployed her physical charm seductively). It is not until the sixteenth century that a poet manages to kill off Helen: Thomas Proctor’s achievement in *The Triumph of Truth* (1580s) is rarely remarked. Twenty years later in Thomas Heywood’s *Troia Britannica* (1609), Helen commits

suicide (depressed by the loss of her youthful beauty). Heywood repeats this in his play 2 *The Iron Age* (1632).

When narrative fails to achieve closure, literary criticism steps into the breach. Interpretation provides one of the strongest forms of closure, turning blanks and discontinuities into connected meaning. Sometimes texts provide their own internal literary critics. We see this in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* when the Herald offers a frustratingly vague piece of information: "Menelaus has vanished, ship and all!" The herald's announcement is literally *unsatisfactory*: it is not enough. It is no coincidence that his news is about absence. As we have seen, auditors and readers abhor narrative vacuums and are driven to occupy the space. Aeschylus' Chorus have already set themselves up as literary critics (Clytemnestra's "style eludes you. We interpret her") and now they supply three details omitted by the herald, in effect ventriloquizing him: "You mean, (1) he sailed with you from Troy, and then (2) a storm / Fell on the fleet and (3) parted his ship from the rest?" (*Agamemnon* in Aeschylus 1968: 64, my numerical insertions). They respond consistently to the herald's blank or incomplete answers ("I can't give it you"; "No one can tell, for no one knows"; 64) with demands for, and insertion of, detail: "You mean, I think, that . . ." (65). Literary interpretation, thus, like readerly response in general, completes the story. In their efforts to understand, critics provide closure; and reciprocally in attempting closure, they offer understanding.

But one can never know or understand Helen. This is partly because she exists only as a narrative device. Norman Austin notes that in the *Iliad* Helen "understands that her function is . . . to be first and foremost a story" (1994: 1). In Euripides' *Women of Troy* she reflects on "how the story goes" – the story of her role as originator of the Trojan War (1973: 120). In the same playwright's *Helen* she tells us about her birth, concluding "that is the story of my origin – if it is true" (1973: 136). Throughout the ancient world we are reminded of the value of story as expedient, appropriate, or fitting rather than as true. In *Agamemnon* Clytemnestra says, "I said, not long since, many things to match the time / All which, that time passed, without shame I here unsay" (Aeschylus 1968: 90). In the *Odyssey* Helen too has a fitting story – "just the one for the occasion" (book 4, p. 52).

Later in the *Odyssey* Odysseus recounts his adventures to King Alcinous, a lengthy narrative that takes up books 9–12. Book 13 begins "Odysseus' tale was finished" (p. 193); here "tale" is a synonym for truthful autobiography. Later in the same book Odysseus fabricates a self-protective identity to the goddess Pallas Athena, whom he has failed to recognize. He invents a story of murder and exile to account for his arrival in Ithaca. The narrative concluded, Homer says "that was Odysseus' story" (book 13, p. 201).

Here “story” means fiction.¹³ How do we know when stories about Helen are self-serving fiction and when they are biography? We do not; we cannot.

We cannot know Helen because we experience her in the already-mediated form of story; we further lack knowledge of her because she is absent. One cannot become acquainted with what is not there. Helen is remote, self-contained, sealed in her beauty, the narrative equivalent of the Mona Lisa smile. Of Helen in the *Iliad*, Linda Lee Clader writes, “[Homer] never says that the war is being fought for a phantom, but his use of Helen in the drama suggests an image rather than a rounded personality” (1976: 17). Carol Rutter observes that the “tantalizing absence” of Helen in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* is the play’s “in-joke, for Shakespeare, making Helen the entire matter of the play, keeps her entirely off-stage, out of sight; except for one, single scene” (2000: 231). Goethe’s Helen narrates her experiences as if they had happened to someone else, “as though they were a literary construct” (Curran 2000: 171). Mark Haddon dramatizes this point from Helen’s perspective in *A Thousand Ships*:

The truth is that no-one cares who I am. You read the stories. You read the poems. You haven’t got a clue. Nothing fits. Nothing makes sense. I have no character. You never get inside my head. I’m a sorceress, a victim, a whore, a wife. I’m the devil. I’m an angel. I’m every woman that ever lived. I’m nobody, a blank slate for you to write whatever you like on.

Here Helen accuses us of creating her blankness for our own interpretive convenience. Even characters within Helen-narratives comment on her emotional inaccessibility and unknowability. Paris feels distanced by Emily Putman’s sardonic Helen in “Helen in Egypt” (1926), Lily Briscoe by Mrs Ramsay (a Helen figure, called “the happier Helen of these days”) in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In this sense Lily Briscoe’s comment on the deceased Mrs Ramsay / Helen – that without her their lives continue round a “centre of complete emptiness” (1992: 417) – applies to Helen whether she is alive or dead; she is always an empty center. Absence is her essence; there is no interior (or anterior) being.

What is absent cannot be contained, brought to closure. Despite this, narrative tries to know Helen, a process implicit in the act of turning her into narrative. Narrative is literally about knowledge. Its Sanskrit root *gnâ*, “know,” leads to two separate Latin forms, the adjective *gnarus* (knowing) and the verb *narro* (I tell), a form of *gnaro* (elided from *gnarum facio*: “I make known”).¹⁴ To narrate is to make something known. Literature is literally know-and-tell (see Abbott 2002: 11; White 1987: 215n).

To know-and-tell Helen's story leads to danger. Knowledge has a long association with danger, which the Christian world best knows in the form of Eden's Tree of Knowledge. Helen's danger manifests itself textually in a series of shudders.

The Textual Shudder

In the *Iliad* Helen describes herself as "hateful" (3.404). The word she uses comes from the verb *stugeo* (fear, shrink from the sight of). Some English translations use the word "abhorrent," which conveys the word's literal effect: Helen is someone who makes men shudder (*horreo* in Latin, from which we derive "abhorrent," means "bristle" or "shudder").¹⁵ A variant occurs at the end of the poem when Helen says people "shrank" when they saw her (from *phrisso*, "shiver with fear"; 24.775). Clader surveys this vocabulary (1976: 18–23): "in each of the three of Helen's appearances in the *Iliad* she is at some point described as a being to be abhorred – she makes people grow stiff or cold with fear . . . or makes them shiver with fear" (22). The shudder that Helen's presence causes in texts is related to her beauty: beauty disrupts narrative.

When Dante sees Beatrice, he shudders and trembles. When Belpheobe enters *The Faerie Queene*, it is the narrative itself that shudders: it pauses for ten stanzas of rapturous (descriptive) response. The only half-line in George Peele's poem *The Tale of Troy* occurs when Helen enters the text: her entrance causes a metrical shudder. In Tennyson her beauty effects a grammatical shudder. The phrase in which Helen's breasts appear in a dream to Lucretius, like the breasts themselves, is doubled, disembodied, and suspended: "Then, then, from utter gloom stood out the breasts, / The breasts of Helen" (Tennyson 1936: 808). The syntactical interruption signaled by the comma forces a pause at the end of the line after "breasts" – a pause for admiration, for a sharp intake of breath – before the sentence resumes, restating its subject and completing the interrupted possessive phrase. Many Helen texts stutter and come to a halt (William Morris's fragmentary "Scenes from the Fall of Troy," C. S. Lewis's abandoned story "After Ten Years") or are disrupted generically (Euripides' *Helen* and Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* push the generic boundaries of tragedy into comedy¹⁶) or have their narrative purpose diverted (in the *Odyssey* Odysseus reveals the Greeks' plan to Helen. Although "his mission into Troy was not to divulge but to gather information . . . men's purposes are easily swayed when Helen is in the room" (Austin 1994: 79). In Goethe's 2 *Faust* Helen's first appearance inspires Faust to a spontaneous

paean to beauty, a textual shudder corrected by Mephistopheles: “stick to your part” (6501).

From Homer onwards, shuddering is not just a reaction to beauty but is a consequence of knowledge. In the *Iliad* book 16 Hector slashes the top off the spear of Telamonian Ajax. This is, for Ajax, not a localized moment of dismay but a premonition of military disaster: “and Aias / knew in his blameless heart, and *shivered for knowing it*, how this / was gods’ work” (16.118–21, my italics). In *Aeneid* 6 the gods reveal Aeneas’ fate through a sibyl. On hearing her prophesy, “the Trojans felt an icy shudder run down their hard spines” (Virgil 1981: 148). When Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, “earth trembled from her entrails” (9.1000); this is surely the same physical reaction as the classical shudder. Yeats later associates sexual knowledge with historical knowledge. The sestet of “Leda and the Swan” begins:

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Yeats concludes by wondering “Did she [Leda] put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” Yeats voices explicitly (albeit interrogatively) what is implicit in the earlier examples, that the beginning of a new historical sequence (exemplified for Yeats by the conception of a person, for Milton by the fall, for Virgil by a national future, and for Homer’s Ajax by the threat of military loss) should be framed as a problem of knowledge.

In William Morris’s *Scenes from the Fall of Troy* it is (unusually) Helen herself who shudders. Morris’s Helen is given (again unusually for Helen narratives) considerable interiority and analytical foresight: she anticipates consequences (1915: 3), accepts the Greeks’ desire for her death and imagines three possible ways of executing it (1915: 4), and realizes that Polyxena is younger and more beautiful than she (1915: 5). Her shudder is linked to knowledge: her awareness that the Greek soldiers live without domestic love, only with hatred of her (1915: 6–7).

We might expect the Greek language to make a distinction between shuddering with awe and shivering with abhorrence, yet the two are mutually intertwined. If Helen’s beauty arrests people and freezes narrative, so too does the monstrous: the property of the Gorgon, for example, is to turn people to stone, to petrify them literally and emotionally. (Spenser understands and exploits this duality in *The Faerie Queene* in the adjective “astonyed.”) Absolute beauty and the monstrous are kin: both are extremes.

Simply put, Helen, like the monstrous, should not exist. The Greek language subliminally realizes this, linking the shudders of awed admiration with those of horror (*stugeo, rigeo, phrisso*).¹⁷

In the fifth century BCE, Gorgias wrote that poetry causes “fearful shuddering and tearful pity and grievous longing” (Sprague 1972: 52). It is perhaps no coincidence that Gorgias’ description of poetry comes from his defense of Helen. His phrasing describes poetry but these responses to poetry are identical to responses to beauty: the fearful shuddering of awe, emotional sympathy, and longing. We see these reactions to beauty in Plato (or Plato’s Socrates): one who sees “a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well . . . shudders” (*Phaedrus* §251 in Plato 1997: 528). Poetry too is a bodily form that has captured Beauty well.

J. M. Coetzee illustrates this point in his novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2004).¹⁸ Costello and another woman, a singer on a cruise ship, are discussing Emmanuel Egudu, a famous African oral poet with whom the singer is having an affair. Costello is trying to warn the younger woman against him:

“*Aber kaum zu vertrauen*”, she remarks to the woman . . . *Kaum zu vertrauen*, not to be trusted.

The woman shrugs again. “*Die Zeit ist immer kurz. Man kann nicht alles haben*”. There is a pause. The woman speaks again. “*Auch die Stimme. Sie macht dass man*” – she searches for the word – “*man schaudert*”.

Schaudern. Shudder. The voice makes one shudder . . .

The voice. Her thoughts go back to Kuala Lumpur, when she was young, or nearly young, when she spent three nights in a row with Emmanuel Egudu, also young then. “The oral poet”, she said to him teasingly. “Show me what an oral poet can do”. And he laid her out, lay upon her, put his lips to her ears, opened them, breathed his breath into her, showed her. (2004: 57–8)

Here the shudder is a reaction to poetry, to oral poetry, to Egudu’s voice.

Coetzee unites the beauty of poetry and physical beauty through contemplation of eternity and time. Despite the secular materiality of Elizabeth Costello’s memory, the sexual episode is colored by the sacred. The poet is resonantly named (Emmanuel = God is with us); he sleeps with Elizabeth Costello for an archetypal “three nights in succession”; sex is seen as spiritual creation (“breathed his breath into her”); and the orifice of creation, as in New Testament narratives and Christian art, is the ear. Most important, Coetzee activates Costello’s nostalgia in an oddly phrased time scheme (“near” implies moving towards something, not away from something. Technically one can never be “nearly” young). Here Coetzee,

like epic, like poetry in general, refuses the linearity of time. The episode is not a sexual reminiscence, but a description of the effect of oral poetry.

Helen is regularly associated with epic oral poetry: in her weaving in the *Iliad*; in the effect of the pharmaceuticals she dispenses in the *Odyssey* that rewind time and make the recipients forget pain (Clader 1976: 33). But epic poetry as we have seen is full of blanks. It is the attempt to articulate this blank that leads to the textual shudder. As Barthes writes, “though incapable of being *spoken* there [in the text], bliss nonetheless transmits the shudder of its annihilation” (1975: 61; italics original). His vocabulary is both textual and sexual: the shudder is both a climax and dispersal of pleasure. Helen’s beauty affects texts in the same way, simultaneously exciting and frustrating.

Myth and Repetition

It is true that there was a city called Troy, on the Dardanelles in Asia Minor (today’s Turkey). It is true that Troy was destroyed and rebuilt on several occasions.¹⁹ It is true that there was economic competition between Troy and ambitious thalassocratic Greek states. It is true that wars were fought over women. But that there was a woman called Helen, Queen of Sparta, that a pan-Achaian alliance was formed to regain her, and that Troy was destroyed in the process is not “true” in any factual sense. Helen’s story, like that of Eve’s to which it is surprisingly similar, is more explanatory myth than demonstrable fact. Both explore the origin of evil; in both a woman, a piece of fruit, and sex cause the downfall of civilization.

What is singular about Helen’s story is that it is not singular. Elements we assume are exclusive to the Trojan War are often commonplaces of myth and folktale in the classical world and the ancient Near East. As Roberto Calasso writes in one of the epigraphs to this chapter, “Stories never live alone. They are branches of a family that we have to trace back and forward” (1994: 10). And Helen’s family tree is extensive.

Paris’ adjudication of the beauty of three goddesses seems to have been a development from the three gift-bearing nymphs who accompanied Hermes to which is added the Hellenic love of beauty contests (Lindsay 1974: 193). Competitions for women are also recurrent in myth: Atalanta, Jocasta, Hippodameia.

The decade of war, with Troy falling in the tenth year of the siege, derives from a mythical tradition of nine-plus-one. In the *Odyssey* Odysseus drifts for nine days before reaching land on the tenth (book 14, p. 216). In the

Iliad Niobe's deceased children lie in blood for nine days, "but on the tenth day the Uranian gods buried them" (24.612). Hesiod explains in the *Theogony* that when an immortal is punished by the Olympian gods, he is exiled for nine years and rejoins the immortals in the tenth (Hesiod 1988: 26). Troy may have suffered a long siege but it was not necessarily of ten years' duration.

The trick of the wooden horse is not unique to the Trojan War. When Pasiphæ (wife of the Cretan king Minos) fell in love with a bull, she was able to approach it concealed in a wooden cow (the offspring of this union, part bull, part human, was the Minotaur).

The phantom Helen, which Stesichorus introduces in the sixth century BCE, is not the only double made by the gods. Athena makes a phantom of Penelope's sister, Iphthina, and sends her to Ithaca to comfort her sibling (*Odyssey* book 4, pp. 68–9). In the *Iliad* Apollo makes a double of Aeneas (5.449–50); Juno does the same in the *Aeneid* (book 10), turning a fragment of cloud "into the shape of Aeneas . . . She gave to it words never real, sound without thought, and perfectly moulded the gait for its walking" (Virgil 1981: 270).

Helen as the (sexually) curious bad woman, breaking taboo, can be paralleled in Pandora, in the daughters of Cecrops, in Eve, and in the Blackfoot Native Americans' myth of the Feather Woman: unable to control themselves, each of these women unleashes disaster.²⁰ Their opposites – Penelope in the *Odyssey*, the virtuous wife of the Old Testament's book of Proverbs – provide a counterexample. In these examples, as so often, myth provides a memorable explanation of causes. Pandora, Eve, and the Feather Woman explain the origin of suffering; the transformation of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt explains salt formations in the Dead Sea; the odd consequence of Eve eating the forbidden fruit – awareness of nakedness – is perhaps an attempt to explain why animals have covering and humans do not (Norris 1998: 26). When the bard sings at the start of the *Aeneid*, "his song told why on each winter day the sun so hastens to dip in ocean, and told of the cause which then retards the nights and makes them slow" (Virgil 1981, book 1: 50).

The mythological detail that Helen went to Egypt is part of this interest in causal explanation. There are several variants of this sojourn: in the epic cycle, in Stesichorus, in Herodotus. M. L. West summarizes the variants:

Some say she went there as well as going to Troy, others say she went there instead of going to Troy: everyone says she went there. Some say she went with Paris, some say she went with Menelaus, some say she went there by herself: everyone says she went. (1975: 5)

Disappearance (particularly seasonal disappearance: the absence of the sun, of leaves, of flowers) and recovery are a feature of myth. Paris is exposed on Mount Ida apparently dead to Troy, reborn as a Trojan prince. Oedipus too is abandoned and rescued. The unborn Dionysus is threatened with death when his mother, Semele, is consumed by lightning, but Zeus rescues his unborn child from the ashes and places him in his thigh until the time is right for his birth. Demeter rescues her daughter, Persephone, from the underworld but is tricked into returning her for six months of each year. Francis M. Cornford (1934) views this structure as a pagan personification of the seasons with a pattern of replacement or (sometimes repeated) disappearance and return.

Helen's name means "shining one" and associates her with the sun. One anthropological argument posits that Helen originated as a sun-goddess (West 1975: 7–13). Her sojourn in Egypt – the land of the sun – may be an attempt to explain not just *why* the sun disappears (as the *Aeneid*'s bard does, above) but *where* it goes. In this context it matters little whether Helen goes to Egypt before, during, or instead of the Trojan War. The important point is that it is from Egypt that she returns to Sparta (West 1975: 5). "How like a winter hath my absence been," says the poet metaphorically to his lover in Shakespeare's Sonnet 97; in mythology Helen's absence may literally have been a winter. The repeated abductions and husbands – Theseus, Menelaus, Paris, Deiphobus, Achilles (the five consistent names in totals of ten or more) accord with this logic. The sun vanishes and is recovered, again and again (Clader 1976: 82). Myth is thus an early form of the science of causation.

Myth is a repetitive form. It repeats situations and creates phantoms. It also often twins or doubles people: Menelaus and Agamemnon, Helen and Clytemnestra, the Dioscuri. The *Iliad*'s two Ajaxes were probably once one person, their variant attitudes and actions stemming from divergences in local legends. As narratives of their myth developed it became easier to accommodate the differences by turning them into two persons. Similarly the depiction of both Helen and Clytemnestra as Iphigenia's mother suggests "an original identification of the two" (Clader 1976: 52n).²¹ Sometimes mythological stories offer inverted pairs. Penelope refuses her suitors, Clytemnestra accepts hers. Clytemnestra kills one man (Agamemnon), while thousands die for Helen. Odysseus slays the uninvited suitors in his house, while Agamemnon is slain by an uninvited suitor (Clader 1976: 28).²²

In practical terms, repetitions, parallels, and pairs are ways of accommodating changes in myth or reapplying myth to new circumstances. In narratological terms they are ways of turning an episode into a pattern

and a pattern into a symbol.²³ Myth provides a common vocabulary for structuring, rearranging, and developing stories. The stories convince because they are familiar; they continue to attract, to appear relevant, and to explain new circumstances because they are different. As the repetitions and parallels above suggest, Helen's story is no more "her" story than is any other myth of a hero or heroine, pagan or Christian. Nor is it any more "true."

Jean-Paul Sartre holds that there are no true stories (because all stories are mediated. They are representations; and representation can be mimetically verisimilar but it cannot be the real thing). But as H. Porter Abbott counters, Sartre's observation does not mean that stories are false (2002: 19). Helen's story is a true account of the forces that destroy cities and civilizations and unite communities and groups. Barbara Tuchman observes, "what it tells us about humanity is basic . . . It speaks to us of ourselves, not least when least rational" (2005: 43); and Michael Wood notes, "the story moves us so much that it must be true" (2005: 46). Arthur in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* illustrates Wood's point. Asked to construe a portion of the *Iliad*, Helen's lament over Hector's body, the schoolboy twice falters over the last two lines of her speech before bursting into tears (Hughes n.d.: 244–5). His tears are proof of how much "the story moves us" and his breakdown is accepted by both the schoolmaster and the narrator as an appropriate response to the lines in question. Arthur responds to Homer's human, rather than historical, truth: to grief, loss, death, fear, sorrow. His tears illustrate Armstrong's point that myth does not work by being factual; it works by being effective (Armstrong 2005: 10).

Origins

So where does Helen's story come from? Or, to put it another way, how does it begin? To answer these questions requires an excursus into the linked worlds of anthropology and etymology. A brief summary must here suffice.

Descriptions of Helen begin with – are embodied in – her name, which may have a religious history. *Helene* is the word used for a torch, and for a reed basket (both used in sacred cults; Clader 1976: 66–8; Lindsay 1974: 209–11). *Argein*, Argive Helen, also has a similar association. There is no logic to Helen being designated Helen of Argos since she is repeatedly said to live in Lacedaemonia, in Sparta specifically (indeed in fifth century BCE drama she is often called the "Lacedaemonian" or "Spartan" Helen).

Rather than referring to the place, *argein* can mean “bright,” “shining” – attributes of and associations with a goddess (Clader 1976: 59–62).²⁴

A reference to Helen’s magical power at Therapnae (her ability to cure a baby girl of an ugliness so great that the parents forbade anyone to look at the infant)²⁵ and other references to her in the same place suggest she was a local goddess at Therapnae (Clader 1976: 69).²⁶ Shrines of *Helen dendritis*, a tree-goddess, are more widespread (found as far away as Rhodes, for instance).²⁷ Trees accord with other pastoral associations of Helen worship – rivers, dancing – and indicate that she was not just a goddess but a fertility-goddess. Dancing is mimetic of agricultural growth (stamping awakens the earth, leaping emulates tall crops); rivers and trees represent growth; the “shining” Helen, as we saw earlier, is associated with the sun. Agriculture, the result of nature’s fertility, was seen as a sacred marriage of heaven and earth with the female soil receiving divine semen (seeds) and heavenly rain representing the sexual act, which leads to harvest (Armstrong 2005: 43). With the introduction of sacred prostitutes, the religious aspect assumed human form but the concept remained the same. Sex with one of these temple prostitutes (“prostitute” means, literally, a substitute: one who stands in [*stare*] for [*pro*] the goddess) was a symbol of sacred marriage.

Fertility-goddesses are permitted multiple partners and husbands, but as the relationship between myth and religion dwindles (leading to the “faded god” theory of epic, where the hybrid heroes (half-mortal, half-immortal) were once minor deities) the divine attributes are reapplied. Helen still has multiple partners but they are explained through a sequence of abductions and attempted seductions. Five is the usual number of partners assigned her but, as we saw in the previous chapter, others double the total.

If Helen as queen (rather than as goddess) is abducted and/or sexually besieged, she now has to be rescued. Helen’s brothers, the Dioscuri, were possibly once her husbands: their role as rapists of their fiancées in the *Cypria* is perhaps a vestige of their earlier role as spouses to Helen. When Helen, the daughter of the sun, became the daughter of Zeus (who is also the Dioscuri’s father), the Dioscuri could no longer be her husbands. Menelaus and Agamemnon, who in previous versions may have been husbands, twins, or one character, become a husband and a brother. (The Chorus in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* calls them “twin monarchs of our warlike race, / Two leaders one in purpose”; Aeschylus 1968: 45.) Helen’s prepubertal association with Theseus fits this pattern. Theseus’ dominant activity is abducting or raping (and occasionally marrying) women: Ariadne, Antiope (or Hippolyta), Persephone, Helen, Phaedra. But Theseus’ connection with Helen and the Trojan War is tangential and it is likely that sometime in the

sixth century BCE, with Athens enjoying prominence as the capital of the unified Attic communities, there was a desire to associate Athens and its most famous king (actually mythical but believed to be an early leader) with the Greeks' most famous international war.

The development and adaptation of myth does not have a recognizably linear progress. Although there is a logical connection between the abducted Helen and the fertility goddess, there is no plausible link between the tree-Helen and the Helen abducted by Paris. Helen's myth (in any of its variants) may have been a separate narrative that later became attached to the myth of the Trojan War. Furthermore all references to Helen-worship postdate Homer (Pollard 1965: 22), in which case we have to show how an epic heroine evolved into a religious figure; this is a more difficult development to explain than that of a goddess dwindling into a wife. My point here is simply to indicate the dynamic nature of myth, a dynamism that frustrates the precision of textual stemmatics.

Myth and Meaning

We are, as Karen Armstrong notes, meaning-seeking creatures (2005: 2) and the question Armstrong asks of myth – not “what happened” but “what an event meant” – is the question I ask in this book in literary redactions of the Trojan War. It is also the question asked by Beaumont and Fletcher in *The Maid's Tragedy* (1610–11), when one of the heroines, Aspatia, blatantly reinterprets the myth of Theseus to suit her own purposes.

Aspatia has just been jilted by her fiancé, and in act 2 converses with her waiting women, Antiphila and Olympias, about classical precedents in rejection: Oenone, Dido, Ariadne. She turns her attention to the tapestry Antiphila is weaving of Ariadne (whom Theseus abandoned). Aspatia identifies Theseus by his false looks and questions Antiphila about Theseus' violent end:

Does not the story say his keel was split
Or his masts spent, or some kind rock or other
Met with his vessel?

(2.2.46–8)

Antiphila's response is as we might expect: the cautiously diplomatic denial “not as I remember” (2.2.48).

Aspatia asks Antiphila to abandon the narrative she is currently stitching and to follow Aspatia's directions:

In this place work a quicksand,
 And over it a shallow smiling water,
 And his ship plowing it; and then a Fear:
 Do that Fear to the life wench.

(2.2.54–7)

Antiphila objects, “’Twill wrong the story,” but Aspatia counters, “’Twill make the story wrong’d by wanton poets, / Live long and be believ’d” (2.2.58–9).

This dialogue illustrates competing notions of story. For Antiphila a story is truthful (it is something that can be wronged). For Aspatia a story is untruthful – it has already been wronged – if it shirks moral closure: it fails to punish Theseus’ perfidy. Aspatia wants to transfer the “false smile” she has observed on Theseus’ face to the sea, with “a shallow smiling water” over a “quicksand.” However, she does not say that this will “right” the story (although that is the implication) but that the new ending will make it last and “be believed.” Aspatia gets to the heart of myth: it matters not whether it is true or not but whether you believe it to be true.

Yet this insight contradicts the implications of her previous description of Ariadne’s/Theseus’ story as something “wrong’d by wanton poets.” If poets falsified the story, there was already something true to be misrepresented. That “something” may be emotional truth: she later criticizes Antiphila for not having made Ariadne sufficiently pale and sorrowful, instructing her “Do it by me; / Do it again by me . . . /And you shall find all true” (2.2.256–7). Aspatia sees her life as story, a story whose emotional intensity is transparently legible: “let all [i.e., everything] about me / Tell that I am forsaken” (2.2.70–1).

Aspatia wants to add emotion to Theseus’ story. She not only wants the tapestry-Theseus to suffer death, she wants him to suffer emotional stress – fear – before he dies. She stresses it twice: “and then a Fear: / Do that Fear to the life.” Fear is similarly personified in another play about epic, myth, and representation written a few years before *The Maid’s Tragedy*, Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. In 2.3 the soothsayer warns Antony that his guardian angel “becomes a fear as being o’erpowered in the presence of Caesar” (2.3.24).²⁸ There is something very *Antony and Cleopatra*-like in the scene between Aspatia and her women in *The Maid’s Tragedy*. Aspatia recommends that her women, like Cleopatra,

take to [their] maiden bosoms
 Two dead-cold aspics and of them make lovers;
 . . . one kiss
 Makes a long peace for all.

(2.2.23–6)

Antony and Cleopatra is also concerned with future and past revisions of myth. Anticipating his reunion with Cleopatra in Elysium, Antony says that Dido and Aeneas' entourage will follow Antony and Cleopatra as they wander through fields of asphodel (4.14.59–62). This is a blatant revision of mythology. Not only do Dido and Aeneas never meet in Elysium, but when Aeneas visits the underworld in the *Aeneid*, Dido explicitly rejects him (as he had previously rejected her in Carthage).

In act 5, *Antony and Cleopatra* shows its relation with epic in the form of Cleopatra's nostalgia. Reminiscing about Antony, Cleopatra calls up a larger-than-life hero: "his legs bestrid the ocean . . . Realms and islands were / As plates dropped from his pocket." Her 11 lines of hyperbolic description are followed by a question: "Think you there was or might be such a man / As this I dreamt of?" Dolabella has to disabuse her: "Gentle madam, no" (5.2.82–94). He brings her from wishful longing, the emotional nostalgia of epic, to the reality of Roman conquest.²⁹

In Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, characters expertly or ineptly revise myth for their purposes. Tamburlaine turns the myth of Icarus – a standard Renaissance trope of folly and failure – into an image of glory and daring (4.2.47–52); Mycetes, on the other hand, compares his attempts to conquer Tamburlaine to Paris' capture of "the Grecian dame" (1.1.66) – a bathetic and gender-inappropriate image. *1 Tamburlaine* shows that if you cannot apply myth appropriately (like Mycetes), you must simply remake it (as does Tamburlaine) – and as, later, do Antony and Aspatia. Myth is like the postman's definition of poetry in the film of *Il Postino*: not for the one who makes it but for the one who needs it. And need may necessitate alteration. The individual interprets, applies, and revises the story, (re)making its meaning.

Causes

Of the historical Troy ruled by King Priam, Michael Wood poses the question: Why would the Mycenaean Empire attack "such a small place?" (2005: 181). To answer this question we need to understand the pressures on Agamemnon as "high king" of Mycenae (the arch-king of all the other kings of mainland Greece). Mycenae was an expensive military fortress. Agamemnon

needed to sustain his military following by generosity, that is, by gift-giving, food, hospitality and perhaps by grants of land. He had to feed his court and its officers, equip and reward his army . . . To do all this, and to keep his army loyal, his friends happy and his enemies subdued, he needed to take land, slaves, women, treasure and booty. (Wood 2005: 180)

Mycenaean war was essentially a piratical operation: skirmishes with theft as their aim. Women and slaves were important objectives and objects as slave labor fueled the domestic economy. Troy was famous for wool, yarn, textiles, horse-breeding, fish, and pottery (Wood 2005: 190). Economically Mycenae needed war; Troy was an obvious target. The medieval Troy book poems, with detailed realism, show how such a war could last ten years: fighting is punctuated not only by periods of rest, recovery, negotiation of terms for prisoners, and funeral rites, but by Greek excursions into Asia Minor to loot and plunder (cattle, crops, women). The Trojan War was more accurately a siege (as the title of the medieval poem *The Siege of Troy* indicates), with occasional battles.

That the war was precipitated or legitimized by the abduction of a queen may or may not have been true. If there was a theft, it was more likely to have been of a Palladium, the emblem of the goddess Athena, anthropomorphized subsequently as a divinely beautiful queen.³⁰ Most wars have complex prehistories, concentrated in one trivial apparent “cause” that functions as tinder. In this case, myth tells us that the tinder was literally Tyndar-eid.

In the afterlife Margaret Atwood’s Penelope tells her cousin Helen that she never existed:

“I understand the interpretation of the whole Trojan War episode has changed,” I tell her, to take some of the wind out of her sails. “Now they think you were just a myth. It was all about trade routes. That’s what the scholars are saying.” (Atwood 2005: 187)

But Helen could have existed and the war still have been about trade. This is the plausible premise of all the film versions of Helen that show Agamemnon’s imperial greed (and, in the 1955 Warner Brothers film, Helen’s awareness of the danger he poses).³¹ The most compelling literary treatment of Helen-as-excuse comes in Jean Giraudoux’s antiwar play of 1935, *Tiger at the Gates*. This is the title of Christopher Fry’s 1955 English translation. The French title is the wonderfully jussive *La Guerre de Troie n’aura pas lieu* (*The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*), which encapsulates the play’s comic and preposterous logic. The fact that the most famous war in ancient history might not have happened, the fact that there is a moment, or sequence of moments, when it might have been averted, is something we rarely consider given its monolithic status in our mythological history.³²

Giraudoux’s Hector is committed to returning Helen to the Greeks. Like an earlier Hector – Shakespeare’s in *Troilus and Cressida* – he does not want war. Whereas Shakespeare’s play soberly shows how little you can

prevent war by not wanting it (his Hector is resigned to acting against his ethical beliefs as early as act 2), Giraudoux's Hector continually attempts to return Helen until events escalate beyond his control in the last act.

The play begins with the extended metaphor that gives the play its English title. "Destiny, the tiger, is getting restive," says Cassandra. She juxtaposes the stages of the tiger/Destiny rousing itself with the innocent activities of Trojans:

Hector has come home in triumph to the wife he adores. The tiger begins to rouse, and opens one eye. The incurables lie out on their benches in the sun and feel immortal. The tiger stretches himself. Today is the chance for peace to enthrone herself over all the world. The tiger licks his lips. And Andromache is going to have a son! And the horsemen have started leaning from their saddles to stroke tom-cats on the battlements! The tiger starts to prowl. (Giraudoux 1955: 3)

It is not just that the Trojan activities and attitudes are unconnected to war: they are determinedly pacific. Connubial love, sunbathing, pregnancy, soldiers stroking cats. The momentum towards war assumes a life of its own. A dozen lines before the end of the play Hector is still proclaiming, "The war is not going to happen," and although the stage manager clearly accepts this as a command (he starts to lower the curtain, interpreting Hector's declaration as a triumphant last line), the dying Demokos manages, in his last breath, mendaciously to blame the Greeks for his death, thereby guaranteeing, as Hector now says numbly, "the war will happen" (74).

War does not need reasons, it needs excuses.³³ As Ulysses tells Hector, "There's a kind of permission for war which can be given only by the world's mood and atmosphere, the feel of its pulse." He describes Troy's wealth, her agricultural abundance, her rich temples: "It isn't very wise to have such golden gods and vegetables." Hector realizes that "Greece has chosen Troy for her prey" (Giraudoux 1955: 69). But Greece needs a pretext for war. Like Hector, Ulysses does not want aggression but unlike Hector he is a realist: "I don't want [war]. But I'm less sure whether war may not want us" (67).

Ulysses explains that Helen is "one of the rare creatures destiny puts on the earth for its own personal use" (Giraudoux 1955: 70). Although Giraudoux's Helen is witty and ironic, coquettish and clever (and clever enough to act dumb), Giraudoux also presents her allegorically in two parallel scenes, one at the end of each act (Singerman 1976). At the end of act 1, the figure of Peace appears and converses with Helen, who is unable to see her clearly. Desperate to be visible, Peace reappears "outrageously

painted.” (As Cassandra observes laconically, “I think she means to make herself clearer”; Giraudoux 1955: 32.) In this confrontation Helen represents War; the audience is given a stage tableau of War versus Peace, and Hecuba will later compare Helen’s face to the face of War (37), as will Demokos the poet (39); and the child Polyxene underlines the point of the comparison: “She [Helen? War?] is very pretty” (39). Peace, Cassandra tells us, “is always standing in her beggarly way on every threshold.” But War treats the beggar-Peace as beggars are often treated: Peace is shunned, ignored, and War is unable to see her.³⁴

Helen’s lack of love for Paris is acknowledged pragmatically throughout the play by all the characters (except Paris). Cassandra explains, “They’ve become now a kind of symbol of love’s devotion. They don’t still have to love each other” (Giraudoux 1955: 23). Troilus’ gauche adolescent approaches to Helen are presented as a fascination with War. Paris teases the teenager about his infatuation with Helen, offering him the option of becoming famous by kissing Helen in public. Troilus awkwardly refuses but later embraces the option (literally). At the end of act 2, as the descending theater curtain stops midway, the Gates of War swing open to reveal Troilus kissing Helen. The parallel with the end of act 1 is clear. Troilus is not kissing Helen as a woman: he is embracing War and the opportunity for fame. Hector cannot prevent war because people are in love with it.

(En)Closure

Myths are never discrete: as Calasso says “stories never live alone.” I want to consider Menelaus’ quest for his wife in Troy as a variant of Theseus’ (incidental, accidental) bridequest in Crete. Theseus has to defeat the Minotaur, the creature at the center of the Cretan labyrinth – an impossible task, not least because of the difficulty of finding his way out of the labyrinth. Minos’ daughter, Ariadne, who has fallen love with Theseus, gives him a thread to find his way back, “in recompense whereof he hath married her” (as Shakespeare’s Fabian says; *Twelfth Night* 5.1.364). The links with Crete are more than thematic: the word “Troy” may be associated (aurally if not etymologically) with a word meaning “labyrinth.” It appears on a seventh-century BCE wine pitcher as “a caption for a drawing of a labyrinth” (Habinek 2005: 18).

Place names are notoriously difficult to etymologize and the derivation of the word “Troy” is not clear. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, attempts were made to connect “Troy” with Latin words meaning

enclosing or winding (*trua* and *truella*: a “ladle,” “pan,” “basin”). Jack Lindsay summarizes and develops these arguments (1974) and, although his efforts to connect “Troy” with both sexual and architectural windings and enclosure are not always etymologically convincing, his instincts are thematically interesting and probably correct: they have recently received independent support from Thomas Habinek (2005). Priam’s city was, it seems, an enfilade construction of streets, gateways, corridors, and towers. The Trojan myth is a revised repetition of the Minotaur myth. The Etruscan *truia* (not cited by Lindsay) means labyrinth (see also Waswo 1988: 549). “Troy” may not “mean” these words but it is aurally associated with them.

Lindsay (1974) argues that the word “Troy” and its cognates mean not only to wind and circle, but to seal and close, for obviously if one winds and turns something sufficiently, one (en)close it; the word thus comes to mean closure. (The related Latin *antrum* means a “cave” or the “hollow of a tree” in Ovid and Virgil.) Lindsay cites *redantruare*, “to repay a kindness” (and hence to “complete the circular arrangement and enclose both parties in a beneficent or uniting force”; 1974: 109). The verb is unusual but Habinek has found an occurrence in a description of a dance ritual: when the praesul is “given movements, the movements are in turn given back to him” (2005: 18, 265n). Lindsay’s examples of the relationship between dancing and maze rituals from 1000 BCE (1974: 108–9) are also corroborated by Habinek (2005: 18–19).

Babylonian tablets c.1000 BCE studied by Lindsay and Habinek associate labyrinthine spirals with intestines and vice versa. The association with entrails becomes transferred to another interior body part: the vagina. The penetration of Troy to (re)gain a wife is an initiation rite, an entry into manhood. This is true not just of the triumphant Menelaus’ sexual triumph but of the deaths of the many who assist him; war and sex are culturally equal rites of passage, twin arenas in which boys become men.

The acoustic nexus is thus of words meaning circle, wind, enclose; maze, labyrinth, sexual and architectural corridors and passages. The suggestion that “Troy” is related to (en)closure returns us to the start of this chapter and its discussion of attempts to close the narrative gap – in the epic cycle and in reading generally. To take Helen to Troy is to move her literally towards a site of closure. I have been arguing that attempts to relate Helen’s story are always attempts at closure; but here it seems that her removal to Troy represents not closure of her story but of something else. The origin that needs to be contained predates abduction. That something else, I suggest, is beauty – the subject of chapter 2.