

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## HELEN

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**Helen** (in Homer's *Iliad*)      **Closed**

**Overview** The passion of Helen and Paris for one another is one of the causes of the Trojan War, as described in Homer's *Iliad*. Each of these figures represents beauty and birth at its finest, Helen the daughter of Leda and Zeus—who raped her in the guise of a swan, in one account—and from birth reputedly the most beautiful woman in the world, while Paris was from childhood known for his intelligence and irresistible good looks. Various accounts explain the initial meeting of these two paragons, but abduction, rather than seduction, prevails as the likely scenario by which Helen was snatched off to Troy; once there, it was incumbent on her earlier suitors, who had sworn to retrieve her in the case of abduction, to assail Troy until she could be brought back to her husband, Menelaus.

**Character** From the results it had, we assume that the relationship of Helen and Paris was from the outset hotly passionate. For Paris, Helen left a comfortable, even sumptuous home, which she shared with her husband, and a role, Queen of Laconia, which honored her fittingly. The Helen we see in Troy, however, is from the start a narcissist, oohing and aahing over the powerful Greek warriors she reviews from the Trojan battlements, and weaving a great ornamental web which depicts the struggles of the Trojans and the Greeks over her, Helen. Later we see her urging Paris to go out and fight, and learn from the scene that this paragon lover of Helen is a reluctant warrior, more nearly a pretty boy than a military man. While it is true that at the end of the epic Paris kills Achilles, by shooting him in the heel, we compile plenty of evidence that Paris prefers dallying in bed with Helen, to sweating on the battle front.

**Parallels** To the asymmetrical relation between Paris and Helen, it is not easy to find parallels; the world's most gorgeous woman married now to a supremely handsome abductor-warrior who, upon returning her to his own land finds himself disinclined to fight, and finds her bitterly critical of the role she has played in the war. Reading inside the mind of Homer, which is vast and multi-form, one senses a *fundamental hostility to war*: the cause of the Trojan war before us is simple lust; the fighting that consumes the war (the first half of the *Iliad*; armed combat in all its savageness) is ruthless and unrelieved; the one act of mercy on the battlefield—Achilles' return of Hector's body to Priam—does nothing but illustrate how merciless the war itself is. All these dark commentaries on war fuse with the irony bathing the would be loving marital relationship of Helen and Paris, and make us call in, as our parallels to this Homeric insight into the hollowness of war, the perceptive views of any number of major war-critical texts from the modern canon: from Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), through the bitter poetry of Wilfrid Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who suffered the trench warfare of WW I, through Heller's *Catch-22* (1953) to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter House 5* (1969), which sizzles with the horrors of the Dresden fire bombings.

### Illustrative moments

**1 Charmer** Prior to the Trojan War Helen is a distinguished seductress living with her husband, Menelaos, in the south of Greece. When Paris comes into her life she falls for him, and is raped, abducted, or seductively given up to Paris—according to the account you prefer. At stake in your choice of account is whether you suppose Helen was responsible for the War of Troy, or was an assaulted co-collaborator, without real responsibility. Later interior snapshots of Helen, as from within the walls of Troy she reflects on her role in the war, suggest that she is far more complex, in the interpretation of her 'guilt,' than myth suggests. When Helen will call herself a mere bitch, she complexifies the 'see me' side of her, which is always glad to be viewed as a leading candidate for Miss World.

**2 Fascinated** When he sees the cuckolded enemy Paris panics and flees back to his lines, only to be snatched away by Aphrodite, and to be deposited in his bedroom with Helen, where a good screw replaces the obligations of armed combat. We may wish to say that Helen likes it this way, but in fact she will soon be the one to urge Paris back into the fray—into the field where his manliness (in her opinion) requires

him. Helen is always fascinated by the strength and handsomeness of her lover, but, unlike him, she is both self-confident and humiliated among the Trojans, on whom her own wanton desires have brought down a disastrous war. Thus she is motivated to keep Paris part of the war machine, though to encourage this lover is to encourage the killing of her own countrypeople.

**3 Domestic** Helen is both a passive victim of adultery—there is dispute in the legends about whether she was abducted or seduced by Paris—and of course the active cause of a vast war, ‘the face that launched a thousand ships, and burnt the topless towers of Ilium’ as Marlowe puts it. When we see Helen the adulteress ‘at home,’ in domestic scenes either with Paris, in the *Iliad*, or later with her husband Menelaus, in the *Odyssey*, she is always a still portrait of womanly gentleness, weaving delicate threads by candlelight. We are reminded that Homer is an archaic epic poet, and that the union of lovers in marriage expresses itself in ritual procedures, far from the concrete ‘details of marital life’ which we might expect in a modern novel.

### **Discussion questions**

The Trojan elders, watching Helen from the battlements of Troy, whisper to each other that the Trojan War was worth it, if it was fought over a beauty as astonishing as Helen. Is that also Homer’s viewpoint?

Does Paris seem to feel any guilt for his adultery?

Does Menelaus behave like a person conscious of having been cuckolded? Is he bent out of shape about this affront?