

The Perfect Wife and the Evil Temptress:  
The Dichotomy of Penelope and Helen of Troy

by

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## Abstract

Stories about Helen of Troy and Odysseus' wife Penelope have existed alongside each other over the centuries since Athens dominated Greek art and culture. By considering depictions of these two women in three time periods, this study will trace the way their stories have changed, and what these changes may tell us about each period's attitude towards women. This analysis also problematizes the tropes of "the virgin" and "the whore" to demonstrate the adverse impact of such recurring images on women today. Starting in the fifth century, Athens, I will consider Helen through three plays by Euripides, asking why Penelope is a major character in Homer's *Odyssey*, but does not appear in any extant Greek tragedy. Moving to the Middle Ages in Britain, I will look at how Helen is constructed in three adaptations of Guido de Colonna's *Hystoria Troiana*, as well as Penelope's letter to her husband in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. I will also consider Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, which places these women onstage and subjects them to the male gaze. My study of these sources will attempt to discern the reasons that the character of Penelope became a well-known ideal of femininity by the late fourteenth century, while Helen was to some extent pardoned for inciting the Trojan War. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, US productions of theatrical adaptations of both of these characters have received widespread attention; but what does this mean for a feminist analysis of Helen and Persephone? To answer this question, I will use three plays that adapt the myths of Helen and Penelope; Jean Giraudoux's *Tiger at the Gates*, Mark Schultz's *A Brief History of Helen of Troy*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. After investigating my chosen time periods, I conclude that stories and dramas about the stereotypical whore and the idealized wife have allowed two characters constructed by men in a patriarchal culture to be re-adapted in the twenty-first century and given their own voices. These

adaptations, however, continue to uphold Helen and Penelope as dichotomous figures, something that hinders their ability to function as theatrical advocates for third wave feminism.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Penelope's Absence in 5th Century Athenian Tragedy.....	9
The Recreation of Helen in Late Medieval England.....	38
Adapting Helen and Penelope for a Twenty-First Century Audience.....	65
Conclusion.....	88
Bibliography.....	90

## Introduction

The Sojourn Theatre's *Penelope Project*, created in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is an ongoing exploration into the true nature of Homer's character, Penelope. The project seeks to "[examine] the complex inner life and trials of Penelope — the heroine who did not go out to conquer the world, but stayed at home."<sup>1</sup> Despite her absence in extant Greek tragedy, interest in Penelope as a character is growing in North America through various mediums, most recently in the theatre for social change exemplified by the *Penelope Project*. In order to create a stronger awareness of Penelope as a character, the project collaborates with residents in long-term care environments to create a performance based on Homer's *Odyssey* which reveals the similarities between Penelope's long wait for her husband and the long wait faced by most residents of assisted-living facilities. The comparison between Penelope the character and the actual people living in such facilities reveals the active nature of waiting. This is just one example of the ways in which theatre practitioners have adapted ancient Greek characters to address important social concerns. Throughout my thesis I will explore several ways that contemporary theatre practitioners can recreate Penelope and Helen of Troy as active women, freed from their creation by male writers who crafted them as idealistic, not realistic, women.

In 2007 Margaret Atwood's play *The Penelopiad* premiered in Stratford-upon-Avon.<sup>2</sup> Her play, and the book upon which it was based,<sup>3</sup> questioned the ways Penelope has been mythologized in Western literature and drama and sought to create a version of Penelope who spoke with her own voice, a voice not created by male poets living in patriarchal cultures. Many adaptations of Penelope in ancient Greece and medieval Britain placed Penelope within the private household space culturally associated with femininity,<sup>4</sup> but in *The Penelopiad* Atwood's

Penelope exists outside of this private space. Nor does she reside in the public male sphere, but rather in what Homi Bhabha calls the “Third Space,”<sup>5</sup> a place in between the public and the private that undoes the opposition between the two. Along with Penelope, Helen of Troy, whose abduction by Paris usually places her as an outsider within the public space,<sup>6</sup> also appears in Atwood’s play and exists within this third space. These two women each figured heavily in Homer’s epics, but today only Helen has become a well-known mythical character in her own right, while Penelope is often remembered only as part of the larger story in which she appears. Throughout this study I want to ask: Why has the figure of Helen captured the dramatic imagination of poets and playwrights over centuries, and why has Penelope faded into a simple representation of the chaste wife?

I will ground my study in the theory of adaptation put forth by Linda Hutcheon in her text *A Theory of Adaptation*, in which she states that adaptation is often “a transcoding into a different set of conventions.”<sup>7</sup> Such a transcoding occurs in The Sojourn Theatre’s *Penelope Project*, Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, as well as in several English medieval texts that I will address later in this paper. Each text that I investigate is an adaptation of ancient Greek myths that existed before they were written about by Homer, or further adapted by Athenian playwrights. By contextualizing these adaptations I will demonstrate the ways that the characters of Penelope and Helen were transformed to fit the cultural norms that governed the times in which they were written. I will consider depictions of Helen of Troy and Penelope in three separate time periods and locations. First, I will ground my study in ancient Greece, where the myths of these two women originated. The first mention of Penelope in extant texts occurs in Homer’s *Odyssey*, probably written around the 8th century BCE.<sup>8</sup> Through a close reading of this epic poem I will show that the figure of Penelope is far more than merely a docile and loyal wife.

This characterization of Penelope was a common representation of the character (into whom she was transformed in the European Middle Ages; and this medieval transformation persists in our literary and dramatic imagination today. Penelope, however, is one of the most active characters in Homer's poem, who displays extreme cunning and intelligence in that she avoids marriage to any of her numerous suitors. She also averts conflicts with her son over control of their household. As a woman, Penelope embodies characteristics of the perfect Greek woman. As I shall show, however, she was far more than a grieving and faithful wife.

Helen too appears in the *Odyssey*, but as a minor character. It is in Athenian theatre that Aeschylus and Euripides represent Helen in a total of four plays. I will focus on these two playwrights to discover why Helen was such a popular figure for fifth-century tragedians, while Penelope does not appear in a single play, and in fact is never even mentioned by name. By analyzing the theatrical representations of Helen by these two playwrights, we may gain insight into how the role of women was idealized and vilified in ancient Greek society.

Central to my understanding of the depictions of Penelope and Helen in theatre texts is the idea of space, and how space for the ancient Greeks was divided into the public and the private, which corresponded with masculine and feminine attributes.<sup>9</sup> My argument about the theoretical spaces assigned to women, as well as their representation onstage in the physical theatre space, is well-supported by Sue-Ellen Case's article "Classical Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts."<sup>10</sup> Case contends that "'Woman' appeared on the stage, in the myths, and in the plastic arts, representing the patriarchal values attached to the gender of 'Woman' while suppressing the experiences, fantasies, feelings, and stories of actual women."<sup>11</sup> This split between actual Greek women and the women represented onstage by male actors is crucial to my understanding of Helen and Penelope as ideal women, created through male fantasy and far



removed from the lives of fifth-century Athenian women. As I shall argue for the Greeks, and especially for fifth-century Athenians, Helen the character was fascinating because she violated the private space of women by leaving her husband to accompany Paris to Troy. In several plays from the period by Aeschylus and Euripides, Helen is casually referred to as a whore or a wicked woman,<sup>12</sup> because she neglects her duty as a wife to maintain her husband's household. In addition to Case, I will rely on several other theorists to establish the notion of divided space in ancient Greece, specifically Lin Foxhall, Helene Foley, Ruth Padel, and David Wiles. Theories of male and female spaces and the manifestation of such spaces in literary depictions of Helen and Penelope are paramount to my study, especially given the significance for current third-wave feminists of such spaces. I draw on Jill Dolan's writings on the male gaze<sup>13</sup> to establish the presence of this gaze in theatrical depictions of Helen and Penelope. Using theorizations of gendered space,<sup>14</sup> I will consider the ways Helen and Penelope conform to or reject their place within the interior female space of the Greek household, a space known as the *oikos* (οἶκος), on which I will elaborate in chapter one.

For centuries after the fall of Athens to Sparta in the Peloponnesian Wars, the writings of Greek philosophers and tragedians were little-known in Northern Europe, but were highly regarded in Eastern Arabic countries.<sup>15</sup> Following the Crusades, these texts were brought to Europe, where an explosion of interest in Greek myth occurred. The fascination with ancient Greek life and literature led to many poetic retellings of the stories of Helen and Penelope during the European Middle Ages. For this reason, the second time period I will consider is medieval Britain, from 1100-1500 CE. This large span of time includes three poetic adaptations<sup>16</sup> of a tenth-century Italian poem that tells the story of the Trojan War. Helen figures heavily in each of the adaptations, but her willingness to accompany Paris to Troy, an action that incites the Trojan

War, is described differently in each poem. Using Corinne Saunders' analysis of medieval laws governing the rape and abduction of women,<sup>17</sup> I will show how Helen has been transformed from the seductive temptress of ancient Greece into a political tool whose consent in her own abduction has no bearing on her fate. Epic poets also transformed the classic figure of Penelope during this time period, deviating from Homer's cunning depiction to portray what may be considered the ideal medieval wife. As in my first chapter, the concept of gendered space in medieval Britain informs my analysis of these poetic rewritings of the myths of Helen and Penelope. The domestic sphere in this period, and the violation of the private female space, whether the unauthorized entrance of a man or the departure of a woman, is even more significant. The realm of the household is of paramount importance in medieval poetic recreations of Helen and Penelope. In addition to space, the physical female body is a recurring theme in British medieval literature about Helen and Penelope. Michal Kolbiaka's *This is my Body: Representational Practices in the Early Middle Ages*,<sup>18</sup> provides us with a means to consider corporeality and the construction of the female body. In this chapter, I will look at the way that medieval poets represent/ re-construct the bodies of Helen and Penelope to consider what these constructions may tell us about today's continued fascination with Helen and Penelope and their bodies.

Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*,<sup>19</sup> serves as an important theatrical example to offset the poetic representations of Helen and Penelope. In his play, Helen appears as a non-speaking character. Rereading *Faustus* with an understanding of the male gaze that permeated the medieval British stage and carried over into the early Renaissance, I will demonstrate the way that the female body was perceived as a political tool for men, and how the gaze of male theatre spectators, as well as the embodiment by male actors, controlled

Helen's appearance in *Faustus*. I will also use Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1603), in which Helen appears at Paris' side during the Trojan War. In Shakespeare's play she speaks little and her speech is often interrupted by the male characters. Similarly to *Faustus*, in *Troilus and Cressida*, Helen's body is discussed by men in terms of its value in the war.

The third time period that comprises my study is the late twentieth to early twenty-first century, in which I will focus on theatrical depictions of Helen and Penelope by North American playwrights. I will show how stage adaptations of the two women may benefit third-wave feminists by adapting Helen and Penelope's stories and re-making them with the intention of revealing their patriarchal roots. As Josephine Donovan has noted, the distinction between male and female spaces persists in the United States today, and is a primary concern of third-wave feminists.<sup>20</sup> Each of the three plays<sup>21</sup> I rely on in chapter three draws attention to these distinctive spaces and to their harmful persistence in the twenty-first century. The female body also features predominately in my chosen plays. In each adaptation of Helen and/or Penelope, the current obsession in the United States with female beauty is acknowledged through its destructive effects on individual women and even on entire societies. Though only one play, Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, is written from a decidedly feminist perspective, an analysis of each play through the lens of third-wave feminism will reveal the changing status of Helen and Penelope in our current culture, from the ancient dichotomy of whore and virgin<sup>22</sup> to more complex characterizations that grant the two women previously impossible agency.

Throughout this study I refer to Penelope as the marriageable virgin, half of the well-established opposition between the virgin and the whore. This terminology requires some preliminary explanation. As a wife and mother, Penelope is not a virgin at all, but rather an aspect of a more complex archetypical woman. Listing the historically dominant female

archetypes in patriarchal cultures, Case includes not the virgin, but the “Virgin/Goddess.”<sup>23</sup> According to Ronald Hutton, scholars and archeologists excavating the sites of ancient Greek civilizations in the early twentieth-century were puzzled by “the problem of how to reconcile the apparently incompatible attributes of virginal and material historic goddesses”<sup>24</sup> that they found represented in art and pottery during excavation. Case’s inclusion of the virgin/goddess archetype points to the strange combination of the innocent mortal girl and the fertile, life-giving female deity in ancient religion, a form that extends to ancient Greece in Artemis, the female protector of animals and nature, who was also eternally chaste. Within Penelope, as she is constructed by Homer, motherhood exists alongside chastity as she waits for Odysseus to return to Ithaca, embodying both maternal love and an almost divine commitment to her physical purity. Thus, when I refer to Penelope as the archetypal virgin, I am referring to the virgin/goddess construction put forth by Hutton and theorized by Case.

Throughout this thesis I draw out the importance of gendered spaces and the physical female body in each of my chosen time periods, and analyze these themes through today’s feminist theorization of the male gaze and the importance of dismantling strictly-gendered public and private spaces. In my final chapter I will argue for an increased collapsing of these spaces into what Homi Bhabha calls the “Third Space,”<sup>25</sup> which exists between the public and the private spheres and, from a third-wave feminist standpoint, allows for greater gender equality than either the public or private spheres. Significantly, the Third Space may present us with a new model that frees women from the impact of the male gaze on female performers and characters.

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<sup>1</sup> Penelope Project, (Peck School of the Arts: 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad: The Play* (London: Faber, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: O.W. Toad Ltd., 2005).

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- <sup>4</sup> See Lin Foxhall, *Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2013) for the construction of male and female spaces in ancient Greece, and Barbara A. Hanawalt, 'Of Good and Ill Repute': Gender and Social Control in Medieval England (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) for female spaces in medieval England.
- <sup>5</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 56.
- <sup>6</sup> Michael Shaw, "The Female Intruder: Women in Fifth-Century Drama," *Classical Philology* 70, no. 4 (1975).
- <sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 33.
- <sup>8</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000).
- <sup>9</sup> Lin Foxhall, *Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2013).
- <sup>10</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, "Classical Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts," *Theatre Journal* 37, no. 3 (1985): 317-327.
- <sup>11</sup> "Classical Drag," 318.
- <sup>12</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Philip De May (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), and Euripides, *Orestes*, trans. Frank Nisetich (New York: Oxford UP, 1995).
- <sup>13</sup> Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2012).
- <sup>14</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 2nd ed., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), and Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004).
- <sup>15</sup> Kathleen Ethel Welch, "What Made Aristotle White?," *Rhetoric Review* 24, no. 4 (2005): 373-377.
- <sup>16</sup> Guido de Colonne *Gest Hystoriale*, trans. Unknown (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1992) Orig. Thirteenth-Century., *Laud Troy Book* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1992) Orig. Fifteenth-Century., John Lydgate, *Troy Book* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1992) Orig. 1412-1420.
- <sup>17</sup> Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001).
- <sup>18</sup> Michal Kobialka, *This is my Body: Representational Practices in the Early Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1999).
- <sup>19</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2005).
- <sup>20</sup> Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012).
- <sup>21</sup> Jean Giraudoux, *Tiger at the Gates*, trans. Christopher Fry (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1955)., Mark Schultz, *A Brief History of Helen of Troy, or, Everything Will Be Different*, (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2005)., Atwood, *The Penelopiad: The Play*.
- <sup>22</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 2nd ed., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). 6.
- <sup>23</sup> "Classical Drag," 318.
- <sup>24</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 36.
- <sup>25</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

*Penelope's Absence in 5th Century Athenian Tragedy*

Of the thirty-two surviving Greek tragedies, only three include the famous Helen of Troy as a character, while a fourth references her at length. The first three tragedies are *Trojan Women* (415 BCE), *Helen* (412 BCE), and *Orestes* (408 BCE), all written by Euripides. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the first play of his *Oresteia* cycle (458 BCE), includes many references to Helen, though she does not appear. I intend to question the varied representations of Helen by Aeschylus and Euripides in terms of women's place in fifth century Athens by looking at these four plays. This study will be necessarily limited for several reasons that have long plagued scholars of ancient Greece. First, though I will be relying on all available plays of the fifth century that include Helen as a character, it is not possible to know whether she appeared in other plays that have since been lost. Second, all of the above plays were written by major Athenian playwrights and are assumed to have premiered at the Dionysia, the largest theatrical festival of the year. For this reason, my study will focus solely on the public and private roles of Athenian women, which may have varied significantly from other city-states. Thus I assume that Aeschylus and Euripides, as major playwrights, represent and reflect pertinent cultural and social concerns of their time in their tragedies. After analyzing the ways in which these playwrights portrayed Helen in Athenian tragedy, I incorporate the characterization of Penelope in Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*. Penelope is a major figure in the *Odyssey*, but she does not appear in any extant Athenian tragedies. By considering how Homer characterizes Penelope as an ideal Greek woman, I will explore why the character Helen was such a fascinating character to fifth century BCE Athenian playwrights, while the character of Penelope was largely ignored.

In *Agamemnon*, *Orestes*, and *Trojan Women*, Helen is represented as an adulteress, complicit in her own abduction by Paris, after Aphrodite promised the prince he could have the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife. As legend tells us,

<sup>1</sup> this abduction caused the Trojan War, for which Helen is often blamed. In only one tragedy, Euripides' *Helen*, is she shown as a loving and faithful wife to her husband, Menelaus. Given that in Euripides' two other surviving plays in which Helen appears, she is clearly characterized as guilty, why did the playwright choose to create one play solely about Helen's virtue and another two in which she is a minor character chastised for her crimes, similar to her portrayal in *Agamemnon*? By considering women's place in Greek society of the time, a place that was highly important for maintaining social and political structure, I will show how this representation of Helen as temptress may have reflected attitudes of what appears to have been a predominately male theatre audience<sup>2</sup> about Greek women. In contrast, as innocent and loyal wife, Helen in *Helen* quite literally addresses concerns about the power of her mind over her physical body. I shall show how both of these topics were important to fifth-century Athenians, at a time when anxiety about Athens' continued prosperity during the devastating Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) was high.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, all four plays deal with the private versus the public space,<sup>4</sup> and the different ways in which women were meant to occupy each. I will focus specifically on the Greek idea of the *oikos*, the household space inhabited and maintained by women. By contextualizing the ways in which playwrights represented Helen in the fifth-century in terms of the Peloponnesian War we can learn much about women's place in Athenian society.

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is the only play that was written before the Peloponnesian War. As the first play in his *Oresteia* cycle, *Agamemnon* tells the story of Agamemnon's victorious return from the Trojan War. Once the king arrives in Mycenae, his wife Clytemnestra and her

lover Aegisthus murder him in his bath and assume control of Mycenae. When Aeschylus wrote *Agamemnon* Athens was in the midst of its golden age of prosperity, having won the Persian Wars several decades earlier. The city-state not yet become embroiled in the Peloponnesian War against Sparta that would spell the end of Athens' dominance of the Mediterranean by 404 BCE. Likewise, Aeschylus' tragic play cycle deals with the aftermath of the Trojan War, rather than with the concerns of a city-state at war. Like Athens, the characters in *Agamemnon* represent members of a city-state, Mycenae, which had recently emerged victorious after a long and bloody conflict. Against the backdrop of peace newly won, *Agamemnon* follows the lives of the title character's family after the war's end. Like Athens after the Persian Wars, the chorus of Mycenaean men in *Agamemnon* are not depicted as concerned with the public consequences of war, but with the family and household drama that unfolds when war ceases to dominate public discourse and stoke anxiety. With Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War, there is a conflict between the male-dominated space of battle and the more female space of the household. According to Nancy Rabinowitz, "In the *Oresteia* all of our binaries [esp. the public (male) and private (female) realms] are once again represented and interrelated through an emphasis on war and the family"<sup>5</sup> with the primary conflict between Agamemnon and his wife, Clytemnestra. There is much talk in the play about Clytemnestra's masculine displays of strength and the way she improperly steps outside of her role as wife. Helen too is said to be traitorous to her home and husband. The chorus perceives Helen as more violent than Clytemnestra, who by the end of *Agamemnon* has killed her husband and taken his throne.

Before I explore Helen's characterization in *Agamemnon*, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the construction of male versus female spaces in ancient Greece. For the Greeks, one of the most important social constructions was the *oikos*, a term that referred both to



the actual members of a family and the idea of the household, a foundational aspect of Greek life. The *oikos* was the bedrock of Greek society, especially in Athens, and all social and political relations referred back to it.<sup>6</sup> As the bearers of children, women were essential to Greek life, but their status was also complicated because of the prevailing idea that women were “passive and incoherent ‘matter,’ while the male was active, structuring ‘form.’”<sup>7</sup> Women were a major aspect of the *oikos* as a type of social structure, but they also largely had to remain within the physical home in their designated ‘private’ space, while men took active roles in forming and debating the laws and norms of Greek Athenian life.

One of these roles was mandatory attendance at the Dionysia, which took place at the Theater of Dionysus. This theatre was built into the hillside underneath the Acropolis, but excavation of the site has yielded contrasting theories about its original shape. David Wiles conducts research into other Greek theatres of the third and fourth-centuries in an attempt to better understand the way the Theater of Dionysus in Athens may have been constructed. His study of the political meaning of the physical theater space provides an important insight into how theatre might have been observed in fifth-century Athens.<sup>8</sup> One element of the Theater of Dionysus that is certain is the shape and divisions of the theatron, where the audience sits. In the massive and well-preserved theatre at Epidauros, the theatron is divided into twelve wedge-shaped sections. This is a significant difference from the thirteen wedges at the Theater of Dionysus, where “the central wedge served not only for the statue and priest of the god, but also for the Council of 500. [Unlike Athens], in Epidauros there is no locus of political power.”<sup>9</sup> At the Dionysia, then, the audience was distinctly divided into sections based on political power, with the city Council and the priest of Dionysus occupying the central part of the theatron. In addition to the religious purpose of the festival, then, theatre performances also served to draw

attention to the politics of the city, both in the arrangement of seating and often in the issues put forth by the playwrights themselves.

Though the Theater of Dionysus is structured to allow a central seating area for important religious and political figures, Wiles notes that the theater itself “was designed for the express purpose of honoring the god at his festival,”<sup>10</sup> not for any political activities, which would have taken place in the *Agora*. Though the politics of Athenian life infiltrated the festival in terms of physical seating arrangements, the presence of Dionysus’ Athenian priest and a statue of the god in the central wedge speaks to the religious nature of performance, which was most important to the Athenians. After all, Greek tragedy itself is widely agreed to be based on the Dithyramb, a sacred dance accompanied by songs that praised Dionysus. As a major part of a religious festival, then, fifth-century Greek tragedy was first and foremost intended to honor Dionysus. The plays themselves present the individual playwrights’ adaptations of Greek myth, and therefore depict an ideal world where all characters are larger than life. The characters, including the women, cannot represent actual people, since, as Aristotle famously states, “Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life.”<sup>11</sup>

Helen, as she is described in *Agamemnon*, is guilty of a serious breach of her role as a passive woman. She physically removes herself from her home and husband, but even worse, by going with Paris to Troy she makes her private indiscretion into a public matter, to the point that a decade-long war is fought over her transgression. Illuminating the shameful nature of such a war, the first reference to Helen in *Agamemnon* occurs when the Watchman calls the Trojan War, “a war of vengeance over a woman.”<sup>12</sup> For the Watchman, and later others in the play, the male, public aspect of war was, or should be, separate from any private, female connections.

Apart from critiquing the improper melding of the public and the private, *Agamemnon* also deals with the more historically pressing anxiety over the aftermath of war. In a lengthy diatribe against Helen, the same Watchman criticizes her for taking “to Ilium [Troy] destruction as her dowry [...and] daring what she should not”<sup>13</sup> when she leaves her husband Menelaus for the youthful and handsome Paris. Helen’s incorrect “daring” relates back to her abandonment of the female private space, but perhaps more significant for the Athenians in the audience of 458 BCE was the description of Helen’s destructive dowry. By this the Watchman means the many deaths that were caused by the Trojan War, both in Troy and in Greece. Here, indirectly, the Watchman blames Helen for the loss of life brought on by the war, and later in *Agamemnon* this blame becomes more explicit when the Chorus compares Clytemnestra’s actions to “the insanity of Helen: though one woman, you destroyed so many, so very many souls beneath Troy.”<sup>14</sup>

Apart from the actual deaths of Greek soldiers during the war, the Watchman also references the pain of that death may have on many, “a suffering woman with a steadfast heart. Ah—it cuts to the quick. For she knows the man she sent out; but back to each man’s home instead of men come urns and ash.”<sup>15</sup> It is the aftermath of war and its effect on the still living members of the city on which *Agamemnon* focuses, and Helen as the cause of the Trojan War also causes the post-war suffering. Two decades after the Persian Wars (499-449 BCE), Greeks, and particularly Athenians, could still clearly remember the loss of young men and the depletion of the population. For the predominately male audience watching *Agamemnon*, the Watchman’s descriptions of the after effects of the Trojan War may have recalled similar grief of lost brothers, sons, and fathers twenty years before. As David Roselli points out in his book *Theatre of the People: Spectators and Society in Ancient Athens*, the presentation of plays at competitive theatre festivals like the Dionysia depended on the presence of an audience who informally

critiqued the play among themselves, as well as the presence of the actual judges who chose the winning playwright. Thus, ancient Athenian spectators played an active role in the creation of theatre and responded actively to what was represented onstage before them<sup>16</sup> and likewise were expected to think critically about the ideas presented in tragedy. Since “Attic drama profoundly questioned and explored its society [and] the contestation, subversion, and consolidation of social norms and values were key components of the festival experience,”<sup>17</sup> it is likely that the male citizen spectators at festivals, the only audience members with the authority to judge a performance, understood *Agamemnon* as partly a remembrance and questioning of the losses experienced in the Persian Wars. Aeschylus draws a parallel between the maintaining of the *oikos* and the maintaining of Greek and Athenian peace. If Athens was to avoid another major conflict, the structure of the *oikos*, the fundamental piece of Greek life, must be of utmost importance.

The earliest extant play by Euripides is *Trojan Women*, in which the character of Helen appears only near the end but her presence and persona pervade the play. *Trojan Women* dramatizes the immediate aftermath of the Trojan War, when the wives of the great Trojan heroes are divided up and enslaved by the Greeks. As in *Agamemnon* Helen is described by the other characters as wicked for leaving her home with Paris, but in *Trojan Women* the focus is not on the destruction she has caused, but on the inappropriateness of her lustful nature. This change of focus from Aeschylus to Euripides has several possible contributing factors. Most importantly, *Trojan Women* was written and performed during the Peloponnesian War, which lasted from 431 to 404 BCE. By 415, when *Trojan Women* was written, Athens was experiencing difficulty and had lost several major battles to Sparta. Anxiety over the outcome of the war was high, and would remain so for the rest of Euripides’ career as a playwright. Pressure from the Athenian

government for citizens to marry other Athenians had increased far earlier, in 451 when a law was passed that marriages would only be considered truly legitimate if both husband and wife were Athenian citizens. Prior to 451 Athenian citizens could marry non-citizens, and any children would also become citizens. As Lin Foxhall, a Professor of Greek Archeology and History at the University of Leicester argues, the purpose of this law was to make marriage, “an institution indispensable for the transfer of both property and citizen status from one generation to the next, and thus for the replication of the Athenian citizen body and its material means of sustenance.”<sup>18</sup> With the law still in effect in 415, and the Peloponnesian War still raging, the prevalence of legitimate Athenian families was imperative for the continuation of Athenian ideals, as well as the creation of large numbers of loyal Athenian soldiers. Euripides’ attention to Helen’s sexuality likely points to distress over the possibility of Athenian citizens marrying or bearing children of non-Athenians, thus weakening the numbers of the Athenian city-state.<sup>19</sup>

At line 886 of Euripides’ *Trojan Women* Andromache, the soon-to-be enslaved widow of Hector, curses Helen for the doom she has brought upon the surviving wives of Troy by having come there. She addresses her, though Helen is not yet on stage, saying, “Die! Die, you whose shining eyes brought such dark and ugly dying to the famous plains of Troy.”<sup>20</sup> This is the first of many references to Helen’s great beauty and the destructive power it wields. Euripides consistently draws attention to Helen’s famed beauty, while Aeschylus oddly does not mention in *Agamemnon*, though it is the trait for which she is most well known. By returning again and again to Helen’s physical allure Euripides depicts Helen as a sexual creature who seduces men even within the private *oikos*. This is especially telling given that to the ancient Greeks, as Foxhall reminds us, in women “a lovely exterior is likely to be a deceptive disguise to conceal a corrupt and destructive interior.”<sup>21</sup> Laura McClure makes a similar point about the treacherous

ways of women in her discussion of the verbal persuasion employed by Athenian women; “erotic persuasion also has connotations of *dolos* [δόλος], a kind of trickery that allows one person to get the better of another who is superior in power [...] Fifth-century Athenian drama typically represents women, especially wives [...] as deploying this kind of persuasion.”<sup>22</sup> Helen as represented in *Trojan Women* fits this stereotype, and deployed such persuasion when she seduced Paris into bringing her to Troy. If, as Foxhall and McClure argue, Athenians understood female seduction and beauty as a form of trickery, the Helen Euripides’ creates in *Trojan Women* embodies this type of feminine cunning.

Euripides differs from Aeschylus in his concentration on Helen’s physical beauty, but his *Trojan Women* reflects Aeschylus’ concern in *Agamemnon* with the idea of *oikos* or public versus private spaces, as well as women’s places within each. In fact, Euripides goes further than Aeschylus to make explicit how Helen rejects her own *oikos* by leaving Menelaus. Andromache, notable for her devotion to her dead husband Hector and her virtue, expresses her commitment to her *oikos*, so important to fifth-century Athenians. She boasts that she has, “pushed away that scandalous desire to be out and about. I kept inside and made sure my house stayed clear of the gossip that passes for cleverness among women.”<sup>23</sup> In expressing her desire to be a good wife and remain in her house, Andromache is set in sharp contrast to Helen who publicly leaves her own house and in the process delivers horrors to Troy. It is effectively Helen’s fault that Andromache will become a slave to the Greeks, and in contrast to Andromache’s expression of the ideal Athenian woman, the alluring Helen is shown as deceptive and displaced from her home.

By the time Helen appears onstage in *Trojan Women*, she has been named as the cause of Andromache’s misfortune, including the destruction of her *oikos*. Menelaus too is disenchanted

with his wife. Before her stage entrance, she proclaims that he will take her away from Troy to kill her. Helen's entrance is not the joyous scene of reunion she hopes it will be; she must immediately defend her actions not only to her husband, but also to the enslaved Trojan women who have been setting Menelaus, and the audience,<sup>24</sup> up to despise her. In her own defense Helen tells Menelaus, "once brokered for my beauty, I'm hated by the very ones who ought to crown my head in gratitude."<sup>25</sup> This refers to Aphrodite's promise that Paris could have Helen as his wife, if he declared Aphrodite the most beautiful goddess. Helen's defense is that she did not dare to resist the goddess of love and is thereby innocent. An ensuing confrontation between Helen and Hecuba —the mother of Paris — reveals the way that immortal goddesses were viewed by the ancient Greeks, and granted power far beyond what Greek women were allowed.

Pointing out the differences between Athenian mortal women and goddesses, Sue Blundell contends that, "female dominance in the divine sphere [...] would be counterbalanced by the suppression of female aggrandisement in the human sphere."<sup>26</sup> For the fifth-century Greeks, Aphrodite could be active and even dominant over gods, as Athena was when she defeated Zeus for the privilege of naming the city of Athens, but mortal Greek women were expected to be submissive to the men who controlled them. Emily Kearns further explicates the traits of immortal deities, suggesting that, "goddesses represent a refraction, not a reflection, of the way men view women, a kind of subconscious 'what if' theme".<sup>27</sup> Helen's argument that she was forced by Aphrodite to fall in love and leave with Paris thus holds little significance because Aphrodite may do whatever she wants, but as a mortal woman Helen is still guilty of betraying her husband. Hecuba's rebuttal to Helen's argument goes beyond the claim that Helen's position as a mortal makes her guilty. Hecuba tells her, "you saw Paris, and instantly your mind itself turned into Aphrodite, who after all is just the name we give to lust run wild."<sup>28</sup> Hecuba's rebuke

of Helen couples her seemingly insatiable sexuality— highly improper for contemporary Athenian women—with the goddess of love herself. Hecuba reiterates that goddesses may do what they like, but that Helen must conform to social mores because she is a mortal. By acting on her lust, Hecuba points out, Helen acts as if she has the power of the goddess to do whatever she likes, but her actions, unlike Aphrodite’s, have consequences that Helen must now face. The chorus of women agree with Hecuba, cautioning, “protect your children and your homeland from the insidious bewitchment of [Helen’s] words.”<sup>29</sup> The chorus as mediator between two opposing forces<sup>30</sup> often represented correct morality, and their backing of Hecuba and condemnation of Helen suggests that Hecuba’s opposition to Helen is morally correct, while Helen’s seductive beauty is improper.

One final aspect of Helen’s characterization in *Trojan Women* concerns the audiences’ knowledge of mythology.<sup>31</sup> The educated citizens of Athens would have been familiar with the story of the Trojan War and Helen’s role in starting the war. Yet at the end of Euripides’ play, Menelaus swears he will kill his wife for her crimes, and such an act is unrecorded in the surviving mythology. In fact, Euripides’ *Orestes*, written several years later (408), shows Helen and Menelaus in Mycenae, but Menelaus does not intend to kill his wife for her crimes. Just before Helen and Menelaus depart in *Trojan Women*, Menelaus proclaims, “when we get to Argos, she will die [...] I’ll make her an example to all women to be faithful.”<sup>32</sup> How might an Athenian audience have reacted to this proclamation, knowing that Menelaus would not actually kill Helen? It might have been troubling to male audience members with wives of their own, to know that Menelaus was incapable of making an example of Helen, too infatuated with her beauty. According to Roselli, “Euripides’ slander of women [was] as pervasive as the theatre”<sup>33</sup> and this, together with his apparently extreme popularity with the audience, if not the judges,



may even have prompted *Trojan Women* to serve as a warning to the audience not to let the women in their *oikos* act outside of socially prescribed behavior, lest they become like Helen and disrupt the careful social order upon which Athenian society depended.

Euripides further explores Menelaus' apparent inability to control his wife in his 408 BCE play, *Orestes*. In the play, Orestes and his friend Pylades rage at Menelaus for refusing to testify on Orestes' behalf when he is tried and sentenced to death for killing his mother, Clytemnestra. In his fury, Orestes swears to kill Helen, whom Menelaus has brought back with him from Troy. There are many criticisms of Helen in *Orestes*, but it is the criticism of Menelaus that may have resounded most strongly with male Athenian audiences. As in 415 when *Trojan Women* was performed, by 408 the Peloponnesian War was devastating Athenian soldiers, and by 404 Athens would surrender to Sparta, never regaining its former glory. Desperate to avoid defeat, the pressure for Athenian families to produce loyal Athenian children would have been immense.<sup>34</sup> This tension is expressed in *Orestes* when Pylades, furious that Menelaus is too afraid to defend Orestes, tells his friend that he "wouldn't expect a whore's husband to be much of a man."<sup>35</sup> Along with his insult of Helen, Pylades' statement is also deeply offensive to Menelaus, because a man who cannot control his wife would have been considered less than a woman himself.

Pylades' statement points to an issue that had long plagued Greek marriages. Given that the maintenance of legitimate families was critical to the continuation of Athenian stability, the problem of illegitimate children was one Athenians worked tirelessly to avoid. There was legislation allowing a husband to kill any man he caught sleeping with his wife, as long as he acted without forethought.<sup>36</sup> The crime of adultery was a serious one to the Athenians, but it was the male perpetrator, not the wife, who could be most seriously punished. The woman would be

divorced and banned from participation in religious festivals, essentially shunned from the community, but not physically harmed. As Foxhall suggests, this disparity in punishment was due to both worries about illegitimate children and the laws that stipulated a woman's position in Athenian society as her husband's chattel. The man who committed adultery with a married woman was labeled a *moichos* (μοιχός), and, according to Foxhall, "a *moichos*, like a thief but worse, invaded another man's home, the realm of his private power. [...] The *moichos* undermined a man's control over the women of his household, especially his control over their sexual relationships. In so doing, the *moichos* also threatens succession, the capacity of the household to reproduce itself politically and sexually."<sup>37</sup> If a *moichos* slept with another man's wife, that man's future children may be illegitimate and thus their status within the *oikos* would be in doubt, should the adultery be discovered. Pylades' chastisement of Menelaus for his inability to control his wife's sexuality was not only insulting, but also cast doubt on any future children they had together.

Apart from the dangers of illegitimate offspring expressed in *Orestes*, Helen as a character provides further insight into the place of women in late fifth-century Athens. Unlike Euripides' earlier *Trojan Women*, Helen arrives onstage early in the text, giving little time for other characters or the chorus to inform the audience of the way Helen will be characterized in this particular play. Nevertheless, before Helen's appearance Electra insults her in her opening speech, calling Helen a woman, "whom the gods hate"<sup>38</sup> and "the cause of all the bloodshed"<sup>39</sup> in Troy, a sentiment the Chorus, acting as the conscience of audience, repeats throughout the play. As in *Trojan Women* and *Agamemnon*, Helen does not behave according to the mores of the time and fails to honor Electra's private grief, or to show her regret over Clytemnestra's death. Even more evidence of Helen's failure to outwardly display sorrow comes several lines later, when

Electra asks the Chorus, “did you see her, barely trimming her locks to save her looks! [...] She’s the woman she always was.”<sup>40</sup> Helen, prideful of her physical beauty, has not cut off the proper amount of hair to lay at Clytemnestra’s tomb. In claiming that such behavior is typical of Helen, Electra reinforces the audience’s perception that Helen is vain, and, as in *Trojan Women*, subtly refers to the belief that a beautiful female body disguised a corrupt soul. Helen’s inner qualities, unseen or ignored by Menelaus, are apparent to the other characters and to the audience, prompting Orestes and Pylades to try to murder her during the climax of the play.

The servant’s account of Orestes’ attempted murder may be one of the most dramatic moments in the play, but Helen’s escape reveals the most about her place in Athenian society. As Orestes is about to strike the killing blow, Helen vanishes, and later appears on the roof of the house, having been rescued by Apollo. He announces that Helen “is to have her throne by Castor and Polydeukes<sup>41</sup> in the heavens.”<sup>42</sup> For all the crimes that Helen has committed, Euripides nonetheless gives her a place among the gods as an immortal. Electra’s early claim that Helen is a woman “whom the gods hate” has been proven false. This transformation of the wicked Helen from woman into goddess saves her from Orestes and Pylades, but also grants her the power of a goddess, who does not have to answer to Athenian constraints on mortal women. Rather than punishing Helen for her faults, which in *Orestes* are many, Euripides invokes the *deus ex machina*, for which he was well known, and pardons her sins. By bestowing Helen with immortal status, Euripides does not actually make her a more noble character, but instead changes the codes that govern her behavior. For the Athenians, “marriage was regarded as the female’s ultimate and definitive destination”<sup>43</sup> and when she is mortal, Helen would have been perceived by an audience as improperly fulfilling her role as a wife. As an immortal, the pressure for Helen to act appropriately feminine<sup>44</sup> was lifted and replaced by the power to give help to

other mortals. Adapting earlier myths, Euripides transforms Helen from a shamed wife to a deity free from the trials of mortal life. Menelaus, seemingly unfazed by losing his wife, tells her, “Helen, daughter of Zeus, farewell! I envy you your happy home among the gods.”<sup>45</sup> Helen is apparently now in a position of such power that the very commander of the Trojan War envies her, though he is a powerful man and she, until her rescue by Apollo, was far below him in the Athenian social hierarchy. In 408, the Athenian audience would have understood that Helen’s change from shamed wife to heavenly deity was not a result of any inherent goodness in Helen the woman, but occurred because she was the daughter of Zeus, and as such was changed into an immortal because her life was in danger. In *Orestes*, therefore, Athenian men still perceived that control of their own mortal wives was essential to the creation of new Athenian citizens. Moreover, Helen’s new status, rather than giving women freedom from their place in the *oikos*, served to reinforce the suitability of that place for mortal women.

Written in 412 BCE, between *Trojan Women* and *Orestes*, Euripides’ *Helen* diverges radically from his other two plays in which Helen appears as a character. Rather than considering Helen’s misdeeds and her instigation of the Trojan War, Euripides relies on another myth in which Helen never goes to Troy. Instead Hera, angry that Paris had named Aphrodite the most beautiful of the goddesses, spites him by creating a phantom Helen, whom he kidnaps and takes to Troy, while the real Helen is brought to safety in Egypt for the duration of the war. In *Helen*, the title character is not an adulteress who incites war, but a loyal wife who waits seventeen years for Menelaus to find her in Egypt.

Helen in this play is not entirely innocent, as she still takes on herself the guilt of the many deaths caused by the Trojan War. Within the first few lines of the play she says, “and I, having suffered every wrong, am roundly cursed because I seem to have betrayed my husband

and kindled a great war for the Greeks.”<sup>46</sup> Helen continually proclaims herself guilty of acts done in her name, though she has no control over them. Far different from the representations of Helen in *Trojan Women* and *Orestes*, then, this version of Helen is the ideal wife. She loyally maintains her chastity while in Egypt, going so far as to sleep in the sanctuary of the late king’s tomb when his son wishes to marry her. All the while she waits patiently for Menelaus to return from Troy and perhaps rescue her, though since he has no idea that the real Helen is in Egypt and the phantom in Troy, rescue seems unlikely. As in the other plays I have discussed, in *Helen* the public and the private spheres of Athenian life are noticeable. In this play, however, their importance is reinforced by Helen’s goodness rather than her wickedness. Helen’s private loyalty to her husband is eclipsed by her phantom counterpart’s public indiscretions, as evidenced by Helen’s claim that she is, “guiltless, though the guilt belongs to me.”<sup>47</sup> For Helen, as for all those who think she is in Troy, it is her perceived, though false, guilt that is most abhorrent, because that guilt is public, while her innocence is private. She laments that, “a name can be in many places, but not the body,”<sup>48</sup> perhaps a metaphorical as well as literal allusion to the harm a woman’s bad public reputation may have on her and her household, tainting the men in control of her sexuality. Menelaus may have been badly viewed by his comrades for not punishing the phantom Helen because public perception of her private life has superseded the reality of her fidelity. In contrast to *Agamemnon*, in which Helen and her misdeeds are only discussed, not shown onstage, *Helen* reveals the grave consequences such gossip can have on Helen, who is innocent, and especially on the Greeks and Trojans who fought and died in the Trojan War on behalf of a false image.

Helen’s public self is an actual phantom made of clouds, and so all of the actions taken by this phantom are done not by Helen but by Hera who has fashioned the false self. Returning

to the Greek perception that, in women, a lovely body often acted as a disguise for a false soul, Helen's actual phantom body hides her loyal true self. There is, in effect, a reversal of the usual Greek understanding that beautiful women should not be trusted, because rather than hiding a wicked interior, the phantom Helen hides the true loyalty of the real Helen. The real Helen has no control over the phantom, because that phantom is the public representation of her love, which should remain private. Helen still claims that, "my body has destroyed the towers of Dardanus' city and the accursed Achaeans, destroyed them."<sup>49</sup> Though the Greeks in the audience may have perceived women's bodies in daily life as disguises for their true selves, in *Helen* the body seen at Troy does the opposite, seemingly showing Helen's true, disloyal self, while in reality Helen's own body, indistinguishable from the phantom, is a lovely reflection of her inner nature. The paradox between Helen's inner and outer self may be a reflection of debate in fifth-century Athens, over whether internal or external forces had more power in the shaping of a person's nature, especially women's nature. As Ruth Padel puts it, "tragedy, like the intensely controlled male society to which tragedy speaks, tends [...] to imagine innards as reactive, entered, hurting and flowing within. Like women, as men imagine them. If these innards have innate power, it is mysterious."<sup>50</sup> Helen as phantom reveals the male anxiety over mysterious female power, but tempers this concern by making the actual Helen into a model wife and woman. When Athenian male audiences were presented with the real Helen, not the phantom that appeared throughout the rest of Greece in *Helen*, they were privy to her private, inner life and saw it to be passive and unthreatening, unlike the public actions of the phantom, or of those actions by the Helen represented in *Trojan Women* and *Orestes*. On another level, we must note that all Greek actors were male, and so the audience at the Dionysian festival watched what they knew to be a man depicting a male playwright's version of a women. According to Froma

Zeitlin, “it is not a woman who speaks or acts for herself and in herself onstage; it is always a man who impersonates her,”<sup>51</sup> and Helen in *Helen* is not portrayed as a real woman, but an idealized version derived from male desire.<sup>52</sup> If those plays in which Helen appears as a wicked temptress warn Athenian men to control of their wives and ensure the continuation of their lineage, Helen in *Helen* shows the way women should ideally behave, an example that male spectators might compare to their own wives.

By making the Athenian audience privy to the true Helen’s inner thoughts, which she soliloquizes at length, Euripides presents Helen as the model woman and wife, because her inner self is an accurate reflection of her outward appearance. Thus Helen becomes almost as honorable as a man, whose outward appearance was thought to be a result of his innards; if a man was athletic and strong he was also assumed to be brave and noble. Helen’s phantom becomes the exception that proves the rule; Athenian women, like the false Helen, could not be judged based on their physical appearance, because their inner thoughts were mysterious and strange to the men who were meant to control them entirely. The real Helen, on the other hand, is transparent in her expression of her thoughts and is thus set apart from other women. The last line of the play, before the Chorus provides its final speech, tells the audience to, “go rejoicing on account of Helen’s most noble mind, something not found in many women.”<sup>53</sup> By the end of the play, Helen has shown herself to be wise, as she devises the plan to escape Egypt with Menelaus, and worthy of praise even by the Egyptian prince who wished to marry her against her will. She likely would be deserving of praise from the male spectators, for whom she represented a perfect combination of female virtue and passivity, combined with a masculine intellect.

When characterizations of Helen, such as those seen in *Agamemnon*, *Trojan Women*, and *Orestes*, are considered in terms of her virtue, Bettany Hughes points out that, “men across time

and space rush to label her a whore.”<sup>54</sup> Considering the way Helen was originally depicted in Greek tragedy is important for debunking these labels, because the historical context in which Aeschylus and Euripides were writing tells us much about fifth-century perceptions and expectations of Athenian women. In much post-Attic literature Helen’s sexuality is often demonized, but when reading the original Athenian drama it is useful to realize that Helen as we know her was not a woman in her own right, but rather a woman created by men to be viewed primarily by men. Continuing to be aware of the circumstances of Helen’s Athenian creation will help to combat widespread assumptions about Helen of Troy’s wicked sexuality and pave the way for creating an image of Helen as a woman in her own right.

Much like Aeschylus and Euripides conceived of a Helen who was constructed and represented by men, Homer created the ever-faithful Greek wife, Penelope who spent twenty years waiting for her husband Odysseus to return from Troy. Penelope was appropriated by medieval writers and made into the symbol of ideal womanhood during the English Middle Ages. But this Penelope was not the only representation created by the Greeks. There are several fragments of lost text in which Penelope was far from the faithful wife popularized by Homer. These opposing poetic traditions are often overlooked in favor of continuing the ideal of Penelope as the perfect wife. In *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, Helene Foley mentions briefly in a footnote “in the *Odyssey* Penelope’s fidelity stands out in implicit contrast to other contemporary poetic traditions in which she was unfaithful,”<sup>55</sup> but she does not mention the specific poetic traditions to which she is referring. In several alternate versions of the Penelope myth, Penelope is far from the dutiful wife, and in fact has a number of affairs with her suitors and even the god Dionysus, resulting in children who are not fathered by Odysseus.<sup>56</sup> Why, then, has the version of Penelope in the *Odyssey* survived and been adapted, while other myths



detailing a far less virtuous side of Penelope have been lost or ignored? A large part of the explanation obviously lies in the absence of physical texts. While Homer's *Odyssey* is thought to be mostly complete, written records of other narratives involving Penelope have been lost or survive only in fragments of text. The *Odyssey* offers by far the most in-depth view of Penelope from before the 5th century BCE. Nevertheless, it is likely that the three extant Athenian playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, were aware of narratives apart from the *Odyssey* that dealt with Penelope, though they have been lost to us in the twenty-first century. So why was Penelope left out, when, as evidenced by the various characterizations of Helen, Athenian playwrights were adapting their own mythology?

I posit that the absence of Penelope in Greek tragedy points to the beginning of the creation of the virgin-whore dichotomy<sup>57</sup> that for centuries has pervaded male-authored European literature and drama. Penelope is not present onstage in any extant tragedies from Athens, yet there are several references to the dutiful wife who waits at home for her husband's return, just as Penelope does in the *Odyssey*. In *Agamemnon* Clytemnestra claims that when Agamemnon returns he shall find "as faithful a wife as the one he left behind, a noble watchdog over the halls on his behalf [...] I know neither pleasure from another man nor disproving comment."<sup>58</sup> The Athenian audience, familiar with the myth on which *Agamemnon* is based, would have been aware that Clytemnestra was lying, yet she nonetheless articulates the qualities that are most desirable in a Greek wife, such as Penelope. Penelope is conspicuous in her absence because her ideal qualities of chastity and loyalty are preserved, but separate from her physical self. By the fifth-century, playwrights and poets had ceased writing about Penelope, but she existed unnamed in many tragedies as the faithful and patient wife. When Clytemnestra speaks the line quoted above, she inadvertently invokes the virgin-whore dichotomy for the

Athenian audience.<sup>59</sup> By her very presence Clytemnestra performs both the chaste and loyal wife in her speech, as well as embodying the immoral adulteress, because the audience likely would have known that she was having an affair with Aegisthus and planned to murder Agamemnon. Thus, the Penelope myth is not directly mentioned in *Agamemnon*, but still present in the description of the ideal wife waiting at home. A closer look at the qualities Homer gives Penelope in the *Odyssey* will show that she was more than a two-dimensional embodiment of female loyalty than appears in fifth-century tragedy. By focusing on Penelope, I argue that her physical absence from tragedy is a result of the increasing insistence by Athenians on the maintaining of the *oikos*, which the Penelope in the *Odyssey* upholds but also threatens.

The first sign of trouble within the household of the absent Odysseus occurs in Book 1 of the *Odyssey*. Penelope and Odysseus' son, Telemachus, harshly berates his mother about her presence in the male-dominated lower quarters of the house. He tells her to “go back upstairs and take care of your work./ Spinning and weaving, and have the maids do theirs./ Speaking is for men, for all men, but for me/ Especially, since I am the master of this house.”<sup>60</sup> Telemachus tries to assert his control over his father's household, but must show it by chastising his mother since he is unable to control the suitors who are living in the house, hoping to marry Penelope in Odysseus' absence. Apart from indicating the tension between Penelope and her son over the control of their household, Telemachus' instructions to his mother deal with the physical separation between men and women in the Greek house. Before Telemachus' outburst, a singer had entertained Penelope, her maids, and the suitors in the lower section of the house, without any indication that this was indecorous behavior for the women. It is only after Penelope asks the singer to sing a different song that Telemachus instructs her to return to the women's quarters. It was not just Penelope's presence among the men that her son found distasteful, but the fact that

she voiced an opinion about the entertainment in a male space. Telemachus makes a point to tell his mother, and thereby all the suitors present, that not only is it only a man's place to speak, but it is Telemachus' place more than the other men, because he is in charge of the household in his father's absence. Telemachus "performs" his criticism of Penelope for the suitors who have been using all the resources of the house he is meant to inherit, taking the place of the singer whose song Penelope found too sorrowful. The lines immediately following Telemachus' outburst tell us that Penelope "was stunned"<sup>61</sup> by her son's words, indicating that Telemachus is not in the habit of speaking to his mother so harshly, and lending further credit to the likelihood that Telemachus has spoken against his mother not because she is exceeding her authority in the masculine space, but to demonstrate his authority over her to the older men present. This sense of performance that begins the *Odyssey* continues throughout the poem, and is also present in the female spaces Homer speaks about. Unlike the virtuous wife idealized in fifth-century tragedy, Penelope in the *Odyssey* pushes back against her son's commands, and later her husband's, even as she maintains her status as the loyal wife, gaining renown throughout Greece for her faithfulness.

After being dismissed by Telemachus, Penelope goes upstairs to the women's quarters, but it is not to weave as her son instructed. The text reads, "she went up the stairs to her room with her women/ And wept for Odysseus, her beloved husband,"<sup>62</sup> contrary to the weaving she and her maids are meant to do. Not only does Penelope not engage in the feminine Greek craft of making cloth, she weeps for her husband against her son's wishes after Telemachus chastised her for mourning Odysseus when so many other men had died at Troy. By instructing his mother not to mourn, Telemachus puts Penelope in a difficult situation, wherein she must choose whether to

be a dutiful wife and mourn her husband or obey her son, the master of her household while Odysseus is away.

Much has been written about Penelope as a wife, and I will discuss this role at length, but the first book of the *Odyssey* concerns Penelope's role as a mother, a position that has been given less attention in recent scholarship. Nancy Felson-Rubin's book, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*, however, dedicates an entire chapter to the relationship between Penelope and Telemachus. In her introduction to this section she writes "during [Telemachus'] maturation journey, for example, Penelope—a rock of her son's trust and border of his world—becomes a near stranger, a potential betrayer of their household, held in suspicion and kept in the dark."<sup>63</sup> According to Felson-Rubin, it is Telemachus whose opinion and relationship to his mother changes as he goes through the transition to adulthood, while Penelope remains the same. That is not to say that Penelope is a static character; in fact she drives much of the action of the *Odyssey*. It is Telemachus, though, whose view of women in general changes throughout the poem. His mother is forced to respond to these changes while attempting to maintain her loyalty to Odysseus in the face of her son's pressure for her to remarry. Felson-Rubin explicitly states this when she argues, "as Telemakhos changes and the category woman' changes for him, Penelope as a member of that category changes, too."<sup>64</sup> Penelope does not interact with her husband until the book eighteen of the *Odyssey*, and so her character's interactions with men are mostly shown through those with her son and the unwanted suitors. Therefore, in order to understand the character of Penelope it is necessary to first get a sense of what Telemachus' place would have been in Greek society.

Building off the anthropologist Terence Turner's model of a boy's maturation into adulthood in a patriarchal culture, Felson-Rubin describes several steps that the boy must take.

First, he must abandon his mother and the female-centered *oikos* in which he was raised. Afterwards he must identify with his father and the male-focused world he is about to enter. In the final step, the youth must find a woman outside of his household to become his partner and with whom he can create his own household.<sup>65</sup> In book one, Telemachus is going through the first phase, and actively attempting to separate himself from the female-dominated space in which he was raised. Though he tries to separate himself from Penelope, he does this so suddenly that he startles his mother, prematurely creating a divide between them that continues throughout the *Odyssey*.

Penelope's refusal to cease mourning her husband as Telemachus has commanded is not public like his outburst, but occurs in the privacy of her chambers. Where Telemachus attempts to show the men and also the women in his household that he has moved out of childhood, Penelope has no need to show her rejection of Telemachus' instructions in such an overtly public way. Through Penelope's quiet rejection of her son's demands, the listeners are reminded that they are privy to actions and even thoughts that would normally be private. Throughout the *Odyssey*, Penelope acts as the ideal, docile wife and mother in public, but in her private female space she has the power to do what she feels necessary to maintain her household for Odysseus' return, even if those private actions are at odds with what her son, by Greek social structure the master of the house in his father's absence, tells her to do.

The dual personality that Penelope develops throughout the *Odyssey* is indicative of a far more complex character than the model wife that she becomes in later Greek drama, and especially in Medieval European literature. In the nineteenth book of the *Odyssey*, Penelope employs what is perhaps her most famous display of cunning. Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus has returned home to see for himself whether his wife has remained faithful, and to observe the

suitors feasting in his home without danger of being slain by them. Disguised, and unknown to his wife, Odysseus tells Penelope that her husband will soon return home, as foretold by a dream she has had. Though she ostensibly does not recognize her husband, for some reason Penelope proceeds to tell him that she will the next day announce a contest in which all the suitors must shoot an arrow from Odysseus' huge bow through the small handles of a row of axes. Whoever wins the contest will be allowed to marry her. Because no one but Odysseus can even string the bow, Penelope's contest is either another attempt to delay her marriage, or an opportunity for Odysseus to reveal himself by winning the contest and regaining his wife unchallenged by the many suitors in his house. In fact, it may be both, for Penelope gains either way. If no one can shoot the bow she can remain unmarried, and if a man wins the contest, it will be Odysseus. Odysseus does win the contest but it was undeniably Penelope who came up with the plan without assistance from her son or the disguised Odysseus. Thus Penelope acts as a moral wife as well as an uncommonly intelligent woman. Her intelligence makes her husband victorious, and ultimately saves her household, which she as a woman would have been responsible for maintaining. Above all, however, it is Penelope's loyalty and faithfulness that has been remembered and praised, not the cleverness that allowed her to act to save her home and remain unmarried to one of her suitors.

When Euripides wrote his plays representing the mythical figure of Helen, Athens was on the verge of defeat by Sparta. Maintaining the private space of the *oikos* was vital to Athenian prosperity. Centuries earlier, Homer's Penelope was not simply the chaste and grieving wife that Clytemnestra pretends to be in *Agamemnon*; she was a strong woman who kept to her place in her household, while actively ensuring that she had a household to maintain. For fifth-century Greeks, then, doing away with the Penelope's cunning in the *Odyssey* created the ideal Greek

woman. As such, the Athenian wife would have been docile and disinclined to undermine her husband in any way, for it was he who would fight in the war against Sparta, in a space far removed from the private *oikos*. It stands to reason that Helen was therefore a far more useful character for Euripides, because she could function as either a warning for husbands whose wives might stray from the home, or she could be molded into the model wife who worked for her household while remaining honest towards her husband. By excluding Penelope from tragedy, 5th century playwrights were able to recreate the figure as the ideal wife without concern for the ways she ventured outside of her designated private space. In contrast, Helen was often portrayed as the pinnacle of vice, the woman all Greeks should avoid. As we shall see, this idealization of Penelope continued into the Middle Ages in northern Europe, along with the representation of Helen as a lustful whore.

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<sup>1</sup> For more ancient Greek sources on Helen and the Trojan War, see Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000) and Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). For more on iterations of Helen in the West from early Mycenae to the present, see Bettany Hughes, *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* (New York: Knopf, 2005) and Laurie Maguire *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> There has been much debate about women's presence at the theatre, and so far no consensus among scholars. For the sake of brevity I will not discuss these debate, but rather proceed under David Wiles that "men alone set the agenda and debated the issues" (85) in the theatre, which was primarily for the men whose social and political stances it had the power to impact. For more information on the history of women's presence or lack thereof, please refer to the bibliography and subsequent footnotes.

<sup>3</sup> See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004) orig. c. 411 BCE. From the Funeral Oration of Pericles, "yet you who are still of an age to beget children must bear up in the hope of having others in their stead; not only will they help you to forget those whom you have lost, but will be to the state at once a reinforcement and a security." Writing during the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides quotes Pericles in the second year of the war encouraging Athenian citizens to have more children to support the war against Sparta.

<sup>4</sup> There is a wealth of scholarship about the formation of the Athenian *oikos* and public versus private spaces. Some helpful introductory texts on this discussion include James Davidson's article "Bodymaps: Sexing Space and Zoning Gender in Ancient Athens," (2011) and Lin

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Foxhall's *Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity* (2013), and David Roselli's *Theater of the People: Spectators and Society in Ancient Athens*.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz. *Greek Tragedy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008) 95.

<sup>6</sup> Sue Blundell *Women in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Lin Foxhall, *Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2013), 71.

<sup>8</sup> David Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher, (Cambridge: MIT Classics, 1994). 3.

<sup>12</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Philip De May (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> David Roselli, *Theatre of the People: Spectators and Society in Ancient Athens* (Austin: Texas UP, 2011), 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Foxhall, *Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> See also "Pericles Funeral Oration" in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, qtd. in footnote 3.

<sup>20</sup> Euripides, *Trojan Women* trans. Alan Shapiro (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 57.

<sup>21</sup> Foxhall, *Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Laura McClure, *Spoken Like A Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 62.

<sup>23</sup> Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 53.

<sup>24</sup> In ancient Athenian tragedy the Chorus often provided audiences with rational arguments in response to the main characters' emotional dilemma, and the Chorus of *Trojan Women* follows this convention in their condemnation of Helen. For more detailed information on the role of the Chorus in Greek tragedy, and their impact on spectators, see *Theatricality of Greek Tragedy: Playing Space and the Chorus* by Graham Ley and "The Chorus as Rhetorical Audience: A Sophoklean Agon Pattern" by Kevin Hawthorne.

<sup>25</sup> Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 63.

<sup>26</sup> Sue Blundell, "Marriage and the Maiden: Narratives on the Parthenon," in *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, ed. Sue Blundell and Margaret Williamson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 56.

<sup>27</sup> Emily Kearns, "The Nature of Heroines," in *The Sacred and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, ed. Sue Blundell and Margaret Williamson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 97.

<sup>28</sup> Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 65.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>30</sup> Graham Ley, *Theatricality of Greek Tragedy: Playing Space and the Chorus* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Myth as we know it was for the ancient Greeks an integral part of life and a way of comprehending the divine power of the gods and its effect on mortals. All Athenian citizens would have been taught stories, such as Helen's involvement in the Trojan War, from a young age. More in-depth analysis of the presence of myth in ancient Greek life can be found in Charles



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Segal's *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text* and John Gould's *Myth, Ritual, Memory, and Exchange: Essays in Greek Literature and Culture*.

<sup>32</sup> Euripides, *Trojan Women*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Roselli, *Theatre of the People*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> See Keith C. Sidwell's *Aristophanes the Democrat: The Politics of Satirical Comedy during the Peloponnesian War*.

<sup>35</sup> Euripides, *Orestes*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Foxhall, *Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity*, 42. C. Carey, "Rape and Adultery in Athenian Law," *The Classical Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1995): 407.

<sup>37</sup> Foxhall, *Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Euripides, *Orestes*, Trans. Frank Nisetich, (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 21.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> Helen's immortal twin brothers, fathered by Zeus. Helen herself is also Zeus' daughter, and thus part immortal.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>43</sup> Blundell, "Marriage and the Maiden," 49.

<sup>44</sup> For more on femininity in ancient Greece, see Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 130-149.

<sup>45</sup> Euripides, *Orestes*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> Euripides, *Helen*, trans. Peter Burian (Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 2007), 60-61.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>49</sup> Euripides, *Orestes*, 85.

<sup>50</sup> Ruth Padel, *In and Out of the Mind: Greek Images of the Tragic Self* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), 112.

<sup>51</sup> Froma Zeitlin, "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama," *Representations* 11, no. 1 (1985): 64.

<sup>52</sup> For more on the gendered roles of Athenian actors, see Kostas Valakas, "The Use of the Body by Actors in Tragedy and Satyr-Play," in *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of Ancient Profession*, ed. Pat Easterling and Edith Hall (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002) and David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Euripides, *Helen*, 187.

<sup>54</sup> Bettany Hughes, *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 143.

<sup>55</sup> Helene Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 304.

<sup>56</sup> See Timothy Gantz, *Ancient Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), 703-712.

<sup>57</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 6.

<sup>58</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 49.

<sup>59</sup> The relationship between Clytemnestra and Helen, both of whom bring death to their households, can be understood in terms of a triad, rather than a dichotomy. In her list of female archetypes, Case describes the "bitch, the witch, and the vamp" (318), a three-part description of the evil woman. In terms of Helen and Clytemnestra, each embodies this triad, while Penelope remains the virgin/goddess.

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<sup>60</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, Trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000) 376-79.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 382-383.

<sup>63</sup> Nancy Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 67.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

*The Recreation of Helen in Late Medieval England*

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the poet depicted Penelope as a complex character whose chastity and loyalty were not only inherent values, but were actively maintained by her intelligence and cunning. These latter traits gave Penelope a surprising amount of agency in the *Odyssey*, but, as I shall discuss in this chapter, were largely eliminated by later writers. The shift in literary texts of the character Penelope from the clever keeper of Odysseus' household to a docile and largely passive wife was solidified during the Middle Ages in England, specifically between 1100 and 1600 CE. In contrast to this change, during this period the figure Helen became an emblem of the social problems that occurred when women were raped or abducted. As in Athenian Greece, in medieval England a variety of writers portrayed Penelope and Helen in stark contrast to each other. Instead of existing as distinct characters as they did in the *Odyssey* and in Greek tragedy, before the late 1500s Helen and Penelope were used to represent social and legal mores of the times that constructed women as property that could be used for political gain and reinscribed specific roles for women.

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Since much theatre from 1100-1600, especially in the early Middle Ages, was liturgical, there is little available drama that includes either Penelope or Helen. For this reason I will not be closely examining liturgical drama, but a brief overview of women's roles in these religious plays can tell us much about the way women's bodies were represented onstage in medieval England. Analyzing the space occupied by women in cycle dramas, Katie Normington writes, "the female body has a paradoxical status within the performance of the cycle dramas. [Since] men's bodies disguised as women are important for the enactment of dramas [...] women's bodies are simultaneously absent and present on the public stage."<sup>2</sup> If, as Hanna Scolnicov

argues, the divisions between public and private in the theatre space are representative of women's place within a culture,<sup>3</sup> then the barring of women from the medieval liturgical stage in body and the refusal for their private sphere to exist onstage<sup>4</sup> is indicative of the upholding of distinction between gendered public and private spaces in religious cycle plays in the late Middle Ages. The only plays in which Penelope and Helen are mentioned comes not from the British Middle Ages but from the late sixteenth century. In Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* Penelope is named in a single line, while Helen appears onstage but does not speak. I will discuss *Faustus* later in this chapter, and will now turn to Penelope. Due to Helen and Penelope's absence from English liturgical drama, I will use examples of late Middle English poetry, in which the stories of Helen and Penelope were retold numerous times. Though the church-focused medieval stage did not allow for representation of secular myth onstage, my study will be informed by the way biblical women were represented on the English stage between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In order to consider the differences in how Penelope is constructed as a character from ancient Greece to late medieval England, I will look at David Danow's essay "Penelope and the Holy Grail," which compares Penelope's overarching presence in the *Odyssey* with the absence of women in the anonymous thirteenth-century work, *The Quest for the Holy Grail*. Danow claims that in the *Odyssey*, Penelope was Odysseus' sole reason for enduring his twenty-year journey, the physical manifestation of his purpose.<sup>5</sup> I disagree that Penelope exists in the *Odyssey* only to provide a reason for Odysseus to continue his difficult journey; as I discussed in my previous chapter, Homer's Penelope is imbued with agency and in many sections drives the action of the poem. She is far from the symbolic representation of Odysseus' ten-year journey that Danow implies. However, Danow's argument that the absence of women in *The Quest for*

*the Holy Grail* is indicative of medieval Christianity's view of women as purely symbolic vessels for the grace of God,<sup>6</sup> is well-supported<sup>7</sup> and useful in my own analysis of Penelope in English medieval poetry. Danow contends that the lack of women in *The Quest for the Holy Grail* is a result of the contemporary idea that women were, or at least should be, chaste and untouchable before marriage, and devoted to their husbands after they were wed. Women were the perfect sex who existed only to be adored; they were, in effect, considered as completely passive treasures who may occasionally be used as political pawns.<sup>8</sup> This construction of women is a far cry from how Homer scripted Penelope as a woman who took control of her household when it was overrun by suitors, unweaving her loom every night to put off marrying. His characterization was of a woman, who through her own choice and agency remained faithful to her husband. An analysis of Penelope as she appears in late British medieval literature will show that this character too was transformed from an active wife in the *Odyssey* to a trope of chastity and loyalty during the late English Middle Ages.

In my analysis of Penelope I will use two literary works in which she is mentioned. John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (c.1386-1392) contains the only representation of Penelope as a physically present character from English poetry between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Little is known about John Gower, but he was apparently a friend of Chaucer and dedicated versions of the *Confessio Amantis* to both Richard II and Henry IV<sup>9</sup> The *Confessio Amantis* itself is a 33,000 line poem that is framed by an elderly man relating his confessions to a chaplain. Within this structure, divided into eight books, are various shorter stories, each concerning one of the seven sins. Like many poems of the period, the *Confessio Amantis* functions as a series of lessons for the reader or listener, detailing moralistic tales that will demonstrate how the listener may live a Christian life. Book four of the poem deals with the sin of Sloth, and opens with a

Latin inscription, of which the final two lines read, “*Poscenti tardo negat emolumenta Cupido/Set Venus in celery ludit amore viri*” (Cupid denies his rewards to the one asking tardily, but Venus plays at merry love for one who is prompt).<sup>10</sup> In the context of love, therefore, the sin of Sloth will cause a hopeful lover to lose his<sup>11</sup> beloved. On the other hand, if he is prompt in wooing his intended, he will surely win her. The appropriateness of these lines to Penelope’s tale will shortly become apparent.

“The Tale of Ulysses and Penelope”<sup>12</sup> is the second story that appears in book four, preceded only by “The Tale of Aeneas and Dido” and the Prologue, which consists of a brief dialogue between the chaplain and the aging lover. In keeping with the advice given in the Latin inscription, the chaplain advises the lover that “The ferste point of Slowthe I calle/Lachesce, and is the chief of all,/And hath this propreliche of kinde,/To leven alle thing behinde./Of the he mihte do now heir/He tarieth al the longe yer./And evermore he seith, ‘Tomorwe’;/And so he wol his time borwe.”<sup>13</sup> (The first point of Sloth I call Procrastination, and it is the chief of all, and has this property of nature, to leave all things behind. Of what he might do here and now, he tarries all the long year, and evermore he says, ‘Tomorrow’; And so he will his time borrow”). This quality of Sloth, by which the sinner neglects his duties until the last possible hour, is afterwards illustrated in “The Tale of Ulysses and Penelope.” In this story appear the only words spoken by Penelope in any of my sources, and even here she speaks through a letter to her husband, not to the reader or another present character in the poem. The introduction of this section informs the reader that Penelope is afraid her husband is neglecting his duties as a warrior at Troy, and needlessly drawing out his separation from her, who is “his trewe wif” (his true wife).<sup>14</sup> As a result of her fear, Penelope writes to her husband at Troy, entreating him to do all he can to win the war quickly, so that he may return to her in Ithaca. The contents of

Penelope's letter demonstrate a slight, but significant difference from the description in the prologue of what might befall a procrastinating lover. The lines quoted above, and especially the Latin inscription, seem to be intended for the hopeful lover-to-be, but Penelope's letter describes the consequences for the love Odysseus has already won, should he tarry too long in Troy.

Penelope warns her husband that suitors who hope to marry her in his absence constantly woo her. She refers specifically to "their carnal desire,"<sup>15</sup> making clear the possibility of her own rape by the suitors. Women in England at this time, especially upper class women, were protected from sexual assault by a variety of laws in which their willingness or unwillingness to have sex with men who were not their husbands was a primary consideration. Unfortunately for Penelope, were she married off to one of her suitors, she would not be protected by these laws.<sup>16</sup> This lack of legal protection may be part of the reason she concludes her letter by assuring Odysseus that, "Mai no man do my chekes rede" (may no man make me blush).<sup>17</sup> Penelope must rely on her husband's swift return to save her from an unwanted marriage that could give Odysseus grounds to kill her for adultery if he should return too late, as Odysseus' return would invalidate any subsequent marriage Penelope had. This letter in *Confessio Amantis* removes all agency that Penelope was afforded in the *Odyssey*. She must plead with her husband to return to save her from her suitors, instead of employing the trick of undoing her weaving every night,<sup>18</sup> as she does in the *Odyssey*. In Gower's poem, the character is also reduced to her physical body, which the suitors desire, whereas in Homer's poem, Penelope is desired primarily because her husband will gain all of Odysseus' vast land on Ithaca. This depiction of Penelope thus equates her with her husband's earth-bound property; she derives her value from this, as well as from her power within the household. This power made her an important part of Odysseus' maintenance of power while he was physically absent. In *Confessio Amantis*, Penelope has only her beauty,

which proves to be an unwelcome virtue as it leaves her in danger of an unwelcome marriage and possible legal repercussions.

The final lines of Penelope's letter reduce her even further from her power in the *Odyssey*. She tells Odysseus, "Bot natheles it is to drede,/That Lachesce in continuance/Fortune mihte such a chance,/Which no man after scholde amende" (But nonetheless it is to dread, that Procrastination in continuance / fortune might bring about such a chance, which no man afterwards should be able to amend).<sup>19</sup> Penelope concludes with the ominous warning that if Odysseus continues to procrastinate at Troy, she will be forced to marry another man. If this happens, she cautions, no one, not even Odysseus, will be able to undo it. Penelope, as she is constructed by Gower, is utterly reliant on her husband to protect her chastity and thus her marriage. But her husband is far away, apparently consumed by the sin of Sloth and unwilling to come to her aid. She has no recourse but to write and beg him to save her, and if he chooses not to do so, it is Penelope who will pay for his "Lachesce." Gower creates the perfect Medieval wife in Penelope.<sup>20</sup> She is virtuous and loyal to her husband, even when Odysseus is so afflicted by vice that he warns against sloth in *Confessio Amantis*. Instead of the idealized Greek wife who was loyal but also able to maintain the household without her husband's support, this Penelope is Odysseus' icon of love, incapable of taking any action on her own behalf. She exists only to illustrate to men how to behave morally.

Penelope's sexuality too is strictly controlled by the men around her. She describes her suitors' lust, but never talks about her own carnal love for her husband, or even talks about herself at all, referring only to the state of women in general when they are left without protection.<sup>21</sup> She says that such women are vulnerable to men who "hope that sche wolde bowe/To such thing as his wille were" (hope that she would bow to such things as his will



were),<sup>22</sup> suggesting only the wishes of such immoral men, and not addressing the possibility of an unprotected woman acquiescing to their desires. Within this letter women are objects of desire and affection, but were not acknowledged as possessing such desires themselves. When women, such as Helen of Troy, were represented as possessing overt sexual desire, their virtue was called into question.<sup>23</sup>

Written at nearly the same time as the *Confessio Amantis*, Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Franklin's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1394-1400) briefly mentions Penelope but does not give her the opportunity to speak. Similar to *Confessio Amantis*, *The Canterbury Tales* are moralistic stories, though unlike Gower's poem they were bawdy and a source of entertainment as well as moral lessons. As with *Confessio Amantis*, the *Canterbury Tales* are compiled together into one poem with a single overarching narrator. Many current scholars, including Judith Laird, have critiqued Chaucer's treatment of women in his poetry, especially *The Canterbury Tales*. Laird aptly notes that Chaucer, "strictly limits his portrayal of goodness in women to their roles as lovers. Such a focus gives him no room to consider the identity of a woman apart from her relationship with a man."<sup>24</sup> Lair's claim, while correct, promotes a perception of medieval women that is highly patriarchal.

Chaucer was not the only male poet to write about women solely in regard to their compliance or lack thereof with cultural norms, as evidenced by my above analysis of Penelope's letter in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Gower never allows Penelope to vocalize her own desires, creating a character that depends entirely on men to have a purpose. In Chaucer, likewise, women are usually not mentioned unless it is in relation to men.<sup>25</sup> Thus, "'Lo, which a wyf was Alceste!' quod she./'What seith Omer of goode Penalopee?/Al Grece knoweth of hire chastitee'" ('Lo, what a wife was Alcestis!' quoth she. What sayeth Homer of good Penelope? All

Greece knoweth of her chastity).<sup>26</sup> It is significant that Chaucer groups Penelope and her chastity with that of another famous Greek wife, Alcestis, the subject of Euripides' play by the same name. Alcestis was the wife of Admetus, a king who was told by the gods that he would die unless someone willingly offered to die in his place. After all of the members of Admetus' family refused to die for him, his wife Alcestis offered herself to the gods, and died. In Euripides' play she is brought back to life as a reward for her loyalty to her husband. In listing many virtuous Greek women, Chaucer places Alcestis before Penelope<sup>27</sup>, thereby giving more weight to Alcestis' virtue and admirable loyalty. Penelope is renowned, according to Chaucer, not for her love of Odysseus or her intelligence, but for her chastity. In keeping with the rhetoric found in *Confessio Amantis*, "The Franklin's Tale" places the utmost value on women's bodies as the signifiers of their worth. Alcestis literally gives up her body when she dies for her husband, and Penelope's body, considered as it is only in relation to men, is kept pure while she waits for Odysseus' return. Neither Alcestis or Penelope's particular husbands are considered, though in Euripides' *Alcestis* Admetus is far from the loyal husband, remarrying only days after he told his wife he would never love another. Homer's Odysseus was chastised for his lengthy journey home to Ithaca as he was in *Confessio Amantis*. No matter their respective husbands' faults, in Chaucer too women are expected to put their husbands' wishes ahead of all other concerns. Their renown as good wives brought their husbands equal renown, because in medieval Europe, husbands were expected to control their wives in all things. A loyal wife was indicative of a strong husband, especially in medieval England, where women were thought to enjoy forceful lovers,<sup>28</sup> men who controlled every aspect of female sexuality and ignored any refusal of sexual relations.

As a paragon of medieval virtue, Penelope is constructed by Gower and Chaucer as unfailingly loyal but largely through passivity. She lacks the agency that Homer endowed her with in the *Odyssey*, and is subject to the secular laws that governed medieval women's bodies. Her brief mention in *The Canterbury Tales*, in conjunction with a mythical Greek woman who died for her ungrateful husband, demonstrates the change her character has undergone in her movement from fifth-century Greece to late medieval England. Like the Holy Grail described by Danow, two contemporary writers in medieval England (in fact, friends) create characters of Penelope as a chaste receptacle for male desire.<sup>29</sup> She fulfills her role as the ideal woman by waiting patiently, though, for Gower, fearfully, for Odysseus' return. According to Martin, "the archetypes of Eve and Mary also lend themselves to this contrast between improper and proper female behavior,"<sup>30</sup> and Penelope as she is represented in Gower and Chaucer conforms to the Mary archetype, embodying 'proper female behavior.'

A resurgence of interest in the Trojan War in England occurred around the beginning of the thirteenth century, and continued through the fifteenth. The anonymous *Gest Hystoriale*, a translation of Guido de Colonne's Italian *Hystoria Troiana*, was written sometime during the 13th century, followed by John Lydgate's *Troy Book* in the 14th century, which was itself followed by the anonymous *Laud Troy Book* in the fifteenth century. The exact dates of each poem are unknown, but each English poem appears to adapt the original *Hystoria Troiana*. Each lengthy poem tells the same basic story of the Trojan War, beginning with the legend of Jason and Medea and ending with Paris' death. Helen appears as a character in each of these poems, though the way she is created varies somewhat within the three works. She is not portrayed as the wicked temptress she was in Euripides' plays, *Orestes* and *Trojan Women*, but she is still somewhat complicit in her abduction by Paris in the three medieval works. In order to

understand Helen's position as a queen, it is first necessary to understand the way medieval law distinguished between rape and abduction.

Helen of Troy, like Penelope, also undergoes a significant transformation between ancient Greece and thirteenth-century England. Unlike Penelope, who becomes the icon of the chaste wife, the association of Helen with a recurring trope of the dangerous whore diminishes. As such, she is rarely forced to take the blame for the entirety of the Trojan War. However, she loses the majority of her agency and is instead constructed as a convenient political tool whose desires have little impact on her fate when she is absolved of complicity in her marriage to Paris.

According to Saunders, secular laws in pre-twelfth century England made clear distinctions between rape and *raptus* (ravishment). The former referred to the sexual violation of an unwilling woman, and the punishments varied over time and especially over distinctions of class. The rape of a peasant woman was at times punishable by a fine paid to her lord, while the rape of a noble woman could also be punishable by a fine, but paid to the woman herself, or it could result in castration or even execution. The crime known as *raptus* differed from rape in that it referred to the physical abduction of a woman, usually with the intent to marry her against her will. The removal of a woman from her household, especially of an upper class woman, was apparently a significant problem, though not punished as harshly as rape. A man found guilty of *raptus* was usually ordered to return the woman to her family and, if he had married her against her will and had sex with her (an act that is never defined as rape), pay a hefty fine, either to the woman or her male protector, and sometimes to both.

After the conquest of England by the Normans, which ended with England under Norman rule in 1076, these laws shifted and the crimes of rape and *raptus* were no longer distinguished. Instead, the single crime of *raptus* served to encapsulate both rape and abduction, but was

weighted increasingly heavily towards concerns over the abduction of women, with less attention paid to the rape of virgins, and almost no attention paid to the rape of women who were not virgins.<sup>31</sup> The increased concern in secular law with the physical removal of a woman from her household is indicative of the strong patriarchal traditions that were brought to England following the Conquest. As the thirteenth century progressed, English women began to be seen as the property of a male relation, usually a father or husband, and the primary concern of the law was to keep them in the physical domain of the man to whom they belonged. If a woman was a virgin she had value related to her potential for marriage, and so the rape of virgins was still punishable by castration, and sometimes also by removing the offender's eyes. A woman who was already married or was not a virgin had significantly less value and thus both secular and liturgical laws largely failed to address the crime of raping a woman who was not a virgin. Rather, these laws focused on the abduction of a woman against the will of her male guardian. Whether or not the woman herself consented to her abduction seems to have been mostly irrelevant.

The significance of *raptus* in the Middle Ages plays a major role in the depictions of Helen in the three extant poems about the Trojan War. Her consent to her abduction by Paris is either not considered or is ambiguously addressed, as in the *Gest Hystoriale*. The section titled "The Rauyshying of Elane" (The Ravishing of Helen)<sup>32</sup> uses the very word 'ravish' to describe Paris' actions towards Helen, but does not include the actual abduction. Instead, in this section Paris addresses his men onboard their ship and proclaims his intent to abduct Helen, "And Elan of all thing we aunter vs to take./Yf we þat luffly may lacche & lede vnto troy" (And Helen of all things we venture us to take. If we that lovely [woman] may take and lead unto Troy."<sup>33</sup> The fact that no actual abduction takes place in the section literally titled 'The Abduction of Helen' is

significant, because it implies that Paris' intent was all that was required for Helen to be abducted. Though the following sections describe their meeting and conversation, it appears that the poet does not consider the question of Helen's consent when he describes how Paris intends to steal her from Greece. In subsequent sections, Helen verbally asserts her willingness to go to Troy with Paris; but the attribution of ravishment to Paris' mere intent to ravish Helen gives him the ultimate power over her.

The ensuing section, entitled "The Wordes Betwene Parys & Elan at Tenydon in the Castell" (The Words Between Paris and Helen at Tenedos<sup>34</sup> in the Castle), contains what appears to be Helen's consent for her abduction by Paris. She says to him:

I wot, sir, witterly, will I or noght,  
 Your wille I moste wirke, waite I non other;  
 Syn weikenes of wemen may not wele stryve,  
 Ne haue no might tawardes men maistries to fend:  
 And nomely in an unkythe lond nedys hom so.  
 And what daunger or dysese þat done is vs here,  
 Auther me or to myne at this myschefe,  
 Hit may hapon you in haste haue suche another.  
 Thurgh giftes of our goddys, þat vs grace leuys,  
 We most suffer all hor senndes, & soberly take.<sup>35</sup>

I know sir, truly, will I or not,  
 Your will I must do, waiting on no other['s will],  
 Since the weakness of women may not well strive,  
 Nor have no might to fend off men's worthy actions:  
 And in a hostile land needs them [men] so.  
 And what danger or disease is done to us here,  
 Either to me or to mine in this mischief,  
 It may happen that you quickly have another [mischief].  
 Through gifts of our gods, that grace leaves us,  
 We must suffer all their [senndes?], and soberly accept them.

Helen addresses Paris on her own behalf, but also speaks for the other women who will be abducted by the Trojans. As a queen Helen has the authority to speak for all the abductees, but as a woman she is unable to act in her own defense. She immediately acknowledges Paris' power over her, and interestingly states that she must from this point forth do only as Paris wishes, and "waite I non other." Paris has not yet physically removed Helen from her home, but his clear intent to do so makes her acknowledge that this intent gives him absolute control over her. Thus she will not answer to another man's commands. This significant passage makes clear that no possibility of agency exists for Helen; she is automatically obedient to Paris even though her description of the dangers that may befall her and the other women indicates her awareness of her undesirable situation. Like Penelope in *Confessio Amantis*, this representation of Helen presents a female character who does not articulate her own wishes, but simply waits to be instructed by the man who claims power over her. She is a victim of *raptus*, but like the married Penelope her virginity is not in danger. This makes Paris' crime one of abduction, or ravishment. The English medieval division between public male and private female spaces is disrupted when Paris abducts Helen, bringing her into the public space at Troy.

In the medieval depictions of Helen, she is never in control of her own sexuality as she was in ancient Greek portrayals of the character, even while her beauty is lauded in a passage prior to "The Rauyshing of Elane." In fact, this section entitled "The Fairnes of Elan," describes Paris observing not only Helen's physical beauty, the description of which takes up almost 100 lines, but also her "hir pure mynde" (her pure mind).<sup>36</sup> In the *Gest Hystoriale* Helen has been rendered lovely and desirable, but only as a passive object to be coveted by men. Far from being complicit in her own abduction, as she is in Homer and in two of Euripides' plays, in these late English medieval poetic adaptations of the Trojan War, Helen is represented as the ideal

medieval woman. Like Penelope in *Confessio Amantis*, she is docile in her beauty and exists as a symbol of holy perfection that English men are expected to desire. Like a statue, Helen is unable either to consent to her abduction or to voice her objections. The anonymous translator of the *Gest Hystoriale* constructs her according to the medieval Christian ideal of women.<sup>37</sup> In the *Gest Hystoriale* Helen becomes an idealized representation of English medieval womanhood and is not blamed for the Trojan War as she was by Euripides and Aeschylus. However, when she is absolved of guilt in the *Gest Hystoriale*, she also loses the control of her physical body that she possessed in Athenian tragedy

The next extant English adaptation of Guido de Colonne's poetic treatment of the Trojan War is an epic poem written in the 14th century by John Lydgate, aptly called *Lydgate's Troy Book*. Lydgate, an English monk who lived from c. 1370-1451, covers the same events as the *Gest Hystoriale*, but his treatment of Helen differs from the 13th century poem. Where the *Gest Hystoriale* provided a lengthy description of Helen's physical attributes without considering her to actively embody those attributes, Lydgate's description harkens back to Euripides. One of Lydgate's first lines about Helen refers to her as "Pis faire Eleyne, pis fresche, lusty quene" (This fair Helen, this fresh, lusty queen)." Fresh and lusty are not favorable descriptions for a medieval woman, especially one of Helen's social status. Lydgate foregrounds Helen's sexual desire as much as it is ignored in the *Gest Hystoriale*. According to Yolanda Martín,<sup>38</sup> female sexual desire during the Middle Ages was associated with animalistic urges. A woman who desired sex as more than a method of procreation was perceived as almost demonic. This prevailing belief was derived from the original sin of Eve in the Old Testament, which forever damned women as the corrupters of men. For medieval Christians, men were the image of godly virtue, while women were constructed as Other in every way; thus, Helen's overt sexual desire



sets her in opposition to reasoned, intelligent men. This would make contemporary depictions of Helen as immoral and lacking all reason in her desires. According to Martín, “This view of feminine nature, supported ideologically on the supposed natural inferiority of women under the Edenic fall, is radicalized throughout the Middle Ages and especially from the thirteenth century.”<sup>39</sup> If Martín is correct in her argument that the late Middle Ages were marked by an increased distrust of women, and especially their sexuality, then Lydgate’s *Troy Book* falls well within the time period when the dominant Christian discourse determined that women would have been considered dangerous opposites to men. The *Gest Hystoriale* was also written in this period, but its anonymous author does not construct Helen as the dangerously lustful woman that appears in Lydgate’s text. This radical difference between the two poems indicates the continued dichotomy inherent in social attitudes toward women: those who were chaste and those marked by their lust, a dichotomy that extends at least back to ancient Greece. In England, however, that dichotomy was even more distinct as a result of the Christian idea that women were inherently immoral, and only by being subservient to men could they hope to be elevated above that low moral station. The characterizations of Penelope and the Helen in *Gest Hystoriale* achieve this ideal, but Lydgate’s Helen fully embodies the lustful and uncontrollable woman feared by the clergy of the Christian Church.

In Lydgate’s *Troy Book*, Helen’s complicity in her own ravishment serves as the ultimate condemnation of her character and solidifies her as the embodiment of medieval fears about sexual women. Conversely, as is apparent in the *Gest Hystoriale*, Helen’s willingness or lack thereof to go to Troy with Paris does not affect her actual abduction. In the *Gest Hystoriale* Paris finds Helen at the temple after deciding to seek her out, and Helen’s own presence there is not explained. In Lydgate, Helen and Paris meet before she is abducted, and together decide to find

each other at the temple later that night, in order to sail together to Troy. Once they meet there, Helen says nothing at all in the text, but is embraced by Paris and then led to his ship where, “he sette wardis to kepe hir honestly,/Whil he returneþ to þe temple ageyn/To spoyle and robbe” (he set guards to keep her honest, while he returned to the temple again to spoil and rob).<sup>40</sup> The use of the word “honest” is ambiguous, because it suggests that Paris has either set guards to keep Helen from being abducted by someone else, or that he does not trust Helen to remain on his ship. In either interpretation, Helen is deprived of agency. It may mean that Paris thinks another man might steal Helen from him because she has no way to protect herself. Or it may mean that Paris believes Helen will flee from his ship and return to her husband if she has the chance. In the latter case, if Paris does not trust Helen to remain on the ship, he may be afraid she will return to her home and to her husband Menelaus. If this is the case, then, for all of Helen’s lustful desire towards Paris, she still would be abducted against her will. Significantly, there is no mention of Helen’s wishes after Lydgate has established that she is a lustful and immoral woman who wants Paris as a lover. She becomes completely passive after her wicked feelings are divulged, remaining silent once she sees Paris in the temple. Helen’s lust for Paris does not necessarily preclude a wish to leave her husband for him. As Saunders notes, “because romance narratives [...] so frequently present desire from the male viewpoint, concepts of rape and force are never far from the surface: for example, ladies are simply informed ‘thou shalt be my lemman’, or ‘I shall thee wedde’.”<sup>41</sup> This is the case in Lydgate’s depiction of Helen, where Helen’s implied immorality associates her with immoral English women, but does not allow her to act in the way that she could as depicted and dramatized in ancient Greek tragedy. For this reason Lydgate’s *Troy Book* offers the least empowered version of Helen. In the context of medieval Christian morality she is unquestionably corrupt, but this corruption exists

paradoxically alongside extreme passivity. Because Paris is described as returning to the temple to loot after he has abducted Helen, Helen is linguistically placed alongside other stolen treasures and less notable abductee women. She, like the treasure in the temple, is stolen as an object of male desire, regardless of her overt sexuality.

The final English poem that adapts the story of the *Gest Hystoriale* is the *Laud Troy Book*, an anonymous work written sometime in the 15th century. In *The Laud Troy Book* Helen displays the most willingness to go to Troy of all the narratives, but her consent is still largely ambiguous. As in Lydgate, Helen arranges to meet Paris at the temple, this time with the implication that he will take her to Troy. Before they go to the temple they have a brief meeting, in which, “atte laste thei drowe hem nere/And spak to-gedir so In-fere,/That, er that thei thennes wente,/Thei were bothe at on assente” (At last they drew near to each other and spoke together so infer, that, before they departed, they were both in agreement).<sup>42</sup> What Paris and Helen have agreed upon is not clear, and it may be their mutual love or the decision to leave together for Troy. The second possibility is troubled some lines later, after Paris has escorted Helen to his ship. As in Lydgate’s narrative, the author has associated Helen linguistically with other stolen items and captive women. The poem reads, “And Paris toke that lady swete/And led hir to his schippis schete,/And left hir there in the same kepyng/And other fele with hir wepyng” (And Paris took that lady sweet and led her to his ship’s port, and left her there in the same place [as the looted treasure], and other beautiful women with her wept).<sup>43</sup> If Helen has willingly left her home, it makes no sense for her to be weeping with other abducted women, so it seems that the agreement between Paris and Helen is only the acknowledgement of their mutual affection, not Helen’s consent to be abducted from her home. Again, as we have seen in Lydgate’s portrayal, Helen’s desire for Paris does not necessarily make her complicit in her own abduction. *The Laud*

*Troy Book* clearly presents Helen as a woman who does not wish to be ravished, no matter what she may feel for Paris. In her chapter on Helen of Troy Saunders points to this unusual construction of Helen's desire without consent to being abducted as recurrent in medieval poetry about the Trojan War. According to Saunders, much attention is paid to Helen's role as a tool for Paris' social power, and this aspect of her abduction is never reconciled with her willful desire for him. Helen may agree to demonstrate her love for Paris, but she never agrees to be used as a pawn for Paris' larger political aims. Saunders sees recurrent in many medieval literary texts this difficulty between apparently thrilling romance and the constant but unspoken threat of rape or abduction of women who hold significant social power for men. Saunders contends that by reading such literature with an understanding of the status of female bodies in the Middle Ages, "we become aware of how readily the negative side of *raptus* may be concealed or forgotten through the evocation of the susceptible and desirous nature of women, a stereotype that allows for the rewriting of force as romance."<sup>44</sup> All three of the narrative poems I have discussed romanticize Helen's abduction. The latter two implicitly blame Helen for her own non-consensual ravishment by setting her up as an immoral and lustful woman. Late medieval English poetic adaptations of the Trojan War largely perpetuates the stereotype of Helen as a wicked whore, while denying her the agency she possessed in various dramatic and epic narratives from ancient Greece. I have shown that in several English poems which portray the legendary characters of Helen and Penelope, Penelope as wife and woman becomes the locus for a continued dichotomy of "whore" and "virgin," for even though Penelope is not a virgin, she represents the chaste yet life-giving virgin/goddess figure posited by Sue-Ellen Case. In several key narratives, Penelope as a character loses the power with which Homer once endowed her in the *Odyssey*, becoming the paragon of a faithful but docile wife. In the poetic adaptations of the

Trojan War I have discussed, as well as in Chaucer and Gower, Penelope and Helen both represent the correct space for women in late medieval England. Their bodies are used by English poets to reinscribe English medieval Christianity's placement of women within the private domestic sphere.

At the end of the English Middle Ages, in the early seventeenth-century, there are two extant plays in which Helen appears. The first is William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1602) where Helen is onstage in one scene near the middle of the play, though she is discussed throughout. As in ancient Greece, during the early English Renaissance all actors were male, and so the Helen presented to Shakespeare's audience did not observe Helen as a living woman, but as a theatrical idealization of female beauty portrayed by a man. As such, Helen the character has little to say when she is onstage, and is frequently interrupted by the male characters with whom she shares the stage. Helen enters the stage about forty lines into Act Three, scene one, accompanied by Paris. She asks Pandarus to sing a song, and the two exchange several lines about whether Pandarus should sing for Helen before or after he conducts his official business with Paris. Helen seems supremely unconcerned about Pandarus' need to discuss the ongoing war with Paris, and insists that Pandarus sing for her, asking "let thy song be love. This love will undo us all. O Cupid, Cupid, Cupid!"<sup>45</sup> Helen is thrilled to learn that Cressida is in love with Troilus. She cares little for the strategizing that Pandarus and Paris discuss in the same scene. Shakespeare creates a Helen who is happily in love with Paris and apparently guileless in her joy, unlike the Helen in Lydgate's *Troy Book*, who is overtly and inappropriately sexual. In *Troilus and Cressida* Helen may be aware of her own beauty, but it is her love for Paris, not lust, which incites the Trojan War. For this reason, Shakespeare's Helen is not associated with the animalistic female passion that plagues the character in Lydgate's *Troy Book*, but she does not

escape use by Paris as a political tool.

In Act Four, scene two, Paris asks Diomedes, one of the Greek commanders, who he thinks deserves Helen most: Menelaus or Paris. Diomedes replies by saying that both Menelaus and Paris are equally deserving of Helen, for “she’s bitter to her country. Hear me, Paris:/ For every false drop in her bawdy veins,/ A Grecian’s live hath sunk; for every scruple/ Of her contaminated carrion weight,/ A Troyan hath been slain.”<sup>46</sup> Diomedes describes Helen as poisonous to whichever country holds her. The joyful love she showed for Paris in the previous act is questioned by Diomedes’ speech; and her very presence is cited as the cause of bloodshed. As in Greek tragedy, in this scene Helen’s physical presence is not required for male characters to disparage her, but Diomedes’ words do more than chastise Helen for violating the private space of her home with Menelaus. They ostracize her from Troy, where she currently resides, and from Greece, where she will return at the end of the war. By making her physical body available to Paris, and also to the gaze of the other male characters who appear onstage with her, Shakespeare’s Helen excludes herself from re-entering the private sphere she has abandoned. In leaving her home, she gives herself up to the power of the men she encounters. Paris makes her position as property clear after Diomedes has spoken, saying, “Fair Diomed, you do as chapmen do,/ Dispraise the thing that they desire to buy,/ But we in silence hold this virtue well,/ We’ll not commend what we intend to sell.”<sup>47</sup> Paris accuses Diomedes of speaking ill of Helen because he wants her for himself, just as customers disparage a merchant’s wares to try to get a lower price. He goes on to remind Diomedes that shady merchants have similar tricks, talking up the value of an item they wish to sell. With his with his last line, Paris continues his comparison of Helen to a merchant’s wares by saying that he is above such tricks like praising Helen before he sells her to another man. Despite her appearance earlier in the play, in this scene Helen is

reduced to property that can be haggled over, and whose worth can be determined by either the man who wishes to sell her, or the one who wants to buy her. In either case, Helen as a character is indicative of seventeenth-century England's construction of women as property, who should, and often are in idealized roles onstage, be under the control of men.

Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*<sup>48</sup> is the only extant theatrical work from this period that includes both Helen and Penelope. Published for the first time in 1604, *Faustus* is technically on the cusp of the English Renaissance, but Marlowe's construction of Helen and Penelope has many similarities to English medieval poetic representations of the two women. In Marlowe's script Helen appears only towards the end of the play, and Penelope once again is referred to as the perfect medieval wife. The play's theme of demonic corruption affects all the women who are portrayed, and provides a fascinating image of the way female sexuality was viewed onstage in the late 1500s in England. Far from the absent women in liturgical cycle plays, the women in *Faustus* are not only physically present onstage, but their sexuality is represented for the audience, by male actors, as a fantasy that does not parallel actual English Renaissance women.

At first glance the mention of Penelope appears similar to the other instances I have discussed. Mephistopheles speaks of a woman "as chaste as was Penelope,"<sup>49</sup> once again reducing Penelope to her most iconic and passive attribute. A closer examination, however, reveals that the woman to whom Penelope is compared is a theoretical courtesan that Mephistopheles promises to acquire for Faustus. He tells the doctor that he will find the loveliest courtesans "and bring them every morning to thy bed./She whom thine eye shall like, thy heart shall have,/But she as chaste as was Penelope."<sup>50</sup> Mephistopheles claims that his demonic power could corrupt even Penelope, the most chaste of all mythical women. In addition to serving as

proof of the demon's power, this line suggests that every human, even the virtuous Penelope, can be swayed to vice by the devil. In her essay, "Within the Massy Entrails of the Earth': Faustus's Relation to Women," Kay Stockholder notes that the images of women who Faustus desires never materialize within the play, and even his kiss with Helen moments before his death is immaterial. Nonetheless, Stockholder argues that the recurring association of women with a sublime and untouchable beauty does not excuse them from the sinfulness of their sexuality. According to Stockholder, "this sublimated sexuality is still thought of as leading to hell, which contains the more immediate, and therefore uglier, images of closer relationships and sexuality."<sup>51</sup> The idea of Penelope's very chastity is tarnished, then, when brought up in the context of the carnal relationships that occur in hell. The virtue she was given in Gower and Chaucer has been corrupted by the physical presence of demons within the play who are capable of ruining her virtue. Marlowe's *Faustus* cautions the audience about the corruption all humans face from demonic forces, but the women are primarily corrupted through their sexuality, while the men, especially Faustus, is corrupted through his greed for power as well as his lust. Martín compares medieval females' sexuality to the terrifying demonic forces that circulated throughout Europe during the Middle Ages in texts like the *Malleus Maleficarum*.<sup>52</sup> Female sexuality was seen as animalistic and even monstrous, both desired and reviled by men who perceived women as constantly in danger of reverting back to nature in which they supposedly existed as horribly sinful creatures, unrestricted by the constraints of Christianity.<sup>53</sup> If the character Penelope can be corrupted by Mephistopheles, then the very ideal of the chaste woman is unstable with woman always on the verge of devolving into a demonic frenzy of lust.

The doubt that Marlowe casts on Penelope's chastity early on in Act Two is a precursor to Helen's appearance on stage at the end of the play. In an astonishing turnabout, it is Helen who is



absolved of all lustful corruption, while Penelope's virtue remains tenuous. Mephistopheles parades Helen once across the stage in front of Faustus' fellow scholars, who exclaim, "no marvel though the angry Greeks pursued/With ten years' war the rape of such a queen,/Whose heavenly beauty passeth all compare."<sup>54</sup> The word "rape" is significant because it implies that Helen was unwilling in her abduction by Paris, and the word also makes violent her sexuality by insisting that she was raped by Paris, not merely ravished or subject to *raptus*. Her function as a political tool, so prevalent in the Troy poems, is absent in Marlowe's *Faustus*, replaced by a male gaze that perceives and desires her sexually, not politically. Helen's overt sexuality, which she does not act on in *Faustus*, is seemingly incorruptible. I posit that this is a result of her physical presence onstage, where she can be viewed and controlled by men. Helen would also have been played by a man, and so her sexuality is a mere representation and thus entirely created and contained by the actor. Penelope, on the other hand, does not appear onstage and so continues to exist outside of and uncontrolled by the male gaze, hence the possibility for her to be corrupted by Mephistopheles.

Faustus' embrace of Helen as his last impulsive action before his death reinscribes the idea of masculine control of Helen's body and sexuality. Faustus asks her, "was this the face that launched a thousand ships,"<sup>55</sup> placing the blame for the Trojan War not on Helen herself, but on her physical body, which, in the context of the play, she cannot control. Helen does not even have a voice with which to reply to Faustus' question; and he implicitly answers it himself when he says that, "heaven be in these lips,"<sup>56</sup> and thus the godly power to topple Troy. Even as Helen exists onstage as a creation of satanic power, her docile presence and passivity imbue her with a virtue she is not granted in medieval English poetry of the Trojan War. If heaven is in her lips it is because her lips, and the rest of her body, are controlled by Faustus as well as the male actor

playing Helen. Entirely created and portrayed by men, Marlowe's Helen is more noble than even Penelope.<sup>57</sup>

The depictions of Helen and Penelope in late medieval English poetry provide new characterizations of the two mythic women, but in doing so perpetuate the virgin/whore dichotomy that emerged in many dramatic and epic portrayals of these women established in ancient Greece. In each poem I have chosen to analyze the women appear to be confined not only to their prescribed sides of this dichotomy, but are further constrained by the Christian morality of the time. This morality insisted that women were either ideal specimens of passive virtue or, failing in any way to attain this perfection, were debased or fallen women and immoral whores. Even in the one instance where Helen achieves the perfection of virtue, the *Gest Hystoriale*, she is nonetheless abducted against her will in order to fulfill her role as Paris' political tool against Greece. In Marlowe's drama, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, Helen and Penelope's scripted and set roles are broken, but only so that they can be inverted, with representations of Penelope becoming the woman ruled by vice, and Helen transformed into the perfect woman, easily dominated by every man she encounters. English poetic representation of Helen and Penelope, though it offered new perspective on these two women, is limited by the overarching authority of the Catholic church, whose dogma prescribed controlling female desire and their physicality. Instead of creating works about Helen and Penelope that expanded on the characters created by the ancient Greeks, the authors I have considered further restricted them. In the next chapter I shall discuss the ways that the myths of Helen and Penelope created and perpetuated in Greece, and subsequently molded into their current form during the Middle Ages, are being reconsidered today through a feminist lens to construct new versions of Helen and Penelope. In contemporary representations of these seminal female figures, we will see

portrayals of women who act with agency and power of their own, rather than merely recreating the norms of the patriarchal cultures in which they were crafted.

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<sup>1</sup> Corrine Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Katie Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 76.

<sup>3</sup> Hanna Scolnicov, *Women's Theatrical Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama*, "male forces are the centre of the special world of the cycles. Women lie on the periphery," 77.

<sup>5</sup> David Danow, "Penelope and the Holy Grail," *Semiotica* 2003 no.144 (2003): 67.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See Barbara A. Hanawalt, 'Of Good and Ill Repute': *Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) and Theresa Coletti *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Women in late medieval England were largely confined to the home so that they could be more easily controlled by men, both socially and sexually. Their removal by men from this private sphere was disruptive of domesticity, and was usually undertaken with the man's intent to use the stolen women to gain social power. See Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama*, 81, as well as Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in Medieval England* (New York: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 187.

<sup>9</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000) 59-64.

<sup>10</sup> All translations from *Confessio Amantis* are from Russell A. Peck's edition.

<sup>11</sup> I say "his," rather than "his or her," because the advice for lovers to pursue a potential paramour without hesitation was intended for men. It would have been unthinkable for a proper medieval woman from England to pursue a man she desired.

<sup>12</sup> Subheading provided by Peck. The original text was only divided into books.

<sup>13</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, Book 4, 4-10. NB All citations from late Middle English poetry will include line numbers rather than a page number.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>16</sup> Saunders, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 185.

<sup>18</sup> Penelope tells her suitors that she cannot marry until she weaves a burial shroud for her aging father. Every night she secretly undoes her weaving, managing to put off choosing a suitor to marry for several years, before her ploy is discovered.

<sup>19</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 186-189.

<sup>20</sup> Gower's women are mostly virtuous, but this virtue helps the men in *Confessio Amantis*, not the women themselves. Gower "finds more potential in women as objects rather than the agents of authority, making womanhood serve an important social and narrative function by embodying

the effects of moral and immoral actions,” Tara Williams, *Inventing Womanhood: Gender and Language in Later Middle English Writing* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2011) 52.

<sup>21</sup> Female sexuality was seen as uncontrollable and threatening, especially in medieval English Christianity which ascribed the biblical Eve’s sins to all women. Gower’s Penelope remains within the prescribed female role of passivity. See Carole Rawcliffe, “Women, Childbirth, and Religion in Later Medieval England,” in *Women and Religion in Medieval England*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2003) 91.

<sup>22</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 162-163

<sup>23</sup> Hanawalt notes that, “to be ‘of good repute’ meant living by the community norms and to be ‘of ill repute’ removed social protections from the miscreant,” Hanawalt, ‘Of Good and Ill Repute’, 14. Helen’s sexuality labels her a woman of ‘ill repute’ and, as we shall see, she is physically removed from the safety of her home.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Laird, “Good Women and Bonnes Dames: Virtuous Females in Chaucer and Christine de Pizan,” *The Chaucer Review* 30, no. 1 (1995): 58.

<sup>25</sup> See Margaret Hallissy, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer’s Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct* (London: Greenwood Press, 1993) 64.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd ed. Ed. Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor (Buffalo: Broadview Press, 2012) *The Franklin’s Tale*, 1442-1444. All translations of *The Canterbury Tales* are from Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor’s edition.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Saunders, 191.

<sup>29</sup> For more on female sexuality in Chaucer, see Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer’s Women* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 218.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>31</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment* 52.

<sup>32</sup> Translations of the *Gest Hystoriale* are my own, with the help of the glossary in Rev. Geo. A. Panton and David Donaldson, *Gest Hystoriale* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2006), Orig. 1869.

<sup>33</sup> Guido de Colonne *Gest Hystoriale*, trans. Unknown (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1992) Orig. Thirteenth-Century. 3179-3180.

<sup>34</sup> Tenedos is an island in the northern Aegean.

<sup>35</sup> *Gest Hystoriale*, 3321-3300.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 3091.

<sup>37</sup> Danow, “Penelope and the Holy Grail,” 67.

<sup>38</sup> Martín, “The Servants of the Devil: The Demonization of Female Sexuality in the Medieval Patristic Discourse,” *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 3, no. 2 (2013): 48-66.

<sup>39</sup> Martín, “The Servants of the Devil,” 48.

<sup>40</sup> Lydgate, *Troy Book*, 3844-3846.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>42</sup> *The Laud Troy Book* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1992) Orig. 15th century, 2805-2808.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 2889-2892.

<sup>44</sup> Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, 186.

<sup>45</sup> William Shakespeare, “Troilus and Cressida” in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 110-111. All citations from *Troilus and Cressida* include line numbers.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-73.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 76-79.

<sup>48</sup> I have chosen to use the A-Text from 1604 in my analysis, as many scholars agree that the 1604 text was likely to one performed, while the 1616 B-Text may be an extension made by another author after Marlowe's death. Some scholars, however, contend that the B-Text is the original, while the A-Text is an abbreviation of Marlowe's longer script. I am not qualified to decide either way, and so will use the version most likely performed for an audience.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2005), 152. All citations of Faustus include line numbers, not page numbers.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 150-152.

<sup>51</sup> Kay Stockholder "Within the massy entrails of the earth': Faustus Relation to Women," *A Poet and a Filthy Play-Maker: New Essays on Christopher Marlowe*. Ed. Kenneth Friedenreich, Roma Gill, Contance Brown Kuriyama. (New York: AMS Press, 1988), 207.

<sup>52</sup> Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers, (New York: BiblioBazaar, 2008). Orig. 1486. This text, also known as the Witches' Hammer, was originally published in Germany and in it Kramer worked to prove the existence of witchcraft, an issue which was hotly debated by the church at the time. Most famously, he described ways of identifying and prosecuting witches. The *Malleus Maleficarum* is thought to have been one of several factors leading to widespread witch-hunts in late fifteenth-century Europe.

<sup>53</sup> Martín, "Servants of the Devil," 49.

<sup>54</sup> Marlowe, *Faustus*, 27-29

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>57</sup> For more on women in the early Renaissance English theatre and Marlow, see Alison Findlay and Stephanie Hodgson Wright's *Women and Dramatic Production 1550-1700* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000).

*Adapting Helen and Penelope for a Twenty-first Century Audience*

Penelope and Helen of Troy have been re-created in opposition to each other in Western cultures over again since the ancient Greeks first told their myths. Both of the periods I have examined constructed Helen and Penelope according to the male gaze, alternately desiring and vilifying Helen, while reducing Penelope to a mere symbol of idealized femininity. In my final chapter I will look at the ways Helen and Penelope have been constructed by dramatists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the United States and Canada, in order to determine if the virgin/whore dichotomy that has been established historically for the characters recurs in contemporary drama, or if this dichotomy has been resolved. In my discussion of the female physical body and her position in private versus public masculinized spaces, I will show how third wave feminism relates to my study in its critique of cultural feminist antecedents.

In *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*, Josephine Donovan claims that, “resistance to the tyranny of monolithic concepts became the central concern of feminism at the end of the twentieth century.”

<sup>1</sup> I posit that the creations of Helen and Penelope already discussed in the previous chapters are monolithic concepts, because they were originally created in the strict patriarchy of ancient Greece and remade under Christian dogma in the English Middle Ages. The plays I will discuss in this chapter each trouble the ancient constructions of the two women, though not all of the plays may be seen as a direct attempt to recreate them in a way that is helpful in promoting third-wave feminism.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the first play I will address has never been considered a particularly feminist work, but reading it through a third-wave feminist lens can reveal the way Helen of Troy as a dramatic character began to diverge from her Greek origins as early as the 1930s.

Jean Giraudoux's *La Guerre De Troie N'Aura Pas Lieu*, written in France in 1935, was translated into English in 1955 by Christopher Fry and alternately called *Tiger at the Gates* or *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*.<sup>3</sup> Fry's translation premiered in New York in 1955 to favorable reviews, with one reviewer noting: "it is a terrifying drama about the inevitability of war and, as such, it could be as horribly timely as tomorrow's headlines."<sup>4</sup> Though Giraudoux was writing after WWI, a time period that explains the play's focus on the futility of war, its New York premier in 1955, less than a decade after the end of WWII, as well as the review in *Variety*, points to the continued concern in the United States about the World Wars that had dominated the first half of the twentieth century, as well as with the advent of the Cold War around 1947. In 1955, tension over the United States' hostile relations with Communist countries was high, and in February of that year an article in *Time* quoted a fighter pilot saying, "we are not out looking for a fight. But if trouble is brought to us, I want every pilot ready to meet it."<sup>5</sup> The title of this particular article, *If Trouble is Brought to Us*, is telling, as it adds to the American fear that the Cold War could turn into outright violence at any time, as noted by the *Variety* reviewer of *Tiger at the Gates* who predicted that the play's production in 1955 could prove even more timely if "tomorrow's headlines" announced the outbreak of war.

The play itself centers on the women of Troy shortly after Paris and Helen have arrived in the city. The women lament the pain that war brings and resolve that they will convince Helen to return to Greece of her own free will, thus avoiding a war when the Greeks come to Troy to claim her. Performed in the United States in 1955 and again in 1968, the massive Gates of War that remain open for almost the entire play would have been a physical reminder of the ongoing Cold War that was to continue until 1991. In my analysis of Fry's translation I consider Helen's presence in the play, and her interaction with the other characters, especially Hector and Paris. A

review of the 1968 New York production of *Tiger at the Gates* describes Helen as a “dumb, dumb blonde, more waitress than temptress; far from launching a thousand ships, it appears doubtful whether she could pilot a coffee cup across a hash house,”<sup>6</sup> and the text of Fry’s translation supports this interpretation. Helen is incapable of speaking for herself, parroting the words of whichever man is addressing her. She tells Paris and Hector what they want to hear, even though her promises to each man are at odds with each other, and cannot both be kept. For example, she tells Paris that she will remain in Troy, while assuring Hector she will return to Greece.<sup>7</sup> Despite the Trojan women’s attempts to convince Helen to return to Greece, Helen herself is given very little agency. In both the 1968 *Time* review and *Variety* in 1955 Helen is described as stupid or “empty-headed.”<sup>8</sup> From a third-wave feminism perspective, however, Helen could be seen not as stupid. Instead, her characterization is indicative of the treatment of women in the United States by the majority of male playwrights of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> In *Tiger at the Gates* the decision to go to war over Helen has nothing to do with the woman herself, but stems entirely from the Greek and Trojan men’s desire to go to war with each other and win glory, no matter the reason for the conflict. Helen is merely a pawn for Paris, who has removed her from her private place in Menelaus’ household. In current feminist scholarship, the distinction between the public and the private space is being troubled, and Helen’s position as an excuse for war in *Tiger at the Gates* can be interpreted through such problematizing arguments to reveal the theoretical role of women in the wars of the twentieth century. We see this in Donovan’s work, where she states that today, “the public-private division and the traditional ascription of women to certain functional roles within the private sphere remain at the heart of current debates in feminist jurisprudence.”<sup>10</sup> As I have established in my previous chapters, Helen has historically emblemized women’s roles in the private sphere of ancient Greece and



medieval Britain. She has also been represented as an example of the chaos that can result from the violation of the private space, whether by a male outsider or the woman herself. If, as Donovan claims, the legalities of women's place in the public and private spaces of North American culture are still being debated today, then reading Fry's translation of *Tiger at the Gates* with an eye to Helen's role in these spaces reveals how Helen, as a dramatic character, is constructed according to a male understanding of the public and private space. An analysis of Helen as she was depicted in 1955 will be useful in comparing twenty-first century feminist dramatic retellings of her story to her characterization in *Tiger at the Gates*, as I will do later in this chapter.

As in medieval Britain and ancient Greece, Helen's significance in *Tiger at the Gates* is confined to her willingness or lack thereof to accompany Paris to Troy. When asked by his brother Hector if he took Helen by force, Paris replies, "listen, Hector! You know women as well as I do. They are only willing when you compel them, but after that they're as enthusiastic as you are."<sup>11</sup> According to Paris, Helen is not unique in her response to her own abduction, but represents all women. Paris establishes his control over Helen's desires, arguing that as a man he knows better than any woman what women desire. Paris' response carefully avoids Hector's actual question, "How did you fetch her away? Willingly, or did you compel her?"<sup>12</sup> This question does not help the audience to figure out what Hector may mean by "compel." Paris asserts that all women must be compelled, so he must have done so to Helen, but does "compel" mean to persuade with loving words? Does it mean that Paris convinced Helen of her own desires, thereby taking control of them, convincing her to leave Menelaus for him? Or is it a delicate phrasing used to disguise the fact that Paris took Helen by force? Any interpretation is possible, and all have literary precedence. The importance of this particular line to my study lies

in the fact that it does not actually matter whether Helen left Greece willingly. Paris and Hector are debating the free will of a woman whose consent is never required for the action of the play to progress. As with her dialogue with Paris later in the play, these lines indicate Helen's absolute acquiescence to Paris' desires, regardless of her own wishes. She is utterly without her own will: the Trojan men fabricate her supposed agency in leaving Greece with Paris as a tactic for inciting war with the Greeks.

In Giraudoux's original play, and in Fry's translation, Helen's inability to speak with her own voice is used as an example of what Giraudoux sees as the male fascination with war, which in *Tiger at the Gates* takes advantage of women's place in the private space in order to create a public war. Giraudoux and Fry's re-creation of Helen as a 'dumb blonde,' exists solely to emphasize the ridiculous nature of war created by men hungry for fame and control. From a feminist perspective, however, the senseless Helen may be read as an example of how strict divisions in the twentieth-century US between the masculine public and the feminine private spaces privilege the public space to the detriment of the population, male and female. A careful reading of *Tiger at the Gates* in the context of third-wave feminism reveals that, even though Helen lacks her own voice and is a mere pawn for the men around her, Giraudoux and Fry have placed all of the Trojan women in opposition to the men who want the Trojan War to take place. This opposition belies an ideological struggle between public and private spaces. The struggle is not resolved, because at the end of the play it is determined that the Trojan War will occur. The very supposition by Giraudoux and Fry that war results from male power in the public space, however, is dangerously close to the upholding of strict divisions between men and women that were present in ancient Greece a move towards the creation of a theatrical space that can collapse the separation between the private feminine and public masculine spaces. Though not intended as

a feminist work, *Tiger at the Gates* overtly raises important questions about the harm that may ensue when women are relegated to the household and only brought into the public sphere as tools through which corrupt men like Paris can create conflict for their own gains.

In *Tiger at the Gates* Helen appears as a docile character, repeating the words Paris instructs her to say in a parrot-like manner, but immediately afterwards refuting her words by agreeing with Hector that she should return to Greece. In her interactions with the male characters, Helen is like a blank slate onto which they can map their desires. Not only does she lack agency, she lacks personality. She has been reduced entirely to her physical body, which is used as a tool by both the Trojans and the Greeks to incite war. Despite the fact that Helen's lack of action presents a version of the character that is troubling to feminists today, it serves to define Helen as a mere object constructed by the men around her for their own aims. These aims are more indicative of the violence that can be caused by excessively patriarchal cultures, just as the ancient Greeks supposedly engaged in a ten year war over Helen's body, than of Helen's own place as the instigator of the Trojan War. In *Tiger at the Gates*, Helen's body is of utmost importance, but is completely separate from her own desires, which are not considered by the men who interact with her. When, at the end of the play, Odysseus comes from Greece to retrieve Helen, he threatens war if Paris has corrupted Helen's honor by having had sex with her. Claiming that it would be easy to tell if Helen has been disloyal to Menelaus, Odysseus says, "water leaves less mark on a duck's back than dishonor does on a woman."<sup>13</sup> Helen's willingness or lack thereof is unimportant. Only her physical body is required to determine if her honor is intact, and this determination will decide whether or not the Trojan War will occur. Helen's chastity is assured when she remains in the private space of her husband's household, but as soon as she leaves it her physical body becomes endangered and subject to use by any man she

encounters in the public space of Troy. Third-wave feminists unanimously consider male control of women's physical bodies problematic, but there is a fierce and ongoing debate about the presence of women in pornography,<sup>14</sup> and whether pornography can ever be created without forcing women to become objects of the male gaze.<sup>15</sup> Fry certainly was not wondering about this split when he translated *Tiger at the Gates*, but looking back on his translation, it is possible to find within it elements of the debate that is currently raging on between Third-Wave feminists. The way that Giraudoux and Fry after him treat Helen's physical body as the sole indicator of her worth echoes in the protests of contemporary anti-pornography feminists, who, according to Jill Dolan, are often aligned with cultural feminists in the belief that, "the insertion of power into social, political, and sexual situations automatically establishes a hierarchy that leads to violence against women."<sup>16</sup> The placement of Helen in a charged political situation where she has no power does not lead to physical onstage violence against her as today's cultural feminists might warn, but her existence outside of her private home as Paris' mistress does result in threats against her by Odysseus who, after comparing dishonored women to ducks (as stated above), promises war if Helen has not remained faithful to Menelaus. As we know from Homer's *Iliad* and many ancient Greek tragedies, depictions of the Trojan War and its aftermath include much violence towards the women of Troy who are raped and taken as slaves after Troy falls. In *Tiger at the Gates*, then, we may argue that cultural feminists and anti-pornography proponents may be justified in their warnings that the sexualization of women for male pleasure has the potential to lead to violence against women in general.

Apart from its stance on pornography and the physical body, cultural feminism relates to this study in another way. Dolan follows her association of anti-pornography feminists with cultural feminists by noting that cultural feminists, "tend to valorize what they see as innate,

biologically based differences between men and women. Women as the life source, for example, and men as destructive warmongers.”<sup>17</sup> This essentialist<sup>18</sup> viewpoint is noticeably present and defended in *Tiger at the Gates*, in which almost all the male characters clamor for war, while the female wives and mothers argue for peace and the return of their men to the household.

Giraudoux’s method of dividing “war-hungry” male characters from the grieving women reinforces his critique of war itself, especially the reasons for which war is waged. Upon learning that Hector—the only male character to align himself with the women and argue rationally for peace—has convinced Helen to return to Greece with Odysseus, the Trojan men summon the character Busiris, an expert in matters of international law, to find a reason for going to war with the approaching Greek embassy. Busiris complies and tells Hector that the Greeks, “have hoisted their flag hatchway and not masthead. A ship of war, my dear Princes and colleagues, hoists its flag hatchway only when replying to a salute from a boat carrying cattle. Clearly, then, to so salute a city and a city’s population is an insult.”<sup>19</sup> Busiris’ circuitous and somewhat ridiculous logic for interpreting the Greek approach as a reason for war reveals the flimsy excuses on which the male Trojans are willing to rely in order to go to war with the Greeks. The Greek men too, upon arriving at Troy, are more than willing to accept any excuse for declaring war against Troy. Giraudoux’s male characters, then, are exactly the warmongers that Dolan claims are envisioned by cultural feminists. The playwright sets up these men in opposition to the life-giving Trojan women, who only wish to protect their families from another devastating war that will inevitably lead to the deaths of many sons and husbands. By creating an almost essentialist struggle between men and women as well as between the private space (the household) and the public space (the battlefield), Giraudoux perpetuates the separate male and female spaces that were the

foundation of fifth century Athenian society. In doing so, he supports their continued existence, because the feminized private household is the only opposition to the destructive Trojan War. When read with an eye to Third-Wave feminism and its criticism of cultural feminism, however, the play shows the beginning of a shift in the representation of Helen as something more than a wicked temptress. At the same time, we grasp an awareness of the continued existence of separate male and female spaces in the United States. As I will discuss next, this shift in view is strengthened in two twenty-first century plays that adapt the myths of Helen and Penelope for distinctly feminist aims.

In her seminal text, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon investigates the ways in which texts, paintings, and videogames have been adapted. In her chapter “Who? Why?” she suggests that one of the reasons that artists adapt texts may be as a type of tribute to another artist or to a work that has significance for the adaptor. Neither of the two plays I will consider was intended to acknowledge the original Greek myths of Helen or Penelope. Instead, the plays use the myths of Helen and Penelope to “supplant canonical cultural authority,”<sup>20</sup> creating new versions of the mythic women who react against the patriarchal ancient Greek society that created them. In this way, the two adapted characters resist the way that they have been memorialized throughout history as the cause of the Trojan War as the chaste and passive wife and the adulteress.

Mark Schultz’s 2005 play *A Brief History of Helen of Troy, or Everything Will Be Different* premiered in April of 2005 in New York City at the Soho Repertory Theatre. According to a publicity description the play was “inspired by Euripides but with its sights set firmly on contemporary America [...] *A Brief History of Helen of Troy* is an unsettling and startlingly authentic examination of complacency culture and the politics of beauty.”<sup>21</sup> The play

is notably referred to as “inspired by Euripides,” rather than an adaptation. This is a small but significant difference between *A Brief History* and the two other plays considered in this chapter. Schultz is not trying to recreate the story of Helen of Troy, as the subtitle *Everything Will Be Different* suggests. Instead, his play uses the myth of Helen’s incomparable beauty as a springboard to explore the effects such an obsession with beauty might have on American teenagers.

Charlotte, the play’s protagonist, is a fifteen-year-old high school student whose beautiful mother has recently died. The play is divided into four Parts and a Prologue, with each part introduced by Charlotte who reads aloud sections of a speech she has written about her idol, Helen of Troy. Charlotte is obsessed with being perceived as just as astonishingly beautiful as her mother by everyone around her, from her father to her guidance counselor. At first Charlotte appears to be a typical teenager, who fights with her father, who is grieving the loss of his wife, and thus unable to relate to Charlotte. By Part Two the audience discovers that Charlotte is an incredibly unreliable narrator. The scenes in which Charlotte is sexually desired by her male guidance counselor, a popular football player at her school, her close female friend, and even her own father, turn out to be figments of her imagination. It is unclear whether or not Charlotte is aware that all of her sexual interactions (with those around her) occur only in her mind. As the play progresses, however, she becomes increasingly focused on being told by the other characters that she has managed to emulate her mother’s beauty.

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler discusses the way that gender is performed, not as an innate set of codes for separate genders, but as constructs of the social worlds in which the human body exists. She writes, “this ‘body’ often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source figured as ‘external’ to that body.”<sup>22</sup> In *A Brief*

*History* Charlotte relies entirely on such external cultural sources, in the form of her family and peers, to let her know that she is performing her gender correctly, and even excelling at such a performance. Within her own mind Charlotte creates the validation that she does not receive in the real world to assure herself that she is a sexually desirable woman in all aspects of her life. She is at all times aware of her own physical body and goes to great lengths to ensure that her appearance satisfies the sexual desires of everyone in the play, even if she herself does not desire them sexually.

Charlotte's sexuality, like Helen's in *Tiger at the Gates*, is not revealed to the audience. Where Helen lacked any of her own desires and became a pawn with which Paris could incite the Trojan War, the characters with whom Charlotte interacts give her ample opportunity to express her desires, whether or not they are specifically sexual. Her guidance counselor Gary asks her what career she would like to pursue, and Charlotte tells him "so like, seeing as I'm made for sex? I'm gonna be in porn."<sup>23</sup> Despite Gary's insistence that he will not help Charlotte pursue a career in pornography and his attempts to guide her towards a career, "a teacher maybe. [...] Do you like math?"<sup>24</sup> Charlotte is fixated on a future as a porn star. Her reasoning for this choice demonstrates her astonishing reliance on the male gaze referenced by Dolan. In arguing for a female gaze in spectatorship, Dolan summarizes the presence of the male gaze in cinema, writing, "women are fetishized as objects to be looked at [...] feminist readings of film spectatorship emphasize that classical cinema constructs the spectator as male, leaving female spectators few—and unsavory—options for how to position themselves within the cinematic experience."<sup>25</sup> With her wish to be a porn star, a genre that almost always fetishizes women for male spectators,<sup>26</sup> Charlotte willingly places herself in a position of passivity in relation to men. She tells Gary that she wants to be in porn because then, "I will be so beautiful. Like my mom.



You seen my mom? No. [...] I'm gonna be beautiful. And you're gonna want me."<sup>27</sup> Charlotte's need to relate to her dead mother is transformed into an obsession with emulating her physical beauty, but she can only be reassured that she has succeeded by subjecting her body to the gaze of male viewers. The only wish that Charlotte expresses throughout the play is to be wanted, a passive grammatical construction that delivers all her self-worth into the hands of the watchers.

Instead of adapting the myth of Helen of Troy, Schultz uses an historical focus on Helen's beauty to explore the detrimental effects that an obsession with beauty can have on young American women. By interweaving Charlotte's speech on Helen throughout the play, Schultz constantly reminds the audience that Charlotte reveres Helen in the same way that she revered her mother, and in fact sees herself as Helen's own little-known daughter, Hermione.<sup>28</sup> In Charlotte's speech, separated into four parts, the audience is privy to Charlotte's inner thoughts that are not expressed elsewhere in the play. While Charlotte tells anyone who will listen that she wants to be as beautiful as her mother, in her speech she reveals her grief at losing her mother, just as she imagines Hermione may have felt without Helen when she left with Paris for Troy. She says, "there's Helen. More beautiful than ever. Radiant in the midst of every horror. Smiling at catastrophe. And on the other side of the world. Still alone. Still in her room. Her daughter. Hermione."<sup>29</sup> If her mother is Helen, then Charlotte sees herself as Hermione, almost nonexistent in the shadow of her mother's great beauty, but desperate to connect with her even though she is absent. All of Charlotte's interactions with the other characters, then, are her attempts to reclaim her lost mother by becoming her. To this end she tries every possible method to make herself desirable to the people she knows; and it is these attempts to become beautiful, so important to female teenagers in North America, that Schultz explores and critiques.

A review of the New York production at the Soho Theatre calls *A Brief History*, “a bitterly funny, wounding story of contemporary teenage malaise.”<sup>30</sup> I do not think that Schultz has treated the American obsession with female beauty as blithely as is suggested by the phrase, “contemporary teenage malaise.” The need to be perceived as beautiful by others is not limited to Charlotte. Her friend Heather, who is apparently one of the most beautiful people Charlotte knows, constantly gives her advice on how to look prettier and make other people, especially men, find her attractive. In one scene Heather instructs Charlotte in using makeup, telling her, “beauty should be your habit. You have to get over this product aversion or whatever. Product is your friend. Read the label and apply. Easy.”<sup>31</sup> For Heather and eventually Charlotte, beauty can be found in makeup and skin products when it is not present in the physical body. Just as Charlotte applies skin care products to conform to Heather’s idea of beauty, so she attempts to manipulate the characters around her into telling her how she can seem beautiful to them. Far from the average American teen’s wish to be pretty, Charlotte’s fascination with beauty results in near-hallucinations in which she vividly imagines encounters with the other characters where her physical beauty is affirmed through their sexual desire for her. Her reliance on the male gaze for validation is so strong that she creates elaborate fantasies where her need for reassurance is satisfied.

It is important to note, however, that Charlotte is often told that she is beautiful in scenes that occur in reality, not in her imagination. Even in the scene where Heather helps her to apply beauty products, she later assures Charlotte that, “I am so lucky to have such a pretty friend. And this is the truth. When we’re done? Everyone will know how pretty you are.”<sup>32</sup> Though Heather does perpetuate the play’s emphasis on physical beauty, she assures Charlotte that she is beautiful before Charlotte actually applies any makeup. So Charlotte is in fact receiving

validation of her beauty by someone she trusts, but not the level of validation she craves in her attempts to be as beautiful as her mother, or Helen of Troy. If the play is accurate in its title, *A Brief History of Helen of Troy*, then Charlotte herself would represent Helen, even as she struggles to attain her mythical beauty. As the reviewer of a 2010 Chicago production noted, “heaven help the girl who buys into [beauty] magazines’ degenerative gossip.”<sup>33</sup> As I have established in the previous chapters, Helen, created as she was by various patriarchal cultures, represented images important to those cultures of an ideal, beautiful woman. She also served as a warning of the danger that could occur if such beauty exists outside the private space of the household. Charlotte wants to become the ideal of the beautiful Helen of Troy so often described in English medieval poetry, instead of being Hermione. As a result, she buys into the aggressive marketing of beauty to young women in the United States. In doing so she attempts to turn herself into Helen of Troy; a mythical woman whose most remembered quality is a beauty controlled by the men who occupied the public spaces she was forbidden to inhabit. Though Schultz’s play is nowhere referred to as feminist, his critique of the American fixation on female beauty, to the detriment of his play’s protagonist, offers a salient view of the emotional and psychological harm that can be done to women when the male gaze is the sole arbiter in determining their beauty, and thus their value.

I have discussed Penelope and Helen of Troy in relation to their dichotomous construction in literature as virgin and whore, as well as in relation to their existence within or outside of the private household space usually attributed to women in Western patriarchal cultures. I now turn to a third space, not public or private, but something in between. The notion of a space that rejects the opposition between the public and the private was first theorized as an aspect of linguistics, not in relation to theatre. Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* (1994),

presents a solution to the struggle between public and private, positing the existence of a “Third Space,” which he describes as, “the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.” He goes on to suggest that “by exploring this Third Space we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.”<sup>34</sup> Using Bhabha’s theorization of this space, I will consider how Margaret Atwood’s play *The Penelopiad* serves as a small step towards dismantling the opposition between the public and the private, which has been the foundation of these two women since they were created in ancient Greece.

Atwood’s play *The Penelopiad*<sup>35</sup> contains several elements from Linda Hutcheon’s definition of an adaptation. It pays tribute to the *Odyssey* by acknowledging its significance in Western culture. Moreover, it adapts the story to retell it from Penelope’s perspective in an effort to question the authority of the *Odyssey*, while presenting an alternative story which gives Penelope back the voice that she was denied in Greek tragedy and in pertinent examples of medieval British literature. The play is adapted from Atwood’s novel of the same name. The novel lends itself well to theatre, as it is constructed in a highly-dramatized form, with scenes narrated by Penelope interspersed with poetry by the Maids, who form a sort of Greek chorus. The play keeps this format and includes the Maids as the Chorus in the character list, but most significantly assigns all the roles except for Penelope to the Maids. Thus, the actual staging of the play<sup>36</sup> involved only female actors who portrayed all of the male characters, a fascinating reversal of the historical portrayal of Helen and Penelope by male actors. This production choice already gives rise to the inclusion of Bhabha’s Third Space. The female actors literally take over the public space of performance, certainly not revolutionary in 2015, but also control the depictions of male characters who existed in the public space of the ancient Greeks without

concern. By casting the same actresses who play Penelope's maids— women who in the *Odyssey* were expected to help Penelope maintain her household, in these male roles— Atwood's play creates a Third Space between the public and the private, in which traditionally silent characters from the *Odyssey* are not only given a voice, but speak with the voices of their oppressors.

To fully understand the significance of the Maids in *The Penelopiad*, it is necessary to briefly summarize their presence in the *Odyssey*. Of the fifty women who serve in Odysseus' household, twelve are named by Odysseus' elderly nursemaid as having “shamed this house”<sup>37</sup> and dishonored Odysseus by sleeping with the suitors who overran his household. When Odysseus returns home to Ithaca and slaughters the suitors in his home, he instructs his son to take the twelve disloyal servants and make them clean up the blood and bodies of the dead suitors. After the house has been cleaned, Odysseus tells Telemachus to bring the maids outside and, “slash them with your swords until they have forgotten their secret lovemaking with the suitors. Then finish them off.”<sup>38</sup> Telemachus, having taken the maids outside, decides that death by the sword is too clean for “the suitors' sluts”<sup>39</sup> and instead hangs them all. The final mention of the twelve maids concludes with, “it was a most piteous death. Their feet fluttered for a little while, but not for long.”<sup>40</sup> In this section of the *Odyssey* the twelve maids are silent while Telemachus is all-powerful in his decision to put them to death by hanging them in the courtyard, a public symbol of their indiscretions. Atwood undoes this silence by having her Maids play all the parts of *The Penelopiad* except Penelope. In doing so she liberates them from their quiet public hanging and brings them into the Third Space, between public and private, in which they quite literally “emerge as the others of [them]selves” and combine their place in Odysseus' household with the authority that he and other ancient Greek men exhibited in the public sphere.

In Atwood's play, Penelope herself supplants Odysseus as the protagonist of the story, and tells the story of her life, from her birth as the daughter of a king and a Naiad, to the death of her twelve faithful Maids by Odysseus' order at Telemachus' hands. Though the Chorus of Maids, and often Penelope herself, act out the action Penelope describes onstage, she is telling her story from the Underworld. The play interweaves scenes from her life with those from her afterlife in the Underworld, where she has a peaceful, but dull existence. Penelope's physical body, so important to the preservation of her virtue in the *Odyssey*, does not actually exist in *The Penelopiad*. As a result, Penelope in Atwood's play exists outside of the control of the men who confined her in the *Odyssey*. She is literally present in a space apart from the one she occupied in life, and thus removed from both the private *oikos* and the public life of Athenian men. This space is not truly *inbetween* the public and the private in the sense of Bhabha's Third Space, but nonetheless exists outside of it in a non-realistic world where distinctions of public and private do not apply. From this space Penelope can tell her story free from the restrictions of ancient Greek culture, especially considering that Atwood set *The Penelopiad* in an undetermined time, but with textual indicators that Penelope addresses the audience at the exact moment that she is onstage, such as the moment when Helen speaks from her bath in the Underworld: "you wouldn't have any idea of how exhausting it is, having such vast numbers of men quarrel over you, year after year."<sup>41</sup> This means that if the play were performed at the present moment, she would exist in 2015, having experienced all the years between now and the time when Homer lived, around 1100 BCE.

In *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case describes the differences between the private and the public lives of ancient women, stating that in the 1970s, feminist scholarship came to realize that "public life is the property of men, and women are relegated to the invisible private

sphere. As a result of the suppression of real women, the culture, such as fifth-century Athens, invented its own representations of the gender, and it was this fictional ‘Woman’ who appeared on stage.”<sup>42</sup> As such a fictional ‘Woman’ in the *Odyssey*, Penelope personifies the ideal wife, not the woman who would really have lived in the hidden, private sphere of Greek life. Atwood’s adaptation of Penelope, therefore, creates the invisible Penelope who does not appear in Homer. The playwright uses her novel and subsequent play to explore the ways that she may look back on her life from a space outside of both the public sphere in which she appears in epic poetry, and the private *oikos* where, if she had been a real Greek woman, she might have dwelled.

As an adaptation of a specific aspect of the *Odyssey*, *The Penelopiad* deals mainly with the relationship between Penelope and her Maids. According to Atwood’s retelling of the legend, Penelope’s twelve maids were born around the same time as her son Telemachus, and the children grew up together in Odysseus’ household, though the Maids were servants, and Telemachus heir to Odysseus’ land and wealth. In life the Maids are unfailingly loyal to Penelope, assisting her as she works to dissuade her unwelcome suitors. In one heart-wrenching scene, the Maids allow the suitors to rape them to prevent them from discovering Penelope’s nightly unweaving of her father-in-law’s shroud. The Maid’s collaboration with Penelope to save her from marriage to one of her suitors is unknown to anyone else. As a result, they endure horrible treatment from the other servants and Telemachus, who believes them to be betraying his father’s household by sleeping with the suitors. Despite the harsh treatment they receive while protecting Penelope, the Maids remain loyal to her until they die. Their pact with Penelope to fool the suitors allows Atwood to create for them a physical space within the house in which no one else intrudes, where Penelope weaves. She reflects on this space from the Underworld: “we told stories as we worked away at our task of destruction; we shared riddles; we made jokes.

We became like sisters.”<sup>43</sup> Penelope and the Maids create a space that is technically within the house, yet separate from regulation by men and the expectations of the *oikos*. This may be exemplified through her act of undoing her weaving of the shroud—a literal destruction of one of Greek women’s main tasks with the home. This represents yet another “Third Space,” which serves to liberate Penelope from the reinscribed standards imposed upon her by Homer in *The Odyssey* and subsequent Greek.

Atwood’s creation of separate spaces for Penelope and her Maids, which allow them to exist without adhering to the strict distinctions of public and private realms, may be interpreted as a strongly feminist use of adaptation and Bhabha’s Third Space in her creation of Penelope as an actual woman whose experiences do not exist solely to uphold the distinctions of public and private so imperative to Greek society. Though such a re-creation of space is useful in crafting Penelope as an individual character, this Third Space does not extend to every character. Most importantly for my study, this space is not extended to Helen. For the first time in North American adaptations of Penelope and Helen, the two women appear onstage in the same play, and interact with each other. However, though Atwood troubles the idealized version of Penelope so prevalent in Greek and medieval literature, she perpetuates the stereotype of Helen as a lustful woman whose beauty is her only virtue.

The first time that Helen and Penelope talk to each other in *The Penelopiad* is the day that Penelope marries Odysseus. Helen, already married, tells her cousin,<sup>44</sup> somewhat spitefully, that Odysseus will make a good husband. Helen says, “they say he’s very clever. And you’re very clever too, they tell me. So at least you’ll be able to understand what he says. I certainly never could!”<sup>45</sup> Atwood sets Helen up as a foolish and excessively vain woman, who takes pleasure in asserting the superiority that her beauty grants her over Penelope. As in *Tiger at the*



*Gates* and *A Brief History of Helen of Troy*, in *The Penelopiad* Helen's beauty is her defining characteristic, dictating how she relates to the world she inhabits. Whenever Helen appears a herd of admiring men follow or watch her, something she enjoys immensely. While Atwood creates a Penelope who bucks her original existence as the ideal, loyal wife, the playwright's version of Helen is disappointingly stereotypical and completely reliant on the male gaze to assure her worth. Robert Emmet Meagher posits that of all the versions of Helen that have been created throughout history, "the many facets and faces of Helen have come down to two. The one is bright, provoking desire and joy. The other is dark, provoking hatred and grief."<sup>46</sup> Atwood's Helen provokes neither joy nor grief: she is an annoyance to Penelope in the afterlife, wrapped up in her own immortal beauty.

Atwood refrains from constructing Helen as the wicked temptress on whose head must fall the blame for the Trojan War, the writer does set her in direct opposition to Penelope, entitling the scene when Penelope finds out that Odysseus must sail to Troy, "Helen Ruins Penelope's Life." This scene includes a somewhat adolescent outburst against Helen that does not carry the weight of the entire devastating Trojan War, but rather Penelope's anger at her cousin. The scene ends with Penelope shouting after Odysseus, "Helen! Wicked cousin Helen. Helen the lovely, Helen the irresistible, Helen the septic bitch, root of all my misfortunes. Helen should have been kept locked in a trunk in a dark cellar because she was poison on legs. Then everything would have been *fine!*"<sup>47</sup> Penelope's outburst does not have quite the same impact as some of Euripides' plays, in which Helen is threatened with death for supposedly causing the Trojan War. Nonetheless, Helen and Penelope's confrontation contributes to the construction of Helen as the faithless strumpet and Penelope as the chaste wife, even though the majority of

Atwood's play works to undo earlier interpretations of Penelope's place in drama and literature as the ideal wife.

Helen is not included in the separate space that Penelope and her Maids occupy, nor does she benefit from the non-corporeal sphere of the Underworld, where she walks around trailed by lovesick men. Penelope gains agency from her lack of a physical body in the Underworld, as well as from her existence in both her life and afterlife of a separate Third Space free from the constraints of the public or private spheres. Meanwhile, however, Helen, who also lacks a physical body in the Underworld, persists in her enjoyment of the male gaze even when it is impossible for that gaze to manifest itself in a physical way. Where *The Penelopiad* creates new spaces for Penelope that subvert the patriarchal confines in which ancient writers created the character, Atwood's contemporary focus on Helen's physical beauty prevents her from also escaping the tradition in which she was made.

In a review of a 2010 production of *The Penelopiad* in Calgary, Alberta, Tina Lambert writes about the play: "Atwood subverts the authority of the myth and reclaims Penelope's legend as contemporary literature, exploiting many of the conventions of ancient Greek theatre to allow populations marginalized by gender and class to redefine their relationship to canonical texts."<sup>48</sup> Atwood's contribution to theatrical adaptation most certainly works against the canonical constructions of Penelope, as well as her Maids, but it also supports the ancient dichotomy made between Penelope and Helen of virgin and whore, archetypes which are, as Case points out, part of the "surplus of misogynistic roles"<sup>49</sup> found in canonical texts.

The three plays I have considered in this chapter each contribute to the rejection of traditional representations of Helen and Penelope, though only *The Penelopiad* claims this as its overarching purpose. The problems of these women's physical bodies and their presence in the

public and private spheres, as well as in what I have shown as the newly-created Third Space, are addressed in each play, but not always overtly or purposefully. Atwood's *The Penelopiad* provides us with a forward-looking model upon which future adaptations of Helen and Penelope, and of many other mythical women, might take in order to truly break away from the traditional constructions of ancient Greek females. Only in this way may playwrights and writers recreate these quintessential characters as women with the power to subvert proscribed social and cultural spaces

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<sup>1</sup> Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 183.

<sup>2</sup> Third-Wave feminism, usually considered our current wave, seeks to give a voice to those who were ignored during the first two waves, especially women of color, transgender women, and queer women. It also seeks to reclaim female sexual power from its restricted history in patriarchal cultures. For more on the third-wave see Shelley Budgeon's *Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* as well as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. For more on First and Second Wave feminism see Josephine Donovan's *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions*.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Giraudoux, *Tiger at the Gates*, trans. Christopher Fry (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1955).

<sup>4</sup> Hobe, "Tiger at the Gates," *Variety*, October 5, 1955, 64.

<sup>5</sup> *Time*, "If Trouble is Brought to Us," February 14, 1955, 128.

<sup>6</sup> *Time*, "Tiger at the Gates," March 3, 1968, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Giraudoux, *Tiger at the Gates*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Hobe, "Tiger at the Gates," 64.

<sup>9</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 2nd ed., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 28.

<sup>10</sup> Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 185.

<sup>11</sup> Giraudoux, *Tiger at the Gates*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Giraudoux, *Tiger at the Gates*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Giraudoux, *Tiger at the Gates*, 60.

<sup>14</sup> Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 2nd ed., (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2012), 59.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the male gaze see Dolan, as well as Naila Kabeer, *Global Perspectives on Gender Equality: Reversing the Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 60- 61.

<sup>18</sup> Briefly define essentialist feminism and then...For more on cultural and essentialist feminism, see Butler, as well as Teresa Brennan's "Essence against Identity."

<sup>19</sup> Giraudoux, *Tiger at the Gates*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2013), 93.

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- <sup>21</sup> Mark Schultz, *A Brief History of Helen of Troy, or, Everything Will Be Different*, (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2005).
- <sup>22</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 1999), 164.
- <sup>23</sup> Schultz, *A Brief History of Helen of Troy*, 35.
- <sup>24</sup> Schultz, *A Brief History of Helen of Troy*, 36.
- <sup>25</sup> Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 48.
- <sup>26</sup> Refer to Dolan, 61.
- <sup>27</sup> Schultz, *A Brief History of Helen of Troy*, 37-38.
- <sup>28</sup> Hermione was Helen's daughter by Menelaus, and she eventually married Orestes. She is rarely mentioned in Athenian tragedy, though she does appear in Euripides' *Orestes* and *Andromache* (425BCE).
- <sup>29</sup> Schultz, *A Brief History of Helen of Troy*, 90.
- <sup>30</sup> Matt Wolf, "Haunting 'Helen.'" *Variety*, November 2005, 57.
- <sup>31</sup> Schultz, *A Brief History of Helen of Troy*, 42.
- <sup>32</sup> Schultz, *A Brief History of Helen of Troy*, 43.
- <sup>33</sup> Paige Listerud, review of *A Brief History of Helen of Troy*, by Mark Schultz, *Chicago Theater Beat* (2010).
- <sup>34</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 56. Original italics.
- <sup>35</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, (London: Faber, 2007).
- <sup>36</sup> The *Penelopiad* premiered in Stratford-upon-Avon, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company. I have chosen to use *The Penelopiad*, despite its British premiere, in my study because Atwood is a Canadian writer who often visits and lectures in the United States, and because *The Penelopiad* has had success in Canada, as well as having been performed in the US by the Pacific Conservatory Theatre in Santa Maria, CA.
- <sup>37</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000). 349.
- <sup>38</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 350.
- <sup>39</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 350.
- <sup>40</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 351.
- <sup>41</sup> Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 42.
- <sup>42</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 2nd ed., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). 6.
- <sup>43</sup> Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 54.
- <sup>44</sup> Nowhere in Greek mythology are Helen and Penelope related, Atwood has created their relationship as cousins.
- <sup>45</sup> Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 17.
- <sup>46</sup> Robert Emmet Meagher, *Helen: Myth, Legend, and the Culture of Misogyny*, (New York: Continuum, 1995). 49.
- <sup>47</sup> Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 35. Original italics.
- <sup>48</sup> Tina Lambert, Review of "The Penelopiad," *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 4 (2010) 673-675.
- <sup>49</sup> Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 6.

### Conclusion

Each play I have dealt with in Chapter Three is meant specifically for the stage, created by a single playwright who adapted the myths of Helen and Penelope. All three plays trouble the ways Helen and Penelope have been constructed by male playwrights and played by male actors: however, they are all confined to the physical theater space where Helen and Penelope have so long existed as fantasies of womanhood, not real women. In attempting to locate the attributes of actual women within the myths and adaptations of Helen and Penelope, it is useful to go beyond the physical theater space and enter other spaces. The *Penelope Project*, with which I began my thesis, is ostensibly the first example of theatre for social change to deal with Penelope as a living woman, not a representation of ideal female virtue constructed by men. The project takes place in assisted living facilities and nursing homes, and works with the elderly inhabitants to create a script that brings Penelope out of the pages of Homer's *Odyssey* and places her in the real world. The primary concern of this project is not Penelope's struggle as a woman in a patriarchal society, but her silence in waiting for Odysseus' return from Troy. Much of the *Odyssey* tells Penelope's private, inner thoughts, but she is largely silent about them and portrays docile femininity to her son and unwanted suitors. Likewise, in the culmination of the first *Penelope Project*, the script created by members of the Sojourn Theatre and nursing home residents investigated Penelope's voice, and vocalized her long-silent thoughts. The final performance was aptly named *Finding Penelope*, as the *Penelope Project* seeks to find Penelope's voice in the *Odyssey*, as well as the often-disregarded voices of the elderly who live in long-term care facilities.

The *Penelope Project*, while not intended to overtly trouble Penelope's construction by male writers in patriarchal cultures, does significant work in demonstrating the relevance of her

story to North American culture today. The collaborative nature of the *Penelope Project* and the creation of a devised script allows the often quiet voices of nursing home residents not only to be heard, but heard telling their own adaptations of Penelope's story. By moving from analyzing Penelope as merely an ideal wife to creating her as a real woman whose story has contemporary relevance, the *Penelope Project* advocates for theatrical intervention in fostering the unheard stories of ancient women and the silenced, personal stories of elderly Americans. Through such cultural and political theatre, the stories of Helen, Penelope, and other mythical women constructed as archetypes, rather than actual people, may be meaningfully adapted to promote social change. It is high time that Penelope and Helen cease existing only in idealized and unrealistic roles and are, and are re-adapted as real women.

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