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'Third cheerleader from the left': from Homer's Helen to Helen of *Troy*

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The supreme beauty of Helen of Troy makes her the most dangerous of all women. Most Greek authors react to the threat she poses by limiting her power, often in the guise of defending her. Thus in the Iliad, *Achilles' story displaces hers, and male characters excuse her from blame by denying her agency. Yet, she remains a real cause of the war and an emblem of the heroic enterprise as such. Wolfgang Petersen's* Troy *(2004), which draws on the Iliad, places a new emphasis on heterosexual pair-bonding. Yet, the film extends the Greek project of disempowering Helen in the guise of defending her. The movie does not celebrate the dangerous power of female beauty but denies it by means of an array of strategies, some of which echo ancient texts and some of which are specific to contemporary ideology and the cinematic medium. Helen is presented as a hapless victim, cast as an adolescent everygirl and contrasted with the feisty Briseis. Finally, her beauty is displaced in favour of the star power and charisma of Brad Pitt's spectacular body. Once again, Helen is displaced by Achilles.*

Female power poses notorious problems for ancient Greek culture. Because Greek ideology and cultural practice both place severe restrictions on female agency, it is difficult for women to exercise power without transgressing the norms constituted to regulate their behaviour. Since the control of female sexuality lies at the heart of these norms, sex — more specifically, the active female pursuit of an object of desire — is typically implicated in women's transgressions and hence in the danger posed by the female as such. Insofar as female danger is wrapped up with sexual transgression, then, so is female power. And insofar as sex is bound up with beauty, Helen of Troy — by definition the most beautiful woman of all time — is also the most dangerous of women. Her godlike beauty grants her supreme erotic power over men, a power that resulted in what was, in Greek eyes, the most devastating war of all time. Other women, such as Helen's half-sister Clytemnestra, may be more violent, but none is more destructive.

Helen's destructive power matches that of Achilles, the mightiest of the Greek warriors at Troy, with whom she is linked as a (potential) sexual partner in several strands of the tradition.[1] The connection is a fitting one, for these two represent the gendered body at its most glorious: they are the apogee of female beauty and male strength, respectively.[2]

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1 For the evidence, see Schmidt (1996: 29–30).

2 Achilles is also the most beautiful of the Greek warriors (*Il.* 2.673–4, Pl., *Symp.* 180a), but he is not eroticized in Homer (in contrast to Paris).

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This complementarity also allies them in a more sinister fashion. Helen is often coupled with Achilles as a cause of the enormous destruction of the Trojan War.[3] Achilles is the principal agent of the slaughter, and Helen its principal — or at least its official — reason, each employing the mode of destruction appropriate to their iconically and symmetrically gendered status: her beauty is as deadly as his physical strength, her body as deadly as his body. The supreme expression of masculinity is predicated on the supreme expression of the feminine. At the same time, Helen's transgression provides a fig leaf to shield Achilles and the rest of the Achaeans from blame for their violence, transmuting invasion into justice and slaughter into heroism.

Having constructed female beauty as dangerous, and imagined an absolute standard of beauty fulfilled by a single extraordinary woman in whom such danger culminates, Greek culture devotes considerable energy to attempting to control or deny the power of its own creation. Blaming Helen is the most obvious way to contain her, by subjecting her to social control while still enabling her to serve as a convenient scapegoat for the Trojan War.[4] Yet, a remarkable number of Greek texts excuse or palliate Helen's behaviour.[5] In their own way, however, these defences too are strategies of containment. Blame is an acknowledgment of power, both because it implies agency in its object and because it recognizes that object as sufficiently threatening to require humiliation in order to constrain the irresponsible exercise of power. In declaring her not guilty, Helen's ancient defenders neutralize her by erasing her identity as a transgressive, dangerous woman. The long history of defences of Helen makes sense as an attempt to disarm her.

Such strategies of containment are arguably more effective than the more obvious discourse of blame, since they attempt to erase the transgressive Helen rather than merely chastising her. Yet, they still depend on the problem of her dangerous power. Significantly, no ancient Greek account simply eliminates Helen or her beauty from the tale of Troy, or denies that the war took place at all. Through all the story's permutations over time, what makes the Trojan war distinctive and gives it its peculiar character as a foundation narrative for Greek identity is the fact that it is always caused, somehow, by Helen as the supreme embodiment of female beauty — regardless of her presence or absence at Troy, her enthusiasm or reluctance to get involved. It is Helen's role that makes the war recognizable as the Trojan War, and not some other war or foundational adventure. And insofar as she is conceptually essential to the Trojan War, she is also essential to ancient Greek constructions of Greek identity — more specifically, masculine identity. That identity, it seems, inextricably predicates the achievement(s) of manhood on the danger of female beauty and its containment. Greek warriors *must* fight in deed to control the person of Helen or its phantasmic representations, and Greek authors *must* fight in word to contain her power by manipulating her story. Achilles is predicated upon Helen.

Despite the enormous distances — in time, space, culture — that divide Hollywood from the ancient Greeks, Helen remains an object of fascination and a site for the exploration of contemporary identities. This article aims to show that process at work in Warner Brothers' *Troy* (2004), directed by Wolfgang Petersen from a script by David Benioff, as it transforms

3 See esp. *Cypria* fr. 1 with Mayer (1996).

4 Blame of Helen is most prominent in lyric poetry and tragedy. See Homeyer (1977: 13–36) and cf. Graver (1995: 53, 55–7). The theme of Helen as scapegoat informs the approach of Suzuki (1989).

5 For example, Gorg. *Hel.;* Eur. *Hel.*; Isoc., *Hel.*; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 11.14, 43–53 (cf. also *Or.* 2.13).

the Helen of the *Iliad*.[6] *Troy*, I shall argue, advances the Greek project of disempowering Helen. Despite a veneer of feminism, the movie does not celebrate the dangerous power of female beauty but denies it by means of an array of strategies, some of which echo ancient texts and some of which are specific to contemporary ideology and the cinematic medium.

The Iliadic Helen is simultaneously dangerous and sympathetic. The sympathy depends on a substantial eclipse of the danger, yet her power still glimmers round the edges.[7] In Homer, she and her surroundings gleam with a light suggestive of divinity.[8] The poet notoriously avoids dwelling on the specifics of her transcendent beauty. She appears swathed in shimmering garments, ambiguous, elusive and liminal.[9] Her impact is conveyed not through detailed description of her body but through the reactions of the internal audience, especially the Trojan elders, who say she is 'terribly like an immortal goddess' (3.158), and Paris, who declares — after ten (or even twenty) years — that he desires her now more than ever (3.442–46).[10] Veiled as it is, her beauty makes her both the ultimate object of desire and an emblem of the heroic enterprise as such. She is not the only reason for the Trojan War, but she is a real one, and as such indispensable.[11] The Greek warriors are, of course, driven by lust for glory and plunder, yet the location of Greek male honour in its women gives real cultural weight to Paris and Helen's transgression. By seducing another man's wife and violating the sacred laws of hospitality, Paris really does threaten the fabric of society and the institution of the household on which it is based. Though Helen may serve as a pretext, she is not *merely* a pretext.

Yet, Helen's own culpability is muted. Men on both sides speak of her as an object that was 'taken' (e.g. 3.48, 13.626–27) and Paris even talks of having 'seized' her (3.444). No Greek blames her for her transgression. As for the Trojans, Helen tells us she fears, or is subject to, shame and reproach from various people (e.g. 3.410–12, 24.768–75), but no such blame is voiced by any speaking character and Priam notoriously declares that the gods are responsible, not Helen herself (3.164–65). This occurs in the same famous scene in which we witness her impact on the Trojan elders. Her effect upon men, which both explains and justifies the war, makes it impossible for the poet to show Helen blamed face-to-face. Her 'face' is, after all, the cause of the trouble — it both captivates and disarms.[12] Reports of blame are therefore removed to the margins of the narrative, where their dissonance is

6 The script draws on a variety of legendary sources for Helen's story, but the *Iliad* seems to have been Benioff's only source for her character. Winkler (2007b: 4) gives reasons for viewing *Troy* as fundamentally Petersen's work (as opposed to the scriptwriter's or the studio's). On Petersen's involvement in the script, see e.g. Cohen (2004: 40) and Goldsmith (2004: 56). Unfortunately, space prohibits me from analysing the contributions of the rest of the production team.

7 See Clader (1976: Ch. 2). The account of Helen in the *Iliad* that follows is based on Blondell (2010), which should be consulted for detailed argument and documentation.

8 See Clader (1976: 25–6, 29–30, 57–62).

9 On Helen's elusiveness in the *Iliad* see esp. Worman (1997: 151–67).

10 Helen speaks of twenty years at 24.765–67, but the passage is anomalous.

11 On the reasons for the war, see Collins (1988: 41–2). Helen does not exhaust those reasons, but she symbolizes them. If Menelaus dies, she will no longer serve as *casus belli*, so the war is over (cf. 4.169–74).

12 Cf. the story that Menelaus planned to kill her after the war but dropped his sword at the sight of her, a scene often portrayed in art (Hedreen 1996).

muted. Yet, this avoidance of blame also disempowers Helen, since it denies her any responsibility for causing the war and thus any agency in her own elopement.

As has often been observed, the only direct abuse of Helen in the *Iliad* comes from Helen herself.[13] Her repeated, and powerful, self-reproaches make it clear that she is to blame, in her own eyes, for betraying her husband to run away with Paris. If Helen herself avows her guilt, then who are we — or Priam — to disagree? Yet, this avowal also frees the poet to present the Achaians and Trojans fighting heroically for an object that is uncontaminated by their own disparagement. Since she blames herself so stringently, they are freed from the necessity of doing so.[14] It is Helen's self-blame that allows Priam to save face for her by attributing responsibility to the gods. It likewise permits the poet to evade the problem of whether a guilty Helen was 'really' worth it,[15] by assuring her guilt while allowing her to retain her splendour as an object of supreme value in the eyes of others. She has — conveniently — put herself in her place, so that they do not have to. Moreover, her remorse helps to characterize her positively in a specifically gendered fashion. Self-deprecation is a form of self-disempowerment characteristic of the Greek male portrayal of 'good' women, who often denigrate their sex in general and themselves in particular as inferior to men.[16] Blame of Helen by men, which would debase her value, is suppressed or eclipsed by the bright light of her beauty, but self-blame enhances her value as a woman, and hence, indirectly, the legitimacy of the heroic struggle to (re)claim her.

The Iliadic Helen also misses Menelaus (3.139–40, 3.173–76), and expresses acute contempt for Paris, whom she castigates as far inferior to her former husband, both as a warrior (3.428–36) and (by implication) in moral sense (sensitivity to shame) and integrity (stable *φρένες*) (6.350–53). This preference for Menelaus amounts to a confession that her elopement with Paris was wrong, not just ethically, but as a decision affecting her own happiness. In modern parlance, it shows the folly of 'romantic' matchmaking in comparison with functional, sensible 'arranged' marriages of the kind with which a 'good' woman is content (a message to be reversed in *Troy*, as we shall see). The point is reinforced by the fact that she also misses her parents, relatives and friends (3.140, 3.163, 3.174–75, 3.180, 3.236–42). Her regrets endorse from her own lips the linchpin of Greek gender ideology whereby women's desires are excessive, unstable and unhealthy, and lead only to trouble. In the *Odyssey*, we see the consequences of the re-established status quo: an elegant if uneasy and passionless[17] alliance between husband and wife, accompanied by an extraordinary level of affluence and comfort. All things considered, Menelaus seems to have been worth coming home to.

Helen's self-reproaches thus serve her interests by situating her as a 'good' woman who has learned her lesson. But they also provide her with a space in which to assert her own subjectivity and reclaim the agency denied to her by men. As an assertion of past agency, her

13 See esp. Graver (1995).

14 Cf. Worman (2001: 27–9, 2002: 53–4).

15 Cf. Collins (1988: 51, 57–8); Ebbott (1999: 19–20).

16 See e.g. Xen. *Oec*. 7.14, 39; Eur. *Med*. 407–09, *Or*. 605–06, *IA* 1393–94, *Andr*. 269–73; Soph. *Ant*. 61–2.

17 Menelaus and Helen sleep side by side (4.304–05, 15.57–58). While this does not preclude sex (which is often implied by 'lying with', e.g. at *Il*. 2.355, 3.448, 16.184, *Od*. 8.342, 18.213), sex is not explicitly mentioned and there is no mention of *φιλότης*, or affection (on *φιλότης* as sex see Clader 1976: 36). Contrast the *φιλότης* that Penelope ascribes to Helen's relationship with Paris (*Od*. 23.219).

self-blame may be viewed as an attempt to retain a trace of the subjectivity of her original transgression. Where others blame only Paris, Helen links them as jointly responsible, implicitly placing their agency on an equal footing (6.356–8). She is the only person to use active verbs for her part in the elopement, saying that she 'followed' Paris after 'leaving' her former family (ἑπόμην . . . λιποῦσα) (3.174), 'went' and 'departed' from her homeland to Troy (ἔβην, ἐλήλυθα) (24.766). Though these verbs do not prove willing agency (one may 'go' under duress), they stand out in light of the fact that no one else uses active verbs for Helen's role. She clearly retains a sense of her own agency regarding the elopement and its disastrous consequences. The abusive language she uses of herself reinforces this, both by implicitly claiming agency and by conjuring her as a menacing, destructive figure.[18] The discourse of Greek misogyny is a transparent expression of male fears regarding female power. By appropriating that discourse Helen implies that she owns such power. Her self-blame is, in its way, an act of defiance.

Helen also remains powerful in Homer in a different way. Many Greek texts make it clear that the threat of women's beauty is intimately bound up with female control of discourse and its manipulative power.[19] Helen's use of self-blame and the discourse of 'good' womanhood are integral to a verbal self-presentation that proves highly effective in winning over the most powerful men in Troy. This verbal skill is complicit with her beauty in disarming external blame.[20] Moreover, speech is the poet's own medium, and there are well-known indications that the poet of the *Iliad* equates Helen's voice with his own. When we first encounter her she is weaving a tapestry that represents the armies fighting over her (3.125–28). This role as weaver of the Trojan War aligns her both with the poet and with Zeus himself, whose plan is fulfilled through that war.[21] Homer's Helen is also a mistress of language, using many modes of discourse to manipulate her audience, like the poet and the rhapsode who perform her.[22] And she is well aware that the stories she tells will live on through the medium of epic poetry (cf. 6.357–58). Her self-presentation is smuggled into the masculine narrative of the war as a whole, ensuring the survival of her voice as long as the epic itself survives. Over the millennia that voice has successfully disarmed not only the men of Troy, but the epic's putatively male external audience.[23]

Despite the fascination of the Iliadic Helen, and her pivotal role as cause of the Trojan War, Achilles usurps what might have been her story. The *Iliad* does not pretend otherwise: it is the tale of the wrath of Achilles. *Troy*, in contrast, though 'inspired' by Homer's *Iliad*, and focusing primarily on the tale of two male heroes, purports to tell 'the Trojan War myth in its entirety', including 'the story of Helen's love for Paris' (Benioff n.d.). Like most recent treatments of the tale, it proceeds from that initial romance to the final destruction of Troy in

18 Her diction associates her with strife, fear, war and death (Clader 1976: 17–23).

19 See e.g. *Il.* 14.214–17, Hes. *Theog.* 201–06, *Hom. Hymn* 5.249–51.

20 Similarly in the *Odyssey*, Helen's seductiveness is conveyed through both her discourse and her magic drug (Bergren 1981). On the manipulative language of both Homeric Helens, see Worman (2001).

21 On Helen as a weaver/bard, see Clader (1976: 6–12); Bergren (1979, 1983: 79) and Worman (2002: 89–90); for Zeus as weaver, see Scheid and Svenbro (1996: 63–5).

22 On the variety of genres that Helen appropriates, see Worman (2001).

23 Helen's voice has won over most readers of the poem. A rare exception is Ryan, who finds her 'wanton, self-centered, deceitful', and yet so 'irresistibly beautiful and charming' that 'we perhaps forgive her everything' (1965: 117).

a way that the *Iliad* pointedly does not.[24] In keeping with classical Hollywood style, the film also gives heterosexual 'love' a prominence that it lacks in the *Iliad*.[25] 'Love' is part of the movie's epic agenda, as announced in the preliminary voice-over, and heterosexual pair-bonding becomes a tenet of the heroic code, as enunciated by the unimpeachably admirable Hector ('Honor the gods. Love your woman. And defend your country').[26]

Even the famous prophecy of Achilles' two fates — he may choose between a short life full of heroic glory and a long but undistinguished one — is recast in *Troy* to include a wife and children as part of the life he eschews. And even he ends up endorsing heterosexual romance. This is the story not of his wrath, but of his conversion to 'love'. He does briefly subordinate romance to revenge for Patroclus, remaining deaf to Briseis's pleas to refrain from fighting; but in the end he sees the error of his homosocial ways, subordinating military comradeship to the ultimate goal of heterosexual romance. He abandons the quest for glory through conquest, using his supreme strength only to seek out Briseis amid the blazing ruins and actually killing men on his own side who are molesting her. In a climactic *liebestod*, Achilles accepts his own death not because he has had his revenge on Hector, but because, so he tells Briseis, 'You gave me peace in a lifetime of war' [transcribed].

All this emphasis on heterosexual pair-bonding might lead us to expect some development of Helen's role. That expectation is not met. Rather, her significance is diminished.[27] An important mechanism in this process is the film's pervasive romantic ideology. *Troy* is heavily influenced by notions of heroism that posit the 'hero' and 'heroine' not primarily as embodiments of power or danger but as romantic victims both doomed and redeemed by 'love'.[28] The elopement of Helen and Paris is presented as a single foolish mis-step, both caused and excused by 'love' — as endorsed by none other than Priam, and even Hector. To be sure, Hector initially scolds Paris, declaring that he knows 'nothing about love'; but once the die is cast he actually prevents Helen from returning to the Greeks, on the ground that 'My brother needs you tonight'. Priam asks only 'do you love her?' Paris responds by equating his love for Helen with the aged king's love of his country. Priam accepts this tacit equivalence of Helen with the city of Troy, even though it calls for the latter to be sacrificed to the former, adding 'I've fought many wars in my time. Some were fought for land, some for power, some for glory. I suppose fighting for love makes more sense than all the rest'. *Why* it makes sense is not explained. Unlike, for example, the sophist Gorgias' argument that *eros* is an irresistible force that exempts its victims from moral judgement, romantic love is apparently self-justifying.

24 Homer is criticized on this point as early as Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 11. 28–29). For the contrast between the structure of *Troy* and that of the *Iliad*, see Mendelsohn (2004).

25 For the centrality of heterosexual romance to 'Hollywood style', see Bordwell *et al.* (1985: 16–17). On Petersen's self-conscious adoption of an 'Old Hollywood' style for *Troy*, see Shahabudin (2007).

26 Except where otherwise indicated, quotations from *Troy* are from the online script (Benioff 2003). In a few cases, where script and film diverge, I have transcribed the dialogue myself.

27 All the most substantial female roles in the *Iliad* are reduced in *Troy*: Helen, Andromache, Hecuba (who is omitted entirely) and Thetis (cf. Cyrino 2005: 10).

28 On the romantic plot(s) of *Troy*, see Futrell (2005). Romantic treatment of the Paris/Helen plot has classical roots (cf. Solomon 2007: 98), became popular in the Middle Ages (Scherer 1967), and is central to most pop-cultural representations, including Robert Wise's *Helen of Troy* (Warner Brothers 1955) and the USA Network's 2003 TV miniseries *Helen of Troy* (cf. Winkler 2009: Ch. 5).

In stark contrast to many of the most prominent ancient Greek heroes, the romantic hero and heroine must be likeable. They may have minor flaws, but these must not be of a kind that risks undermining the sympathies of the audience. More serious defects may be present initially, but only if they are later shed under the influence of 'love', which typically transforms its victims for the better (quite unlike the typically devastating impact of Greek *eros*). (In *Troy*, 'love' has this effect on both Achilles and Paris.) Also unlike Homeric heroes, romantic heroes need not be powerful. In fact, power is something of a drawback, since it tends to undermine sympathy, at least according to the sensibilities of modern audiences who expect even their warrior heroes to be temporarily down — if not quite out — before they rise to ultimate victory. Power is particularly threatening to romantic sympathy, insofar as such sympathy is predicated on the powerlessness of the romantic dyad in the face of hostile forces arrayed against them (and often against 'love' itself). Accordingly, in service to the romantic validation of Helen's affair with Paris, *Troy* strips her of her ancient power even more thoroughly than does the *Iliad*. This Helen's reluctance to yield to her desire for Paris and her passive, unthreatening demeanour both capture important aspects of her Homeric persona; but the film goes further, completely eliminating the dark undercurrents that swirl around the bright figure of the Homeric Helen, and the hints of her veiled power.

An easy way to make Paris and Helen innocent victims in the eyes of a modern movie audience would be to portray them as puppets of the gods — Helen merely a gift to Paris from Aphrodite in consideration of services rendered. This would reflect the common view among non-specialists that the Greek gods use humans as mere puppets, depriving them of 'free will', choice and responsibility.[29] But there are no divine characters in this movie.[30] Their presence would violate Petersen's notion of 'realism', an aspect of the film on which he laid considerable stress.[31] This refers not to 'realistic' recreation of the ancient world, but to the representation of the way people 'really' are. As the scriptwriter, David Benioff put it, he wanted to 'see the human thing' (Faraci 2004b). This purportedly transhistorical human nature turns out, of course, to look remarkably modern. Like most epic films, *Troy* fetishizes certain aspects of 'realism' or 'authenticity', but does so in order to address contemporary concerns using a highly stylized and historically arbitrary rendition of ancient times.[32] The ancients are exotic and alien, as marked by iconic details of script, costume and set, but emotionally and ideologically, the Greeks are us.

The gods are therefore ruled out as a vehicle with which to engineer sympathy for the romantic dyad. Benioff's Helen is not, as he believes she is in Greek mythology, 'the victim of circumstances'; rather, the removal of the gods means 'her will is free, the choice is her own, and the consequences on her own conscience' (Benioff n.d.). This gives the impression of empowering Helen by freeing her from divine control. Yet ironically, it *lessens* her power

29 This view of the Greek gods has long been discredited by scholars. The classic treatment is Dodds (1951: Ch. 1). For a succinct statement of the case regarding Helen, see Edwards (1987: 318).

30 The only exception is the ageing Thetis (Julie Christie), who shows no hint of special power or status. And, of course, she is not an Olympian, not one of the 'Greek gods' with whom many of the movie's audience would be familiar.

31 Petersen (n.d.); see further Futrell (2005); Winkler (2007c: 456–60). Petersen claimed 'people would laugh today if you had God entering the scene and fighting and helping out. It's hard to even imagine that' (Russell 2004) — a claim that seems quite extraordinary in a period when popular film and television are replete with the supernatural in myriad forms.

32 Cf. Futrell (2005); and also Sobchak (2003).

from an ancient perspective. In Greek myth, her semi-divine parentage and her intimate connection with Aphrodite are marks of exceptional status, which enhance, rather than detract from, the significance of her actions. The medium of film supplies many creative possibilities for such effects.[33] Petersen's conception of 'realism', in contrast, undermines the notion of Helen as someone whose god-like beauty makes her a creature of the imagination, not fully of this world. It leaves no room for her divine traces, for any suggestion that her beauty is other-worldly, transcendently desirable, or sinister in its power.

Eliminating the gods means that some other way must be found to sustain our sympathy for Helen, by minimizing, if not excusing, her transgression. Benioff claims that his script 'doesn't judge her for the choice' but merely shows its devastating consequences (Benioff n.d.).[34] But in fact, both the script and its realization on screen do everything possible to judge her, and to find her not guilty.

To start with, key aspects of the Greek story are altered in Helen's favour. She leaves no daughter behind her in Sparta — a standard feature of the ancient story (including the *Iliad*), and a standard cause for reproach by herself and others.[35] A Helen who abandoned her child would lose the sympathy of modern American popular culture, which values only parenthood above romantic coupledom. Nor does Benioff's Helen suffer any reproach from the Trojan women or her new family, even from Hecuba, the carping mother-in-law of the *Iliad* (24.770), who has disappeared from the script altogether. Like Homer's Helen she does blame herself for her actions, but far less repeatedly and severely, and, most importantly, not for the same things. She does not chastise herself as a moral or sexual transgressor, regretting only the consequences of a pursuit of 'love' that would otherwise clearly be fully justified. This characterization is arguably less effective than Homer's in eliciting sympathy for Helen, since her remorse is grounded not in her own weakness but in consequences that anyone could have foreseen — and that Paris actually predicts when he seduces her ('Men will hunt us and the gods will curse us').

In contrast to her Homeric counterpart, this Helen shows no trace of ambivalence towards Paris, even after he provides an excruciating display of cowardice in his duel with Menelaus. The romantic defence would be shattered if she declared, as she does in the *Iliad*, that Menelaus is a 'better man' and she should never have left him. When *Troy's* Paris says 'I'm a coward', Helen not only applauds his courage for facing Menelaus in the first place, but consoles him by claiming that he ran away not to save his skin, but 'for love'. She does call Menelaus a brave man (in implied contrast to Paris), and a 'great warrior' who 'lived for fighting',[36] but such prowess is no longer intrinsically admirable. Helen continues, 'I don't want a hero, my love. I want a man to grow old with'. The fantasy of a happy ending for their romance is left open by keeping Paris alive at the end of the movie, thus pre-empting the

33 Thus, in the television mini-series *Helen of Troy* (USA Network 2003) the action is frozen around Menelaus when he sees Helen on the ramparts, effectively endowing this Helen (Sienna Guillory) with an impact that transcends her girlish looks. In *Troy*, cinematic special effects (e.g. slo-mo) are used to enhance Achilles' heroic splendor (cf. Scully 2007: 129), but not Helen's.

34 More generally, it is hard to give serious credence to his claim that 'both sides have good and evil mixed among them' (Cohen 2004: 38) — a notion reiterated by Petersen, who claimed that the film 'refuses to take sides' (Russell 2004), and bought by a remarkable number of critics and reviewers.

35 Cf. *Il.* 3.174–75, *Od.* 4.263; Sappho 16 LP; Alc. 283 LP.

36 In the *Iliad*, in contrast, Menelaus is a 'soft' warrior (17.587–88), whom Agamemnon deems too weak to battle Hector (7.104–19).

awkward mythological tradition that Helen remarried at Troy after his death in battle.[37] And of course Menelaus is dead, so the distinctly unromantic shadow of re-imposed domesticity at Sparta no longer looms over her.

Besides making Helen and Paris as innocent as possible under the circumstances, *Troy* shores up our sympathy for the romantic dyad by pitting them against the powerful and unequivocally wicked Agamemnon. In contrast to the *Iliad* — where the Greeks want to destroy Troy and then go home — this Agamemnon is a naked imperialist. For him, Helen's departure is no more than a convenient excuse.[38] As he tells Menelaus, 'I didn't come here for your pretty wife. I came for Troy'. He calls Helen 'a foolish woman' who has nevertheless 'proven to be very useful'. In the *Iliad*, it is implied that the rationale for war would die with Menelaus (4.169–74); in *Troy* he does die, but that does not put an end to the war. The most beautiful woman in the world, desired by every man in the world (including Agamemnon),[39] has become the merest 'pretty' pretext for a war that is really being fought, in Hector's words, 'for one man's greed'. If Helen had not provided Agamemnon with the excuse he needed, he would have found another.

If the Trojan War has nothing to do with Helen then she did not start it, and she cannot end it. Accordingly, it is insisted that even her return to Menelaus would not stop the war. Hector prevents her from leaving Troy, saying that her departure would accomplish nothing, because for the Greeks 'this is about power. Not love'. The Trojans under Priam are willing to fight on behalf of 'love', yet Hector at the same time realizes that the war is 'not about love' and not about Helen, thus simultaneously giving a Trojan seal of approval to the romantic plot and exculpating Helen through Hector's understanding of the real nature of Greek imperialism. Hector's endorsement of the love between Paris and Helen is thus at the same time a denial of its significance, and more specifically of Helen's significance. If she did not cause the war, and cannot end it, then by implication she is not 'worth it' — not an adequate *casus belli* with power to wreak havoc among men. As we saw earlier, Helen does serve in Greek tradition as an ideological figleaf for the glorification of male violence. But that is not all she is. At the end of the day, the Iliadic Helen *must* be worth it, if only to justify the glorious heroic enterprise of which she is the emblem. In *Troy*, however, the entire complex of motives for the war is replaced by an imperialism that is truly naked. The film removes the fig leaf, leaving the phallus exposed to view. This exposure requires a hapless, child-like, victimized Helen. She *must* be *not* worth it.

The move that supports Helen's innocence by rendering her transgression irrelevant thus requires her trivialization and disempowerment. It also permits the film to strip the Greek Helen of her very identity as the supreme embodiment of female beauty. If Helen is no more than a pretext for the war, there is no need to grant her beauty intrinsic power or value. There is consequently no need for *Troy* to protect the idea of her value by conveying the awesome power that the sight of her exercises over men. When she first rides into Troy, a group of women stare and point in apparent puzzlement, but there is no sign that the onlookers are awe-struck at her looks. As in the *Iliad*, Priam is clearly charmed by Helen, and he does

37 Benioff's original script had Paris escaping alive with Helen. The movie leaves his fate uncertain, but he assures Helen that they will always be together, whether 'in this world or the next'.

38 On *Troy's* 'realist' power politics, see Rabel (2007).

39 Helen is sometimes allowed to choose her own husband; on one account this is to curtail the threat she poses to other men's marriages, specifically Agamemnon's to Clytemnestra (Hyg. *Fab*. 78; cf. Gantz 1993: 566).

compliment her on her beauty. But no one besides Paris seems dazzled by it — none of the group of Trojan elders gazes at her in uneasy awe. Nor do we see her exercising her charm over men through discourse — the script strips away her Homeric eloquence. The erotic danger that the Greek Helen embodies is domesticated by confining its overwhelming impact to a single mate.

The romantic defence is reinforced by the faux-feminist strategy of presenting any transgressive woman as a victim who would not have so acted if men had just treated her right. This makes Helen reactive, a refugee from Greek male oppression, not active in asserting her own desire or taking responsibility for her own transgression, as she does in the *Iliad*. Diane Kruger, who played Helen, tried to make the character 'youthful, vulnerable ... sad ... tragic' (Fischer 2004). When an interviewer asked her to address the moral issue of Helen's departure, by asking why Helen went with Paris if she knew there was going to be war, Kruger did not answer the question directly but replied with a description of a 'sad', 'young' Helen who is 'married to a man she hates', adding, 'I just hope that people will look and see and believe in that hope of love, that hope of freedom, even if it was just for a limited time' — a freedom that a courageous Helen 'dared' to grasp (Fischer 2004).[40] This feminism lite justifies the representation of Helen as a disempowered victim by claiming it as a feminist gesture. But if this is a species of feminism it is an uncommonly comfortable one. In marked contrast to the Greek original, Helen's defection is neither culturally nor ethically disturbing because it offers no threat to the prevailing ideology of the target audience.[41]

Unlike ancient Greek texts, art, and even theatre (with its stylized costumes, masks and male actors), the medium of live action film–despite its own myriad forms of stylization–requires the director to choose a particular flesh-and-blood woman to embody Helen's legendary beauty. The script of *Troy*, along with Petersen's notion of 'realism', calls not for a figure of awe-inspiring beauty but for an innocent, hapless everygirl. She must be attractive enough to be seen as a victim of her looks, but at the same time childlike and ordinary, not charismatic or threatening in her sexual power. She must be not a heroic presence but a 'girl next door' who poses no threat to the male viewership, and with whom any (putatively youthful) female viewer may identify and sympathize. She must be pretty rather than beautiful.

'Pretty', the very word used of Helen by the patronizing Agamemnon, suggests triviality, innocence and girlishness. This dismissive judgement of Diane Kruger's Helen rang true to the ear of countless movie critics. Reviewers were almost unanimous in finding her insufficiently 'fabulous-looking' (McGrath 2004: 38). A website that assembles the 'nastiest' critics' quotes on the subject conveys an overwhelming ordinariness: she resembles 'dozens of young women you might see at the mall', or 'the third cheerleader from the left at a basketball game', and has a 'bland sweetness' that makes her 'Helen of Abercrombie & Fitch' or 'Helen of Troy, N.Y.' (Anonymous n.d.).[42] The most euphoric account of her looks that I have

40 Benioff also evades the moral issue. He says that Helen's elopement is 'beyond good and evil', that she does it because 'she has to survive' (Cohen 2004: 39).

41 On vulnerability and victimhood as constituents of female desirability in Hollywood, see Dyer (2004: 42–6).

42 The word 'bland' recurs repeatedly (e.g. in Travers 2004). Cf. also French (2004) and Mendelsohn (2004: 46). An exception is Stuttaford (2004), who rates Kruger at 1000 ships even though he hates almost everything else about the film.

found appears on a very pink website, 'written and edited by girls and teens', under the title, 'Diane Kruger: Gorgeous Girl Next Door' (Lynn B. 2004).

Though Kruger is 5'7'' tall, according to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), and gained 15 lbs to play this role, she remains slender and waiflike, lacking maturity, dignity and the statuesque quality so highly valued by the ancient Greeks.[43] She is also devoid of the spice of danger whose fragrance lingers around the Homeric Helen. There is, as Cyrino puts it, 'something insubstantial about her, a diminutive or adolescent quality that fails to capture the sexual magnetism of this legendary beauty' (2005: 10). Kruger's former careers — ballet dancer and successful model — speak volumes about the type of beauty Petersen chose for his Helen: not that of an actor, trained to express herself through her voice as well as her body, but that of a silent object depending for self-expression on the body alone, and in the case of modelling, presenting static images for the consumer's gaze.[44] We are worlds away from the Iliadic Helen, whose voice is a vital component of her seductive power, one that she uses to inscribe herself in history. Nor are Kruger's mediocre acting skills irrelevant.[45] Helen as object does not need to act, simply to be viewed. In acting/agency lies her danger. This is more than word play. The power of the Homeric Helen resides partly in her potential for agency. No woman's features alone can make her a Helen. In fact, the specifics of her looks are almost irrelevant, if she can *act* the part.

Perhaps Petersen thought that in order for Helen to serve as a blank slate for the projection of male heterosexual desire as such — a daunting role, it must be said — she should be deficient in any striking qualities of her own. Though this might seem to have a certain logic, it is fatally mistaken. A verbal description may successfully appeal to the imagination by leaving beauty under-described or generic, leaving fantasy to flesh out the picture. The same is true, in a different way, for highly stylized forms of visual representation such as Greek vase painting or tragedy. But mainstream cinema is characterized by a strong, if naive, conception of realism,[46] which relies in part on audience knowledge that 'real' people lie behind its images. In these circumstances, blankness is neither sexy nor the stuff of fantasy.

If an empty screen is desired, it might have been more effective to follow Homer's example by presenting a Helen veiled in mystery and using the reactions of the internal audience, combined with her concealed body, to provoke the imagination of the external audience and triangulate their desire.[47] But *Troy* takes the opposite tack. By stripping Helen naked early in

43 The word 'statuesque' is used advisedly, given the Greek propensity to liken beautiful people to statues (see esp. Steiner 2001). For height and physical substance as components of the Greek ideal of female beauty, see e.g. *Od*. 18.192–96. Even Wise's Helen, Rossana Podestà, who is three inches shorter than Kruger (according to the IMDb), appears to have more physical substance.

44 Kruger's personal enthusiasm for acting, compared to modeling, seems distinctly lukewarm (Weinberg 2004: 148).

45 As Green cruelly puts it (alluding to the ancient tradition of a phantom Helen or *eidolon*), Kruger's acting makes her 'the next best thing' to an *eidolon* (2004: 183). Admittedly the script gives her almost nothing to work with.

46 For the 'realism' of Hollywood style, see Bordwell (1985: 37) and cf. Ellis (1992: 57–61). For the illusion of unmediated 'historical' realism provided by film, see e.g. Lowenthal (1985: 367–68).

47 On 'triangular' desire, see Girard (1965). These strategies are brilliantly employed in Michael Cacoyannis' presentation of Irene Papas as Helen — the most powerful Helen on screen of which I am aware — in *The Trojan Women* (Kino Video 1972). Even in Wise's playful treatment the audience is invited by Paris's repeated comparisons of Helen to Aphrodite to see her beauty as transcending that of ordinary mortals.

the movie, Petersen also strips her of the mystery that might make this unknown actress's hidden body an effective site for fantasy. Nudity might seem to provide a more substantive view of Helen's ineffable beauty, but paradoxically it reduces the impact of that beauty by making it all too effable. By thwarting the gaze, clothing insists on the mystery that lies beneath.[48] To remove Helen's clothes is to locate her allure in the surface of her body, erasing the fascination and danger of that mystery by exposing her as a naked object to be assessed and evaluated in all her particularity. Such a 'realistic' Helen erases the 'real' Helen of Greek myth, insofar as the latter is phantasmal in her very essence.

Any actor playing Helen invites comparison not only with the viewer's personal fantasy but with the idea of physical perfection as such — a standard by which she is bound to fail. The Greeks seem to have conceived of beauty as something that can be measured objectively,[49] a conception that allows Helen by definition to reign supreme, and which indeed makes Helen possible in the first place. But current ideology locates beauty in the eye of the beholder.[50] This conception of beauty is a natural companion to the romantic view of love as a subjective, personal phenomenon uniting two people who are uniquely and exclusively 'meant' for each other. But it makes the exemplification of perfect beauty literally impossible. A particular actor can only be *a* beautiful woman, not the *most* beautiful. We are unable to conceive of a Helen in the Greek sense, one who just is the most beautiful of all women. Once again, Petersen could have evaded this problem by focusing not on Helen's features as such, but instead on her effect on those around her. But as we have seen, he resists empowering her through the impact of her beauty, leaving Kruger exposed as merely one man's erotic ideal (whether that man be Paris or Wolfgang Petersen).

The selection of Diane Kruger to play this impossible part erases the ancient Helen's power in yet another, distinctively cinematic, fashion. As we saw earlier, the ancient Helen is a female analogue of Achilles. Each dangerous in his or her own way, they are both demigods whose awe-inspiring, divinely bestowed gifts raise them above the common run of mortals. As such, they are iconic and glamorous figures, comparable, in certain respects, with movie stars. Despite the obvious yawning contextual differences, there are ways in which ancient mythic heroes and film stars perform similar cultural work. Like stars, such heroes are charismatic, quasi-divine figures who embody specific qualities (such as strength or beauty) to a maximal degree; they reach us mediated by repeated verbal and visual representations; their images are iconic yet remain open to endless manipulation and reinterpretation; they are used as cultural ideals or models for behaviour, especially where gender is concerned.[51] *Troy*'s representation of Achilles as charismatic, self-aware and effortlessly powerful was therefore enhanced by the deft choice of Brad Pitt for the role, which

48 In Greek mythology, the story of Pandora (Hes. *Theog*. 570–612, *Op*. 57–105) suggests that female beauty is itself constructed through clothing and adornment, leaving the interior mysterious or empty (see esp. Loraux 1993: Ch. 2; Zeitlin 1996: Ch. 2).

49 Cf. Pollitt (1974: 12–23) and Steiner (2001: 32–44).

50 This may be traced back at least to Shakespeare (*Love's Labour's Lost* II.i.14: 'Beauty is bought by judgment of the eye'). It does, of course, coexist with more 'objective' assessments of beauty, e.g. through beauty pageants, though these have long incorporated elements other than physical charm and are now on the wane, in large part displaced by designations of the world's 'sexiest' women (and men) in magazines and websites.

51 On stars as models for human behaviour, see Stacey 1994; for Greek heroes, see Blondell 2002: 80–5.

effected a plausible cultural translation of ancient heroic glory into an approximate modern equivalent. Like the glory (*κλέος*) of the ancient hero, passed down over generations in song and story, such casting brings with it the actor's glamour and renown, the resonance of his previous roles, of the tributary media and off-screen gossip.[52] The casting is reflexive: Achilles, as reviewers noted, resembles a sulky movie star, his 'celebrity status' rendering him 'remote and unapproachable' (McGrath 2004: 38);[53] Pitt, in turn, is described by Petersen as a 'dark, edgy . . . tortured soul' — just like Achilles.[54] The script also gives him moody reflections on fame, which fit the modern star as well as the ancient hero.

No legendary figure radiates more star power than Helen. As the most beautiful woman of all time, she exercises supreme erotic power through her blinding impact on men's eyes. She exists to be viewed. Yet even in ancient tales this impact is often mediated by her images, whether verbal or pictorial. Like a screen star she is not only beautiful, but seductive, evasive, and available for fantasy and appropriation by fans and admirers, who may fall in love with her without ever having seen her in the flesh.[55] In the story of the wooing of Helen, most of her suitors know of her beauty only by repute. They court her sight unseen, based on her renown (*κλέος*).[56] Given the symbiosis between stardom and beauty–especially female beauty–one might imagine that Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world, would represent the ultimate role for the female star. Ironically, however, in the making of *Troy* this kind of casting was reserved for the male roles (notably Pitt). Despite rumours that various high-voltage stars were being considered to play Helen,[57] the final choice was a German with little movie experience and no public visibility in the USA.[58] Eschewing better known actors, Petersen was looking for 'someone who was unknown, a new face, a fresh face', in explicit contrast to his desire to cast Achilles as a 'superstar' (van Beekus 2004: 20–1).[59]

Petersen adopted this casting strategy because he wanted his Helen to have 'no baggage', but be just 'Helen from Sparta', since 'no one had ever seen her . . . hidden in Sparta' (van Beekus 2004: 22).[60] His film thus elides the traditional wooing of Helen, and with it the

52 Petersen chose Pitt because Achilles was 'a pop star of those days' (Spelling 2004: 72–3). In his childhood, he saw Achilles as 'like James Dean or Marlon Brando' (van Beekus 2004: 19). 'Tributary media' is Smith's useful expression (1993: *passim*).

53 Cf. also Scott 2004: 16. This kind of equation of actor and role is central to the functioning of the star system.

54 Flynn (2004: 28); cf. Bennetts (2004: 171, 211).

55 For the 'complicated game of desires that plays out around the figure of the star' see Ellis (1992: 98).

56 [Hes.] *Cat.* 199.2–3 MW, 199.9 MW. Idomeneus is an exception: he wants to see her in advance (204.60–63 MW).

57 These rumours were fostered by the film makers (Lowe 2005). One rumoured candidate was Angelina Jolie, on whom see further below. A number of models were also considered, including sultry super-model Kemp Muhl, who was rejected because she was too young (Turner 2004).

58 She had appeared in one English-language TV movie and three French-language films.

59 The pattern echoes Wise's choice of Podestà, who was 'the requisite "unknown" outside Italy' (Hayes n.d.).

60 Conversely, his idea that everyone knew what Achilles looked like seems to be based on the kind of exposure offered by film and TV (contrast the need for even the most famous warriors to be identified, by none other than Helen, in *Iliad* 3).

renown that brought heroes from all over the Greek world to seek her hand.[61] Perhaps he thought the familiar features of a major star would obstruct Helen's function as an empty space for the projection of male desire.[62] But the choice of an 'unknown' actor only exacerbates the kind of problem that is (as I argued earlier) inherent in using any specific actress to play this role 'realistically'. To embody Helen successfully an actor must be not individual, but iconic; and an unknown is liable to come across as less iconic because more ordinary — or more 'real' in Petersen's sense — and thus, paradoxically, more individual than a star. Star-appeal itself depends in part on a carefully constructed 'ordinariness'; but this is complemented by a cultural circulation that makes the star simultaneously extraordinary.[63] The exposure of stardom makes an actor a public signifier, allowing audiences to draw on the collective desire that is produced and reproduced through ceaseless circulation of her images and the concomitant triangulation of desire. This kind of iconic energy is concentrated in the sex goddesses of a culture's collective fantasy — the Marilyn Monroes — who carry a burden of erotic signification that far outstrips their identity as individual actors.[64] Angelina Jolie, *Esquire* magazine's 2004's 'sexiest woman alive', might have been able to channel this kind of erotic energy into the role of Helen. Indeed, with hindsight that choice seems irresistible, since she and Pitt were poised to become Hollywood's most glamorous couple.[65] There is, as we saw, an undercurrent in Greek tradition suggesting that Helen's 'true' partner is Achilles. On the screen, however, as in ancient myth, Helen and Achilles were fated to remain apart.

In *Troy*, Achilles is not Helen's male counterpart but her replacement. Despite the luster of Orlando Bloom's then-emerging idol status among teenage girls,[66] Brad Pitt, with his blazing star power and overwhelming sexual appeal, is clearly the primary erotic focus of this film. In Greek myth, Paris, like Helen, is the favourite of Aphrodite; as such he belongs in the bedroom, as opposed to the battlefield, where Achilles reigns supreme. In *Troy*, however, he is no competition for Achilles even in bed. Both men are womanizers until they meet the 'right' unique love-object, but in Paris's case this is reported sentimentally by his father ('Women have always loved Paris and he's loved them back'), whereas Achilles is presented

61 In the film, her parents sent her to Sparta at the age of sixteen to marry a Menelaus who apparently lived there already. There is no indication of where she was sent from, and nothing about a competition for her hand, or the oath (Agamemnon assembles the Greek army through conquest).

62 Such a view was expressed by the casting director, Lucinda Syson (Turner 2004). According to the IMDb trivia page (which I have not been able to authenticate), 'Wolfgang Petersen originally didn't want Helen to appear in the movie. He felt that an actress couldn't live up to the audience's expectations, but the producers insisted she appear. Petersen went with an unknown actress for the same reason.'

63 On stars as at once extraordinary and ordinary, see esp. Dyer 1998 and 2004.

64 For the way Monroe embodied the sexual pre-occupations of the 1950s, so that she 'conforms to, and is part of the construction of, what constitutes desirability in women', see Dyer 2004: Ch. 1 (the quote is from p. 40). Among those who have played Helen on screen, Elizabeth Taylor in *Doctor Faustus* best exemplifies this kind of use of star power (Director Richard Burton and Nevill Coghill, Columbia Pictures 1967). Taylor 'stands for the type "star" — the most expensive, the most beautiful, and the most married and divorced, being in the world' (Dyer 1998: 43, summarizing Walker 1966: Ch. 7). Cf. also Wyke (1997: 101–9) and Sobchak (2003: 309–10) on Taylor as Cleopatra.

65 Her scandalous image at the time would have been an added bonus. She was involved in a high-profile divorce and would soon be accused of 'breaking up' Brad Pitt's marriage to Jennifer Aniston.

66 Cf. van Beekus (2004: 24), Flynn (2004: 27) and Faraci (2004a).

to our gaze in a nude erotic tableau with two women. As critics realized,[67] it is Achilles who is *Troy's* supreme object of desire, supplanting not just Paris but Helen herself as the truly glorious sex object in this film. Brad Pitt was at that time 'the most desired male in the world',[68] the only man ever to have been twice (1994 and 2000) named *People Magazine*'s 'sexiest man alive', whose gorgeous physique and celebrity status made him a male Helen for the turn of the twenty-first century.

The first appearance of Achilles is also the first erotic image in the film. We see him initially through the eyes of a nervous child, awestruck by the hero's reputation. Yet he is presented as the naked object of our gaze, asleep, passive and apparently vulnerable. The departure from the standard Hollywood fetishizing of the naked female is quite striking.[69] But this objectification turns out to be no impediment to vigorous action; in a startling gesture, the sleeping Achilles suddenly grabs the child who has been sent to fetch him. He proceeds directly from this presumably heroic night of sex — with multiple women — to the heroic military conquest of a giant opponent. Throughout the film, his body remains the site of supreme masculine power, displayed and eroticized, on the battlefield as well as in the bedroom. He finally dies almost like St Sebastian, wearing only a cuirass and short leather skirt, as his magnificent body takes one arrow after another from Paris' bow (not just a single ignominious shot to the ankle).

The disrobing of Helen is treated very differently. She is seen first from Paris's point of view, as she removes her jewellery (apparently unaware of his presence), then facing into the camera in close-up as he fondles her throat from behind (a shot conveying extreme vulnerability). She then unpins her dress before Paris's gaze and embraces him, in her only moment of erotic agency. Both are visible only from the waist up. The spectacle of Kruger's naked breasts pressed against Paris's armored torso does not inspire awe. Rather, it continues to convey Helen's vulnerability.[70] No further sexual activity is shown (during their putative sex act, the film cuts away to Menelaus' dalliance with a dancing girl). Afterwards, we see the nude Helen from behind, reclining in a pose reminiscent of Velázquez's Rokeby Venus, while Paris looks down at her, now naked from the waist up.[71] They are not seen in bed together again. Instead, erotic attention shifts to Achilles and Briseis.

The substitution of Pitt's body for Kruger's is conveyed cinematically by trumping Kruger's only sex scene, early in the film, with Pitt's first such scene with Briseis. The latter starts with a shot of Achilles' sleeping face, again passive and apparently vulnerable, while Briseis stands over him with a knife at his throat. But once again his passivity is deceptive. He turns out to be well aware of her presence and soon turns the tables, rolling,

67 For example, Baine (2004), Burr (2004) and Edelstein (2004).

68 Anonymous 2005. Vanity Fair called him 'the face that launched a thousand tabloids ... who's perennially at the top of the world's sexiest-man-alive lists' (Bennetts 2004: 166). Advance publicity for *Troy* made abundant use of the exposure of Pitt's body.

69 McCarthy (2004) notes that Pitt is 'lavished with elaborate photographic attention' of the kind usually reserved for female stars like Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich.

70 We have Kruger's word for her sense of vulnerability in this scene (Fischer 2004). The effect was not lost on reviewers (Stanley 2004).

71 Both Kruger in this scene and Pitt in the scene described below reveal another inch or so of skin in the Director's Cut (2007), but without significantly affecting the contrast that concerns me here. The difference in Pitt's first nude scene is more striking, since the camera angle is changed to provide a fuller view of the two naked women behind him.

buck-naked, on top of the fully clothed Briseis and actively initiating sexual intercourse. His naked body is a signifier of active eroticism, rather than a vulnerable object of display.[72] Petersen thus allows Pitt to supplant Kruger not only in charisma, star-power, dramatic and emotional significance, but also as both subject and object of desire. As in the *Iliad* — though in quite a different way — Helen's centrality to the Trojan War story is usurped by Achilles.

Like Helen in myth — as opposed to the movie — Achilles is presented as an object of desire to multiple sexual partners. Chief among these is Briseis, whose role as romantic heroine further displaces Helen from the erotic epicentre of the story.[73] Briseis, played by another little-known actor, the Australian Rose Byrne, is a 'feisty' heroine, in obedience to modern romantic conventions and the requirements of feminism lite.[74] Her counterpart in the *Iliad* is in some ways Helen's analogue — a woman at both the margins and the centre of the narrative, whose theft is the catalyst for a catastrophic dispute between men. But her role remains a tiny one.[75] Subsequent accounts, even in antiquity, enhanced her role as a love interest for Achilles (King 1987: 172–4). Following in this tradition, *Troy* places their relationship at centre stage.

Benioff conceived of Briseis as a powerful female presence.[76] As such, she supplants Helen to become the true focus of the pivotal story of abduction, seduction and passion, serving among other things to make the Greeks, not the Trojans, the 'real' rapists and abductors of women. At the same time she is something of an anti-Helen. She is dark-haired, not blonde, and devoid of royal elegance or rich costume. Her lively manner underlines Helen's passivity and powerlessness. She resists victimization, chooses to return home rather than stay with the man she loves, and explicitly eschews a Helenic role ('I don't want anyone dying for me'). An effect — if not a cause — of this promotion of Briseis is the further erasure of Helen. Helen of Troy herself is no longer the most powerful female character (or the most powerful *as* a character) in the story of the Trojan War.[77]

The relationship between Achilles and Briseis trumps the childish romance between Paris and Helen in both erotic and emotional power. The personal connection between Achilles and Briseis is deeper, their sex scenes more numerous, more sexually explicit, more passionate,[78] and more intimate,[79] and their conversations much longer and more substantive. Judged by the standard visual codes of Hollywood, Byrne's Briseis is not stunningly beautiful, yet Achilles sees in her a beauty that shines through dirt, blood and wounds ('You will

72 Cf. Dyer's discussion of the difference between male and female pin-ups, where the former are distinguished from the latter by hard muscularity and activity (1992).

73 For the undermining of the Paris/Helen love trope cf. Futrell (2005).

74 On Briseis as a formulaic 'feisty' heroine, see McGrath (2004: 38).

75 Her only speech is her lament for Patroclus (19.282–300).

76 Her character incorporates not only her namesake in Homer — much developed — but elements of the ancient Cassandra, Polyxena, Chryseis, Clytemnestra and even Athena (Allen 2007: 156–62; Danek 2007: 80–1). The script asserts that 'despite her torn robes, her noble bearing and authoritative tone command respect'.

77 *Troy* exceeds even the requirements of the romantic plot in making Helen a passive victim. Wise's treatment is equally romantic, but gives Helen a much more assertive (and 'feisty') role.

78 Briseis' knife in their first sex scene is a trope for violent, risky, destructive passion. Note too the swelling background music, which is absent from Paris and Helen's sex scene.

79 We see them spooning, engaging in pillow-talk, and waking up in the morning with their naked bodies intertwined.

never be lovelier than you are right now'). Her beauty is thus marked as 'natural', in contrast to the refinement and elegance of Helen, who never has a hair out of place. Achilles' attraction to his grimy captive also suggests that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This accords with the romantic principle that there exists just one uniquely well-matched love object for each human being, in contrast to the Greek assumption that beauty can be objectively measured — an assumption that underpins the very notion of Helen, as we have seen. This trumping of Helen as an ideal standard of beauty, and hence of her supreme erotic power, is a new twist not only in the story of the Trojan War but in the side-lining of Helen within that story.

It might seem surprising that contemporary popular culture — which typically pays at least lip-service to female empowerment — should not only embrace the ancient disempowerment of Helen but find new ways to express it. For the makers of *Troy*, however, as for Greek authors and for Agamemnon in this very movie, such a Helen is 'useful'. A powerful, wilful and transgressive Helen would undermine both the film's romanticism and its political ideology, both of which depend on making her a pretext rather than a cause, a victim rather than an agent, a vulnerable girl rather than an erotically powerful woman. Greek authors, including Homer, react to the threat of Helen by limiting her power, often in the guise of defending her. *Troy* does the same thing in a different way, by casting her as an adolescent everygirl, contrasting her with the feisty Briseis, and displacing her beauty in favour of the star power and charisma of Brad Pitt's spectacular body. These contemporary modes of trivialization strip Helen of power and danger more effectively than any ancient text. By using her name and story the movie-makers are able to claim their tale as an ancient and (therefore) 'timeless' representation of 'the human thing'; but this prevents them acknowledging that their 'reality' leaves no conceptual or ideological space for the 'real' Greek Helen.

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