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*The Varying Portrayals of Helen Through Time*

The acclaimed quote, “Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, /And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?” from the play, *The Tragical*, by Christopher Marlowe, describes the beginning of the Trojan War. Marlowe questions whether Helen of Troy, the once wife of King Menelaus of Sparta, sparked the Trojan War with her beauty. Helen’s role and perception in the Trojan War, as well as her influence amongst the Trojan people, are heavily debated. Some scholars and analysts believe her to be a direct cause of the Trojan War as the claimed wife of Prince of Troy, Paris. Others believe that Helen was important merely for her looks and charm. As time has progressed, the public perception of Helen has evolved from focused on her appearance to acknowledgment of her independence and freedom as a woman. Many works of literature over time have discussed Helen and her actions, particularly those during the Trojan War. These texts include the poems, the *Iliad* by Homer (8th Century BC), *The Women of Troy* by Euripides (5th Century BC), and the modern *Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing* by Margaret Atwood (20th Century AD). Texts like the *Iliad*, *The Women of Troy*, and contemporary poems from authors such as Margaret Atwood, show the evolution of Helen’s portrayal through time from seeking pity, to the cunning cause of the war, and finally, to a woman living independently and in her own self-interest.

Book six of the *Iliad* initializes the portrayal of the one-dimensional Helen of Troy, as a woman seeking pity, who has charmed many to sympathize with her situation during the fall of

Troy. The *Iliad* provides the first portrayal of Helen in text form. In Book six, Helen defines her own portrayal in her address to Hector when he returns home to reunite with his wife and family through three different techniques: blatant self-pity, blaming fate and the divine beings, and associating the cause of the war with her new husband Paris, without any admission of liability. The first thing Helen says to Hector upon his arrival is, “Brother / by marriage to me, who am a nasty bitch evil-intriguing, how I wish that on that day when my mother first bore me / the foul whirlwind of the storm had caught me away and swept me,” (Homer 77). Helen blatantly pities herself by initiating a conversation with Hector to gain sympathy rather than comforting him. She attempts to blame the Greek gods for her situation when she claims, “Yet since the gods had brought it about that these vile things must be,” (Homer 77). Although the idea of fate is accepted in this society, Helen refuses to understand that it is simply the way things are and that fate has no bias against her. Helen does not make peace with situation which stemmed from fate, merely choosing to weep and whine about it. By whining like this, Helen is again seeking pity and sympathy from Hector. Towards the end of her monologue, Helen says the following to Hector: “since it is on your heart beyond all that the hard work has fallen / for the sake of dishonored me and the blind act of Alexandros” (Homer 77). Helen betrays Paris as she begins to see the cause of Hector’s pain is ultimately her relationship with Paris. She blames Paris, although she was not completely innocent either. Book six of the *Iliad* demonstrates Helen’s tendency to seek sympathy and pity, in her initial portrayal.

In *The Women of Troy*, Hecabe and her chorus portray Helen as the source of the plight of Troy, while Helen actively defends herself, showing an evolution of thought and perspective from the *Iliad*. Euripides antagonizes Helen more than Homer does and relegates the blame for the Trojan War upon her. Andromache first states to Helen, “To fasten death on tens of

thousands east and west! / My curse on you! The beauty of your glance has brought / This rich and noble country to a shameful end” (Euripides 138). Here it appears that Andromache views Helen’s beauty as the cause of the ultimate demise to the women’s home of Troy, a similar stance as Helen’s own in the Iliad. This is restated through the Chorus’s line, “O miserable Troy, you have lost ten thousand dead / All for one woman’s sake and her accursed love” (Euripides 138). Helen later goes on to deflect the claims of many that she is the direct cause of the war, arguing her innocence, by trying to blame others like Hecabe for giving birth to Paris in the first place, and also for the divine beauty contest which permitted Paris to obtain Helen as his own wife (Euripides 140). Helen is eventually put on a mock trial by Menelaus; the idea of a trial especially for Helen, can be accredited to the rise of democracy and justice in Euripides’ time (1), a distinct change from Homer’s time. However, Hecabe later refutes Helen’s claim during the “trial” when she claims that “The palace of Menelaus was too confined a sphere to give full scope to your luxurious insolence. / Well now, you say my son abducted you by force. / What Spartan noble heard you call for help?” (Euripides 140). Hecabe suggests that Helen is lying about the situation, because if Helen were really opposed to being “abducted” and being forced to marry Paris, she could have easily avoided the situation by calling for any number of the multitude of Spartan guards in the palace of Menelaus. She clearly was inclined to join Paris on his journey back to Troy. As time as progressed, the common portrayal of Helen as a character who seeks pity, evolves to a more cunning cause of the Trojan War and the subsequent fall of the Trojans.

Contemporary poems, such as “Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing” by Margaret Atwood, display the independence and resiliency of a women in a position such as that of Helen’s, which reflects a more modern feminist view. This poem provides a unique perspective

on Helen, by embodying her character in the role of a modern exotic dancer. Atwood compares the similarity of the predicament of many female exotic dancers (or those in a similar profession) to the position that the ever-so-beautiful Helen of Troy had centuries prior. In the first stanza, the speaker is constantly probed by other members of society to get some “self-respect” (Atwood) and get a “day job” (Atwood). Mandating gender roles and standards represents stereotypes on females seen all across time. This is refuted by the dancer when she replies, “Exploited, they’d say. / Yes, any way you cut it, but I’ve a choice of how, and I’ll take the money” (Atwood). The dancer’s choice of work based on preference and how she will be exploited, emphasizes her portrayal as that of an independent woman, free to make her own decisions in the modern world. In this poem, Atwood alludes to the mythological Helen in order to compare her life and choices to that of the dancer. Helen was known to be immensely beautiful and sought after by men, and she would take advantage of that. Although she could have had an uncontroversial life as the wife of Menelaus, she chose to utilize her gift of beauty and seek more wealth and prosperity for herself. Although this decision was very controversial, it does symbolize the more modernly accepted independence for a female to live her life accordingly. Another similarity between Helen and the exotic dancer is their mutual representation as standing out from their respective societies. The line in the poem, “Speaking of which, it’s the smiling tires me out the most. / This, and the pretense that I can’t hear them. / And I can’t,” (Atwood) is a proclamation of isolation by the exotic dancer. The dancer is viewed as being different and isolated from society, due to her personal lifestyle driven by her own choices. This is very reminiscent of the situation that Helen had in Troy, where many of the women originally had a lack of empathy for her and later distaste, as they attributed the destruction of Troy to her. Helen of Troy and her story, can be

viewed as a symbol for modern day feminist independence and resilience, through the use of contemporary poems.

Helen's portrayal in texts like the *Iliad*, *The Women of Troy*, and, *Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing*, evolves from the one-dimensional pity-seeking woman, to the cause of the war, and finally a symbol of modern feministic views. As a result of the endless progression of time, viewpoints and ideas tend to grow and evolve. This tendency leads to varying portrayals of Helen of Troy, with each new iteration growing from an older version. The initial portrayal set by Homer in the *Iliad*, represents Helen as a character seeking pity. Euripides progressed this view by making Helen more cunning and the cause of the Trojan War. In modern times, poems by authors such as Margaret Atwood revolutionize the portrayal of Helen by depicting her to be an independent female with a lot of resiliency. The trend goes to show that as time progresses, the portrayal of Helen correlates to the standards and overall behavior towards women from each time period.