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The Face that Launched a Thousand Ships: Helen of Troy in the Poetry of Atwood and Tufts

Alea Walstrom

Abstract

This paper considers the transformation of Greek myth over time, how character's attributes change over time, and ultimately how contemporary poets employ these myths. The myth of focus in the paper is that of Helen of Troy and the depiction of her character throughout the many years and variations of the myth. Her character is then considered in the contemporary feminist poetry of Carol Tufts and Margaret Atwood.

Keywords: *Greek myth, feminist, contemporary poetry, Helen of Troy, Atwood, Tufts*

Author Interview

Which professors (if any) have helped you in your research?

Professor Ramirez gave valuable guidance in order to decide and narrow my topic and Professor Juan Delgado's class on contemporary poetry inspired the poetry connection.

What are your research interests?

I am currently interested in researching literature of the Renaissance and Victorian literary movements. I will most likely employ one of these topics in my M.A. thesis.

What are your plans after earning your degree? What is your ultimate career goal?

I plan to teach composition and/or literature at the community college level before pursuing a PhD. I ultimately would like to become a tenured professor of English Literature.

Acknowledgements

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When considering Greek Mythology people often think of the main gods or goddesses, the action, drama, and the adventures of the demigods: not much thought is given to the women who play minor yet crucial roles in each myth. Each version of the same myth tends to differ, either slightly or drastically, which causes the depiction of its characters to change as well. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to find completely identical versions of the same myth. This impediment can be attributed to the transformation of myths throughout time. Helen of Troy is generally known today as the “face that launched a thousand ships” starting the Trojan War, but when closely reading numerous variations of this myth it is clear that each version has its own particular belief about the character of Helen and works to portray her in that way with some being slightly sympathetic towards her and others blaming the entirety of the war on her being a terrible woman. It is interesting to see the vast differences in the myths and how they portray Helen’s character, but what is even more compelling is how contemporary poets have taken the myth and completely changed the way in which the characters are portrayed. The contemporary poets Margaret Atwood and Carol Tufts have written exemplary poems that address the characters involved in the myth through a feminist perspective, and have chosen to either empower Helen or belittle the men of the myth in order to drastically change the way in which the characters are perceived, which drastically contradicts the perception of them in the original variations of the myth. In order to understand the significance these author’s contributions had on the portrayal of the characters in this myth it is important to understand the role of women in Greece during the time of myth creation, as well as how exactly many versions of these myths differ in their depiction of the characters. Following these important elements an analysis can be given to Tufts and Atwood’s poetry while considering the radically different nature of how myth is presented as well as the differences in the character portrayals and the feminist messages they contain.

Current Scholarship on Women in Greek Myth

Because of the incongruence of myths much of the scholarship focused on exploring the stories recounted in Greek Mythology are based on epic poems or plays that depict the characters a specific and consistent way, unlike the irregularity found in myths. This is seen in the overwhelming scholarship on the topic of Euripides play “Helen,” which has a drastically different approach to the myth and is the only source with this particular variation. Thus the scholarship on the topic of the character of Helen of Troy in the Greek myths is little if not nonexistent so the search for scholarship must be broadened to the general depiction of women in the Greek myths, which brings much more scholarship to the forefront that can be applied to this topic.

An interesting topic represented in published and peer-reviewed scholarship concerns the interaction of women in the ancient Greek world, as depicted by the myths, which helps give insight into the setting and type of culture in which the myths are written. The only description of women at events occurs through the perspective of a man retelling a story of the particular event, which demonstrates the male dominated culture of the time that is also frequently seen in the myths. One article focuses on the presence of women at parties or dinners, mainly to highlight the nature of these events, since women were not allowed to be present at occasions during which “deals were made, political and social linkages established, ideas discussed” (Burton 143). However over the course of time, seen in both life and in myth, the presence of women changed to where certain respectable women would be allowed at events that were dominated by men. An example of this is seen at a party in the home of Menelaus and Helen, following their return home from Troy, in which “Helen takes the lead in the drinking party: she directs the serving of the wine and suggests storytelling for the entertainment... Thus Helen uses the forum of the dinner party for political purposes: to try to rebuild her reputation, to try to limit damage from her adulterous journey to Troy” (145). While this article is but one of few works discussing the involvement of women in

Greek culture and myths it sets this paper up for the compelling topic of the depiction of women in myth alongside the allusions of the same woman in contemporary poetry while considering the significance of the male dominated culture in which the myth is set.

Variations of the Myth and their Implications

As previously stated the transformation of myth over time makes it nearly impossible to find two identical myths depicting the same story; this is the case with all myths including the story of Helen of Troy. The different renditions of this same story reflect the open-ended nature of Greek myths and allow for an increased number of interpretations of the characters they include. Some of these versions reflect Helen's character far differently than others creating incongruence in the perception of her personality attributes. According to many sources with renditions of the myth, the story of Helen began with Zeus who came to Leda in the form of a swan, it is unclear if this was a rape scene or if it was consensual in many of the variations, but the union resulted in the birth of Helen who hatched from one egg and Polydeuces and Castor who hatched from another egg, some versions state Clytemnestra also hatched from one of these eggs. Controversy over whether Zeus sired all three children or just Helen is based on the belief that Leda slept with her husband, Tyndareus, on the same night; some sources claim all three children were Zeus' but others maintain that Polydeuces and Castor were Tyndareus' children with Helen being the only one of divine parentage (Graves 206).

Leda and the Spartan king Tyndareus raised Helen alongside her brothers until she was twelve and was kidnapped by Theseus, the Athenian King who had turned to piracy after he lost the gods' favor (McLaren 5-7). Another version of the kidnapping of Helen depicts it as a pact Theseus and Peirithous made when they decided to kidnap and marry daughters of Zeus; Theseus chose Helen and Peirithous chose Persephone. After kidnapping Helen, Theseus took her to Attica and left her in the care of his mother as a caregiver until she was of age to marry (Graves 362). Theseus then went to Tartarus with Peirithous on the expedition to kidnap Persephone, Hades' wife, it is said that

during his absence Helen was rescued by the Dioscuri, her brothers Castor and Polydeuces, who also took Theseus' mother, Aethra, as a captive (Rose 231). The way in which these versions depict Helen and the men supports the setting of the myth being in a male dominated culture, which also supports this traditional depiction in myths. The men appear to have all the power including the freedom to take whatever they want without considering the feelings of others, Theseus and Peirithous, and the power to save the damsel in distress, Castor and Polydeuces, while Helen and Aethra appear to be helpless victims of the actions of men.

The following years Helen had numerous suitors during which time all of "the ruling heads of Hellas went to Sparta to seek marriage with Helen" (Apollodorus 75). The vast number of potential suitors scared Tyndareus who feared when the announcement was made of who would marry Helen there would be rioting; Odysseus, a potential suitor with little hope of success, proposed providing a way to eliminate any chance of rioting if Tyndareus would help win Penelope as his bride. Tyndareus agreed and Odysseus suggested making all potential suitors swear an oath "of assistance, if ever the chosen groom should be injured by anyone with respect to his marriage;" all of the suitors took the oath and Menelaus was announced as the man chosen, by her father, to be Helen's husband (75). The male dominated and female suppressed culture is depicted with Helen's husband being chosen by her father in this version. However, other versions claim Helen was given the choice of who she would marry, and she chose Menelaus, the richest of all the potential suitors (Rose 231). This rendition appears to suggest Helen chose Menelaus to be her husband because he was the wealthiest of all the potential suitors, which depicts her as being superficial and only wanting him for money rather than for any deeper reason. Despite the potential character flaws suggested by these versions, Menelaus and Helen lived happily and quietly for years until Paris became their guest (Bulfinch 197).

The myth that explains the purpose of Paris' visit originated at the wedding of Thetis and Peleus, to which all Gods and Goddesses were invited with the exception of Eris, goddess of strife, discord, and chaos: "Enraged at being

excluded from the wedding ceremony, Eris threw a golden apple among the guests which was inscribed 'to the fairest.' As a result, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite all claimed it for themselves" (Seton-Williams 104). The three went to Zeus asking him to decide who should get the apple, but "not willing to decide in so delicate a matter, [he] sent the goddesses to Mount Ida" where Paris was tending to his flocks and committed Paris to making the decision (Bulfinch 197). Each goddess offered Paris bribes to entice him to choose them: Hera promised "dominion over mankind, particularly Asia; Athena promised him victory in war and Aphrodite promised him the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife; so Paris gave the golden apple to Aphrodite" (Seton-Williams 104). Shortly after this decision King Priam called for Paris to "assume some political responsibilities" and sent him on his first diplomatic mission to the home of Menelaus and Helen (Harris and Platzner 233). Another version suggested Paris knew of Helen's beauty and went to Sparta to kidnap her (234). It is once Paris arrives in Sparta as a guest of Menelaus and Helen that many of the myths diverge. Some renditions state Helen fell in love with Paris immediately, these versions portray Helen's character as being easily swayed and perhaps as equally focused on beauty as the men who seek her, since Paris was said to be handsome as well (McLaren 52). Others suggest she wasn't initially attracted to Paris until, "Aphrodite put a spell on her" to make her fall in love with him, these renditions help alleviate some of the guilt placed on Helen since she remained faithful to her husband until a spell was used (Seton-Williams 105). While Paris was still a guest in their home Menelaus went away on a trip, "left alone with Helen, Paris seduces her. Or perhaps he abducts her, along with some of Menelaus's treasure, and returns to Troy," this is a particularly interesting version of the myth since it originally depicts Helen as being a woman who gave in to the seduction of another man then it completely contradicts that by suggesting perhaps Paris simply abducted Helen which removes the initial guilt placed on her (Harris and Platzner 234). Upon his arrival back home Menelaus discovered Helen missing and called upon his brother Agamemnon to "put together as expeditionary force requiring all the

oath-takers that they be as good as their word" hence beginning the famous Trojan war, ten years of death and chaos that resulted in the fall of Troy (Buxton 133).

During the entire myth Helen's beauty is the driving force behind the actions of the men in her life highlighting the importance placed on beauty, yet even though Helen was the most beautiful woman in the world during the myth she is still depicted as having a second-class status to the men dominating the story. It is Helen's famous beauty that draws the attention of the men; it was the reason behind her kidnapping as well as the reason she attracted numerous suitors and it was the reason Paris chose Aphrodite as the fairest and started the Ten Years War. This clearly illustrates the importance of beauty in the myth, however while every man in the myth seems to be yearning for Helen's beauty they in turn attempt to remove her individual identity reducing her to just a pretty face. This can be seen in her father choosing a man for her to marry, and when Paris chose Aphrodite who bribed him using Helen as the prize without her knowledge. Similarly, with the notion that perhaps Helen was under a spell by Aphrodite so she would run away with Paris, it appears as if every character in the myth attempts to remove any decision making and individual action from Helen so she will do what is expected of her rather than what she wanted. It also seems very interesting that Helen is the main character in the story, with the entire Trojan War being blamed on her in many versions, yet she doesn't appear as a prominent character in the myth. The men overshadow her at every turn both in her life as well as characters in the story, thus confirming the second-class treatment of a beautiful woman; the numerous variations of the story are all the same in this respect. Helen appears to have little if any power and merely goes where the men in her life take her, which paints the male dominated and female oppressive nature of the myth. Contrary to the oppressive society in which the myth depicts, many contemporary poets, when alluding to the myth, depict a significantly different and more empowering setting. While some current poets attribute powerful and liberating characteristics to Helen and display her as the individual she really is rather than the second-class citizen shown in the myth, others criticize the men in the

myth that took advantage of Helen's beauty by belittling their character, pointing out their flaws, and blaming them for the consequences of their actions instead of continuing the myth's concluding indication that the war was Helen's fault alone.

Tuft's Depiction of Guilty Paris and Innocent Helen

Carol Tuft's poem "Paris and Helen" is an example of a contemporary poem that seeks to deprecate Paris rather than explicitly empower Helen, as seen in Atwood's poem later, however since the entire blame of the Trojan War seems to be placed on him it appears to free her from the burden of blame for starting this war as the myth seems to suggest. The speaker of the poem is Paris and it appears to be a self-reflective poem in which he acknowledges the reasons behind his actions with Helen however he does not seem remorseful, which helps the case that he should take the entire blame for starting the Trojan war. The initial statement made by Paris, "it was never so much the essential her / he was after" suggests that the concept of men obsessing over beauty and striving to acquire that which is beautiful is still as compelling as the myth seemed to suggest (Tufts line 1-2). This line also begins the poem's self-reflection where Paris, the speaker, appears to be completely honest with himself, which unmasks the ambiguity behind his motivations and actions as well as removes any sympathy the reader might have had for him. Following his initial statement that he did not necessarily want Helen he continues by suggesting he just wanted everyone to know he had her and he experienced her beauty, "the way their heads would turn...they would know he embraced a symmetry absolute as marble in that surrendering flesh" (5-10). The selection of the word "surrendering" when referring to Helen submitting to him is particularly significant because the word has different denotations that could suggest Helen was innocent in this encounter and Paris was entirely in the wrong. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines surrender as "to yield to the power, control, or possession of another upon compulsion or demand" or "to give (oneself) up into the power of another especially as a prisoner" ("Surrender"). The second definition seems to

suggest the term should be used in an instance where a prisoner is involved, if that is the case with the "surrendering flesh" this suggests that Helen was indeed abducted by Paris and their consensual elopement in which Helen was seen as the unfaithful wife and wrongful party was false and the very few variations in which Helen was innocent were accurate.

Not only did Paris want "those big-time warriors, / those spear throwers he had never bested, / Those thick-muscled men besotted in the summer sun," to know that he experienced Helen and he possessed her, like an object, but he wanted their envy, which also shows the reader more of his egocentrism in addition to his nonexistent remorse for his actions (Tufts line 11-13). This statement seems to initiate the speaker's justification for his actions as if once he acknowledged he wanted other men's envy of his experience with Helen he also acknowledged that he hadn't done anything in his life to warrant such a magnificent prize, again speaking of Helen as an object. He begins his self-justification by claiming "how could he not" accept Aphrodite's bribe of "this other man's, this stranger's /wife" (14-16). By adding that it was a "stranger's" wife it seems as if he is trying to justify an action he knew was wrong by taking the power away from the husband in the happy marriage he wanted to break up by considering him a random stranger instead of the reality that he was a powerful king with military support protecting his marriage. The decision he made between the goddess's bribes showed Paris's personality "which myth-tellers often represent as vain and superficial—both attractive and susceptible to attractiveness. Also implicated in his choice was transgression: for Helen another man's wife" (Buxton 132). The speaker continues on his justification track then ultimately realizes "that he had chosen beauty/ above all else, worth everything they had loved or fashioned in their city of stone," suggesting that he knows what his actions were founded on yet there is still no sense of regret or remorse in his statement (Tufts line 21-23). Also, the ambiguity of the "they" in his statement leads the reader to wonder if "they" refers to Helen and Paris losing everything in their lives based on their actions or if "they" are all the people affected by Paris' actions both within and outside the walls of Troy despite their innocence in his decisions. If "they"

are the people of Troy who are losing everything they love and have worked for because Paris made the choice to take another man's wife the tone of remorse, empathy, and regret are all lacking in his statement, which further illustrates his egocentrism and eliminates any empathy the reader might have still had for Paris.

The speaker not only claims his choices were worth all of the consequences that affected an uncountable number of people, but he has the audacity to claim at the end of it all someone has to take the blame and the person will be Helen. The final lines of the poem depict this temerity as he sums up his reflection on the events that unfolded as the result of his selfish behavior, "at the end /of it all, because there needs someone always/ to take the blame and she had opened up to him" (27-29). The scandalousness of this statement is the position of it in the rest of the poem; it appears the entire poem shows how the entire war was Paris' fault but he fails to see that or he does yet seeks to blame someone else who had far less to do with the events that unfolded. As the final statement in the poem that shows the true nature of Paris he is depicted as an egocentric man who merely seeks out beauty regardless of the consequences.

The last two lines of the poem show Helen for the first time as a woman and not solely a sexual beautiful prize. In these lines the first night of their journey from Sparta to Troy appears to be the occasion of great sadness on Helen's part which appears to redeem her in the eyes of the reader since it supports the previous notions in the poem that Paris actually abducted her helping increase her innocence in the affair, "her cries that night the cries of any woman, / a frenzy of abandonment, or grief" (31-32). As the only lines in this poem that attempt to show Helen as something other than an object it is interesting that from Paris's perspective he equates her crying with the crying of any other woman in the world and appears to write it off as unimportant, however simply acknowledging that she was crying that night because she was being abducted by a man who only wanted her for her beauty erases all blame that the speaker attempted to place on her by showing that she was in fact another victim in the situation. This poem is clearly one of those that chose to belittle the men in the myth rather than focus on liberating Helen

by giving her certain attributes that were not otherwise suggested in the myth, however it does seek to expunge her record as an unfaithful wife and a wicked women which is empowering on its own. Unlike Tuft's poem "Paris and Helen" that focuses on degrading Paris in an attempt to attribute innocence to Helen, Margaret Atwood's poem attributes certain qualities to Helen which allows her to use her beauty as a source power against the men who seek to take advantage of it in the myth.

Atwood's Empowerment of Helen

The poem "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing" makes a commanding feminist statement of empowerment. The poem is written using an ambiguous persona, which allows for multiple interpretations. The poem could be read from Helen of Troy's perspective during an event when her husband put her on display for the entertainment of others, or it can be read as if spoken from a modern day exotic dancer whose stage name perhaps is Helen of Troy. Both of these interpretive options lead to the same feminist message, which is the significantly different from the depiction of Helen in the myth and the implication gained from it. While the persona perspectives are notably different the analysis of each leads to a common conclusion: "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing" is an extremely inspiring example of a feminist woman in control of her body and life, which completely redefines the Helen of Troy from the myth as now having these characteristics.

When looking at this poem as a scene in mythology it is important to understand the background in order to understand the many allusions. One version of the myth and the movie "Helen" suggest on the night of a party Menelaus made Helen dance naked in front of the princes and kings that had lost in the effort to marry her (McLaren 54). In essence he was rubbing their faces in what they could not have by exploiting his wife's beauty. In the reading of the poem from this perspective it can be said that Helen was chosen as the speaker as a motif for men's stress on beauty. Although men exploit Helen because of her beauty it can be said that she has gained power over them because when they focus on and

crave her beauty she has control over the situation.

The first stanza of the poem begins with Helen claiming other women say she needs self-respect and she needs to stop allowing herself to be exploited by men, but she answers these women with the empowering statement; "but I've a choice/ of how, and I'll take the money," which seems to directly confront the issue of her exploitation (Atwood line 18-19). Keeping in mind these lines were said after the women told her to put clothes on and stop allowing herself to be exploited, this statement appears to say the speaker knows she will be exploited because of her beauty so she will choose the method of her exploitation rather than succumbing to the inevitable manipulation according to men's rules. This is a very distinct notion that empowers the speaker by giving her control of her body and how she will choose to use it.

Another reading could suggest that perhaps the speaker is a modern day exotic dancer whose on stage persona is Helen of Troy because she is thought of as the most beautiful woman in the world and a dancer would want to take advantage of that common belief among her clientele. This perspective also supports the redefining of Helen of Troy's character based on the notion that in order to channel a persona one would need to become in tune with the original character. Either because the speaker is truly beautiful or she has the illusion of beauty as suggested by her stage persona she is given the power to manipulate and exploit the men who watch her show. While observing her "beery worshipers! That or a bleary / hopeless love. Seeing the rows of heads/ and upturned eyes, imploring," it appears the speaker again realizes her power over these men who are forced to obey her rules in regards to observing her beauty (32-34). The powerful line, previously quoted for another reason, also shows the power the speaker holds in being able to choose her method of exploitation, "Exploited, they'd say. Yes, any way / you cut it, but I've a choice / of how, and I'll take the money" (17-19). Instead of being used by men because of her beauty and not getting anything out of the nonexistent exchange the speaker basically says she will be exploited for her beauty while exploiting the men by manipulating their

obsession with beauty, and she will make a substantial living off of it.

The sense of empowerment found when the speaker says, "I keep the beat, / and dance for them because / they can't," is created because the statement seems to be ambiguous. It is unclear whether the speaker is simply stating she dances for the "beery worshippers" because they are incapable of dancing like she is able to in her show or if there is a deeper meaning behind it (36-38 & 17). An empowering feminist message can be read when the line is interpreted as the speaker puts on the show for these men because they lack the beauty she possesses and they are seeking it elsewhere, which is why they come to her shows. Through this interpretation the speaker is clearly manipulating men's weakness and obsession for beauty by making money off the dance. The notion of the men being obsessed with the beautiful also supports these observations in the myth, however rather than submitting it to them, as Helen appears to do in myth, the speaker now uses it to her advantage. And by claiming the men can't accomplish what she can she also effectively degrades the men which allows the speaker to gain the upper hand in the exploitative situation she finds herself in, which is quite empowering from a feminist standpoint.

The ambiguous lines, "they'd like to see through me, / but nothing is more opaque / than absolute transparency," allow for yet another empowering interpretation (35-36). The statement appears contradictory but when considered in relation to the empowerment or objectification of women the statement develops a richer meaning. Perhaps it refers to the fact that the oppressive male dominated culture seeks to know everything about women in order to "reduce them to components" and oppress them as the poem also suggests (35). It could also be a reference to the fact that beauty is searched for and focused on by the men in society, but when they are faced with a completely naked beautiful woman they still seek more, as if they possess an unquenchable thirst for beauty they can objectify. It is as if the statement claims male oppressors have a need to find and exploit beauty, yet when confronted by it do not see what they thought they would which creates a confusion or continued additional obsession with continuing the search.

It can be concluded that the multiple interpretations the poem's ambiguity leads to a very empowering female message in Atwood's poem "Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing." Clearly the speaker manipulates the men who seek to exploit her by making them pay to see her dance; the advantage is given to Helen, the dancing woman, so she can benefit from the exploitation she has chosen. However the manipulation of men is seen as simply the result of a powerful woman in charge of her body and mind as if suggesting when men manipulate and exploit women it is a negative situation yet when women use their power to manipulate the men it is seen as empowering. While this contemporary poem is clearly a feminist piece of literature it grants certain attributes to Helen who would have otherwise been looked down upon as a woman who allowed herself to be mistreated by one man then left her husband for her lover who also only wanted her because she was beautiful. As she dances the power Helen has over the men is seen and appears to grow stronger, and the poem's portrayal of her shows the same notions that are prevalent in the myth do not hold strong in contemporary works today.

Concluding Thoughts

It is interesting that the same theme of men obsessing over beauty and seeking it wherever they can is a dominant theme not only in the Greek myth but also in the contemporary poetry that alludes to it. In the myth Helen is portrayed as a secondary character in her own story, and the men dominate the culture in which she lives. The contemporary poetry both empowers Helen as an individual character in a very feminist manner as well as denigrates the men in the culture. Carol Tufts' poem sought to undermine Paris by providing his view of everything that happened without a trace of remorse or regret as well as suggesting he in fact abducted Helen. This portrayal of Paris removed any empathy the reader might have had for him as the man who was blamed alongside Helen as the cause of the Trojan War. And while it did not necessarily seek to empower Helen it did free her from the burden of being blamed for the war by presenting her as an innocent character that was also a victim unlike many versions of the myth

suggested. On the other end of the spectrum, Margaret Atwood's poem attributes a great power to Helen by giving her the ability to use her beauty to her advantage and exploit the men who seek to misuse her. Her innocence or guilt in the starting of the war are not brought into question in this poem however the simple attribution of this powerful ability allows Helen, as an individual, to become empowered and liberated from the oppressive male dominated society to which she was a victim in the myth. As suspected, the contemporary poetry depicted the character of Helen of Troy in a significantly different light than was seen in all the variations of the myth by attributing empowering qualities to her character as well as alleviating the guilt of the war.

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