"They say she is veiled": A rhetorical analysis of Judy Grahn's poetry

Damaris Hawkins

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“THEY SAY SHE IS VEILED:”

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF JUDY GRAHN’S POETRY

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Damaris Hawkins

September 1997
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Approved by:

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8-11-97
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ABSTRACT

Judy Grahn is a contemporary feminist American poet who utilizes myth in her poetry. Grahn’s early work weaves in minimal references to Venus and Jason, she soon progresses to focusing on the myth of Helen of Troy—and all her incantations—to create a book of poems to instruct and unite womankind in the hope that her poetical work will lay the foundation for a spiritual and psychological transformation. Most recently, she has narrowed her focus from Helen to Inanna, an ancestor of Helen, and from all women to Lesbians in particular.

By rhetorically using mythic Helen to inspire, direct, and influence her poetry, Grahn hopes her audience will find within themselves the strength of self-acceptance and the power to re-vision their lives. By analyzing Grahn’s rhetorical use of myth, this thesis hopes to give readers a closer look at Grahn’s rhetorical purpose and authors a closer look at how she achieved it.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my friends, Salon, and my family, who for two years patiently and kindly asked how my thesis was going and sincerely listened as I vented. I wish to thank everyone who read and/or helped edit my thesis. I wish to thank my mother, Judy Hawkins, for her constant emotional support and financial assistance, without which I would not have finished, let alone begun. I wish to thank my committee: Dian Pizurie, for giving me a shoulder to cry on and sound advice, and for patience; Juan Delgado, for inspiring my thesis topic and for patience; and Loralee MacPike, for focus, insight, and patience. I wish to thank Judy Grahn for publishing her work, therein providing me not only with thesis material, but with poetry which supports the ongoing journey of women, straight and Lesbian alike. And I wish to thank Helen, in all her incantations.

Thank you.
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CHAPTER ONE:

Four Functions of Myth

People want answers to help define "safe" boundaries within their perceived chaos of the universe. When modern answers do not work, people search history for answers. When we think of history, we often think of long-forgotten events, wars, names and dates, or dry history tomes and even drier history teachers, yet one type of history appeals to the masses: myth. Originally myths—such as the Greek myths—were sacred religious texts detailing the culture’s religious life and beliefs, but over time, particularly in this modern age, we have come to see myth not as religious but as fictitious. Although most modern audiences view myth as fiction, myths have not lost their power to influence readers and authors alike. Modern America still employs the power of these myths from other cultures mostly from ancient Western cultures, the ancient Greeks in particular to invoke our implicit continuing reliance on the meanings inherent in myth.
Ancient Greek people searched for explanations to their daily problems. For example, these ancient people took what they knew about the principles of everyday life and applied them to the unknown: thunder was caused by a supernatural being’s anger; the sun was dragged across the sky by a deity. Mythic characters and their lives were reality to ancient people. In this way Greek deities came into existence as being both greater than mortals and as the cause of unexplained events. The ancient Greek people also wanted to record history, to chronicle events for future generations, so they could instruct their children and help them benefit from the answers myths appeared to offer. These chronicles became the Greek myths modern audiences know and use.

Marija Gimbutas, in her article “The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe,” agrees when she says, “Vestiges of the myths and artistic concepts of Old Europe, which endured from the seventh to the fourth millennium B.C.[,] were transmitted to the modern Western world and became part of its cultural heritage” (129). Greek deities and their stories did not vanish into the past; Western cultures, including the
American culture, have kept the Greek myths alive by borrowing themes, images, symbols, and names from ancient Greek stories and transforming them in literature and the arts.

Modern audiences and authors use myth because it creates an echo, drawing lines of connections through a text and its themes, back in time to myth’s origins. When we cannot find contemporary answers, we look back and reflect on our past as seen in myth to better understand and make decisions about our futures. Since myth embodies universal issues almost everyone can relate to, authors utilize it in their work, drawing readers in with echoes of Greek myths to help their readers and themselves find answers to pressing contemporary questions. Thus in literature, myth can be seen to have the power to instruct, to connect, and to transform readers and writers alike.

In America, Greek myths have survived and thrived into contemporary times because these myths do still hold power; their basic power is educational. Because these myths are instructive, they have become indestructible, surviving through history. Greek myths also help to shed light on
ancient times, educating us in the daily lives of ancient people, their concerns, hopes, and fears.

Some Greek myths also leave the reader with a moral lesson. For example, the myth of Icarus tells of a son who ignores his father’s warning. Icarus flies too high and then too low, thus melting and dampening his homemade wings. By disobeying his father, who flies to freedom, Icarus crashes into the sea and drowns. This myth holds two possible morals: one, obey your elders, and two, sometimes risking death is necessary to feel alive.

Another example of Greek myths’ instructive power is the myth of the Trojan War. By studying it, scholars and archeologists rediscovered the actual city of Troy that housed the beautiful Helen and was destroyed by Greeks bearing gifts. Would scholars have found Troy without the myth? Maybe. However, all they would have seen was another ancient Mediterranean city-state destroyed and left for rubble. By studying the Trojan myth for contextual details of the area surrounding Troy, scholars were able to tie archeological sites to the ancient battles between Greek and
Trojan forces. In this way also myths have the power to instruct.

Furthermore, as Stephan Bertman in his speech "Modern Values: The Challenge of Myth" says, "Each one of us is a time-traveler, journeying from past to future, oblivious as one melts into another" (508). He believes that our contextual base contains both modern and ancient references. Bertman feels myth began as history and, therefore, can instruct readers, teaching them how to navigate through "time," through life. "Myth embodied truths that transcended time and, as such, deserved special reverence" (509). He feels that we have lost our reverence for myth, but by studying it, by reintroducing it into our lives, we can understand ourselves better.

Bertman also thinks myth can connect readers with themselves because "[myth] answers a hunger born of a fragmented world that spiritually isolates its inhabitants from wholeness" (511). Without knowledge of myth, Bertman believes that people can become lost within themselves, disconnected from society and self. But he feels "the legacy of myth . . . stands ready to help guide" us into the
future (511). Bertman's conclusion insists that myth's ability to reconnect readers with themselves makes it a powerful tool.

Myth also has the power to connect individuals not only to themselves but also to others. By giving us a window into ancient events and lives, myth allows readers to understand that their problems are universal in nature. Mythic characters and plot lines endure because myths deal with timeless issues such as love, greed, death, and power. Each new generation must face the same set of problems that plagued their ancestors. Through myth, readers gain a sense of connection with past generations by exploring how others faced the same dilemmas, fought the same battles, and found the same answers.

People trying to decide whether to take a risk or travel the safe path are able to sympathize with Icarus. They can understand Icarus' dilemma: fly to safety or soar and swoop to death. Readers of myth can see that even thousands of years ago others had the same decisions to make. In this way, readers are able to connect with mythic
characters and know that they are not alone, not unique in their crises.

In Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry, Lillian Feder speaks about the connecting power of myth. She believes that while scholars argue over what myth is, the fact that myth still exists is overlooked. Feder believes myth "survives because it functions in the present, revealing a remarkable capacity to evolve and adapt to... the twentieth century" (3-4). By analyzing such poets as Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Auden, Feder concludes that myth has the power to connect people together when she says, "Myth unites individual with general experience, connecting the apparently incidental to characteristic forms or patterns of human feeling and conduct" (355). So by reading myth, people can connect their personal experiences with the timeless experiences myth embodies and can know they are not alone.

Likewise, in her book Worlds Within Women, Thelma Shinn explores the connections between ancient myth and modern female science fiction authors. Shinn believes that:

As the cultural myths of patriarchy are questioned, researchers and creative writers alike begin to reread the myths and to reexamine old and new discoveries in their efforts to uncover the
ancient myth behind the surface stories. (23)

Shinn feels that science fiction authors have joined an ancient cycle of authors looking back to find answers for today when she says, "Perhaps the twilight of one age is speaking to the twilight of another, reminding us of old values which are about to be reinstated" (30-31). By connecting the readers' present day lives with the past, Shinn believes myths "plug into our unconscious; beneath their seemingly solid surfaces are found universal undercurrents" (3). These powerful and universal undercurrents connect readers to myth and vice versa, giving readers an arena in which to explore personal insights and find solace.

Myth also has the power to transform. By studying myth and understanding its universal issues, readers can apply what they have learned and transform their own lives. Readers can receive courage and support by connecting their own experiences with mythic characters and events, and this courage can give them the strength to make changes in their own lives. Because few of us want to risk jumping into a completely unknown arena, myths help readers by giving them
evidence of people who have transformed their lives. Knowing that someone else has endured transformation and survived is enough to encourage some readers to try to transform their own lives.

After sympathizing with Icarus, readers may decide to make changes in their own lives based on Icarus’ decisions and mistakes. Deciding to live life to its fullest brought Icarus a watery grave; however, some readers may decide that “short and sweet” is what they want. When taking the risky path, readers can be happy with adventure but still learn from Icarus’ mistakes and try to avoid those pitfalls themselves, or they may decide that happiness lies down the path of safety and long life. Either way, the myth of Icarus, and others like it, can help them to transform their lives.

Paul Broadhurst likewise speaks to myth’s power to transform in “Subtle Power,” an excerpt from his book Tintagel and Arthurian Mythos. He begins by explaining that “[a] mythology . . . is the guiding force behind each culture,” and he also believes that myth molds and shapes the direction a society takes while giving each of its
members "an idea of his or her place in the scheme of things" (12). So by knowing the mythology of their own society, Broadhurst feels individuals can make choices about events in their lives. In addition, Broadhurst is suggesting that myth has the power to help individuals transform their lives for the better. Broadhurst believes that myth is "essential to a balanced outlook and spiritual health" (13). He believes that societies need to return to their myths and "return myth to its former status as a vehicle for human ideal[s] and aspiration[s]" (13).

Therefore, since myth is a powerful tool for transforming lives, Broadhurst concludes, "It is a powerful force to be reckoned with" (13).

Thus, if we accept that myth has the power to instruct, connect, and transform, we see that by using myth as a rhetorical device in their texts to support their own ideas, authors have given myth another power, rhetorical power. By invoking this rhetorical power, authors gain another tool by which to persuade audiences. By drawing readers in with echoes of myth in their work, authors have continued an old pattern of rhetorical use and revision of myth,
strengthening myth's power by using it again and again themselves. Each time myth is used, our collective contextual boundaries as readers widen.

Feder, while believing that myth is a connecting tool, also believes that myth is a powerful rhetorical device for authors. "Poets have consciously attempted to revive myth as a literary device" (25). Feder believes that myth is used not only because it embodies our past, but because it reliably expresses our "lonely and courageous questioning of traditional beliefs and solaces" (417). So by connecting us individually, myth becomes a powerful rhetorical tool to also connect readers to an author’s work.

Annis Pratt’s book Archetypal Pattern in Women’s Fiction speaks to the idea that myths represent archetypal or original patterns for humanity and that a comparison of these myths to modern fiction will reveal answers "capable . . . of turning our [cultural] wasteland once again into fruitful orchards" (12). In her conclusion, Pratt tells the story of a knitter who learns to spin by "unventing" the skill intuitively (178). Pratt believes authors and readers have the ability to "unvent," to intuitively reach back and
rediscover the innate skills and powers our ancestors possessed but lost through the ages, and thus, to "unvent" who they are. Pratt believes that myth can be used as a tool to help unlock what women have lost. She believes that by using myth as a rhetorical device authors can "unvent" a new future.

These four functions, instruction, connection, transformation, and rhetorical utilization, make myth not only a powerful rhetorical device but also a popular one with authors. Once such author who freely calls on myth to inform and "unvent" her work is Judy Grahn.
CHAPTER TWO:
An Introduction to Judy Grahn

Judy Grahn is a contemporary feminist American poet who wants her audience to understand who women are and who women can become as individuals and as a group. Among her many separately published poems and essays, Grahn has written three main collections of poetry: The Work of a Common Woman, a collection from 1964 to 1977 (including Edward the Dyke, The Common Woman, She Who, A Woman is Talking to Death, and Confrontations with the Devil in the Form of Love); Queen of Wands in 1982; and more recently, Queen of Swords in 1987. She has also researched and written three non-fiction books: Another Mother Tongue in 1984, The Highest Apple in 1985, and Blood, Bread and Roses in 1993.

In Another Mother Tongue, Grahn traces gay culture in modern America back through ancient European cultures. While she was looking for why such things as the color purple, pink triangles, and words like "bulldyke" and "fairy" are associated with gay culture, Grahn came across an ancient Babylonian text, The Tablet of Lamentation. This
ancient cuneiform tablet details a dethroned, kidnapped, and enslaved queen/deity.

The Tablet raised new questions for her. Grahn became very interested in the similarities between this text and other myths about female power dethroned and enslaved. Among the various versions of myths about displaced female rule, the myth of Helen of Troy became a common thread which Grahn used as a reference point. While it was not the oldest text Grahn found, the myth of Helen of Troy was the most familiar to her audience. Most Americans have at least heard of Helen of Troy, whose face launched a thousand ships.

Robert Graves, in his work *Greek Myths*, H.J. Rose, in his book *A Handbook to Greek Mythology*, and Jay MacPherson, in his book *Four Ages of Man*, all agree on the details concerning the myth of Helen of Troy. In this myth, Helen was born from an egg. Her parents were Leda, the mortal queen of Sparta, and Zeus, the highest Greek deity who appeared to Leda as a swan. Helen had one mortal sister, Clytemnestra, and two twin brothers, Kastor and Polydeuces, who later in life became gods.
Helen was the most beautiful woman in the world. Her father held a bride contest where all suitors promised to support the winner and to help protect Helen. Agamemnon, Helen’s brother-in-law, won. However, since Agamemnon was already married to Helen’s sister, Odysseus suggested Helen choose her own husband. Helen chose Menelaus, Agamemnon’s brother.

Married for years with one daughter, Helen and Menelaus welcomed Paris into their home. Believing that Aphrodite had given him Helen as a prize, Paris stole Helen and fled home to Troy. Menelaus and Agamemnon gathered an army and went to Troy to retrieve Helen. The war lasted ten years. Finally, the Greeks left a giant horse statue with soldiers hidden inside as a gift for the Trojans. The Trojans, believing that the Greeks had given up and left the gift to appease the gods, took the horse into the city. During the night, the Greek soldiers broke out of the horse, and thus Troy finally fell. The Greeks burned Troy to the ground, killed all the men, and enslaved the women. Menelaus took Helen back, and everyone sailed home.
Basically this is the agreed-upon story of Helen of Troy. There are other overlapping stories, but the parts concerning Helen can be nicely condensed like this. Was Homer the originator of this myth? He did use the myth of Helen of Troy for the foundation to his epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But did he create the myth of Helen from imagination only? By looking even further back, as Grahn did, we can see that Homer was drawing from preexisting myths about a deity/Queen of life (beauty) and death (war) as his model for Helen.

In “Dog-Helen and Homeric Insult,” Margaret Graver explains that the contextual definitions of the word “dog” in Homer’s epic poems show that he was drawing on older versions of the Trojan War myth and the mythic Helen. Graver says that the contextual meanings of Helen’s self-use of “dog” conflict with Homer’s persistent textual insistence that Helen was free of blame for the war. “[A]s such [this conflict] signals to the audience that what will be given here is a revisionist history of Helen” (58). So, by analyzing this conflict, Graver proves Homer’s epic poems
draw on older texts, probably oral, of Helen and the Trojan War in his creation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Feder also supports the idea that Homer's Helen pre-existing Homer. Feder says that Helen "was no doubt a pre-Hellenic agricultural goddess long before she became a heroine in epic" (23). She continues by saying, "Her strange, ambivalent relationship with Paris and the other Trojans in the *Iliad* and her tie of hatred with Aphrodite suggest rituals older than those of heroic warfare over abduction" (23).

Gimbutas also confirms the idea that the Helen myth is based on an older deity. She says, "The Great Goddess existed for at least five thousand years before the appearance of Classical Greek civilization" (126). Gimbutas believes that "mythical images last for many millennia," and each new culture takes images from the old (126). So she believes it is "no mere coincidence" that the Greek deities, goddesses in particular, persist throughout the ages and are passed down and absorbed into new religious stories. In "The Prehistoric Goddess," Anne Barstow agrees with Gimbutas. Barstow tells of a goddess of life and death who
is the patron to weavers and who was "the forerunner to the
great goddess . . . of ancient Greece" (112).

Likewise, Robert Meagher in the introduction to his
translation of Euripides’ play, Helen, discusses mythic
Helen and her origins. Meagher explains that the myth of
Helen is "certainly of Indo-European origin," existing
before the ancient Greek culture (xviii). Meagher points to
Helen’s twin brothers, Kastor and Polydeukes, to show a
connection between Greek Helen and Indic Surya, the Sun
Princess, who is daily rescued and escorted across the sky
by the twin Morning Star and Evening Star. To illustrate
this connection, Meagher points to the story of how Kastor
and Polydeukus rescue Helen when she is kidnapped.

Hence, we see evidence that Homer’s epic poems unite
the ancient stories of Helen as goddess dethroned with the
story of Troy. So it seems Homer was not the originator of
Helen; he simply synthesized the versions of the mythic
Helen he knew.

By looking forward from Homer, we can see that
progressive authors have used and rewritten Helen to fit
their own purposes. Not only does this support the idea
that Homer was drawing from older material, but it also emphasizes how powerful myth can be. If authors have been using and changing myth since before written texts, then it must indeed hold a powerful force. Since authors like Grahn have been continually changing myths, especially the Helen myth, it is necessary to look farther back to understand the power Helen has had over generations of readers and (before those) listeners.

As Gimbutas and Barstow explain, in Europe for thousands of years, peaceful agricultural people worshipped a life/death goddess. However, a patriarchal society invaded. Bringing male gods and war/trade as an economic base, these invaders transformed the pre-existing myths to fit within their own religion. Thus the mesh of the ancient Helen goddess into the Helen of Troy myth is easily understandable. The basis of the myth is a stolen/dethroned Queen, which parallels the invader dethroning the pre-existing female power structure. Helen is seen as mortal, yet, as Meagher explains, Helen is given the title "koure Dios," daughter of Zeus (xix). This title puts her on the same level as Aphrodite, Athene, and Artemis, Zeus’ other
daughters, who are immortal. So, here is Helen, mortal yet equal to immortals and with powers of the immortal: her beauty, her weaving, her impersonation.

These intratextual contradictions can be seen as the combination of two opposing cultures. As Graver explains, even in Helen’s own words from the Iliad, echoes of the older female deity myths can be seen. Helen calls herself a “dog.” Graver explains that one explanation can be seen in the idiomatic definitions of “dog” at the time. To be a dog meant to be selfish, to not follow the norms of social behavior, to take more than one’s share of food, of material goods, or of death (51). Helen’s behavior at Troy can be seen in this light.

However, looking back, Gimbutas explains that part of the older goddess religion was the death aspect of the goddess. “Dogs were sacrificed to her and she herself could turn into a dog” (125). Gimbutas says this ancient goddess is “described as journeying over the graves of the dead” (125). In this aspect, she scavenged on the dead from the battlefields in her animal form, a dog.
Meagher affirms this when he says Helen "in the Iliad,... frequently refers to herself as the kuon, the dog or bitch" (xx). Meagher says kuon is "almost invariably [used] to summon the horrific images of the dreaded scavenger dogs who roam the battlefield of Troy and rip the fetid flesh from the carcasses of the unburied warriors" (xx-xxi).

Not only is it selfish to take more than her share of men/sex, Helen is also literally and figuratively the dog/goddess of death responsible for the war as a whole and each individual death. These two definitions of "dog" fit Helen when viewed through the lens of her dual cultural nature. They also support the idea that Homer was drawing on contemporary and ancient versions of Helen for his epic poems.

During her research, Grahn uncovered many versions of Helen dating back from Homer to The Tablet of Lamentations, all of which dealt with the changing of power from female to male centered governments and religions. To Grahn Helen represents everything women were and can be again. Finding these interconnecting tales of queens dethroned inspired
Grahn to write a series of poems using the myth of Helen as a rhetorical device.

Many poets have written about and/or used mythic Helen of Troy in their work. By looking back to Helen as Grahn has, these authors believe they have found answers to the pressing questions of their times. And as each new age searches for and finds answers in myths, myths are re-used and re-visioned to meet modern requirements, yet the core is still recognizable in its new literary shell.

One author who used mythic Helen is Euripides. Meagher, in the introduction to his translation of Euripides' play, *Helen*, explains how Euripides used myth as the basis for all his plays. Helen made cameo appearances in some of Euripides' other plays as an evil woman, responsible for the deaths of many great heroes. However, Euripides' *Helen* breaks from his earlier use of her by placing mythic Helen in Egypt, not Troy, absolving her of responsibility for the war. Meagher explains that Euripides uses the Helen in Egypt variant, where Helen stayed safe in Egypt during the Trojan war, to parallel a recent Athenian battle whose prize, once won in battle, was in reality non-existent. In
this way, Euripides used mythic Helen as a political statement to mock Athens and the ancient Greek sense of honor and battle.

Gorgias, a noted sophist in the fifth century BC, wrote "Encomium of Helen" to lift any and all blame from Helen's shoulders. Gorgias believed that language can have a damaging persuasive power over people. And thus, since Helen was persuaded to go with Paris, she was "under the influence of speech, just as if ravished by the force of the mighty" (41). Thus Gorgias feels mythic Helen deserves pity, not blame. Here mythic Helen is used as a sophist's example to prove his speech's point.

In her book, Feder analyzes modern poets' use of myth. She explains how poets like Yeats and Pound use mythic Helen of Troy as a foundation for female character traits in their poetry. In "No Second Troy" Yeats combines past and present by creating a modern Helen of Troy character in his poem. Feder says that to Yeats "Helen represents both an era and the qualities of personality reborn in the human soul" (282). In this way, Yeats uses the mythic Helen as a
template, paralleling her problems to his modern questions of beauty and death.

Feder also explains how in Pound’s *Cantos*, mythic Helen is used to define the poem’s main female character as “man-destroying, city-destroying” (109). To Pound, Helen represented an all-woman character stereotype, “alluring and destructive” (109). In this way, Feder says, “Helen, or some form of the beautiful and destructive female, part goddess and part demanding and chaotic biological principle, dominated the external and inner world of the Cantos” (110). Feder shows how both Yeats and Pound compare modern women and modern issues against mythic Helen and her situation.

Another author who has utilized mythic Helen in her work is HD. Alicia Ostriker, in her book *Stealing the Language*, looks at women’s poetry in America. Ostriker describes HD’s use of myth in *Helen in Egypt* as parallel to “traditional epic [poetry] in that it pursues a journey” (224). Ostriker explains that HD questions the “self” of every woman; her poem shows “one woman’s quest epitomizing the struggle of Everywoman” (228). In this way, HD uses
mythic Helen of Troy to look for some of the answers to the questions modern women have.

All these authors, and others, have, like Grahn, found in mythic Helen a powerful ally for their literary work because Helen herself is powerful. Helen's power stays with her as each generation of authors taps into her to empower their texts. They like Grahn, know that myth creates an echo, drawing lines of connections through a text and its themes, back in time to its origins. Myths' timeless themes give readers familiar plot structures, creating what is known as an epistemic context: information that is general knowledge to a chosen audience. Epistemic context gives readers a comfort zone within which to read a new work. Contextual echoes allow authors to parallel their personal rhetorical purposes with a myth's known and accepted message(s), thus increasing the chance that the audience will accept their message. Likewise, mythic Helen's power and her plight gives Grahn a context within which to discuss the plight of modern womankind and the power available to all women.
While this echo is a powerful tool, it can be enhanced. If authors change the myth in a new and/or unexpected way, this change will intrigue most readers. By playing with readers’ expectations, authors not only create powerful echoes within their work, but they also deviate from traditional rhetorical usage, allowing for new interpretations and connections. Being exposed to these new interpretations, readers are led to accept an author’s unique rhetorical purpose created by the new rhetorical usage of the myth.

So, by using the Helen myth, Grahn creates an epistemic context within her poetry. This familiar echo comforts readers, giving them a known reference point from which to interpret Grahn’s rhetorical purpose. Grahn’s poetry is a specific example of how the use and re-vision of myth can be a powerful feminist rhetorical tool in relaying an author’s message. After Grahn draws her audience in, she re-visions the Helen myth by weaving the pre-Greek Helen deity into the traditional Helen of Troy myth and then transplanting this new everywoman Helen character into the twentieth century.
Grahn’s poem from Queen of Wands “One for Helen” is a good example of how Grahn re-visions mythic Helen.

Grahn writes:

One for Helen

What did the Greeks steal
when they stole Helen of Troy--
what was the loot, the beauty?
Was it only a face, some graces--
a sex toy?

Doesn’t even she remember how she spun
twine from her woolly distaff, and strung
cords in a line with even spaces
on a wooden frame? And as she wove
the songs she sung were played upon
another kind of loom which has become
the fundamental harp. The music staff
unravelled from the weaver’s staff,
the notes taken from the knots,
the shuttle reshaped into a bow,
the resinated strings--
all these were her things.

This was viola
da gamba, violin, cello,
the chamber with strings, the singing in
and of, the loom. From her room,
the wooden belly of her
chamber, came the sitar, twelve string
guitar, piano, banjo, kyoto,
clavichord and zither. The electric bass.
This (and not her face)
was the original, the real lute. The instruments
of Helen, when she was a poet,
a singer and a weaver.
She emitted so much music! in her work.
They heard. They pried open the door.
And these are only some of the things they took her for. (18)

In the first stanza, Grahn references Helen of Troy, setting up for her audience who the poem is about, giving readers a point to begin from. Ah, yes, they will think, Helen was taken to Troy and then the Greeks fought to get her back, and wasn’t there something about ‘Beware Greeks bearing gifts?’ From the beginning, Grahn uses this familiarity to draw readers into her poem. But then, subtly, Grahn adds a new dimension to Helen’s tale.

In the first stanza, Grahn says, “What did the Greeks steal/ when they stole Helen of Troy—” (18). The original story begins when Paris, a Trojan prince, steals Helen. However, Grahn shifts the beginning around and starts the poem by saying the Greeks stole Helen from Troy, not that they were stealing her back. Her second twist begins in the second stanza where Grahn connects Helen’s weaving with music. She writes, “This (and not her face)/ was the original, the real lute” (18). This line in the third stanza culminates the turnabout and clarifies with a pun Helen’s material value to the Greeks. The last shift comes at the end of the poem when she says, “They pried open the
door" (18). Most people believe that Helen was taken to Troy against her will and gladly, willingly returned to Sparta when her husband finally freed her from Troy. Yet, here Grahn is insinuating that Helen was forced to return, that she locked herself against the Greeks, and they had to pry the door open to get at her.

Tradition places the side of righteousness with the Greeks, since Helen is seen as being originally the Queen of Sparta. Yet with these new twists to the familiar myth of Helen of Troy, Grahn helps her readers to think about the fact that maybe the Greeks were wrong maybe Helen was more than just a woman, maybe she created more than just a tapestry of the war, maybe, she was more than a sex toy to be fought over like boundary lines. Grahn hopes her readers will see that maybe Helen was an independent, thinking woman who made her own decisions about whom she would love and live with. When questions like these begin to churn in a reader’s mind, Grahn has succeeded in her mission to get her readers to see her rhetorical purpose. Accordingly, Grahn’s use of myth becomes rhetorical, in that it helps Grahn to direct her readers’ thoughts.
Overall, Grahn’s use of myth progresses in three stages. When she first begins using myth in Confrontations with the Devil in the Form of Love, Grahn writes a few poems featuring Venus and Jason. In her next work Queen of Wands, Grahn writes poems concerning Helen of Troy and the Spinster, a female deity weaving life and death. Then she writes Queen of Swords, a modernization of the myth of Inanna, a Helen deity ancestor. Grahn’s use of myth progresses from minimal references to a general character created from many myths surrounding a common theme, Helen, to the specific use of one myth, Inanna, and this continuum mirrors the changes in her rhetorical purpose from women in general to Lesbian women specifically. Grahn’s use and re-visioning of myth within her poetry reflects and frames her rhetorical purpose: to offer readers the opportunity to find within themselves the strength of self-acceptance and the power of rebirth by demonstrating how to re-vision their own “selves.”

In Grahn’s first stage, her use of myth is minimal and limited. She is not using myth primarily to frame her rhetorical purpose. Confrontations, an unfinished set of
poems, was inspired by a stage production of Ntozake Shange's poetry. In her introduction to *Confrontations*, Grahn explains her rhetorical purpose when she says, "Love, in these poems, is a character, a person" (134). Seen in this light, her use of Venus and Jason accentuates the pre-existing rhetorical purpose of the character of Love, rather than inspiring the whole set of poems.

Between this unfinished set of poems and *Queen of Wands*, Grahn is consumed with a new passion: Helen. Grahn's research for *Another Mother Tongue* turns up again and again myths of queens dethroned and disempowered. Now she begins to form a new rhetorical purpose with Helen in mind as inspiration and influence. Instead of focusing on Love, Grahn shifts to focus on "herstoric narration," as she explains in the introduction to *Wands* (xi). She outlines a series of books to come, beginning with *Queen of Wands* and going on to *Queen of Swords*, *Queen of Cups*, and finishing with *Queen of Diamonds*. For Grahn, Helen of Troy is a good story to begin her series. Helen at once represents a mortal queen, an immortal deity, and an everywoman whom Grahn uses to illustrate her point about what has been
stolen from women: heritage, power, strength, choice, identity.

By focusing on these stolen items, Grahn is leading women to the idea that women not only have lost possession of them but deserve to have them back, deserve to be empowered by the journey to and recapture of heritage, power, strength, choice, and identity. So, in her second stage, Grahn’s use of myth has greater depth and purpose. She uses myth to frame and manipulate her rhetorical purpose; thus mythic Helen becomes a rhetorical device.

In her third stage, Grahn specifically uses only one myth, the Sumerian myth of Queen Inanna, a queen/deity, as inspiration for her work. She shifts her focus from all women to Lesbians in particular. In re-visioning the myth of Inanna, Grahn changes the setting from ancient Sumerian Underworld to a modern Lesbian bar. By shifting the setting, Grahn is able to emphasize the parallels between the ancient myth and the problems modern Lesbians face. Thus has she further narrowed her rhetorical purpose to focus on what has been stolen from Lesbian women. Even though the stolen items are mostly the same for Lesbian and
straight women, Lesbians face a longer journey to self-
acceptance because their lifestyle still lies outside the
accepted norm for American women. By focusing on the
similarities and the differences between straight and
Lesbian women in her poetry, Grahn has begun to erode the
walls which separate women and segregate Lesbians from
themselves and each other. Grahn’s use of myth gives her
audience a safe beginning point, helping them hear Grahn’s
rhetorical purpose.

Grahn is not alone in using myth this way. Other
contemporary feminist poets have begun to use myth to
redefine who they are as women, as individuals, to answer
the important question of what a woman’s place is in the
present. For some, the answers can be found in “herstory,”
timeless answers for timeless questions. However, Audre
Lorde, in her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle
the Master’s House,” argues that women cannot redefine who
they are by using male tools, male rules. And myths
certainly qualify as male: male written, translated, and
dominated. Lorde argues that the master’s tools “will never
enable us to bring about genuine change" (112). So why would a feminist poet like Grahn choose to use myth?

In this case Lorde would probably accept Grahn's use of myth. Grahn's choice of myth and its rhetorical use appears deliberate. First, with her use of myth, Grahn places readers where they will feel comfortable, within a known context. She knows, and I think Lorde would agree, that for an audience to listen and change, first it must hear what is said. Authors need to start with a reference common to the audience in order to reach a common understanding.

Second, Grahn does not use the "master's" version, the male standard version, of the myths with which she works. She has researched and found older versions of the Helen of Troy myth and possibly its origin in general in The Tablet of Lamentation. In The Tablet, Grahn believes she has found not only a "herstorical" link between the ancient female deity religions and the Helen of Troy myths, but also a female tool with which to dismantle the traditional male definition of women. By researching for herself the "herstoric narrations" of Helen, Grahn bypasses Lorde's objections without discounting Lorde's idea (Swords xi).
Using female tools is very important to Grahn. Grahn has found a way to make myth a feminist tool.

Adrienne Rich in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" discusses the idea of searching history with new eyes, with a female lens. Female authors need to search his-story for her-story, for a truth about women as told by women. This idea fits perfectly with what Grahn has done with myth. Rich says, "Re-vision--the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a critical direction--is for women more than a chapter of cultural history: it is an act of survival" (35). For women to survive they must search old texts for new meanings. And this is what Grahn has done.

Grahn has re-visioned Helen of Troy. She re-sees Helen in her original form as deity and re-sees how she became mistress and slut. By re-visioning all of Helen's selves into a twentieth-century context, Grahn hopes her poetry will help women to re-vision themselves and where they belong in society today. Lorde concludes her essay by saying, "I urge each one of us here to reach down into that
deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that error and loathing of any difference that lives there” (113).

Lorde believes that “Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged” (112). Grahn has done just that--taken the differences in Helen and forged a new Helen, an everywoman, to clear the path for her audience to forge personal power by re-visioning their selves. Grahn believes we must each look inside ourselves to find the answers we all need. Lorde agrees when she says:

Within the interdependence of mutual . . . differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the . . . power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. (112)

Ultimately this is what Grahn wants: a new future for all women. Grahn hopes to begin building it with her poetry.

To accomplish this, Grahn uses another female tool coined “unvention” by Annis Pratt. Grahn believes women still possess within themselves the lost skills and powers of ages past. Grahn hopes her poetry will give women a jumping off point to unvent selves that the world has constructed and to re-vision who they are and who they want
to be. To do this—to unvent their places as individuals and as groups—women must begin by looking within. Grahn’s poetry gives readers a way to reach Lorde’s “deep place of knowledge” within themselves, and thus the journey to self-discovery and rebirth begins. In her poetry, myth has moved from historic to herstoric. Let us see how.
CHAPTER THREE:

A Rhetorical Analysis of Grahn’s Stages

Stage One

Use of Myth

Judy Grahn’s early poetic work, *Edward the Dyke and Other Poems*, (1964 to 1970,) focused mainly on Lesbian issues. In the introduction to *Edward*, Grahn says, “woman must redefine what our poetry is” (24). So, from the very beginning, Grahn believed women, and especially Lesbians, needed a forum to express themselves. By helping to establish an independent women’s press in 1969, Grahn gave other women and herself the opportunity to publish what before had been unpublishable.

Her next set of poems, *The Common Woman* (1969,) details ordinary women in their everyday lives. As Grahn explains in the introduction, she hopes by showing the similarities between all women, her poetry “would help break current stereotypes about women and the work [they] do” (60). Again, Grahn’s poetry focuses not only on redefining women, but also on how others, men and women both, view
women. Grahn then wrote *She Who* (1971 to 1972.) This set of poems can be read as a process of naming, naming who 'She' is, naming who 'She' is thought to be, who 'She' was, and who 'She' will be. This process of naming is another important step in Grahn’s journey to redefine women.

In 1973, Grahn published *A Woman is Talking to Death*. In the introduction, Grahn explains that she is trying “to define a Lesbian life within the context of other people in the world” with this set of poems (112). By writing about factual events, Grahn hopes to give her audience a chance to see the truth within her own life, thus giving them a model for seeing the truth within their own lives. In the last stanza in this series of poems, Grahn writes:

I want nothing left for you, ho death
except some fertilizer
for the next batch of us
who do not hold hands with you
who do not embrace you
who try not to work for you
or sacrifice themselves or trust
or believe you, ho ignorant
death, how do you know
we happened to you?
wherever our meat hangs on our bones
for our own use
your pot is empty
death, ho death
you shall be poor (130-131)
This ending sums up Grahn’s hopes in this series. She wants women to sidestep the oppressions and expectations of society and live for life, not for death. She hopes the next generation of women will not sacrifice their selves to death, but will leave death empty and poor.

Again and again with each set of new poems, Grahn pushes and strengthens the boundaries of women. She begins with the notion that women need redefining; and how better to redefine womankind than to re-write women? Through all of this exploration and redefining, Grahn does not use myth to underscore her rhetorical purpose.

Changes from Previous Stage

Even in her next set of unfinished poems, Confrontations with the Devil in the Form of Love (1977 to ?), Grahn does not overtly use myth or mythic characters as the foundation for the whole set of poems, but she uses myth on an individual poem level. In Confrontations, Grahn writes two poems using Venus, where she is obviously calling on the reader’s epistemic knowledge of Venus, Goddess of Love, to get her message across. Therefore, Grahn’s use of
Venus, even though limited to the level of the poem, becomes rhetorical. And this is the beginning of her rhetorical use of myth. While this usage is not of the same scope and influence as in her later stages, we can clearly see that her use began here with these two poems.

Grahn writes:

Venus, ever since they knocked
your block off
your face is so vacant
waiting to be moved in on
by men's imaginations.
how could anybody love you?
having the ugliest mug in the world,
the one that's missing. (141)

Then she writes:

Venus, dear, where are your arms?
if only you were a tree.
they have so many,
& no one thinks less of them for it. (146)

Also in Confrontations there are two other poems, "Jason, hero" and "Jason as the surgeon," which refer to the classical Greek Jason of Jason and the Argonauts. Grahn writes:

Jason, hero
everytime we created something
you put on our clothes
and called it yours
    you sat down on our birthing chairs
    & crowned yourself
the king of life

took the contents of our medicine bags
and appointed yourself
surgeon general
    gathered up our potatoes sheep & yams
    moved into the Dept of Agriculture
    and told us to go on a diet

Jason, trousers were invented
by Queen Semiramis.
when you put them on you called yourself
manly, which meant that you
would pay us the littlest possible amount
to make them for you
you call this: screwing people
Queen Semiramis would have your head for that

Jason you are no good
and you have such a pretty name, too
I wonder who gave it to you.
We should take all your names away from you
and give you one: Mr. Grand Larceny
sentenced to stand aside while we take
all our stuff back where it came from. (139)

Next, she writes:

Jason as the surgeon
Jason to me your well-trained hands
are dog’s teeth gnashing
near my vital organs.
your prescriptive doctor eyes
are ignorant pits
for me to fall into.

before you pick up that knife
to stick in my life,
here are some orders for you:
leave my breast on my chest
where you found it,
& my ass on the chair where it sits;  
leave my brain in the strain  
that describes it  
& my heart in its own pocket of tears;  
leave my guts in their coil of a serpent,  
& my womb in condition to bear.  

& anytime unnecessary knifing tempts you  
put your razor fingers in your own mouth, Jason.  
bite down hard. (151)

While there are minimal textual references to support the idea that Grahn’s Jason is in fact the classical Jason, in conjunctions with her use of Venus, these four poems mark the first stage of her use of myth; her work goes from no myth use to minimal and shallow mythic references supporting her rhetorical purpose.

How Usage Reflects Rhetorical Purpose

With this unfinished set of poems, Grahn is playing with the idea of love as a character. In her introduction, Grahn admits “She [Love] is not yet developed, and neither is her idea of revolution” (134). The idea that love can revolt, can overturn, can change, that love needs to revolt flows well with Grahn’s earlier poetry. It goes back to the very beginning where she insists women need to be redefined.
What form need this redefining take? Revolution! To overturn society's standards and expectations, to change how and who women are perceived to be, to tip the scales of context and create anew womankind is a revolution, a poetic revolution.

Grahn writes:

you are what is female
you shall be called Eve.
and what is masculine shall be called God.

And from your name Eve we shall take
the word Evil.
and from God's, the word Good.
now you understand patriarchal morality. (137)

This poem talks about how a society's language, religion, and power structure can deeply oppress a group. Historically, and now herstorically, when a group is oppressed long enough that literally even death is a change for the better, usually the group is willing to revolt. Grahn's poetry speaks to this idea of revolution for women, in that first women must revolt, throw off society's expectations, before they can begin to redefine who they are.

One way society oppresses women is with the idea of beauty. The ideal for women for the most part is in
unspoken agreement for Americans: 5'8", slim waist, round
hips, long legs, long hair, and C-cup breasts with a usually
negotiable face. The image of Mattel's Barbie Doll fits the
ideal to perfection.

In "Venus, ever since they knocked" and "Venus, dear,
where are your arms," Grahn works with opposite sides of
this ideal beauty. The first side is beauty as standard,
the expected ideal. The second side is when beauty does not
meet the standard and is lacking. Since this use of Venus
is the beginning to her use of myth, there are no twists, no
re-visioning of Venus. Venus is not even a fully developed
character, just a classical statue.

In "Venus, ever since they knocked," Grahn refers us to
the statue of Venus de Milo, which has lost its head and
arms. Typically Venus is considered a deity of beauty and
love. Grahn plays with this idea of "known" yet unspecified
beauty which is left open to interpretation and thus lacking
in any intrinsic value for itself. Grahn implies that men
prefer women to be "vacant" so that men can "move in" and
imagine who women are, give women an imposed value. Yet,
with no face, no intrinsic value, how can anybody love a
person who is missing? This idea that society wants women to be "vacant" and empty, waiting for external definition is exactly the kind of oppression Grahn wants women free of. "How can anybody love you?" (141). How can women even love themselves? Revolt! Self-love is a step towards redefinition.

In "Venus, dear, where are your arms?" again we see the reference to Venus de Milo. Here, Grahn plays with the idea of arms and branches, sarcastically telling Venus that if she were a tree she could regrow her lost limbs; then no one would criticize her. This other side of beauty, the side that points out each flaw and detracts value, is another way society crushes women. If women are too busy worrying how to "fix" themselves, to get thinner thighs, bigger breasts, brighter smiles, then they have no time or energy to ask who set the standards to begin with. Grahn wants women to question expectations, not only the physical ones but all of them.

In the other two myth poems from Confrontations, Grahn is using "Jason" as a thief who is titled "hero" for his efforts (139). Traditionally, Jason is considered a
displaced prince who seeks the Golden Fleece to exchange it for his kingdom. Along the way, Jason not only steals the Fleece, but also steals the credit from Medea whose help enabled him to complete his quest, then goes on to steal her reward and her sanity. Grahn uses this idea of Jason as material thief and spiritual thief to create a character to represent men in general.

"Jason" has the title of hero yet the actions of a thief in "Jason, hero." In this poem a pattern appears of ancient theft and modern consequences, as seen in the fourth stanza of "Jason, hero."

\[
gathered up our potatoes sheep & yams 
moved into the Dept of Agriculture 
and told us to go on a diet \quad (139)
\]

In this poem, Grahn delineates things which "Jason" has stolen from women: creation, medicine, agriculture, gendered power. By stealing, "Jason" has oppressed women, displaced them. Yet, at the end of the poem, Grahn warns him "to stand aside while we take/ all our stuff back where it came from" (139). Revolt, she says. Women must reclaim their heritage. They need to take, take back their very selves.
In “Jason as the surgeon” Grahn puts Jason in the role of doctor yet “orders” him to leave her breasts, ass, brain, heart, guts, and womb “where [he] found it” (151). Here again Jason’s character is a cultural hero: a doctor; yet, he is a thief of womanhood. Grahn calls “Jason” out, challenges the idea that “surgeon” is a positive cultural “hero” title. Instead, Grahn believes that surgeons are actually “dog’s teeth gnashing/ near my [women’s] vital organs” (151). Grahn wants “Jason,” and all men, to stop physically and spiritually hacking away at women. Grahn hopes women will see how oppressive titles can be. The title of “surgeon” instantly gives “Jason” the power and the assumed intellect to put women under the knife, literally and figurative. If women are to be redefined, all titles and actions must be measured and challenged. Revolution means challenging the status quo.

In these four poems, Grahn uses myth to do just that. Rhetorically, she looks at love and the revolution to come. By using a smidgen of myth here as a rhetorical device, Grahn begins a new phase in her poetry. Now myth as rhetorical device comes to the forefront and dominates her
poetry in the next stage as she works to instruct her readers, connecting them together and encouraging them to begin a journey towards self-acceptance and transformation.

Stage Two

Use of Myth

As she explains in the introduction to Queen of Wands, A Tablet of Lamentation moved Grahn to search “for other stories of stolen queens” (xii). What Grahn found was that “[t]he most persistently retold story of a queen stolen in Western tradition” was the story of “Helen, Queen of Sparta and known as Helen of Troy” (xii). As Grahn researched further into Helen’s herstory, she discovered worldwide versions similar in content and character. The common threads Grahn found were myths of a “female god of beauty, fire, love, light, thought and weaving” (xii). Grahn takes these threads and weaves them into a frame to hold her hopes for redefining women. She weaves words and ideas into poems, using Helen-as-deity and Helen-as-mortal as her guiding motifs. “For language is a form of weaving too, a
clothing our ideas wear, a glowing flesh they are made of, a heart that beats in them" (xiii).

In a conversation published in *Women Writers of the West Coast*, Grahn tells John Felstiner, a professor of English at Stanford, that she is "expanding the notion of how poetry can be use[d]" (100). She believes it can help women understand "where we come from and what the basis of women’s power is, what it looks like, where it developed and where it might go" (100). In this way, Grahn hopes her poetry will address these and other issues.

Mythic Helen is the perfect frame within which to discuss these issues. Helen gives Grahn and her readers a concrete example to compare themselves against. Grahn uses Helen’s story to talk about the origins of women and women’s powers. She uses Helen’s problems to parallel the facts of what women lack today. And most importantly, Grahn uses Helen to point out the direction she believes womankind’s future needs to travel. Grahn writes:

> Frigga with Hela

> Her fingers
within me
   a spindle

50
my feelings
woolly
her dear hand
axis
on which my internal world
whirls.

"She is making me"
on the whorl of her love
turning me out and in
transforming patterns.

So I say of her,
"she is making me,"
and I mean she is
making me over,
again. (34)

Grahn wants her poetry to be the internal axis by which each woman spins a new definition of her self; she wants to make women over, to be the pattern by which readers transform their lives. Grahn uses Helen to weave a landscape, a nether world which contains the herstory of Helen as everywoman, of what women are today, and of how women may transform their 'selves.' While this landscape does not contain definitive answers, it does give readers models and tools so they may re-vision and re-construct life on their own, so they may weave their own heritage, power, strength, choice, and identity--especially identity, because
who women are as individuals is crucial to re-defining who womankind is as a whole.

Changes from Previous Stage

Previously Grahn used mythic references only passingly. In Confrontations, her use of Venus and Jason was minimal and shallow. She did not add any new plot twists or personality layers. Grahn simply employed the surface epistemic references connected to Venus and Jason: beauty and theft, respectively.

Now in Queen of Wands, Grahn’s use of myth gains depth. By researching the varying worldwide myths of Helen, Grahn is able to add many layers to Helen’s personality, expanding her from a two-dimensional epic character of myth into a complex everywoman, immortal and mortal at once. “Helen’s names” reflects Grahn’s point that Helen is a widely known world deity and a mythic character. In this poem, Grahn not only expands and explains Helen’s name, but also adds depth to her research which draws connecting lines between the ancient female deity religions and common present-day first names. Grahn writes:
Helen’s names

Helen has such a lengthy history
as a god and as a queen
that her name, El-Ana, has derivations
and echoes that are widespread over
continents. The Muhammedan Venus is called
Anael, which has the syllables of
El-Ana reversed. From El comes Bella
meaning “beauty.”
Beulah Ann is one variation,
as are Helena, Helga, Holga, Helda,
Hilda, Holde, Hillary, Helna, Hildegard,
Heleme.
Yelana, El-Inna, Lil-Ana, Lilly Anne,
Lou Anne, Lillian. Angelina.
El-Luna, Elna, Elanya
Elana. Hannah Bella
Annabel, Belle Anna, Belana,
Helana, Elaina, Elaine
Eleanor, Eileen, Alienor
Hela, Nina, Lenora, Lee Anna, Leona
Nona, Ilona, Lena
Ellen, Ella, Ellie
Nellie, Nell. Hel-Aine,
Helaine.
Lena, Lana, Lanya
Helanya.
Hello, Helanya. (16)

By filling to overflowing Helen’s personality, Grahn’s
new Helen speaks for herself, telling us her tale of
“wisdom, war, love and foolery” (7). We hear Helen’s voice
as she spins her life into existence. (For a complete
reading of this poem, please see Appendix A. What follows are excerpts from this poem.) Grahn writes:

Queen Helen

A queen am I
Queen Helen is my title...

Husband I am leaving you,
have left. And my homeland,
child, and precious people...

Without his heart he ranted
thinking it was me he wanted,
thinking that he could not live
or rule without me...

In ships he came to me,
in ships surrounded.
I was dumbfounded.
A thousand ships, so many!...

None of us knew the war would
last so long...

And they won finally with a lie,
hypocrisy,
the offer of friendship
with soldiers in its belly...

So Helen fell like a pretty city
into the lap of war, a husband's war
against her...

I went out a Queen
a Sovereign, Mother of my people
and a lover--
I came back a captive.
My husband had gone out
a King, a Sovereign
and a soldier.
He came back a tyrant,
a master of slaves--
and I came back a slave.

For the first time
when he put his hands
upon me, I was afraid . . . (20-27)

Unlike her previous use, one of the ways Grahn uses
myth in this stage is to instruct. In Wands, as represented
by the previous two poems, Grahn uses mythic Helen simply to
teach about Helen’s life, Helen’s worldwide existence. By
giving readers facts they can hold on to, Grahn creates an
environment where readers will see and accept her Helen
research as true. After her readers learn the truth about
Helen, they can begin to see the truth within themselves.

Another way Grahn adds depth to her use of myth is by
paralleling mythic Helen’s problems with modern issues women
face today. By addressing these issues and voicing them as
valid, Grahn connects her readers to Helen’s dilemma. This
ability to connect, to link in the readers’ minds,
individual readers to mythic Helen adds weight and strength
to Grahn’s point that what was stolen from Helen, modern
women are still lacking.
"But I mean any kind of thief" and "When I went looking for the Foe" both speak to what Grahn feels have been taken from women. Grahn writes:

But I mean any kind of thief

When I went
looking for the Foe
I called him "He"
the one in the fast
car and the outside lane,
the getaway man
who came and took
and went, a stranger

but I mean any kind of thief--
of souls, pride, the heart,
of land, space, air, and work.
I mean the thief of truth
of meaning

the one who goes
by what is said
and not by what is done
that one
that kind of liar
the fantasizer

smoker of bad wishes;
the cold one who, shivering
steals your thunder and your fire
then calls you poor,
calls you "Queen of Wants"

and wants.

When I went looking
for the Foe I thought of
boots and leather, barbed wire fences, aggressive legal stances and the colonizer who takes the heart out of your sky, diverts the light from your eye into his own

but I mean any kind of Foes, her, the sap-sucking cannibalizer, idea-eater, and the one, the one who makes war with rents and wages

the masked mate, who makes war with love and personal rages the raper who takes your sense of self and wholeness, flame of trust and leaves you trembling, crusted with his fear.

the daisy bringer who calls you Queen for a Day and takes your year

the friend who cries on your shoulder and never sees your grief who looks in your mirror and calls you low and calls you less than who you are. I mean the Foe that one I mean any kind of thief. (62-63)
Next, she writes:

When I went looking for the Foe

When I went looking for the Foe
I could not find him.

I mean,
when I went looking for the Foe
I found him trying so hard
to be the Queen,
the mother, source.

I don't mean impersonating,
that's another kind of Queen,
a flaming queen.
I mean replacing.

I hated, and I understood. 
Women know their wombs are mysteries
who operate on dreams, 
a loom or flax seed
given to an unknown weaver
from an unknown mind.
Spider Webster's, no doubt.

What's a poor Foe to do?
When the queen is equal to the power.
Stealing's the prerogative
of those who have not got
and have no other way to get.

Now we know the meaning of
he wants.
He wants me, and of me, and
he steals to get it,
what he has not, himself,
got. Then he can be "who gets,"
a god--
and I can be gottess. (67)
"But I mean any kind of thief" mainly focuses on the what of the theft while "When I went looking for the Foe" looks at the who. Both deal with issues of the "Foe," an enemy, the enemy of womankind. By calling the "Foe" out into the open, Grahn is giving women a chance to unvent their lost skills.

Even though name calling can easily become male-bashing for some feminists, Grahn's use of "Foe" is tied directly to Tablet, which uses "Foe" to refer to the invading group who dethroned and enslaved the queen. Grahn means "any kind of thief," male or female (62). And this willingness to depend on multiple facets of a definition sets her use of myth one step further along in Stage Two than in Stage One, where her myth usage is simple and direct.

The last way Grahn's use of myth is different in Stage Two from in Stage One is that Grahn weaves the future into her usage. Grahn not only modernizes Helen into the twentieth century but takes her into the future, the future of all women. Grahn sees clearly where she believes women need to be, one way to re-vise womankind into what it should become. By using myth to overlay the future of women in her
poetry, Grahn adds another layer of depth and thus strengthens the foundation of her rhetorical purpose.

In "Old Helen," Grahn takes the Helen of after the war and transplants her into modern America, modern factory life. At the end of the poem, Grahn looks into the future, showing two possibilities: repetition of the past or creation of a new path through unvention. Grahn writes:

Old Helen

Discarded in old town, bunched,
wearing indigo-blue
worsted leg veins,
you were a beauty once,
Helen, weren’t you--
before the ships came.

You were a beauty once
before the ships came
to your (oh oh) rescue,
bearing gifts or promises or chains,
field labor or the mills.
Warping you with pain,
debts or deadly chemicals,
spinning your beauty down
to an empty spool in old town.

You were a beauty once
Helen, a singer and a weaver,
spinner and a storyteller too,
of greatest fame,
before the ships came.

Now your face shows
what you have had to know
about the use of beauty,
youth, flying fingers too
(where they fly to).
You know the first name of the booty
they got, and as you lug
your burdens down the street
with no one to help you,
you remember what they mean by "rescue."

You were a beauty once
Helen and you will be.
Your expressions prophesize.
The anger migrates through your veins
like great flocks of flesh-devouring
birds, wheeling and diving, gathering the drives
to unknit the terrible pattern of our lives. (65-66)

In "Beauty, sleeping (Who shall wake us)," Grahn takes
the story of Sleeping Beauty, (beauty as bella, Bella from
El, from El-Ana, to Helen, so the chain goes in "Helen's
names") and parallels the sleeping heroine to all of
womankind sleeping. She looks to womankind's future when
she writes:

Beauty, sleeping (Who shall wake us)

Who shall wake us
if we don't ourselves
shake loose the sleep
of ages, animate the doll
at last and bid her
rise, and move and rule.

Who will wake us from our
dream of capture
of we don’t ourselves
shake loose the long spell,
the illusion of being small
and silences, sourceless
and unheated.

Who will be all knowing
and the prince if we don’t
make him happen, somehow
groom him for his task
to rouse us from the suicidal
slumber.

(And the Foe if no one else
knows how to shine his boots
knows how to stride
to the tower steps
and rocket up to shake us
from our sleepy lives
with fear. But I don’t mean
the Foe, I mean another
and ourselves)

Let the princes come
integrated and sure
let it be time
for a man strong in his
insides
without boots or
a broken brain, let him
have a golden net
around him

Let him arrive now
in any form, as a Bear God
or computer programmer
or even a dyke in a man’s costume
let his step resonate the steps
of the hightower

Mothers mothers raise him
tell him, make him
who will wake us
who will wake us
who will wake us from our
trance of ages
if we don’t

Ourselves prepare
for that reception;
animate the doll’s flesh
for the kiss of like
of recognition,
animate the doll’s will at last
and bid her rise
and move, and rule (76-77)

By looking at the possible futures for women and by
pointing out the truth that women must themselves take
action to create a new future, a good future, Grahn’s use of
myth gives women an example to follow of how to empower and
transform their lives. This useful tool of transformation
is what adds depth to Grahn’s use of mythic Helen and what
puts Stage Two’s usage firmly above Stage One’s.

**Deviations from Traditional Usage**

To show how Grahn deviates from the traditional Helen
myth, I will refer to the synthesized version I compiled
earlier from Rose, MacPherson, and Graves. Also, since
Grahn’s usage tends to fall into three main types,
In the traditional myth, the story assumes that during her life Helen is mortal, and only at death is she flown to Olympus and immortality. Yet even though Helen is the daughter of Zeus and is granted immortality instead of death, within the myth Helen is never referred to as a deity, a goddess. If we search Homer’s texts for contextual evidence, however, we can see, as Graver and Meagher point out, there are subtle textual references to Helen being an ancient female deity. Therefore, when Grahn gives form to all of “Helen’s names,” she creates two deviations from the traditional perspective of Helen as mortal woman: 1) that there is more than one Helen, and 2) that Helen was “a god,” a female deity (16).

In “Queen Helen,” Grahn emphasizes that Helen is “Sovereign” (20) to her people while Menelaus was “a King, a Sovereign/ and a soldier,” making them equals (26). In the myth, Helen is a King’s daughter, a King’s wife, and a
Prince's stolen bride, but she is not referred to as
Menelaus or Paris' equal.

In the poem, Paris claims Helen as a prize from the
gods and takes Helen "home/ to his own land" (20).
Traditionally, Athene gives Helen to Paris as a prize, so
that matches up. But then Grahn deviates by having Helen
write a good-bye note to Menelaus. And then she deviates
again by explaining that Helen took her court and looms with
her to Troy, when the myth would have us believe they left
without time to pack.

In both the myth and "Queen Helen," Menelaus gathers
one thousand ships and goes to Troy to fight a ten-year
battle. However, the poem says it was not just Menelaus'
pride "thinking it was [Helen] he wanted,/ thinking that he
could not live/ or rule without [her]" (22), but it was
Helen's waiting women who "needled and poked incessantly"
until Menelaus got up and went to retrieve Helen (22). This
deviation implies that without the extra pushing, Menelaus
believed that Helen had the power to choose to leave and
would have let her stay in Troy.
The poem and the myth parallel in the telling of the Trojan Horse, how even Helen believed it was really an "offer of friendship" to end the war (24). But instead it held soldiers who came out at night and "seared the city down to ash and/ rubble" (25). Both the poem and the myth blame Helen for all the death and destruction resulting from the war. Both tell how Menelaus took Helen back to Sparta, yet the myth has an air of happiness in spouses re-united, while in the poem Helen "was afraid" of Menelaus (26). Grahn's Helen is aware that when she returns to Sparta her power as a Queen and a deity has been taken from her, while mythic Helen seems oblivious to any possession or loss of power altogether.

Another overall deviation is that Helen is telling us her story in first person. This change is crucial on Grahn's part. Without a change from the usual third person, readers would not be able to hear how Helen's tone deviates from acceptance to indecision and doubt. In the myth, Helen is a pawn who passes from the hands of one man into another and another and whose emotions are dictated by the gods. In "Queen Helen," we can see how Helen changes her mind. As
she goes from certainty to doubtfulness, Helen tell us she has "been trying for centuries/ to recall exactly why/ [she] left [her] original queendom" (27). She explains that "they have said that/ [she] did not die normally, but flew/ into the heavens and became a star" (27). Helen does not even know why she let Paris take her or what happened when she died. This uncertainty deviates from the traditional Helen who always accepts whatever happens to her without question.

Traditionally, Helen is assumed to exist only in ancient Greece, yet Grahn brings Helen and her story into the twentieth century again and again. In "But I mean any kind of thief," Paris becomes "the one in the fast/ car and the outside lane,/ the getaway man/ who came and took/ and went, a stranger" (62). Beyond the change of modernization, Grahn keeps Paris' character in line with the myth in which Paris quickly steals Helen and runs away, the getaway driver to Athene's crime of interference.

Grahn continues to allow Helen to speak in the first person, so Helen can tell us of her search for other "Foes," which is a difference from the myth which lays the blame of Helen's plight at Paris and Athene's feet. In "When I went
looking for the Foe," Grahn again allows Helen as first-person narrator to look for a new understanding of who the "Foe" is. Mythic Helen does not search for a "Foe" or for someone to blame; she always accepts events as they happen, as if fate ruled her destiny.

"Old Helen" changes the myth not only by setting Helen in a postwar time, but by putting her in modern America as a factory worker. These changes in setting reflect the audience of working women Grahn is trying to reach. Instead of weaving the story of the war on her loom, Helen now works for "the mills./ Warping [her] with pain,/ debts or deadly chemicals,/ spinning [her] beauty down/ to an empty spool in old town" (65). Another deviation in this poem comes at the end where the narrator suggests that Helen use her anger "to unknit the terrible pattern of our [women's] lives" (66). In the myth, Helen has no power to help the enslaved women, let alone modern women. Yet Grahn changes that and gives Helen back her power to help, to weave womankind a new future.

Another deviation Grahn makes is by turning Helen into an everywoman, as in "Beauty, sleeping (who shall wake us)"
where the "we" represents a collective of women. Also, Grahn continues her previous change of empowering Helen. If we the sleeping beauties, the sleeping Helens, do not awake, the narrator claims, womankind will sleep forever. This empowerment is a major change from the traditional myth where Helen has no power, over self or others.

These five main deviations--first person perspective, deity aspect, bad treatment after the war, empowerment, and new "Foes"--represent the major changes from the traditional Helen of Troy myth Grahn uses in Wands.

**How Usage Reflects Rhetorical Purpose**

And it is these five things which clearly point out Grahn's rhetorical purpose. Grahn wants to redefine who women are and how they are perceived. The re-visioning Grahn does to mythic Helen allows her to use Helen not only as inspiration for but also as a rhetorical device within Queen of Wands. Throughout her poetic career, Grahn strives to help redefine women, first as individuals and now as a group.
By using myth to teach readers about Helen, Grahn feels she is giving her readers the knowledge and tools of herstory to revolt against society and its treatment of women. In poems like "Helen's names" and "Queen Helen," Grahn is instructing her audience, teaching them about Helen's life, the life of a deity and a mortal in one. By creating an everywoman character for her readers to connect with, Grahn is saying, here is Helen--here is everywoman--here is you. What Helen has suffered, so have all women--so have you. This first step of identifying and validating every woman's experience, of linking women, is an important step towards individual empowerment and ultimately group redefinition.

The next step Grahn's poetry helps women through is blame. When a person realizes that she has been harmed, oppressed, devalued, usually she wants to find the person or persons responsible and place blame there. Grahn knows that with blame comes responsibility, and if one is shifted elsewhere, the other is also. So, when women shift blame onto men, the responsibility of fixing the situation is also
shifted. True healing can only come with self-truth, and self-truth involves accepting blame.

In her poem "But I mean any kind of thief," Grahn works her way through many "Foes," men in general, liars, the government, other women, spouses, family members, friends, until she reaches the core, the central most enemy to every woman, the one "who looks in your mirror/ and calls you low/ and calls you less/ than you are" (63). Each woman is her own enemy, this poem says. There are other "Foes," but Grahn is trying to point out the fact that most enemies are secondary to the enemy of self-hate. To revolt and change the group, first each individual must change her self, must love her self, know her self.

In "When I went looking for the Foe," Grahn makes another point about the "Foe," about the search for the "Foe." When we search for a thing, we are usually searching for our idea of the thing, of a "Foe." In this poem, Grahn is talking about the notion that the "Foe" is not who or what women expect. She says, "he steals to get it," to get the "mysteries" of women’s wombs, women’s ability to create since "he has not, himself,/ got" (67). Men do not have the
power of women, Grahn says, and so men believe themselves to be the one "who gets," a stealer of power, while women are "gottess"/goddess, the one whom the power is stolen from (67).

Grahn thinks it is important for women to realize that men and society have not taken anything from women they did not originally possess. Grahn knows women need knowledge to unlock the power of action, so she hopes women will see that the "Foes," the mighty, all-knowing "Foes," are created by society and our childhood indoctrination. These "Foes" are imposed by society and kept in motion by women's immobility and inaction. The "Foes" will begin to disappear when women begin to move about and take action.

In "Old Helen," Grahn begins to give form to the needed action, the necessary activities. She says Helen, and thus all women, need to take "[t]he anger migrat[ing] through [their] veins" and "unknit the terrible pattern of our lives" (66). Grahn wants women to take all their pent-up anger and frustration and channel it into positive action. "Unknit," she says, revolt against society's patterns, gender roles, norms of behavior, expectations. Taking a
stand and re-laying the pattern for our own lives begins the journey of redefining womankind.

We, as in "Beauty, sleeping," must "animate the doll/ at last and bid her/ rise, and move and rule" (76). Grahn sees that modern women have become dolls, inanimate toys, made to please and be played with, but with no will, no power, no voice of their own. She believes women need to "animate," to make real these dolls, to "shake the long spell,/ the illusion of being small/ and silenced, sourceless/ and unheated" (76). If women do not transform their own lives, "[w]ho shall" (76). "Who shall wake us/ if we don’t ourselves" (76).

Grahn wants women to wake from their sleep of oppression and find within themselves the power to re-vision, re-knit, a future; the power to unvent their heritage, power, strength, choice, and identity which all lie in wait just beneath the thin surface of each woman’s soul. Revolt, Grahn says, and claim these possessions as is each woman’s right. With her poetry in Queen of Wands, Grahn has not only created a safe atmosphere in which women can learn and connect, but she has also given women the
tools needed to begin their individual transformations, their journeys from inanimate toys to self-possessed women.

Stage Three

Use of Myth

Grahn's third stage of myth use is found in Queen of Swords, which is comprised of one long play-poem, "Queen of Swords," and two additional poems, "Descent to the Roses of the Family," and "Talkers in a Dream Doorway." In the introduction to this book, Grahn discusses the Sumerian myth of Inanna, a goddess of heaven and earth. Inanna came to Grahn's attention when Betty De Shong Meador joined one of Grahn's writing classes to work on a poetic translation of the myth.

In her introduction, Grahn summarizes portions of the myth relevant to her use of Inanna, which begins with Inanna "risking everything in order to gather more powers for the benefit of her cities" (3). Inanna travels to the underworld/afterlife to see "Ereshkigal, a Kali-like figure of death and transformation" (3). To reach Ereshkigal,
Inanna must pass through seven gates where she is stripped of her symbolic possessions: crown, necklace, measuring rod, breastplate, and perfume. At the seventh gate, Inanna is "judged" and "fixed with the 'eye of death,'" and then Ereshkigal kills her, flays her corpse, and hangs her" (4). After three days, Ereshkigal gives "birth to a renewed Inanna" (4).

While Inanna traverses the seven gates, Ninshubur, her "faithful servant," goes looking for help and finds Enki, "god of wisdom and sweet waters" (4). Enki creates two creatures who follow Inanna to the underworld. When they reach the labor-racked Ereshkigal, they bring Inanna "back to life" (4). Ereshkigal agrees to let Inanna return to the aboveworld only if Innana sends someone else down to "take her place" (4). Upon her return, Inanna finds Dumuzi, her consort, "gorgeously dressed and sitting on a jeweled throne near his apple tree, not mourning or missing her" (5). "Inanna stares at him with her newly attained 'eye of death'" and marks him for Ereshkigal (5). Geshtinanna, Dumuzi's sister, offers to spend six months in the Underworld, switching off with her brother so he need not
spend all his time below. Ereshkigal accepts this plan, and this leaves Inanna to rule happily "now with even greater powers" (5). At the end of the myth, Inanna acknowledges her love for Ereshkigal.

Grahn says:

After living with this ongoing translation [from text to poem] for several years I have no doubt that Inanna's story informed many later stories about the goddess-queen-harlot figures who are related to Helen. (2-3)

Grahn could see that Inanna’s myth represented an earlier female-deity-centered culture from which Helen later evolved. Thus, Grahn sees Inanna as one of Helen’s many worldwide incantations as a "weaver/fire goddess of fiery beauty and creativity" (2).

After working closely with Helen in Queen of Wands, Grahn must have seen Inanna’s myth as the next logical step to narrow her rhetorical purpose to focus specifically on Lesbians. While Grahn is not excluding any woman from her message in Queen of Swords, she has narrowed her focus. In Queen of Wands, Grahn writes about womankind’s need for revision, the possessions women have lost, and the idea that women, although individuals, are a collective. In Swords,
Grahn continues with the next step: the journey toward self-discovery. Inanna’s myth provides Grahn with the perfect frame within which to reveal this journey.

The 3000 BC Sumerian myths about Inanna predate the change from female-dominated to male-dominated society. Grahn sees the Helen myths as a marker for this change. While Helen’s struggles in Troy between her deity nature and her mortal conventions outline the fall of female power, Inanna’s myth outlines the time of a powerful woman who journeys to the underworld/afterlife to gain new power. Inanna’s myth, not one of a queen/deity dethroned, kidnapped, and enslaved by a male-dominated culture, is one of inner struggle, of being stripped to the core, of giving up all of what one is, of sacrifice, of rebirth. Inanna represents who Helen was before she fell from grace.

Inanna’s struggle to attain power, her stripping off of symbolic possessions, and her final rebirth encompass the journey Grahn believes women need to make to regain their lost heritage, choice, power, strength, and identity. Grahn uses the myth of Inanna not only because it is the perfect vehicle for a journey of self-transformation, but because it
represents an early Helen, the Helen of power before Troy, before she fell from the sky beneath the heel of male-dominated societies.

Grahn has closely paralleled "Queen of Swords," a play-poem, to the structure of Inanna’s myth, which is broken up into sections depicting parts of her journey: Scene One [Aboveworld], Gate One, Gate Two, Gate Three, Gate Four, Scene Two [Aboveworld], Gate Five, Gate Six, Gate Seven, and Scene Three [Aboveworld]. The characters in Grahn’s play-poem correspond directly to the character in Inanna’s myth:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODERN NAME</th>
<th>ANCIENT SUMERIAN NAMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HELEN, a modern woman</td>
<td>Inanna, goddess of heaven and earth, Venus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THOMAS, her husband, a scientist</td>
<td>Dumuzi, Inanna’s consort, the bull god</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIN, Helen’s friend and Higher Mind</td>
<td>Ninshubur, Inanna’s minister, queen of the East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTHING, bartender, dealer and bouncer</td>
<td>Neti, gatekeeper of the Great Below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERESHKIGAL, Lesbian bar owner</td>
<td>Ereshkigal, Lady of the Great Below, goddess</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the underworld

Seven CROWS, variously
crows, dikes,
Amazon warriors,
motorcyclists,
judges, demons

Annunaki, the seven
judges of the
underworld,
also the Galla,
seven demons

PEN, corpse of an
Amazon warrior

Pentesilea, Greek
name for the
leader of the
thirteen
Amazons who
fought at Troy

ENKI, god of the
wisdom of nature

Enki, god of wisdom
and sweet
waters

KUR and GAL,
vegetarian fairies

Kurgarra and
Galaturra,
genderless
professional
mourners/
musicians

GISHI, Thomas’
girlfriend

Geshtinanna,
Dumuzi’s loyal
sister (9)

Grahn draws on the structure and characters of the Sumerian myth.

She has also patterned the plot of "Queen of Swords" directly from Inanna’s myth. Helen from the play-poem, like Inanna, feels she is lacking some power, some substance and begins a journey to find and claim what is missing. Helen’s
life is stripped to the core as she discovers the truth about her 'self,' and finally she returns home a new woman and kicks her husband out.

Grahn has used Inanna’s myth as inspiration for Stage Three of her rhetorical use of myth just as she drew from Helen of Troy for Stage Two of her rhetorical use of myth. While with Helen in Queen of Wands Grahn was creating an everywoman to talk about the issues all women face, in Queen of Swords Grahn uses Inanna’s myth to create a more tightly focused everywoman who happens to be Lesbian. While not wishing to exclude straight woman, nevertheless Grahn focuses on Lesbians and the journey some women might take when uncovering their Lesbian natures.

In her introduction, Grahn also connects Inanna’s descent to the underworld to her inspiration for “Descent to the Roses of the Family.” With minimal textual references in “Descent” to parallel the plot of Inanna’s myth, the female narrator tells of her family’s descent into hell, while imploring her brother to “help her not repeat the same descent,” not repeat their mother and father’s mistakes and prejudices (5). In this poem, Grahn uses Inanna to frame
and underscore the journey of one modern Lesbian woman to reclaim her ‘self,’ to reclaim her stolen rights, stolen life.

While “Descent” is specifically told from one woman’s perspective, the poem as a whole deals with many ideas, gender roles, dysfunctional families, “battery, alcoholism, madness, and white and male supremacy;” topics with which almost everyone can relate (5). Grahn uses the mythic structure and plot line of “Queen of Swords” to connect readers to the narrator’s descent. This connection allows readers to see up close one woman’s journey to the depth of her soul as she seeks the heritage, choice, power, strength and identity she so desperately needs. To Grahn, the narrator represents the pain and confusion all woman, Lesbian and straight, will face as each journeys “down to the bottom of [her] heart” (6).

So as not to leave her readers at the painful “bottom” of their souls, Grahn ends her book with a “tribute to women’s collective powers” in “Talkers in a Dream Doorway” (6). The poem can be seen as a symbolic end-goal, giving
women hope for what is possible at the end of the journey.

She ends the poems by saying:

This is our love, this stuff
pouring out of us, and if this mutual desire is
some peculiar ether-marriage
among queens, made of the longing of women
to really love each other, made of dreams
and needs larger than all of us,
we may not know what to do
with it yet but at least
we’ve got it,
we’re in the doorway.
We’ve got it right here, between us,
(admit it) on the tip of our tongues. (147-148)

Grahn uses “Talkers” to represent the joy and peace
that exist at the end of the journey, the knowledge of who
one is. The female narrator symbolically encompasses Helen,
Inanna’s empowered return from the Underworld, and all newly
born women, fresh from their journeys of self-discovery. To
Grahn, this poem’s narrator provides a glimpse into a future
for all women, a future of connection and collective
individuality, which is not so far away. “We’ve got it,”
she says (148). At the end of the journey are self-respect,
self-acceptance, self-understanding: self-love. Grahn wants
her audience as individuals to take her poetry’s verbal
courage and move onward, creating new herstories as they go.
Changes from Previous Stage

Grahn makes three major changes in her use of myth in this stage. First, she has written a play-poem patterned after the myth of Inanna with running dialogue and stage directions. Embedded within the play are fifty-one poems. While these can be read as free-standing poems, and are marked as such, Grahn integrates them into the play so as to enhance each poem within the context of the play. At the end of the book are two long independent poems. This use of myth in the creation of a play-poem and long saga poems departs from her previous stage in which she wrote shorter poems, on average two pages each, around her central theme of mythic Helen.

Another point of departure from Stage Two of Grahn’s rhetorical use of myth is the myth of Inanna itself. In Stage Two, Grahn drew from a body of different versions and variants from around the world based on one theme, Helen. In Stage Three, Grahn uses only one myth, Inanna, for her play-poem and for “Descent” and “Talkers.”
The last aspect of Grahn’s major changes in Stage Three is revealed in her narrowed rhetorical purpose. All throughout her poetic career, Grahn has worked to re-define who women are. She hopes her poetry will help women see into herstory and give them the knowledge and tools to re- vision and unvent who they are and can be. In Stage Three, Grahn narrows her focus from all women to Lesbians in particular.

Grahn believes that standing up for oneself is part of the journey. Grahn knows what Lesbians are up against on this journey: fear, fear of failure, fear of success. Fear is an all-consuming enemy. Many people, many societies, have lost themselves within fear. In the internal poem "I, Boudica" in "Queen of Swords," Grahn says to this fear:

A queen am I, a living memory
who knows her own worth
and who remembers that the future
is the past rehearsed (85)

Grahn believes each woman is Boudica, a queen who must fight for her lost sovereignty, her self-sovereignty.

She reminds her readers that herstory is the blueprint for the future; women, especially Lesbians, need to look into the past for clues as to how to re-vision their
futures. Grahn’s use of myth to unearth role models for Lesbians reflects a hope that if readers know a thing has been done before, the battle has been fought, is currently engaged, it will help them overcome their initial fears and begin a journey toward self-discovery. So Grahn uses Inanna’s myth to show readers a success story of Lesbian awakening, thus narrowing her rhetorical purpose.

Deviations from Traditional Usage

In her introduction to Swords, Grahn points out that the Sumerian texts were only “found at the beginning of this century . . . at archeological sites in the Tigris-Euphrates river valley” (2). Therefore, modern authors have had access to the mythic Inanna only for roughly ninety years. In this time, there has been no marked usage of Inanna and her journey by poets or novelists, whereas Helen has remained in print for several thousand years, giving authors easy access to use and change her myths at will. Inanna’s print life has been revived only recently and is only “now beginning to be understood” (2). However, having no literary traditions to follow, augment, or change did not
daunt Grahn. Lacking a literary tradition from which to deviate, Grahn found her own way to develop the myth itself.

First, while the tale of Innana is not traditionally interpreted as a tale of Lesbian awakening and empowerment, Grahn says she “found it irresistible to present the relationship between these two female mythic characters, Helen [Inanna] and Ereshkigal, as a Lesbian saga” (30). Other than this Lesbian slant to match her narrowed rhetorical purpose, Grahn keeps the myth in dialogue form as a play-poem and retains all the original characters as players. By changing only the theme and not the form, Grahn retains in her play-poem every play’s implicit internal immortality. This immortality allows the play-poem to act itself out again with a new leading lady each time a new reader begins, giving the reader an immediate vicarious experience. To illustrate this point, this excerpt from “Queen of Swords” shows the Lesbian slant Grahn uses while retaining the play form.

Helen
And what do Lesbians love?

Crow Dikes (by turns)
Lesbians love
to talk
to sing
to walk
to cling
to balk
to sting
Lesbians love to do anything,
and to do nothing.

Nothing
Not without my permission they don’t.

Helen
Actually it isn’t hate I feel
but endless curiosity.
What do Lesbians do? (48-49)

Throughout the play-poem, Grahn changes small things to
shift the poem towards Lesbianism, for example the Crows as
dikes, and having Ereshkigal call herself the “Butch of
Darkness” and her “usual companion-lover . . . a Dike” (52).
With these small changes Grahn creates an environment which
allows Helen to find her Lesbian self.

Second, Grahn changes the setting of the Sumerian myth
by modernizing it. Grahn transplants Inanna five thousand
years into the future and places her in an underground
Lesbian bar. By changing the chronological and physical
settings, Grahn has tapped into a strong combination. Just
bringing the story into the twentieth century strengthens
the connection her readers will have with it.
However, Grahn takes the play-poem a step further; she sets it underground, paralleling the Underworld, in a Lesbian bar. Simply by coming to the bar to begin with, Helen’s actions reveal her need to explore what her true nature is. While Grahn preserves the essential plot points in her retelling, her modernization gives the play-poem a contemporary relevance and depth when viewed against the backdrop of Lesbian coming-out narratives, stories which detail Lesbians’ journeys to accept their true natures.

Grahn knows these two changes in theme and setting shift the significance of the myth, enhancing the Lesbian journey toward self-acceptance. Therefore, these changes are the only deviations Grahn feels necessary.

How Usage Reflects Rhetorical Purpose

In the third stage, Grahn uses the myth of Inanna to structure the plot of her play-poem “Queen of Swords.” Inanna’s journey parallels the journey Grahn hopes her audience will take to re-vision who they are as women. Grahn hopes women, and especially Lesbians, will begin their journey to self-empowerment by realizing that society has
created a false sense of self for women. Traditionally, male-dominated society expects women to be ornamental, domestic, and pliable. Grahn wants women to cast off society’s expectations of who women should be, whether straight or Lesbian.

Grahn wants women to realize that the lies society tells about disease, acceptance, loneliness, rape, birth defects, aging, beauty, duty, and desire are hollow, holding no substance, no truth. To show these lies and expectations that society has for women, Grahn uses Thomas, Helen’s husband in the play-poem, to represent the male voice of society in this internal poem in “Queen of Swords.”

Oh Helen, don’t go down to undertown, if you go down to the underground town you’ll never be found, nor worth finding. You’ll catch some disease-- a venereal chancre-- and then who’ll want you? Who’ll speak to you? Don’t take such chances.

Don’t go down to undertown, you’re sure to be raped and then who’ll want you? You’ll give birth to an ape or a pig-headed monster. 89
You’ll have experiences, you’ll age, you’ll wrinkle up around the mouth and eyes, you’ll be despised!

Oh I’m just joking, but Helen, really, think of your position and your beauty. Like it or not, beauty such as yours becomes a duty. To save your face--and mine--you need to stay here in this place--and simply be desired. (18-19)

Helen responds by leaving him to look for “an adventure, or something” (20). Later in the play, Helen is discouraged and wonders if Thomas and society were right. Grahn has Ereshkigal respond by telling Helen about the four kinds of memory or herstory needed for her journey: female deities’ lives, inner and outer lives, collective lives, and the personal lives of all woman (97-98). Grahn believes that women need to know and understand herstory, so she uses mythic women to open women’s minds to truths about ancient and contemporary women alike.

Grahn also uses mythic Inanna’s journey and death to give readers a model of what to expect on their own journeys and the deaths of their own society-imposed selves. Of this journey Grahn writes:
Going to go looking for my real mind,  
the one I think I once had  
before my memory got lost. (87)

This passage clearly shows the inner journey Grahn feels women can take to unvent who they are, the journey of thinking and questioning conventions for straight and Lesbian women alike.

Grahn believes a woman's male-dominated society-imposed "self" must die, so that she can be reborn. In the internal poem "Is this what dying is really like?" in "Queen of Swords," Grahn shows this death when she writes:

Is this what dying is really like?  
I have the sensation of needing to regulate my every breath;  
of my being something I stand and watch,  
a falling star against a falling sky--reality I thought I had in hand suddenly dropping down  
a funnel of air--  
I have the sensation  
of the black hole of creation squeezing me through its bloody gate,  
to what's out there;  
what's out there?

I wait. I cannot breathe. I shake.  
What if I admit, admit, admit, and still can't make sense of any of it?  
What if I'm crazy?  
What if I never again act right?  
What if everything--  
even the mirror of sound and sight--
is a lie?
What if all I ever do is die?
What if I don't, and hate
every minute of staying alive?
Is this what being born is like? (102)

Only by dying, by throwing off the life society has given them, does Grahn feel that women can live, can be re-
visioned, be born anew where "absolutely everything,
everything at all" is acceptable, is possible (111).

This journey to re-vision who women are as individuals
and as a group is Grahn's goal. She uses myth to create a
connection between her readers and her poetry. She chose
Inanna's myth because Inanna is connected to Helen Stage Two
and thus the stages flow nicely together, strengthening
Grahn's rhetorical purpose. Grahn also chose Inanna because
her myth fit Grahn's newly focused rhetorical purpose.
Grahn wants women to start their journeys, to put their feet
on the path of self-transformation and begin walking. To
jump start this journey, Grahn wrote "Descent," a
contemporary woman's journey to hell, to the "bottom" of her
soul. She wrote "Talkers" as a sample of life at the end of
the journey. Accordingly, both poems reflect Grahn's
rhetorical purpose of the journey and its goal of inner peace and acceptance.
They say she is veiled
and a mystery. That is
one way of looking.
Another
is that she is where
she always has been,
exactly in place,
and it is we,
who are mystified,
we who are veiled
and without faces. (Queen of Wands 12)

"They say she is veiled" speaks directly to the point
of Grahn’s poetry. Grahn has worked for three decades to
enlighten women, to empower women, to voice the fact that
what society wants, what “They” want, is not what womankind
should want for itself. As seen in this poem, Grahn
believes that society has placed a veil over womankind, a
veil to separate, to hide, to disguise.

This veil may have seemed “pretty” in decades past;
however, Grahn sees it as a net to segregate women from
their essential selves, from who they are and what they can
be. Grahn believes that women, the “we” of this poem, are
hidden from each other and from the power womankind as a
whole contains. It might seem a contradiction that womankind is clearly visible while each woman is disguised behind society’s veil, yet this is just what Grahn is saying. She wants women to see society’s direct lies and its lies of omission. Women need only throw off society’s “veil,” revolt against traditional oppression, and journey toward self-love and self-acceptance.

Grahn knows that this journey will be painful, soul wrenching. She knows that society’s expectations are comfortable in that they are a known quantity, but still these expectations are slowly squashing women’s potential beneath layers of conventions and habits until nothing remains but husks, toy dolls to be wound up and set in motion at society’s will. What Grahn hopes for and sees is a future so much better for womankind as a whole and for women individually.

She sees a future where women learn from each other and from herstory, where women link their lives and souls together for love and for joy, a future where women re- vision their lives and unvent lost skills. Grahn sees a grand future where women are equal—equal to men, to
society, and to each other. Grahn know her re-vision will take time to achieve, but with her poetry, Grahn has begun to lay the foundation.

Grahn’s poetry brings her readers a re-vision of history: herstory, a new look into womankind’s rich past and promising future. For scholars and sister authors, Grahn’s poetry brings an honest, hope-filled voice to academia and the literary world. Her poetry opens new doors of interpretation and creates new paths into Composition studies as she pushes myth’s boundaries.

Grahn does not sit still for imposed expectations, academic or otherwise; she is not “a good little girl” who does watercolors and writes little poems about flowers. Grahn pries at doors, strides into traditionally forbidden, whispered about, taboo topics, throws acidic facts into society’s smirking face. She serves up answers in poetic form for all to read, for all to see.

Grahn’s poetry does not hide or bury unpleasant information from her readers, hoping to win by smothering the truth with euphemisms or propaganda. With her poetry, she seeks to excavate the layers of stereotypes with which
society has veiled womankind. "They" may believe that womankind is "veiled and a mystery," but the further Grahn digs down, the more truth she digs up (12).
APPENDIX A: Additional Poetry

Queen Helen

A queen am I
Queen Helen is my title.
As the sun shines so shines Helen
most beautiful.
I am what ever is
the weaving tree
and Mother of my people

I was Sovereign of my homespun folk
with their sheepshorn woolly garments.
We were considered most ascetic,
most athletic and democratic,
and I was entirely settled in my queendom
with my husband and my child,
when one day a young man came by
and I was undone.
He had won a contest
with the gods. I was the prize.
I was the golden apple
he had won. He, Paris, took me home
to his own land.

"Husband I am leaving,"
was my song.

Husband I am leaving you,
have left. And my homeland,
child, and precious people;
all the wild, wild island
of my queendom.

I believe it was a matter of the
time, of Fate, a cosmic binding
and unbinding.
Ties I felt to go
pulled harder than the ties
I felt to stay.
Had my power been slipping?
Did you get the message I had pinned for you to see:
"I want my full measure of reality,
I don't want the numb illusions.
Only sightfulness can make us see.
Only freedom makes us free."
Foolish words probably,
of a queen wrenched from her earth,
a queen taking to the air,
a queen flying.
Yet I feel a new fertility . . .

I moved my queendom and my court,
my ladies and my special looms I brought with me as well as the hearthfire
that was my totem,
"Heart of the sky,"
and heart of the house
of Helena of Sparta.

"Lilanna," Queen of sheep-folds they called me,
who caused the earth to quake.
Mother of the temple
and of the people,
Nana.
A Queen am I
Queen Helen and a Sovereign,
Flama. Shaker
alike of earth and the heavens.

Without his heart he ranted
thinking it was me he wanted,
thinking that he could not live or rule without me.

And the women I left knitting
at his palace
needled and poked incessantly,
until his pride bled
and his whole brain broke.
Who does Helen think she is, they said, 
to go amongst strangers,  
and to let herself be prized  
so highly, to be called "the fairest."  
Haughtiest of dames and proudest,  
has she never heard of "modest"?  
Sitting in the Trojan tower,  
does she think she has such power,  
does she think she is a goddess?

Here is what I know:  
Even the most golden  
golden apple sometimes  
rolls down the long wand limb  
and lands in the lap of fire.

In ships he came to me,  
in ships surrounded.  
I was dumbfounded.  
A thousand ships, so many!  
where has he gotten them?  
They filled the harbor  
like a bobbing forest.  
I was almost proud;  
I stood on the ramparts of the city  
and exclaimed out loud.

None of us knew the war would  
last so long  
and be so boring.  
None of us knew we women were already  
in prison. We sat in the weaving room  
month on month, winding the distaff,  
working the shuttle,  
with only our own housebound prattle,  
with never anything fresh, not air  
or news or love or food.

We entertained each other  
with bawdy jokes and stories  
and a tapestry that told the progress  
of the war. We comforted the new
widows, the bone-torn mothers.
Subject we were to every nervous stew of
scary rumors. No one danced.
Almost, we lost our glow. Ten
years passed. At least the men
had action—however many bodies paid for it.
And we all held fast, somehow.

In the tenth year it was clear
that those from the ships
had lost. They quarrelled
and skulked and bled.
Stench of the burning dead
came to our noses even in
the weaving room.
And they had stopped singing at night
or calling out my name
in derision or admiration
or lust.

They had lost, their shoulders sagged.
They won battle after battle without
taking the city or getting near me.
We no longer lived in so much dread.
We waited for surrender to be said.
But we were unjust.

And they won finally with a lie,
hypocrisy,
the offer of friendship
with soldiers in its belly.
They won it with
the lie, hidden under honey
like a razor in the bread.

I too fell for the lovely painted horse,
with his wide nose flaring.
I too wished to have a party and be daring.
Queen of morbid siege was I,
Queen only by my title.
And I too grabbed for the sudden win,
the grinning, golden bridle.
Forgotten were the lessons of want and pain, the bodies dragged round the walls of our emotions.

He was glinting like the sun or like an apple. He was neither; he was a bomb exploding in the last battle. Years of boredom and regret blanked out as I reached to embrace, to bind, to pull him nearer with his sparkling, blind cargo.

We cheered when we had got him all the way in. And then he flamed into a torch and tortured; seared the city down to ash and rubble twenty centuries could not even find. And I began to live the recent history of my kind.

All that night we clung in tiny groups together watching Paris and every other Trojan man die, too shocked to cry. Thousands of corpses, so many! such a limp crowd. I stood on the ramparts of the tower and exclaimed out loud.

So Helen fell like a pretty city into the lap of war, a husband’s war against her.

A queen am I, Queen Helen is my title.
Queen at the heart of the greatest Western battle—
they have said was all on my account.

They have said the war was on my account, my "beauty," they said, as though beauty is something someone else can capture. As though the Flame transfers.

I went out a Queen
a Sovereign, Mother of my people
and a lover--
I came back a captive.
My husband had gone out
a King, a Sovereign
and a soldier.
He came back a tyrant,
a master of slaves--
and I came back a slave.

For the first time
when he put his hands
upon me, I was afraid.
I was positively filled
with fear. He chased me
through my own halls,
even into my temple. I
crouched like a frightened
dove, passing my nights
on the edge of my bed.

Never had anyone felt so ugly.

I hardly recall the remainder
of the story; it dragged
past like a sluggish drug.
No one in the country used the
word "civil" anymore.
In the aftermath of theft and war
came more war, more blood
and sudden changes.

My sister had murdered her
child-killing husband on his return.
No woman blamed her, none except her daughter Elektra.
And that was the one who mattered.
Elektra goaded her brother 'till he broke with rage and slaughtered his own mother.

And me, I was not only a slave, I was a murdered slave, by my own sister's children. The old maternal order flooded in blood the day the two conspirators climbed the steps to my jail tower. It was my worst hour, and I hardly remember it. They have said that I did not die normally, but flew into the heavens and became a star. Venus? was it? Beauty.

I have been trying for centuries to recall exactly why I left my original queendom, was it on such shaky ground? Downward bound? Why was I dragged back into such a state— Do I lie sleeping? Will I wake?

A Queen am I. Queen Helen and a Sovereign. Flama. Shaker alike of earth and the heaven. a queen am I Queen Helen is my title. As the sun shines so shines Helen most beautiful, most blamed. I am what ever is, the weaving tree and Mother of my people. and I shall be the Mother of my people. (Queen of Wands 20-27)
WORKS CITED


