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**'As Meeke as Medea, as Honest as Hellen':**  
**English Literary Representations of Two**  
**Troublesome Classical Women, c.1160-1650.**

**Katherine Heavey**

**PhD Thesis**

**Durham University Department of English  
Studies**

**December 2008**

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- 5 MAY 2009

**Thesis Abstract: 'As Meek as Medea, as Honest as Hellen': English Literary Representations of Two Troublesome Classical Women, c.1160-1650.**

My thesis considers English literary representations of two notorious classical women, Helen of Troy and Medea, from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries. My primary focus is on the ways in which male authors in the period deal with the troubling spectres of the women's very different powers: Helen's alarming and captivating sexuality, Medea's magical abilities and unrestrained violence. First tracing how their power is represented in classical and late antique Greek and Latin texts, I then assess how their stories enter the English literary imagination. My project considers both longer renderings of their stories (Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Lydgate's *Troy Book*, Heywood's *Ages*) and also the brief references to both women that recur time and again in the works of authors including Chaucer, Hoccleve, Gascoigne, Turberville and Greene. My research spans genres and media, considering the various uses the women are put to (didactic, cautionary, tragic, occasionally comic) in history, prose, poetry and drama, as well as in direct translation of classical works. Very often, authors use Helen and/or Medea ironically, in a way that demands a close familiarity with their classical incarnations (particularly, perhaps, with Ovid). Often paired as well as treated separately, Helen and Medea are used across the period to exemplify the unhappy effects of love, the dangerous effects of passion, and perhaps most frequently, the peculiar dangers women pose to men. Though their literary incarnations have often been considered separately by critics, by handling them together my research considers the way authors such as Chaucer, Lydgate, Gascoigne and Turberville choose their classical exemplars very carefully, how two apparently quite different notorious women may be turned to the same ends, used to caution both men and women. Taking their power, and concerted male efforts to undermine it, as its overarching theme, the thesis considers Helen and Medea in relation to medieval and Renaissance theories of translation, to instructional, didactic or cautionary literature, to Christianity, to political and religious upheaval, and most significantly, in relation to the male establishment of the period.

My thanks are due to my two supervisors, Dr Robert Carver and Professor Corinne Saunders, for their help and advice throughout the project, and for checking Latin and Old French translations. Thanks also to Jon Carter, Romain Fournier and Laura Jose for help with proofreading, and to the staff of Durham University Library, the British Library and the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

### **List of Abbreviations**

- EETS OS     *Early English Text Society*, Original Series 1864-.
- EETS XS     *Early English Text Society*, Extra Series 1867-1921.
- ELH         *English Literary History*
- MLN         *Modern Language Notes*
- MLR         *Modern Language Review*
- PL           *Patrologia Latina Cursus Completus*, ed. J. P. Migne. Paris: 1844-65.
- PMLA        *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*
- RER         *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores*. London: 1858-1964.
- RES         *Review of English Studies*
- SQ           *Shakespeare Quarterly*

**Note on editions used**

The structure of the thesis means that frequently, texts are discussed and quoted first in a chapter on Helen, and then again some time later in a chapter on Medea. Unless I have noted otherwise, I have used the same editions of primary texts throughout. Thus if I have used a text in my discussion of both women, the citation will generally be found in the relevant place in the Helen chapter.

**Note on early modern texts**

Throughout the thesis, where necessary I have replaced u with v and i with j in medieval and early modern English texts and translations. I have also replaced the long s in early modern texts with a standard s. Unless I am quoting a critic or primary text, I have also standardised certain names, most notably Aeetes, Ageus, Apsyrtus, Helen, Menelaus, and Pelias.

Particularly long titles have been abbreviated in the text and in footnotes; the full title may be found in the Bibliography.

Occasionally in early modern texts, I have been unable to find a signature. In such cases, I have noted this in the footnotes, and wherever possible have supplied the missing signature, or else the page number given in the early modern edition used.

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## Introduction

“[...] it seemeth his Lady *Laymos* that he so highly commended, was in very déede as fayre as *Flora*, as faithful as *Faustine*, as loving as *Layis*, as meeke as *Medea*, as honest as *Hellen*, as constant as *Cressed*, and as modest as *Maria Bianca*, and therefore worthie of estimation”. (P<sup>r</sup>)

George Whetstone, *The Rocke of Regard* (1576).<sup>1</sup>

In this extract from *The Rocke of Regard*, a collection of prose and poetry published by George Whetstone in 1576, the Reporter makes wry comment on the hero Plasmos' misguided love for Laymos, a woman who is later to prove faithless. In his use of classical mythology, and through the Reporter, Whetstone introduces several issues that were key to the representation of both Helen and Medea by male authors in the sixteenth century, throughout the Middle Ages and into the seventeenth century. First, if the reader is to understand the point that the Reporter hopes to make, he or she must understand the allusion, must know the classical stories of Homer, Ovid, Virgil or Seneca, and understand who Helen and Medea were, and how they arrived in Elizabethan England. However, knowledge of these classical texts, of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides*, and *Ars Amatoria*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the tragedies of Euripides and Seneca (all of which were available by the time Whetstone came to write) may seem to complicate, rather than to elucidate, the Reporter's commentary on Plasmos' love. An astute reader of the classics would know that Medea was typically far from meek, that Helen was deceptive and untrustworthy, and that the comparison between them and Laymos therefore seems inherently flawed. In turn, the reader must appreciate that the women are used ironically, that the choice of such classical figures is intended to say far more about Plasmos' blindness than it does about Laymos and her virtue. Accordingly, Whetstone's words problematise the issue of how to read the classics, and how male characters read them in the period. Whetstone cleverly subverts not only the classical reputations of these

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<sup>1</sup> George Whetstone, *The Rocke of Regard* (London: H. Middleton for Robert Waley, 1576).

women, but also the medieval catalogue tradition, which very often saw such women (and often, specifically, Helen and Medea) listed as examples either of wicked women, or of women who suffered for love.

Plasmos' infatuation with Laymos - his refusal to recognise or acknowledge her infidelity - gives her a degree of power, which is underlined by his failure to recognise the subversive threat that his classical models posed to the male establishment (and specifically to male control over their wives). At the same time, however, if the Reporter (and through him Whetstone) poke fun at Plasmos by making such comparisons, they concurrently undermine their classical models: Helen, Medea, Cressid. (It is worth noting that here Whetstone is deliberately choosing a trio frequently linked by disapproving male authors from the Middle Ages onwards: all embroiled in the story of the Trojan War, all women any man would be unwise to become involved with). Accordingly, Whetstone's use of both women underscores the uncomfortable relationship between their power and the male authorial community in the period, and earlier. Male authors from antiquity onwards found Helen and Medea's power in relation to the male community to be deeply alarming: Helen's disturbing sexual appeal, and the devastating war it engendered; Medea's control over Jason's success in the quest for the Golden Fleece, and later the devastating revenge she wreaks on him for ignoring the marriage vows he swore to her, in favour of a more auspicious match.

Helen and Medea both make some of their earliest appearances in ancient literature as deities: Helen as nature-goddess, Medea as vengeful child-killer.<sup>2</sup> Even later, for example in the plays of Euripides, vestiges of their divine origins survive: Medea is the granddaughter of Apollo; Helen, famously,

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<sup>2</sup> For Helen's divine origins, see Linda Lee Clader, *Helen: The Evolution From Divine to Heroic in Greek Epic Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), Andy Crockett, "Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*: Violent Rhetoric or Radical Feminism?" *Rhetoric Review* 13.1 (1994): 71-90, 75, and Otto Skutsch, "Helen, Her Name and Nature", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987): 188-93, 189. For Medea's, see Sarah Iles Johnston, "Corinthian Medea and the Cult of Hera Akraia", in James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, eds. *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997): 44-70, and Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993) 132-3.



the result of Jupiter's liaison with Leda. Their divine status becomes less important from late antiquity (though their famous ancestry, particularly Helen's, continues to be mentioned in medieval and Renaissance reference works, such as Alexander Neckam's twelfth-century commentary on the *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* of Martianus Capella, or Thomas Walsingham's *De Archana Deorum*). When the pagan gods are invoked by Helen or Medea in later literature, it is often so that they may despairingly complain that they do not really control their destinies, that instead some higher power dictates Helen's abduction or Medea's passion for Jason, and accordingly that they enjoy less troubling autonomous power.

What is more compelling for medieval and early modern English writers is their effect on men, on male relationships, and on empire. Helen's role in the fall of Troy resonated particularly significantly for English writers in the Renaissance, a result of England's claiming Aeneas' descendant Brutus as part of its earliest history. Medea's devastating effect on the patriarchal institutions of family and monarchy was also well-documented, however. Her betrayal of her father Aeetes, her theft of his kingdom's greatest prize, the Golden Fleece, her killing of her brother, and finally her ruthless destruction of the new life Jason was attempting to create for himself, were extensively documented by Ovid, and thus would have been familiar tales for medieval and early modern men from the school-room onward. The commonly-known details of their stories were as follows. Medea falls in love with Jason, a prince sent to Colchis by his uncle Pelias to gain her kingdom's greatest treasure, the Golden Fleece, from her father Aeetes. She warns him that he will not attain it without her help, because of the supernatural obstacles which guard it. He swears love to her, they are married, and she gives him the potions, amulets and charms necessary to defeat the dragon, fire-breathing bulls and earth-born soldiers that guard the Fleece. The Fleece won, Jason and Medea steal away from Colchis. In the most popular version of the story, Medea takes her young brother Apsyrtus with them, and when her father sets off in pursuit dismembers the child and scatters his limbs over the side of the Argo to distract the King. Back in Iolcos, Jason asks Medea to use her magical powers to rejuvenate his aging father, Aeson. She does so successfully, and then promises similar benefits to Jason's tyrannical uncle Pelias: however, she deliberately neglects

to prepare the potions correctly, and having been stabbed by his daughters on Medea's orders, Pelias dies. Pursued by his son Acastus, Jason and Medea flee to Corinth, where they live for some years under the protection of King Creon. Eventually, Jason abandons Medea to marry Glauce, Creon's daughter (also known as Creusa). Furious, Medea murders Glauce (usually by sending her a poisoned robe and crown), and embracing his daughter, Creon is also killed. Jason sets off in pursuit of Medea, but she kills their two young sons and escapes – in the tragedies of Euripides and Seneca, by taking advantage of her divine origins and summoning a dragon-drawn chariot. In the versions of the story that continue beyond this point, she often seeks sanctuary with King Ageus (or sometimes with Hercules). Having married Ageus, she is driven out of Crete after an unsuccessful plot to poison his son Theseus. Finally, she is sometimes described as reconciling with Jason and working to repair the rifts she has created, by restoring her father to the throne and helping him, and/or her father-in-law Aeson, to win more kingdoms.

Helen's story is less convoluted, less supernatural and certainly suggests less of a female threat. Famously, she is conceived after Zeus (or Jupiter) raped her mother, Leda, in the form of a swan: Helen is then born from an egg. First abducted by Theseus as a young girl, held at Therapnae and rescued by her brothers Castor and Pollux, her mortal father Tyndareus then organises a competition among her suitors for her hand in marriage. The victor is Menelaus, brother of Agamemnon, the Greek king. Meanwhile, in Troy, the Trojans are keen to avenge the kidnap of King Priam's sister Hesione, who has been taken by Hercules and handed over to Ajax. The Trojans decide to abduct a Greek woman who might be exchanged for Hesione. Priam's son Paris tells the council that Venus, Juno and Minerva, disputing over a golden ball (or apple) asked him to judge who was the most beautiful of the three, and award the prize accordingly. Paris describes the bribes offered by the goddesses, and reports that he chose Venus after she offered him the most beautiful woman in the world. With the Trojans' agreement, Paris abducts Helen from Menelaus' palace: as early as the *Iliad*, Helen agrees that she desired Paris, and in many accounts she is described as actively colluding in the abduction. Furious, Menelaus and Agamemnon set sail for Troy, and besiege the city. Despite protracted negotiations and a duel between Paris and Menelaus (described in

the *Iliad*) Helen is not returned. Paris is killed, and Helen marries his brother Deiphobus. Finally, though, the city falls (and Helen is often accused of colluding with the Greeks against Troy). Menelaus kills Deiphobus and takes Helen back to Greece, stopping in Egypt on the way. As is the case with Medea, the end of Helen's story becomes slightly confused, probably because classical authors were more interested in the scandal and bloodshed of her earlier years. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes her growing old and mourning the loss of her famous beauty, while other accounts have her being murdered by the vengeful wife of a Greek soldier killed at Troy. Elsewhere her story continues after death, as she is described by the historians Pausanias and Apollodorus as living peacefully on the Blessed Isle, or in Elysium, with either Menelaus or Achilles.

As these brief synopses would suggest, there are valuable points of contact between the two women and their stories, though the contrast between (for example) Helen's guilty despair in the *Iliad*, and Medea's terrifying refusal to be bound by human mores or the expectations of her gender in Euripides or Seneca, might seem to suggest that they are very different. Both women become embroiled in passionate, ill-advised love affairs, both are royals, abducted (willingly or unwillingly) from court, both see their private desires become public concerns, and specifically as reflecting on male empire: Helen's choice of Paris over Menelaus precipitates the Trojan War, Medea's desire for Jason first deprives her father's kingdom of an heir (as she leaves Colchis and kills her brother) and later destroys Corinth's monarchy. As this would suggest, the key point of similarity between the two women is the threat that they pose to men as a result of their powers: their own desires, Helen's compelling sexuality, Medea's violence and magic. In the classical period, the stories of Helen and Medea spoke to concerns such as the opposition between Greek and barbarian, familiar and foreign, the roles of women, and the terrible consequences of war. In the English redactions of, and reactions to, these stories in the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, all these concerns continued to resound, and were joined by a growing interest in women's social roles, by the conflict between Christian teaching and ancient pagan beliefs, and by a keen interest in how to rewrite and recycle the authorities of the past. Though in many ways they may seem of their time, profoundly linked to

classical customs and beliefs, in the Middle Ages and beyond these women's stories accord with contemporary interests and concerns, and this, combined with the memorable and evocative nature of their narratives, perhaps contributes to their enduring popularity. Frequently discernible, though, is a male authorial desire to contain or somehow manipulate their power, either by reducing it, or by turning it to their own didactic ends (both stories, for example, were frequently used in England to caution women about the dangers of excessive desire).

Though the tragedies of Euripides and Seneca, and the epics of Homer and Apollonius Rhodius, did not circulate in England in the Middle Ages, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* and *Tristia*, and the pseudo-classical account of the Trojan war given by Dares the Phrygian, would have supplied many of the necessary details of their stories. Also important were the mythographies and reference works produced by Fulgentius, Hyginus and the Vatican Mythographers. Continental authors, too, contributed hugely to English understandings of Helen and Medea in the Middle Ages and beyond: perhaps the most important continental renderings came from Benoît de Saint-Maure (his *Roman de Troie*), Guido de Columnis (his *Historia Destructionis Troiae*), and Giovanni Boccaccio (his *De Claris Mulieribus* and *De Genealogia Deorum Gentili Libri*). Drawing on these models, and later on Homer, Seneca and Euripides, English authors engage enthusiastically, if warily, with the power of both women, but they are noticeably reluctant to represent this unquestioningly. Rather, writers aim to question, manipulate and destabilise the power of Helen and Medea, and this thesis will engage primarily with the ways in which English male authors do so, in the period c.1160-1650.

Taking the alarming power of Helen and Medea and concerted male efforts to undermine it as its overarching theme, the thesis considers Helen and Medea in relation to medieval and Renaissance theories of translation, to instructional, didactic or cautionary literature, to Christianity, and most significantly, to the male establishment in the period. It engages with previous criticism of both women in the literature of the period, for example Ruth Morse's consideration of Medea in the Middle Ages, or Mihoko Suzuki's work on Helen in antiquity and the Renaissance. However, the thesis extends the work of such critics to consider both women over a longer period, and to look

at how they are very often grouped together as examples of the worst of their gender.<sup>3</sup> Authors including Joseph of Exeter, Hoccleve, Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate in the Middle Ages, Gascoigne, Turberville, Spenser, Shakespeare and Jonson in the sixteenth century, and Shirley, Heywood, and Brathwaite in the seventeenth century, all use Helen and Medea in diverse and often innovative ways, and very often, an undermining or manipulation of their power can be discerned, a reaction to male discomfort with their magic, their supernatural origins, and/or their alarming power over men. In the Middle Ages, Helen and Medea are frequently silenced, and their autonomy and influence are reduced as a result of greater male control over their situations. For example, Chaucer rewrites the dynamic between Jason and Medea to give Jason far more control, over both the quest and the love relationship. It is significant that this use of Medea is found in the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer's (very probably ironic) representation of the "best" of classical womanhood, which includes notorious figures such as Cleopatra and Medea, and women whose greatest achievement is to have been abandoned by their lovers: Hypsipyle, Ariadne, Dido. A similar reduction of the power of Helen and Medea can be discerned in texts which respond to the medieval taste for chivalric romance: *The Seege or Batayle of Troy*, for example, excludes Medea entirely, despite its early focus on Jason's capture of the Fleece. Elsewhere in the Middle Ages, Helen's and Medea's autonomy, their capacity for wrongdoing, may be played up rather than suppressed. However, male authors do this with misogynist didactic intent, invoking Helen and Medea to chastise women and to caution men to exercise greater control over wives, daughters and sisters. The most famous medieval example of such a use is perhaps Guido's 1287 *Historia* (which impacted significantly on later English representations of both women), but the same intent can be discerned in Whetstone's *Rocke of Regard* and in Richard Robinson's *Rewarde of Wickednesse* (1574), which gives both women a voice,

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<sup>3</sup> At points, too, the thesis questions previous findings on one or both women: Diane Purkiss, for example, suggests that "the standard Renaissance Medea was a treacherous and passionate young *girl*, a girl who helps a hero on his way in exchange for marrying him", but Chapter Seven discusses the influence of the more violent, terrifying classical Medea on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature. Diane Purkiss, "Medea in the English Renaissance", in Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Oliver Taplin, eds., *Medea in Performance 1500-2000* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000): 32-48, 32-3.

but only so that they may whole-heartedly regret their choices and actions, and caution sixteenth-century women to act differently.

Other sixteenth-century uses of Helen and Medea, like *The Seege or Batayle of Troy*, Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*, respond to changes in literary taste. George Turberville, George Gascoigne, George Pettie and others all invoke these women in connection with love stories, and particularly female lovers. Very often, the use will be relatively straightforward – a woman may be as fair as Helen but more virtuous, an abandoned lover may accuse her lover of being a Jason. More interesting, however, are uses that react to and manipulate the classical knowledge of their readers, or even of characters within the text. When, in George Gascoigne's *The Adventures of Master F. J.*, the hapless F. J. praises his lover by naming her Helen, she takes offence because of her failure to appreciate the classical reference, and his compliment.<sup>4</sup> F. J. himself proves a similarly poor reader of the classics: in naming his lover as Helen, he effectively writes the story's ending, predicts and invites his lover's eventual infidelity, in an irony that would be entirely satisfying to the canny Elizabethan reader. James Shirley's deliberate failure to represent Medea on stage in *The Triumph of Beautie*, meanwhile, very obviously takes its cue from Shakespeare's deliberate mangling of the Ovidian story of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (though his effort is further complicated by the rise of the female performer in private Caroline entertainments). Intentionally choosing a far more contentious woman than Thisbe, he has his shepherds squabble comically over who will play Medea, and how they may cut the story, but in so doing raises serious questions about the status of women on the stage, and about the understanding of myth, and its rewriting. To Bottle and his fellow shepherds, the story of Jason and Medea is fitting material to entertain the mournful Paris. To Shirley's knowing audience, however - saturated not only in the classics but also in the immense medieval Troy-narratives of Lydgate and Guido, and the works of Gower and Boccaccio - Jason and

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<sup>4</sup> George Gascoigne, *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* (London: Henrie Bynemann and Henrie Middleton for Richarde Smith, 1573).

Medea's story foreshadows the tragic consequences, both national and personal, of ravishing a foreign princess.<sup>5</sup>

These and many other renderings of Helen and Medea are deliberately ambiguous, intentionally exerting pressure on their readers and audiences, demanding a close familiarity with the classics of Ovid, Virgil, Homer and Seneca, but also an appreciation of how such canonical texts and characters can be rewritten in accordance with authorial agenda. English representations of Helen and Medea throughout the period speak to authorial interest in use (and misuse) of sources, classical, late antique, medieval and Renaissance. Moreover, since both were believed to be historical figures, both are affected by medieval and Renaissance perceptions of history. In the Middle Ages, respect for the supposedly eye-witness accounts of the Trojan war found in the *Ephemeridos Belli Troiani Libri* and *De Excidio Troia Historia* of Dictys of Crete and Dares the Phrygian meant that the medieval accounts of Helen's role in the war by John Clerk, John Lydgate, and Joseph of Exeter followed broadly similar narrative patterns. Medea, meanwhile, is mentioned with relative frequency in world histories and explorers' narratives well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At the same time, despite their apparent belief in the veracity of their ancient sources, authors could and did alter details and emphases in an effort to make their texts their own. Joseph of Exeter expands extensively on the condemnation of Helen's voracious sexuality that he found in his sources, while Lydgate adds to Guido's misogynist criticism of both Helen and Medea, despite repeatedly protesting that he does no more nor less than translate the Latin. Meanwhile, George E. Rowe points to the Renaissance attitude to history:

[...] although they admitted that history should depict events truthfully, early humanist historians tended to emphasize verisimilitude, persuasiveness, and moral usefulness rather than accuracy in their discussions of historiography. They frequently embellished their histories, altering and creating events to enhance their works' effectiveness, and in their eyes such embellishment was precisely what distinguished a true history from an inferior imitation which simply collected and described facts.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James Shirley, *The Triumph of Beautie* (London: Humphrey Moseley, 1646).

<sup>6</sup> George E. Rowe, "Interpretation, Sixteenth-Century Readers, and George Gascoigne's *The Adventures of Master F. J.*", *ELH* 48.2 (1981): 271-89, 280.

Accordingly, male authors in the early modern period were just as keen as their medieval predecessors to manipulate inherited ideas of two women whom they saw as historical, not merely as mythical. Helen and Medea are often apparently divorced from their classical origins (though they retain echoes of their well-known stories) and seem to become medieval or early modern characters themselves, made to reflect contemporary issues as varied as anxiety over witchcraft, the correct conduct of rulers, England's conquest of foreign territories, and the balance of power between the sexes.

In a discussion that focuses on male representations of two female characters, the gender of characters, authors and readers is inevitably of key importance. The thesis focuses on depictions of Helen and Medea's power by male writers, in large part because there are so many more of these. Female writers from the Middle Ages through to the seventeenth century were less likely to be acquainted with the Greek and Roman classics, though they could have read later vernacular renderings of both women. Even if they did know their classical texts as well as their male counterparts, female authors were often far less willing than men to engage with such notorious examples of femininity. Very often unable to divorce their writing from their gender (and in fact often compelled to embrace and react to the perceived frailty of their sex by composing defences of women, or instructional tracts), female authors who portray Helen or Medea sympathetically lay themselves open to charges of wilful inaccuracy (a charge also frequently levelled at Chaucer's "Legend of Medea", but with a very different emphasis). Women who embrace the notoriety of Helen and Medea, who detail those qualities which have attracted such criticism from classical times onwards, run the risk of reinscribing and underscoring misogynist perceptions of female nature, of the fundamental wickedness, vanity and carnality of women. Thus Jocelyn Catty notes that in her translation of Euripides' *Iphigenia*, Lady Jane Lumley "omits at least nine references to [Helen] as a 'whore', or to her adultery, and this seems consistent with her more general tendency to eliminate details which might be thought unsuitable for the female pen".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jocelyn Catty, *Writing Rape, Writing Women in Early Modern England: Unbridled Speech* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 141.



In the Middle Ages, Christine de Pisan attempts a rehabilitation of both women, but it is one that is in many ways fundamentally unsatisfying: her Helen can only be redeemed by being painted as a victim who suffered for her beauty, while her Medea, like Chaucer's, can be sympathetic only through judicious use of authorial elision, and through authorial insistence that she suffers at the hands of a more powerful man. Later, and in England, female uses of Helen and Medea are very often conservative: to Aemilia Lanyer in her *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*,<sup>8</sup> Helen is an example of beauty that is worth less because it is not coupled with virtue, while in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Isabella Whitney and Lady Mary Wroth use Medea conventionally as an example of a spurned lover, while eliding any suggestion of future revenge, and underscoring her powerlessness.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps one of the most interesting female uses of either woman in the period is Mary Queen of Scots' identification with Medea in her letters to the Earl of Bothwell. Although she tells Bothwell that she does not intend to compare him to Jason, or herself to Medea, she admits

[...] ye caus me to be sumquhat like unto hyr in any thing that touchis you, or that may preserve and keip you unto hir, to quhome onely ye appertaine: if it be sa that I may appropriate that quhilk is wonne through faythfull yea onely luffing of you, as I do and sall do all the dayes of my lyfe, for payne or evill that can cume thair of.  
(Uiii<sup>v</sup>)<sup>10</sup>

Here, classical mythology is brought into contact with historical and political event, and Mary exploits her own knowledge of classical mythology, expecting the same knowledge from her reader. However, the afterlife of Mary's comparison reveals the danger of invoking such a figure. While Mary meant to portray herself as a passionate woman desperate for reassurance from her lover, detractors such as George Buchanan (who had himself translated Euripides' *Medea* into Latin in 1544), leapt eagerly on the comparison. Buchanan

<sup>8</sup> Aemilia Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, ed. Susanne Woods (NY: Oxford UP, 1993), lines 189-92.

<sup>9</sup> Isabella Whitney, *The Copy of a Letter, Lately Written in Meeter, By a Yonge Gentilwoman* (London: Richard Jones, 1567). Lady Mary Wroth, *The Countesse of Montgomeries Urania* (London: Augustine Mathewes for Jo[h]n Marriott and John Grismand, 1621).

<sup>10</sup> Mary's letter is reproduced in George Buchanan, *Ane Detectioun of the Duinges of Marie Quene of Scottes* (London: John Day, 1571).

encouraged Mary's opponents to see parallels with the Medea of Ovid, of Euripides and Seneca, the murderous witch whose romantic frustration leads inevitably to horrifying crimes. He urges his readers "Call to mind that part of her Letters to *Bothwel*, wherein she maketh her self *Medea*, that is, a Woman that neither in love nor hatred can keep any mean", and sees this comparison as evidence that Mary conspired to poison her husband, Lord Darnley:

[...] thay decree, that in any wise the kyng must be slayn. Yet wer thay not fully advisit with quhat kinde of death he should be murderit. Quhilk may easily be gatherit by hir letter quhairin she partly compareth hir selfe with Medea a bludy woman and a poysoning witch. (Kiii<sup>f</sup>)<sup>11</sup>

Male readers often cast their characters, male and female, as bad readers of the classics: if Gascoigne's F. J. invites disaster by characterising his lover as Helen, then Shakespeare's Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, and William Painter's Adelasia in *The Palace of Pleasure*, misread the classics in their invocations of Medea as nothing more than an example of an eloping lover. Mary obviously does not intend to represent herself comically, as one who names a classical figure without considering the consequences of her reference, and the backfiring of her use of Medea perhaps epitomises the risk women ran invoking such notorious figures, explaining why they seem to prefer other models of historical or classical femininity.

If female representations of Helen and Medea are largely absent from the thesis, constraints of space have meant that continental renderings must also be largely ignored, except where they have had a particularly important impact on English versions (as is the case with the works of Benoît or Guido) and despite the wealth of examples of original and provocative European uses of both women. (To take one example, in his 1635 *Médée*, Pierre Corneille conflates the Euripidean and Senecan Medeas, and adds many of his own touches, to create a powerfully commanding magical presence, a far more alarming Medea than was represented in English drama in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries). Absent too are English representations of either woman

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<sup>11</sup> Buchanan, *Ane Detection*. I. D. McFarlane suggests that Mary's former tutor was angered by her marriage to Bothwell: if so, he may have found Mary's comparing herself to a woman famed for the tragic consequences of her desire to be particularly infuriating. I. D. McFarlane, *Buchanan* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1981) 320.

after c.1650. During the Restoration and beyond, original uses of both women abounded, in translations and in more original works. Once again, constraints of space constitute the least interesting reason to leave material out; but important too is the shift in national identity after the Civil Wars, the change in the character of drama and in the attitude to the classical past. Since both stories are profoundly linked to the Trojan War, to the dissolution of kingdoms and empires and to the fracturing of male and national identity, the end of the thesis focuses on how both women were used by male writers during the cataclysmic events of the 1640s.

Because the classical sources an author knew and chose to engage with are of key importance, the thesis begins with a consideration of classical incarnations of Helen and Medea, specifically with reference to how Greek and Roman authors represented their power and threat. Next, the study considers how these classical representations survived into the Middle Ages, how Helen and Medea moved from the writings of Ovid and Hyginus to those of Benoît, through the works of Baebius Italicus, Servius, Dictys and Dares, Dracontius, St Augustine and the early Church fathers, the Vatican Mythographers and others. The next two chapters are devoted to considerations of Helen and of Medea in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Chapters Six and Seven deal with the two women in the sixteenth century, and in the first half of the seventeenth. In all cases, longer treatments of both women are discussed, but particularly interesting brief references (Skelton's reference to Medea in *Phyllyp Sparrow*, Shirley's use of Helen in *The Constant Maid*) are also included; while it is not possible to include every brief mention of the women in the period, every effort has been made to include the most suggestive and/or problematic. Texts are dealt with in a broadly chronological order, since one key interest is how authors chose to rewrite their literary predecessors: it is important to appreciate, for example, that Chaucer probably had Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* in mind when he depicted his radically different Medea in the *Legend of Good Women*. The works of authors with long careers, who return to Helen and/or Medea several times, may not be dealt with together: Shakespeare's seventeenth-century rendering of Helen, in *Troilus and Cressida*, is discussed separately from his sixteenth-century references to her in Sonnet 53, and in *The Rape of Lucrece*. This decision was made partly in order

to preserve the chronological structure, and partly because I believe it is valuable to appreciate the other Renaissance Helens (those of John Trussell or George Chapman, for example) who appeared before Shakespeare's last rendering of her, and thus may have influenced his (re)vision of Helen in the seventeenth century. Throughout the work, when the two women are discussed separately I have dealt with Helen's incarnations first, despite the fact that in classical legend, Medea's involvement with the Argonauts came before Helen's with Paris, and the fall of Priam's Troy, and this chronology was preserved in the long medieval renderings of Benoît and Lydgate. The decision to deal first with Helen and then with Medea was taken first because Helen's story seems to have been the better-known: she is far more frequently invoked in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, for example in works such as the *Carmina Burana*. Also important, though, is the fact that if the women embodied similar concerns for male writers (a duplicitousness, a lack of respect for patriarchal institutions of family and monarchy) Medea's story presented Christian authors with the additional problems of her magical powers, and her murders. Since her story is so much more startling, male authorial reactions to it are often more extreme, and thus constitute particularly interesting examples of how and why the classics were reread in the period. Finally, the thesis' emphasis on the tradition of Helen and Medea as it was inherited in England means that some interesting classical renderings (for example, Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, or Dio Chrysostom's *Eleventh Discourse*) are mentioned only very briefly, since they were not known, or were not widely used, before 1650.

Helen and Medea were far from the only notorious women of classical antiquity: medieval and early modern male authors could and did invoke Clytemnestra, Cressida and Cleopatra, all well-known examples of female transgression or wickedness, all warnings to male readers about the consequences of failing to exercise control over their women. However, Helen and Medea appear to have been particularly evocative examples throughout both periods. Linked by narratives of male conflict and conquest, Helen and Medea refuse to be subsumed by these narratives, surviving from classical antiquity into the Middle Ages and beyond as two of the ancient world's most compelling figures: for Robert E. Bell, Helen is "perhaps the most inspired

character in all literature, ancient or modern”,<sup>12</sup> while Carolyn A. Durham notes that Medea’s legend is “the oldest story in Greek tradition”.<sup>13</sup> The thesis aims to establish why English authors across such a long time-span, with such differing political, religious and artistic beliefs, return again and again to Helen and Medea’s power, reacting as they do so not only to the Greek and Latin classics, but to the renderings of their English forebears, and to their continental sources. As the quotation from Whetstone suggests, Helen and Medea were at once “typical” classical women, used throughout the period as utterly familiar illustrative and didactic examples, and alarmingly atypical, used to underscore conflicts and frictions between men and women, between the human and the divine, and between individual and state, as well as between classical rendering and later rewriting.

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<sup>12</sup> Robert E. Bell, *Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 223.

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn A. Durham, “Medea: Hero or Heroine?”, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 8.1 (1984): 54-9, 54.

## Chapter One: Classical Helen

The abiding popularity of the Trojan War meant that Helen's story was extensively used in classical texts. Whether she is blamed for the Trojan War or presented sympathetically by the male authors of the classical period, Helen becomes inevitably a construct of the male literary establishment, and this establishment is fully aware of the threat she poses. To one extent or another all the authors who approach this story attempt to control or neutralise the threat she represents to masculine community, even as they present it. Classical texts that engage with the issue of Helen's agency, and yet in doing so treat her sympathetically, include Herodotus' *Histories*, Euripides' dark comedy *Helen*, and most importantly Homer's *Iliad*. All of these texts portray Helen as in some way passive, helpless to resist the machinations of the male characters that surround her. Herodotus portrays a Helen who never went to Troy, and Euripides dramatises this story in *Helen*. Homer, conversely, locates Helen at Troy, and has her admit she went willingly and now regrets her actions. This acknowledgement of the suffering she claims responsibility for makes Homer's Helen appealing to the male community. She is not a threat to men any longer, and is rather herself at the mercy of the masculine world in, and of, the epic. On the other hand, Homer's *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Trojan Women* and *Orestes* show the same authors questioning the innocence and passivity they have presented, and underlining how, from a very early stage, Helen's power is difficult or impossible to quantify.

In the *Iliad*, Homer refers only briefly to the Judgement of Paris, that example of human and divine interaction that arguably caused the war,<sup>1</sup> but Paris and the gods are undeniably to blame for Troy's woes, and correspondingly Helen is portrayed as a helpless pawn, able to affect men and impress gods with her beauty, but then unable to control the results of this effect. Mihoko Suzuki sees Helen, even in such an early rendering of her story, as already somehow divorced from the war she is blamed for:

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<sup>1</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) 24.28-30. All quotations from Homer's *Iliad* are from this edition.

The warriors in a sense fight over Helen's phantom, for they have transformed her into an emblem, a construct of their own minds: on Helen, goddesslike beauty and scourge of war, they project their ambivalence toward the [...] war that brings both glory and death.<sup>2</sup>

While versions of the story (such as Euripides' and Herodotus') that claim that Helen was absent from Troy underscore her lack of autonomy, here her passivity is often stressed by Homer's use of the gods. Thus Aphrodite continues to attempt to influence Helen, coming to her in disguise and attempting to lead her to Paris. Helen angrily tells the goddess "I am not going to him. It would be too shameful. / I will not serve his bed, since the Trojan women hereafter / would laugh at me, all, and my heart even now is confused with sorrows" (3.410-412). Here, Helen appears to retain some autonomy, and the idea that she can redeem herself at least to some degree by refusing to compound her shame further (something that Paris refuses to do) is important. However, while Paris may appear better by going into battle for his prize, as Hector orders him to, Helen may only appear more sympathetic with a late (and ultimately unsuccessful) display of sexual morality. This is very clearly the beginning and end of her power in the *Iliad*, despite repeated references to her divine ancestry.

Helen's disgust for Paris may seem difficult to square with the fact that she clearly went with him voluntarily, but Robert Emmet Meagher resolves this paradox by pointing to Aphrodite's inescapable influence: "Helen is, at it were, possessed [...] Like Aphrodite, she *is* desire. Helen can no more resist the power that defines her than can others resist her".<sup>3</sup> Clearly, though she is represented sympathetically, the Helen of the *Iliad* is essentially passive, and this passivity arguably springs both from her femininity and from her status as an epic character. Though she may rebuke Paris angrily, telling him bluntly when he returns from the duel with Menelaus: "Oh, how I wish you had died there / beaten down by the stronger man, who was once my husband" (3.428-429), she has no power over him, or the other men in the poem. Paris leads her

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<sup>2</sup> Mihoko Suzuki, *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference and the Epic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989) 16.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Emmet Meagher, *Helen: Myth, Legend, and the Culture of Misogyny* (NY: Continuum, 1995) 27.

to bed at the end of Book Three, despite her angry protestations, and later she is unable to convince Hector to stay out of battle. Similarly, she has no control over the gods' interference in her destiny. Priam assures her "I am not blaming you: to me the gods are blameworthy" (3.164), but in absolving Helen from blame he first underscores her utter lack of power over the situation, and secondly, and paradoxically, highlights the issue of Helen's responsibility, that was (through the intervening texts of Virgil, Ovid and Dares the Phrygian) to become central to so many medieval and Renaissance representations of her. At the same time, the Trojan men's approval of her beauty even in the face of all the destruction it has engendered, suggest that, to the men in the text and to Homer's audience at least, she enjoys a kind of power. However, it is merely the power to set destructive events in motion, rather than to affect outcomes or atone for her misguided actions.<sup>4</sup>

The Odyssean Helen appears to feel similar regret for the destructive power of her desire, and of desire for her, reflecting on how "for the sake of shameless me, the Achaians / went beneath Troy, their hearts intent upon reckless warfare" (4.145-6).<sup>5</sup> In the *Odyssey*, though, Homer presents her with a calculated ambiguity. Suzuki sees her as "clearly duplicitous and disloyal, yet marginal and inconsequential" (90). Certainly, the men of the epic may see her as "marginal and inconsequential", may be content to dismiss her protestations of guilt with glib assurances, as Priam has done in the *Iliad*. However, to the men of Homer's audience her threat and agency, both during the war and during her reception of Telemachus, would have been obvious. In his description of events not included in the *Iliad*, Homer makes Helen appear a more powerfully threatening character, and irrevocably destabilises the helplessness she affectingly regrets in the earlier poem. Most interestingly, Menelaus describes her approaching the wooden horse and calling out to the Greeks using their wives' voices. He does not blame his wife, opining "you

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<sup>4</sup> For an account of the poem which is determined to invest Helen with malign agency at every step, see George J. Ryan, "Helen in Homer", *The Classical Journal* 61.3 (1965): 115-117. For Ryan, Helen's disparagement of herself at 3.180 is evidence that she is "conceited and far from honest" (115), at her submission to Paris at the close of Book Three she is "clearly a wanton" (116), and her words at Hector's burial, though "they do a great deal to redeem her character", reveal her at the last to be "egocentric" (116). The article is thus itself a testament to the fluidity of Helen's representation, to how even an apparently sympathetic rendering can be glossed as deeply critical.

<sup>5</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (NY: Harper & Row, 1965).



will have been moved by / some divine spirit who wished to grant glory to the Trojans” (4.274-275). Here, the suggestion that Helen is manipulated by the gods, and is not responsible for her own actions, is familiar from the *Iliad*. Nevertheless, this mention of Helen’s efforts to betray the Greek side, whether as a pawn of the gods or as a free agent, underscores the sense that she is a danger to men on both sides of the conflict, and the Greeks’ trust in her jars with the audience’s growing doubt.<sup>6</sup>

Though she may appear to be comfortably located in her rightful place, back in Menelaus’ palace, Helen’s mystery is deepened even as she is domesticated, assigned a traditional female role rather than that of the fatally desirable incarnation of Aphrodite. As the company reflect sadly on Odysseus’ long absence, “Into the wine of which they were drinking she cast a medicine / of heartsease, free of gall, to make one forget all sorrows [...] Such were the subtle medicines Zeus’ daughter had in her possessions” (4.220-227). Here, notably, Helen is allied with her divine father, rather than being portrayed as manipulated by the gods: Norman Austin notes that the *Odyssey* “reinvests Helen with the divinity that would no doubt be dramatically inappropriate in the context of the *Iliad*”.<sup>7</sup> Here she is in league with the gods rather than seeming their pawn, and is able to manipulate the men’s perception of past events (a power which must surely problematise the trust male characters such as Priam place in her in the *Iliad*). Homer makes no mention of whether she takes the medicine herself, and it casts doubt on the harmony she and Menelaus seem to enjoy. She is an unmistakable threat both to the individual men she plays hostess to here, and also to the epic’s masculinist agenda, as she plays on Telemachus’ desire to find his father, but at the same time clearly obstructs this inevitable reunion, delaying Telemachus with her drugs as Kalypso has delayed his father. The *Odyssey* presents Helen as a threat to male community that has not been subsumed by the end of her appearance in the text, despite what her helplessness in the *Iliad* might seem to predict. Her threat is

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<sup>6</sup> See also Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996) 410. She suggests that, despite his sympathetic view of his wife, the effect of Menelaus’ troubling story following Helen’s is to destabilise her attempts to represent herself positively.

<sup>7</sup> Norman Austin, *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1994) 19.

deliberately unresolved, and her destabilising influence only heightened by the fact that the Greek men believe they have regained control of her.

### **“Not I but my name”: Guiltless Helen in Herodotus and Euripides**

In their *Histories* and *Helen* respectively, Herodotus and Euripides are concerned with stressing Helen’s inability to affect the tragic events at Troy. However, the *Odyssey* in particular has demonstrated the threat Helen (may have) posed in Troy, and thus they feel unable to stress her innocence while still placing her in the city, and implicating her in adultery and betrayal. Accordingly, both claim that while Helen was taken from her husband, she did not betray him and in fact spent the entirety of the war in Egypt, waiting for his return. Austin notes that “Stesichorus, the sixth-century poet from Sicily, is the first in our literary record to give voice to this revision of the Helen myth” (2).<sup>8</sup> In his *Histories*, written in the fifth century BC, the Greek historian Herodotus also presents a version in which Paris lands in Egypt and is not allowed to travel back to Troy with Helen. He leaves her and brings nothing back to Troy, but cannot convince the Greeks of this, leaving the Trojans to appeal helplessly to the Greeks that “there was no justice in trying to force them to give satisfaction for property which was being detained by the Egyptian king Proteus” (2.118).<sup>9</sup> The historian uses this theory to address one of the principal difficulties over the conflict, arguing:

[...] had Helen really been in Troy, she would have been handed over to the Greeks without Paris’ consent; for I cannot believe that either Priam or any other kinsman of his was mad enough to be willing to risk his own and his children’s lives and the safety of the city, simply to let Paris continue to live with Helen. (2.120)

Such a version of the story reduces her threat to men, and obviously goes some way towards redeeming Helen, since she remains utterly faithful to Menelaus. Moreover, Herodotus sees Troy’s defeat as a consequence of the gods’ anger.

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<sup>8</sup> See also Edward Tripp, *The Handbook of Classical Mythology* (London: Barker, 1970) 265, for an account of the legend that Stesichorus composed his *Palinode* to appease the shade of Helen, who had blinded him in anger at his earlier criticism of her.

<sup>9</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt, rev. John Marincola (London: Penguin, 1954, rev. 2003).

Such an argument reduces Helen's power even further, allying her with the Iliadic figure who was merely a pawn of the gods. Since Herodotus' construction of a defence implies Helen is being attacked for her role in the war by other writers, his *Histories* only manage to underline the extent to which she was powerless to influence either the convictions of male characters, or the literary intentions of other male authors.

In *Helen*, Euripides complicates the idea that Helen never went to Troy by making Paris unaware of this, since he bears back to his city an *eidolon*, or phantom, resembling Helen but constructed by the goddess Minerva. Nevertheless, she berates herself as Homer's Helen does, reflecting that the war came about "because of me, the killer of so many, / because of my name, so full of pain for men" (198-199).<sup>10</sup> Helen's words here encapsulate the instability of her power in ancient literature, but particularly in Euripides' own works. Her regretful words suggest that while in the world of the text she enjoys no power, her earlier decision to go with Paris mean that she is, somehow, responsible for the slaughter at Troy. Like her Iliadic counterpart, she has become the focus of male competition, the centre of male debates about value and honour, but her own power is continually undermined. Pursued by the Pharaoh Theoclymenos, she must contend, like her Iliadic forebear, with unwanted male attention, and with her sense of guilt that (though she is not in Troy) her abduction is, ultimately, the cause of the war. She is able, finally, to convince Menelaus of her identity, and in some respects Euripides' Helen does enjoy agency, for example as she plots with her husband to escape the Pharaoh. Any agency, though, is undermined and tempered with doubt, since she must deceive Theoclymenos to escape him. Even her imperious commanding of Menelaus' men, as she demands "Where is the name for courage that you won at Troy? Show these barbarians that it was justly earned" (1603-1605) is deliberately evocative of her perceived role in the Trojan War, during which she only enjoys power inasmuch as she can set one man against another. Christian Wolff finds that in the play, Euripides "dramatizes the power of subjective and mass illusion, created by the irresistible pressure of reputation

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<sup>10</sup> Euripides, '*Medea*'; '*Hippolytus*'; '*Electra*'; '*Helen*', trans. James Morwood (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

and past tradition”.<sup>11</sup> The dramatist plays with Helen’s reputation, as he does in his early, less sympathetic renderings of her, in *Orestes* and the *Trojan Women* (which *Helen* was supposedly meant to atone for). While he may present her as a sympathetic character, Euripides’ main concern is to present a Helen who appears fundamentally powerless, and whose powerlessness is constructed once more with reference to the gods’ will, to male desire and to her own burdensome reputation.

### **“Helen is Hell”: Euripides’ Threatening Helens**

If *Helen* engages innovatively with the legacy Euripides inherited from Homer, in an attempt to construct and question its heroine’s power in new ways, in the *Trojan Women* and *Orestes* the dramatist attacks her role in Troy far more directly. In the *Trojan Women*, Hecuba, Andromache and the chorus return again and again to castigation of Helen, long before she makes her brief appearance in the play. The Trojan queen urges Menelaus to kill Helen, whom she has already blamed for the death of Priam and the fall of the city. However, she warns the Greek

[...] be careful not to look at this woman. Helen is Hell.  
She will make you captive with desire. She turns men’s eyes; she overturns cities;  
she burns men’s homes. (891-3)<sup>12</sup>

In *Orestes*, meanwhile, Electra uses Helen’s beauty, and her vanity, to criticise her insufficient display of mourning for her dead sister Clytemnestra, exclaiming “Did you see how she has trimmed just the ends of her hair, to preserve her beauty? She’s the same woman she always was” (127-9).<sup>13</sup> However, while both plays may represent Helen’s fatal beauty as an alarming

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<sup>11</sup> Christian Wolff, “On Euripides’ *Helen*”, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 77 (1973): 61-84, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, trans. Diskin Clay (Newburyport, Mass: Focus, 2005). Laurie Maguire notes “Greek tragedy regularly punned on the supposed association of Helen with the root *hele*, meaning destruction”. Laurie Maguire, *Shakespeare’s Names* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 32. Clay notes that Euripides repeats a similar pun at 1213, and that Aeschylus uses it in his *Agamemnon*, 688-90. (n.p.78).

<sup>13</sup> Euripides, *Orestes and Other Plays: ‘Ion’, ‘Orestes’, ‘Phoenician Woman’, ‘Suppliant Women’*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

power, to which the men of both plays appear troublingly susceptible, once more, as he is to do in *Helen*, Euripides undermines the power he finds so threatening. In the *Trojan Women*, though she is allowed to speak to defend herself, predictably Helen stresses her helplessness in the face of divine will in an attempt to exonerate herself. She argues “I was destroyed by my beauty” (936); Paris stole her away assisted by “no mean goddess” (940); Menelaus was the “craven coward” (943) who left his wife at the mercy of the Trojan prince. Juxtaposed with Hecuba’s rage and grief, Helen’s complaints seem unconvincing, in contrast to the *Iliad*. What seems certain, though, is that whether or not she enjoyed her time in Troy (as Hecuba claims she did), here she is helpless in the face of male force, and Hecuba’s demands. Menelaus remains unconvinced by Helen’s pleas, assuring the watching Trojan women of Helen’s fate:

[...] when she reaches Argos, this shameless woman  
will die a shameful death and teach all of womankind a lesson in restraint.  
This is no easy lesson. Even so, the fate of this woman will instil fear  
into their love-crazed hearts,  
even if they are more shameless than she. (1055-9)

In his epitome of the seventh-century BC *Little Iliad* of Lesches of Pyrrha, Proclus describes Menelaus’ determination to kill Helen wavering, as she exposes her naked breasts to him.<sup>14</sup> Euripides is playing on his audience’s knowledge of this earlier story, and of the *Odyssey*, which saw the pair reunited. The effect is to suggest that though Menelaus assures Hecuba the pair will travel back to Greece on separate ships, in fact he will ultimately prove unable to resist her seductive power. More sympathetic Helens have regretted their involvement with Paris, and complained that they are stymied by the involvement of the gods. Here, Helen pleads helplessness, and Menelaus assures the Trojans of his powerful resolve, and yet the interplay of this Helen with her predecessors subtly suggests a destructive power, even as the Helen of

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<sup>14</sup> See Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classical, Harvard UP, 1936) p. 519.

the *Trojan Women* explicitly denies it, and is apparently subsumed back into the patriarchal community of Greece.<sup>15</sup>

In *Orestes*, Pylades invests Helen with threatening power as a justification for the murder he is plotting, telling Orestes “we shall be punishing her on behalf of all Greece, for the fathers she killed, the children she destroyed, the brides she robbed of husbands” (1134-6). Ultimately, though, Helen’s power appears to spring from her beauty, but also, ironically, from the links with the gods that she has played down (preferring to portray herself as a helpless pawn in their control over human affairs). Orestes tells Menelaus he wanted to kill her but was “robbed of success by the gods” (1580-1). In fact, Apollo removes her from the seemingly impossible situation she has found herself in, and neutralises her threat in an original way that is somewhat akin to Medea’s assumption of divine status as a way of escaping male threat at the end of the same playwright’s *Medea*. Here, Euripides is arguably drawing on the ancient traditions that saw Helen not merely as the daughter of Jove, but as a divinity in her own right. At the same time, though, and in contrast to his *Medea*, Euripides’ Helen appears to enjoy little direct power. As he is to do later in *Helen*, in *Orestes* Euripides undercuts his representation of Helen as a cause to fight for, since in the end, in a painfully ironic twist, Menelaus cannot even keep the wife for whom he waged such a terrible war. Finally, Helen is only important as far as male reactions to her are concerned. Throughout Euripides’ works she remains paradoxically incidental even as she is constantly discussed and argued over, and though she seems to have power over male reactions to her, Euripides’ *Helen* destabilises even this, suggesting that even when she is innocent, she is unable to control the reputation that became more negative as the classical period progressed.

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<sup>15</sup> For a contrastive argument, see Michael Lloyd, “The Helen Scene in Euripides’ *Troades*”, *The Classical Quarterly, New Series* 34.2 (1984): 303-13, 304. He suggests that “Helen’s escape, right or wrong, is not an issue in the play”. However, I would argue that Euripides is an early example of an author playing with his audience’s knowledge of Helen’s story, and with his own repeated rewritings of her.

## “Spinning Subtle Threads”: Defending Helen, from Gorgias of Leontini to Theocritus

Clearly, even at this early stage there is debate over whether Helen was to blame for the suffering inscribed by the Trojan War, and linked to this, whether she enjoyed any real power. As the classical period progressed, rhetoricians, as well as poets and playwrights, became interested in Helen’s story. With the events of the war and its aftermath firmly established, the characters became appealing as literary and rhetorical devices. In the defences composed by Gorgias, Isocrates and Dio Chrysostom, the authors’ agenda extends beyond a straightforward praise of Helen. They may aim to make serious points about her character, but at the same time to demonstrate their own rhetorical skills or play with their male audiences’ expectations and perceptions of Helen, underscoring her threat even as they purport to exonerate her from blame. The audience’s knowledge of her story at Troy is assumed, and here genre supersedes content just as, in the rhetorician’s eyes, the skill of the argument is more important than the truth of the facts argued. Thus they do not dwell on these facts or on Helen’s motivation – as D. M. Macdowell notes of Gorgias, “he argues not that Helen went to Troy for a particular reason in fact but that it is logically wrong to blame her whatever her reason may have been”.<sup>16</sup> However, Gorgias still follows the two traditional methods of shifting Helen’s blame, both of which render her more passive. He blames the gods and notes Paris’ culpability, while at the same time correlating this to Helen’s innocence, stressing her suffering far more than other accounts:

[...] the woman was violated and deprived of her country and bereaved of her family, would she not reasonably be pitied rather than reviled? He performed terrible acts, she suffered them; so it is just to sympathize with her but to hate him. (7)

Crockett points to the double-edged nature of such authorial sympathy, arguing that “pity like charity seems only to further entrench the lower caste represented by Helen”,<sup>17</sup> and that “making Helen a victim [...] inscribes

<sup>16</sup> Gorgias of Leontini, *Encomium of Helen*, ed. and trans. D. M. MacDowell (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1982) 14.

<sup>17</sup> Crockett, “Gorgias’ *Encomium*”, 78.

violence by designating or delimiting the social roles of victim/Helen and victimizer/Paris".<sup>18</sup> This reductive way of representing Helen, of making her appear sympathetic because powerless in relation to men, was to remain key to sympathetic representations of both Helen and Medea throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Moreover, Macdowell notes that Gorgias himself seems to compromise the defence he has composed, since "In the very last word he reveals his encomium of Helen is a game" (16).<sup>19</sup> Here, then, praise of Helen can seem convincing at first, but is undermined by authorial intent. Similarly, the troubling power Gorgias found in the Helen responsible for the Trojan War is undermined, as he attempts to show her as finally, and comfortingly, subject to control.<sup>20</sup>

A similar trend can be discerned in the work of Gorgias' pupil, Isocrates, whose defence of Helen, Larue van Hook observes, is "generally put around 370 BC".<sup>21</sup> In his version, Isocrates seeks to praise Helen at a remove, here by writing at length of Theseus' virtues, and arguing that his kidnapping Helen as a young girl (an episode dropped from many later versions of her story, though referred to in Ovid's *Heroides*) reflects well on her.<sup>22</sup>

I think this will be the strongest assurance for those who wish to praise Helen, if we can show that those who loved and admired her were themselves more deserving of admiration than other men. (73)

The homosocial focus of the piece (which is in itself reductive to Helen) continues as Paris (or Alexander as he is here) picks Helen for the ways in which she can benefit his family, "because he was eager to become a son of Zeus by marriage [...] he foresaw that this choice would be to the advantage of

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>19</sup> For Gorgias' authorial motives, see also Jack Lindsay, *Helen of Troy: Woman and Goddess* (London: Constable, 1974) 155.

<sup>20</sup> As Crockett puts it, "Few texts would seem to offer a better study of the symbolic as well as historical subordination of women", and this subordination is made more troublesome by Gorgias' insistence that he is praising Helen. Crockett, "Gorgias' *Encomium*", 71.

<sup>21</sup> Isocrates, *Works*, Vol. 3, trans. G. Norlin and L. van Hook, 3 vols (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1928-45) 59.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the significance of the Theseus episode, and how it reflects on Helen, see George A. Kennedy, "Isocrates' *Encomium of Helen*: A Panhellenic Document", *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 89 (1958): 77-83, and Gunther Heilbrunn, "The Composition of Isocrates' *Helen*", *TAPA* 107 (1977): 147-59.



all his race” (83-5). Here, once again, Helen’s power appears significant only because of her relation to the male establishment. Zeus has lent her the divine ancestry that makes her attractive to Paris, and this ancestry is attractive only inasmuch as it will raise Paris’ own status.

Although in some ways he is keen to undermine her power by representing her as subject to the desires and wills of the male characters in the *encomium*, surprisingly Isocrates is also willing to invest her with a kind of objective power. Thus he both places her in Troy and invests her with “power equalling that of a god” (93) – a dual strategy avoided by Homer, Herodotus and Euripides in their positive accounts, which either remove Helen from Troy or make it clear that, while there, she is helpless and being kept there against her wishes. Such discrepancies may seem to undermine the integrity of Isocrates’ defence, but may also show him subtly suggesting Helen as a powerful entity, somehow akin to her Odyssean predecessor, even as he tries to absolve her from responsibility for the events of the *Iliad*. In fact, such is her influence over men that this Helen inspires Homer to write the *Iliad*, a poem in which she becomes, in Isocrates’ mind, the central feature. He notes:

[...] some of the *Homeridae* also relate that Helen appeared to Homer by night and commanded him to compose a poem on those who went on the expedition to Troy, since she wished to make their death more to be envied than the life of the rest of mankind; and they say that while it is partly because of Homer’s art, yet it is chiefly through her that his poem has such charm and has become so famous among all men. (95)

The irony of this meta-literary supposition – that Helen shaped the *Iliad* even as it had been (and would continue to be) so central in shaping classical perceptions of her – is apparent. So too is the discrepancy between Helen’s power and wishes as they are recounted here by Isocrates, and the way she castigates herself in the *Iliad* for the deaths she feels responsible for: in Homer’s epic, she certainly does not see men’s deaths as a defence of her cause, and literary immortality as a rich reward. Here, in his description of Helen’s power and influence on Homer, Isocrates seems to playfully suggest that she influenced the *Iliad*’s sympathetic portrayal of her, and that, by extension, she may be influencing his defence as he writes. Despite the harsh

realities and divisions of the war that the *Iliad* portrays, Isocrates argues that far from being a source of dissent and conflict, Helen was a unifying and beneficial force:

[...] we should be justified in considering that it is owing to Helen that we are not the slaves of the barbarians. For we shall find that it was because of her that the Greeks became united in harmonious accord and organized a common expedition against the barbarians. (97)

Here, then, Helen is given absolute influence over male achievements, but she enjoys this influence only because she is powerless to resist Paris, and in fact, ultimately, any female power she does have is best displayed by its ability to solidify male empire. More importantly, though, the power that Isocrates does ascribe to her appears to be, at the last, the power to rewrite her own story, to influence her own literary representation by encouraging Homer to present her as passive and helpless. Macdowell observes of Isocrates' teacher "Plainly Gorgias enjoys showing off his rhetorical skill in defending conduct which is really indefensible" (16). Though Lindsay argues "Whereas [Gorgias] was writing a playful *apologia* [...] Isokrates was in deadly earnest. For him the Trojan War represented the war against the East which he so fiercely wanted" (158),<sup>23</sup> in fact Macdowell's comment can be equally well applied to the later orator. Isocrates' representation is on some level at least a game, an attempt to refer archly to the always-delicate balancing act between Helen's power and helplessness that characterises so many of her classical representations.

Theocritus' *Idyll 18*, composed in the third century BC, and in many ways vastly different in tone and style from the defences of Isocrates and Gorgias, may be allied to their works as further evidence of the period's interest in drawing on Helen's reputation, and on her representation in earlier works, in an attempt to defend or even praise her. In the poem, otherwise known as *The Marriage Song of Helen and Menelaus*, Helen does not appear, and features only through the Spartan girls' fulsome praise of her. However, though Lindsay can find in the *Idyll* "no hint of Paris and Troy, no shadow of doom" (163), Theocritus' choice of Helen, like Isocrates' and Gorgias', is

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<sup>23</sup> A theory that invests Helen, indirectly, with the power to bring about another male conflict.

calculated, and his apparently positive representation of her is fraught with the typical conflicts and uncertainties. Helen is of child-bearing age, and the girls of Sparta exclaim “What a wonderful thing it will be, if the child she bears resembles / Her mother!” (21-22).<sup>24</sup> However, any reader of the poem would be aware that although she is famously beautiful, Helen is not a woman that any parent would want their daughter to emulate. Even the girls’ promise to make offerings for Helen, to “plait for you a wreath of ground-loving / Clover to hang on a shady plane-tree” (42-3) is compromised. Their promise, “In its bark we shall cut these words, that / Passers-by may read its Dorian message: ‘Respect me; I am Helen’s tree” (47-8), may contain a grim nod to one version of Helen’s death at the hands of Polyxo, queen of Rhodes, whose husband had died at Troy. The Rhodian version of the story is recounted thus by the second century historian Pausanias:

They say that this Polyxo desired to avenge the death of Tlepolemus on Helen, now that she had her in her power. So she sent against her when she was bathing handmaidens dressed up as Furies, who seized Helen and hanged her on a tree, and for this reason the Rhodians have a sanctuary of Helen of the Tree. (3.19, p.123)<sup>25</sup>

Lindsay argues that in his *Idyll*, Theocritus “had to try to evoke an essence of beauty while carefully avoiding all the implications of daimonic Helen” (163). In fact, I would argue that like Isocrates and Gorgias, and despite the vision of blissful harmony the piece purports to represent, Theocritus writes *Idyll 18* with Helen’s prior incarnations firmly in mind, and is not at all afraid of alluding to them. The Spartan girls boast “No woman spins a subtler thread and winds it from her basket / On to her spool” (33-4), and while Helen’s power here may seem focused entirely on her awe-inspiring beauty, her domestic accomplishments and the glory she is to bring Menelaus, the allusion is to the Helen of the *Iliad*, who famously weaves an account of the conflict even as she

<sup>24</sup> Theocritus, *Idylls*, trans. Anthony Verity, ed. Richard Hunter (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, Vol. 2, trans. W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, 6 vols (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1918-35). For an alternative account of this episode, see Lindsay, 216. He outlines the rhetorician Polyainos’ argument that Menelaus sent a servant girl disguised as Helen out to meet the angry mob, which then stoned her to death. Polyainos thus finds a way to accommodate both the Polyxo legend, and the Odyssean account of Helen and Menelaus reunited in Greece.

is enmeshed by it.<sup>26</sup> Though it resolutely refuses to make direct reference to Helen's scandalous future, *The Marriage Song for Helen and Menelaus* recalls it constantly and inescapably, and like Gorgias' and Isocrates' defences, troublingly compromises the power men appear to enjoy over her, while also hinting that she, too, will suffer, and will only briefly enjoy the happiness her handmaidens describe here.

### **"Fame Among Men Forever More": Latin Helen, from Virgil to Hyginus**

Ancient Greek Helen is deliberately and continually complicated by her authors, who question every aspect of her power, both over her own destiny and, more importantly, over the lives of the men who fight over her. From Virgil onwards, Latin authors continue to represent her as a threat. Though she features in the *Aeneid* only peripherally, a radically anti-Helen sentiment, and conception of her threat, can easily be perceived in Virgil's pro-Trojan rendering of the story in the poem. Helen is a minor character in the Latin epic, denied the opportunity to speak and appearing only briefly in Book Two, crouched in the ruins of Troy – an episode that is rendered more mysterious since, as Suzuki observes, the passage "is of disputed authenticity since it is only preserved in Servius' *Vita Vergilii*, and scholars have questioned it for its verbal repetitions, extravagance of expression, and contradiction of Deiphobus' tale in Book 6" (94).<sup>27</sup> However, she argues, "we can perhaps explain these textual problems as Virgil's attempt to dramatize the violence of an earlier heroic model, as exemplified by the *Iliad*" (94). Here as there, Helen's inclusion is significant, as is her apparent passivity. Both her presence in Troy and her silent helplessness allow Aeneas the chance to rail against a woman he sees as utterly in the wrong, and by extension, underline how far Helen has become a symbol for events that have clearly long since spun out of her

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<sup>26</sup> *Iliad* 3.125-8. When she is forced to go to Paris, Helen becomes literally "enmeshed" by her own depiction of the conflict – at 3.419 she wraps herself in the robe she has made and follows Aphrodite.

<sup>27</sup> On the doubtful authenticity of these lines, see also G. P. Goold, "Servius and the Helen Episode", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 74 (1970): 101-68, 133.

control. Aeneas calls her *communis Erinys* (2.573)<sup>28</sup> (“common Fury”), investing her with great and malign agency. Recounting their meeting to Dido, he recalls: *exarsere ignes animo; subit ira cadentem / ulcisci patriam et sceleratas sumere poenas* (2.575-6) (“Now fires blazed up in my mind - / Anger came upon me to avenge my fatherland / And exact a wicked punishment”). Here the issue of Helen’s blame is certainly inextricably linked to her sexual transgression, but also, interestingly, to a specifically male honour (a motif that was to become more noticeable in medieval accounts of her story). Thus Helen, having come to Aeneas’ attention, comes to symbolise not only sexual impropriety or the city’s folly, but also his own reputation – he tells himself

[...] *namque etsi nullum memorabile nomen  
feminea in poena est, nec habet victoria laudem,  
extinxisse nefas tamen et sumpsisse merentis  
laudabor poenas, animumque explesse iuvabit  
ultrix flammae, et cineres satiasset meorum.* (2.583-587)

(“For even if there is no memorable name or praiseworthy victory to be had in punishing a woman, I will nevertheless be praised for having extinguished this evil and having exacted a well-deserved punishment, and it will be a joy to have sated the mind with the flame of vengeance and to have satisfied the ashes of my people”).

Finally, however, Venus appears and urges Aeneas to resist the threatening distraction that Helen still clearly poses (though it is not here, and to this man, a sexual distraction) and to forge on with his task. Later, in Book Six, Deiphobus’ horrific mutilation reinscribes for Aeneas the danger of desiring Helen, and specifically the damaging effect untempered desire may have on the body politic (a lesson that Dido has, by this time, learnt to her cost). Virgil’s Helen seems as much a passive tool of the gods as she is in other versions of the story, but she is nonetheless a danger to masculine endeavour. The importance Aeneas ascribes to her before Venus’ warning, and his determination to punish her, make her a threat to Aeneas’ quest and to the security of his future community, since she is a woman who may fatally delay

<sup>28</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, ed. R. Deryck Williams (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 2005). Translations are my own.

him as Dido is to do. Indeed, Augustus' emphasis on the sanctity of marriage may have contributed to Virgil's negative portrayal of Helen, as well as the importance Virgil lays on formally recognised marriage elsewhere in the poem. Suzuki observes:

Under Augustus' national program, new codes sought to bring the family under the protection of the state by tightening the matrimonial bond; to strengthen the stability of marriage, the power of husbands over wives, supposedly prevalent in early Rome, was idealized. (124-125)

A Dido or a Helen would obviously have no place in such a program, and accordingly while he may portray her as apparently powerless, for Virgil Helen's importance lies in her continuing threat to male order. Though it is now a temptation to punish, rather than to marry or seduce, Aeneas must resist the temptation represented by Helen (as Menelaus cannot) in his efforts to establish a new city.

In the *Heroides*, by contrast, Ovid attempts to address Helen's decision to elope with Paris, and to contextualise, rather than describe, the events of her abduction. Thus in *Heroides* 5, Oenone's letter to Paris, Oenone is devastated by Paris' betrayal, and Ovid uses her clearly to foreshadow the consequences of his actions, as she points out *causa pudenda tua est; iusta vir arma movet* (5.98) ("Your case is one that calls for shame; just are the arms her lord takes up").<sup>29</sup> Here Oenone emphasises not only the essentially homosocial nature of the Trojan War, but the extent to which Helen may seem troublingly incidental. Paris has disrupted the masculine community in his cuckolding of Menelaus, and thus must face the masculine consequence of his actions, Menelaus' warmongering. While Oenone attacks Helen too, scoffing *ardet amore tui? sic et Menelaon amavit* (5.105) ("Is she ardent with love for you? So, too, she loved Menelaus"), she is clearly more interested in castigating Paris. Ovid

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<sup>29</sup>Ovid, *Heroides* and *Amores*, trans. G. Showerman (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1914). I have not considered the veracity or otherwise of individual epistles here – for a brief discussion, see Ovid, *Heroides XVI-XXI*, ed. and trans. E. J. Kenney (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 20-25, and Ralph J. Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling: Studies in Medieval School Commentaries on Ovid's 'Ars Amatoria', 'Epistulae Ex Ponto', and 'Epistulae Heroidum'* (München: Arbe-Gesellschaft, 1986) 141. Also see Peter E. Knox, "Ovid's Medea and the Authenticity of *Heroides* 12" *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 90 (1986): 207-23.

appears to concur with her view in *Heroides 16*, Paris' letter to Helen, which follows Homer in portraying the Trojan prince as passionate but impulsive, and naive. However, at the same time *Heroides 17*, Helen's reply, does not paint her in an especially positive light, and it seems that once again, like Gorgias and Isocrates, Ovid is playing on his audience's knowledge of the tragic events that followed the flirtation he outlines here, to underline the insidious threat Helen poses.

Thus much of Paris' letter is deeply ironic, for example when he tells Helen *arsurum Paridis vates canit Ilion igni - / pectoris, ut nunc est, fax fuit illa mei!* (16.49-50) ("One of the seers sang that Ilion would burn with the fire of Paris – that was the torch of my heart, as now has come to pass!"). Meanwhile, he makes very clear his desire for Helen and specifically his desire to possess her irrespective of the morality of the situation, or even her own wishes. Speaking of her earlier abduction by Theseus, he tells her:

*Si reddenda fores, aliquid tamen aute tulissem,  
Nec Venus ex toto nostra fuisset iners  
Vel mihi virginitas esset libata, vel illud  
Quod poterat salva virginitate rapi.* (16.159-162)

("If you must needs have been rendered up, I should first at least have taken some pledge from you; my love for you would not have been wholly for naught. Either your virgin flower I should have plucked, or taken what could have been stolen without hurt to your virgin state").

This aggressively proprietary attitude seems to imply that Helen could have had little chance of withstanding Paris. However, he attempts to lay some guilt at her door, asking her *hanc faciem culpa posse carere putas?* (16.288) ("do you think that beauty of yours can be free from fault?") Here, as Euripides does in *Helen*, Ovid emphasises the paradoxical nature of the beauty that gives Helen her power, but also threatens the same masculine community it so influences: the men she encounters believe she must be dangerous or blameworthy. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid depicts an aged Helen marvelling over the fleeting nature of the beauty that caused such destruction. This brief episode, which was to influence the English writers Thomas Heywood and

Edmund Waller among others, underscores the futility of the war, and also the utterly unstable nature of Helen's power, over her own beauty and over male reactions to it.

Paris assures Helen that the only consequence to her will be renown within the masculine community, rather than the notoriety that Ovid's audience knows to be her destiny: *tu quoque, si de te tutus contenderit orbis, / nomen ab aeterna posteritate feres* (16.375-376) ("You, besides, if the whole world shall contend for you, will attain to fame among men forever more!") Helen, in her reply, sees the issue of her future reputation very differently, sarcastically asking Paris *Thesea paenituit, Paris ut succederet illi, / ne quando nomen non sit in ore meum?* (17.32-33) ("Did Theseus repent but for Paris to follow in his steps, / Lest my name should sometime cease from the lips of men?") Here, Ovid is exploiting the fact that his readers know that Helen is right and Paris is wrong, and that if she submits to him, she will become more infamous than famous. Thus, like Oenone, Helen worries far more than Paris about the wider consequences of their affair, telling him *vatum timeo monitus, quos igne Pelasgo / Ilion arsurum praemonuisse ferunt* (17.239-240) ("I shrink at the words of the seers who they say forewarned that Ilion would burn with Pelasgian fire"), and fearing the reactions of Minerva and Juno. At the same time, however, she flirts increasingly with Paris, telling him coyly, *Hectora, quem laudas, pro te pugnare iubeto; / militia est operis altera digna tuis* (17.255-256) ("Bid Hector, whom you praise, go warring in your stead: 'tis the other campaigning befits your prowess"), thereby emphasising the threat she potentially poses to male duty: in the *Iliad*, Hector does indeed find himself fighting in his brother's place. Kenney calls Ovid's Helen "a brilliant retrojection of Euripides' acid deconstruction" (2), and in her letter, the Latin poet renders Helen surprisingly sympathetic. However, as he does so he emphasises those aspects of her character - her vanity, her refusal to accept blame, her flirtatious nature - that earned her such vitriolic criticism from the Athenian dramatist. Ovid exploits Helen's story for his own ends, purporting to give her a voice (and one which seems initially sympathetic), but also undermining her defence by portraying Helen's growing desire for Paris, and continually referring to the consequences of actions that are still in the future,



but which the Ovidian Helen is ironically, and paradoxically, powerless to influence.<sup>30</sup>

Ovid's sense that Helen's power is unstable, that she can foresee the potential consequences of Paris' passion but is unable to control either his desire, or her own, seems to be echoed in Seneca's rendering of her character, in his *Trojan Women*. Like the Roman dramatist's *Medea*, his play is far from a straightforward Latin translation of Euripides' earlier Greek work. Here much has been changed, not only Helen's representation but also many aspects of the plot. Some elements are familiar: Andromache and Hecuba, awaiting the Greeks in the ruins of Troy, both curse Helen, and her beauty is once more held as a pernicious and unearthly power over men. However, she is much less the constant point of reference that she is in Euripides' *Trojan Women* (in which Hecuba and Andromache attack her repeatedly long before she appears). Significantly, Hecuba blames herself for the fall of Troy: she exclaims *meus ignis iste est, facibus ardetis meis* (40) ("that fire is mine, you burn from my fatal brands").<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the play as a whole appears to aim for a more sympathetic rendering of Helen than Euripides' tragedy. Thus while Helen is not manipulated by the gods as she claims to be in Euripides' tragedy (Euripides' opening scene, the conversation between Poseidon and Athene about the future of the Greeks, is here missing) she defines herself as a pawn of both the Greek and Trojan men. When she was taken by Paris she was *praeda* (920) ("plunder"), and now she must wait for the anger of Menelaus, *meus* [...] *dominus* (916-7) ("my master"). At the beginning of Act Four, she regrets that, at Greek instruction, she must deceive Polyxena into believing she will marry Pyrrhus (rather than be sacrificed to Achilles' tomb), exclaiming *eversis quoque / nocere cogor Phrygibus* (863-4) ("Even when the Trojans are cast down, I am compelled to harm them"). This episode is all Seneca's, and the

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<sup>30</sup> Kenney (2-3) notes that Helen may seem to have the choice to reject Paris, but that Ovid's readers would be fully aware that she will not, and indeed cannot. By way of contrast see Elizabeth Belfiore, "Ovid's Encomium of Helen", *The Classical Journal* 76.2 (1980-1981): 136-48, 139. She argues that Ovid's Helen is "in full control of the situation from start to finish". I think it is more likely, though, that Ovid was, as Kenney suggests, playing with his readers' knowledge of Helen's story, creating an apparently feisty and self-possessed woman whose future actions and reputation are already written elsewhere, and hence utterly beyond her control.

<sup>31</sup> Seneca, *Seneca's 'Troades': A Literary Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Elaine Fantham (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982). The reference is to Hecuba's dream of the firebrand before Paris' birth.

scene in which Helen prepares the unwitting princess for her “marriage” is poignant. It seems to underscore the sense that even women who are ascribed agency and power by others (as Helen is) are, in this world of classical tragedy, under the control of men.

Helen does have one strange power in the play, though: Frederick Ahl notes that she announces the results of the lottery the Greek men have taken part in to assign the Trojan women. Ahl suggests that she tells the Trojan women (who have attacked her throughout the play) their fates “with perhaps a touch of Laconic satisfaction”.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, putting Helen in this role, like involving her in Polyxena’s tragedy, seems to make Helen more powerful than the Trojan women (though less powerful than the Greek men: as she herself notes, her fate has already been decided, and her man assigned her). As she prepares to deceive Polyxena, Helen tells herself *ad auctorem redit / sceleris coacti culpa* (870-1) (“The guilt of my enforced offence turns back on its originator”). Here, as she is to do repeatedly in later renderings, Helen excuses herself from blame by downplaying her own agency, emphasising how she is helpless in the face of masculine desire or order. Here even her famous beauty does not give her the power it does in Euripides’ tragedy. There, Helen’s appearance is stressed: stage directions given by modern editors of Euripides frequently emphasise it on her entrance.<sup>33</sup> Here, conversely, Ahl notes the extent to which beauty is a devalued currency: when she is given to Ulysses, Hecuba exults in her old age, and “takes consolation in the fact that she has thus deprived him of the chance of an appealing woman” (37). Here then, the Greeks’ manipulation of Helen means that she is excluded from the community of Trojan women, and yet despite what Hecuba and Andromache believe, she appears just as much a victim, unable to draw power from her divine ancestry or her notorious beauty.

Conversely, the first-century mythographer Hyginus makes the issue of Helen’s guilt unequivocal. In his *Fabulae*, he lists Helen as an example of a woman who killed her husband (Deiphobus), and repeats the accusation Deiphobus makes in Book Six of the *Aeneid*, speaking of *Facem [...] Helenae*

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<sup>32</sup> Seneca, *Three Tragedies: ‘Trojan Women’; ‘Medea’; ‘Phaedra’*, ed. and trans. Frederick Ahl (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986) 40.

<sup>33</sup> In Clay’s edition, for example, the reader is told: “Unlike Hecuba, Andromache, and the Trojan women, Helen is elegantly dressed and her hair carefully plaited” (S.D. p.78).

*quam de muris ostendit et Troiam prodidit* (CCXLIX) (“the torch of Helen which she displayed from the walls and betrayed Troy”).<sup>34</sup> Here, Hyginus demonstrates his resistance to any suggestion of her innocence (she herself does not kill Deiphobus, any more than she kills any of the other innumerable Grecians and Trojans). Ovid evokes a sense, rather than a certainty, of her future culpability far more sensitively. In doing so, he was to provide an important model for renderings of Helen that underline her alarm and fear, as well as her desire for Paris, throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Though the impact of the *Aeneid* on the literary imagination of the European Middle Ages is undisputed, the brevity of Virgil’s allusions to Helen meant that, certainly from the twelfth century onwards, the conflicted Ovidian Helen was at least as influential. Through late antiquity and into the Middle Ages and beyond, these classical ways of representing Helen’s blame and agency persisted. Her power remains unstable and often paradoxical – rooted in beauty that is surpassing but cannot last, it is exemplified by her effect on men who very quickly come to control her. Classical authors were fascinated by Helen, and felt compelled to represent her power and threat even as they sought to neutralise it, to emphasise her passivity in Troy, or the punishment, and infamy, that was to catch up with her. Important too, even at this very early stage, is an obvious authorial interest in responding to earlier models, to rewriting them, challenging or undermining them, and expecting (and rewarding) a reader’s knowledge of Helen’s earlier incarnations. These themes, of unstable threat and conscious rewriting, are also key to representations of Medea, a woman who evinced similar feelings of alarm in many of the same classical authors, but for very different reasons.

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<sup>34</sup> Hyginus, *Fabulae*, ed. P. K. Marshall (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1993). Translations of Hyginus are my own.

## Chapter Two: Classical Medea

The treatment of Helen in the classical period typifies the peculiarly symbiotic relationship between the woman and the men in the texts – the woman who exerts a fascination over men, but at the same time relies on their continued interest in her for any kind of literary representation – as well as between the female character and the male author who relies on but also (re)creates her. The same kind of relationship may be discerned in classical accounts of Medea’s life and magical career. Once more, the emphasis is on her threatening power, and how this is simultaneously created and undermined by and within the texts. Sarah Iles Johnston underlines the influence of the Medea story: “Although the earliest works in which she appeared are no longer intact, their fragments suggest that her story was an old and popular one by at least the eighth century BC”.<sup>1</sup> While (with the arguable exception of the *Odyssey*) classical texts often show Helen as having little objective power, and this assumption is carried over into medieval and early modern texts (and often strengthened), the issue of Medea’s power is more uncertainly defined. Hesiod’s *Theogony* characterises her as utterly passive, describing her in a series of stock epithets:

And the son of Aeson [...] came to Iolcus after long toil bringing the coy-eyed girl with him on his swift ship, and made her his buxom wife. And she was subject to Jason, shepherd of the people, and bare a son Medeus. (153)<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, the classical accounts of Euripides, Pindar and Seneca in particular seem to define Medea very differently, as intensely powerful, whether because of her magical powers or because of the extent to which she is prepared to transgress male-imposed societal norms. However, even these texts define Medea to a certain extent as vulnerable to the male establishment, while accounts that portray her more sympathetically, for example those of Ovid or

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Iles Johnston, “Introduction”, in Clauss and Johnston, eds. *Medea*: 3-17, 3.

<sup>2</sup> In Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, trans. Evelyn-White.

Apollonius Rhodius, seek in their own different ways to impose limits on her power, or to undermine it even as they portray it.

### **“A Woman of a Very Different Kind”: Euripides’ Medea and the Threat to Natural Order**

References to Medea’s earlier life and crimes are woven throughout Greek drama, and Euripides’ *Medea*, like so many other versions of her story (and Helen’s) assumes a degree of knowledge of what has gone before, of the “coy-eyed girl” of the *Theogony* who was “subject to Jason”. Thus the tragedy begins with Medea fatally weakened by Jason’s betrayal, not even onstage to articulate her own grief, but distraught, and fully aware of what she has sacrificed. Her Nurse observes “sometimes she turns away her pale, pale neck and bemoans to herself her dear father and her country and the home which she betrayed to come here with the man who now holds her in dishonour” (31-4).<sup>3</sup> Like Helen, she has sacrificed everything she knows for a foreign man, and the gamble has proved unsuccessful, leaving her “a desolate woman without a city” (256-7). Medea is weakened by her status as a foreigner, by her past misdeeds (which have left her unable to return home), and above all by her gender.

Though Robin Sowerby argues that “Through her Euripides shows great understanding of the actual position of women in Greek society in his times and of a foreign woman in particular”,<sup>4</sup> other critics have seen Euripides as reluctant to address the issue of Medea’s femininity (in contrast to Seneca, for example). Introducing Deborah Boedeker’s essay on Euripides’ tragedy, Johnston argues “Euripidean Medea becomes *dissociated* from the very things that should most obviously describe her: the words “woman” and “mother” are used of Medea in this play only ironically”.<sup>5</sup> In fact, in the play Medea’s femininity, and concurrently her power, are represented in complex (and

<sup>3</sup> Euripides, ‘*Medea*’; ‘*Hippolytus*’; ‘*Electra*’; ‘*Helen*’, trans. Morwood.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Sowerby, *The Classical Legacy in Renaissance Poetry* (London: Longman, 1994) 76. See also Durham, “Medea”, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Johnston, “Introduction”, in Clauss and Johnston, eds., *Medea*, 11. See also Deborah Boedeker, “Becoming Medea: Assimilation in Euripides”, in Clauss and Johnston, eds., *Medea*: 127-48.

perhaps perplexing) ways. Here, she is stereotypically powerless, “pining away in tears unceasingly” (26-7). Her impotence manifests itself in feminine behaviour (and likewise, ‘feminine’ behaviour manifests itself as impotence and passivity, a literal refusal to look the facts of her abandonment in the face). Nevertheless, later her power is found to be rooted in her sex, paradoxically because of the lack of power men believe her identity as a woman must signify. As Rabinowitz argues,

The very device Euripides employed to gain our sympathy for her, her similarity to other women, makes her most terrifying, for she is not a victim and not vulnerable – that is, not feminine – yet she has been identified as and with other women. To the extent that she is nonetheless a woman like other women, she destabilises the category ‘woman’.<sup>6</sup>

Thus as she puts her plan for revenge on Jason into action, Medea plays on Creon’s perceptions of ‘woman’. To appeal to the king she must belittle herself, try to play down her difference from his stereotypical concept of woman as passive and naturally subject to male will. Later too, her appeal to Ageus for sanctuary (that nod to the possible consequences of her violent actions that Aristotle found so displeasing)<sup>7</sup> succeeds in part at least because of her hint that, as a woman, she has the power to bear Ageus the heirs he so desires.

Patently, Medea retains a degree of power in Corinth, specifically a rhetorical power over the men she encounters.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, she sees herself as doubly weakened, both by her gender and her race, telling her husband “your marriage with a barbarian was proving a source of no glory for you as you faced old age” (591-3). Morwood notes the fundamental nature of the error Medea has made: “In Euripides’ Athens, a marriage with a foreigner would have no legal validity and Jason certainly does not feel tied by it” (169). Rabinowitz suggests that Euripides may be using Medea to represent his own

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<sup>6</sup> Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*, 132.

<sup>7</sup> In Chapter 25 of *On the Art of Poetry*, “Critical Objections and Their Answers”, Aristotle opines “no good use is made of the irrationality in Euripides’ introduction of Aegeus in the *Medea*”. In T. S. Dorsch, trans., *Classical Literary Criticism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 73.

<sup>8</sup> See J. O. De G. Hanson, “The Secret of Medea’s Success”, *Greece & Rome* Second Series 12.1 (1965): 54-61, 55.

feelings as an exile. However, she points out: “If Euripides is indeed using Medea in this way, [...] it is still an example of what Gayatri Spivak has called ‘double displacement’, a strategy by which the male poet occupies all the positions” (152). Edith Hall’s suggestion, in her introduction to Morwood’s translation of the play, that “Euripides was almost certainly the first poet to turn her from a Corinthian into a barbarian” (xvii) backs up this theory of a damaging homosocial attitude, by hypothesising connections of understanding between Jason, Euripides and a male Athenian audience,<sup>9</sup> connections which operate to exclude Medea on the grounds of both her race and gender. Jason blithely ignores the ominous hints she drops about the murder of her brother, and reduces her power further by telling her “You are a clever woman – but it would be invidious to spell out how Love forced you with his inescapable arrows to save me” (529-31). Though he foolishly does not see the sex as a force to be reckoned with, Jason wishes for a world free from women, and one in which they do not hold any control over the survival of the male line (573-5). In fact, despite Jason’s dismissive attitude, Medea’s revenge, the alarming demonstration of her power that was to echo from Euripides down into the seventeenth century and beyond, is inextricably linked both to her sexuality and to her reproductive power.

Many critics have suggested that Medea’s murder of her children may be Euripides’ innovation<sup>10</sup> – in her introduction to Morwood’s edition of the play, Hall notes “His Medea is [...] the first known child-killing mother in Greek myth to perform the deed in cold blood; the others (Ino, Agave, Procne) seem always to have been given the ‘excuse’ of temporary madness” (xvi). Indeed, in one account given by the scholiast on Euripides’ tragedy, Medea is absolved of the crime. The author notes Creophylus’ alternative account:

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<sup>9</sup> See also Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, rep. 2004) 35. For an account of European societies’ interest in including the foreign or barbarian in their myths, as a way of confirming their own superiority, see Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). Medea’s foreignness continues to be a theme of interest to male writers into the seventeenth century, making her at once fascinating, alarming, and comfortingly distant.

<sup>10</sup> Although in his edition of Seneca’s *Medea*, H. M. Hine notes “it is disputed whether the innovation was his, or occurred earlier in a *Medea* by the tragedian Neophon”. Seneca, *Medea*, trans. H. M. Hine (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 2000) 13. All subsequent quotations from Seneca’s *Medea* (discussed below) are from this edition.

[...] while Medea was living in Corinth, she poisoned Creon, who was ruler of the city at that time, and because she feared his friends and kinfolk, fled to Athens. However, since her sons were too young to go along with her, she left them at the altar of Hera Acraea, thinking that their father would see to their safety. But the relatives of Creon killed them and spread the story that Medea had killed her own children as well as Creon. (p.535)<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, Pausanias reports:

[...] they are said to have been stoned to death by the Corinthians owing to the gifts which legend says they brought to Glauce. (2.3, vol.1, p. 263)

In yet another variation, John Kerrigan notes that in the eighth-century BC account of Eumelus, “Medea kills the children in error while trying to give them immortal life”.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, in Euripides’ tragedy, having deliberately killed her children, she rises up to the heavens on a dragon-drawn chariot. Here again, her power is clearly linked to her divinity, to her distance from human experience. Morwood notes that Medea predicts Jason’s death, and in so doing “usurps the role of the god who is likely to appear to foretell the future at the end of a Euripides play” (179), and Oliver Taplin sees this episode as another Euripidean innovation.<sup>13</sup> However, as so often in Euripides’ work, the play’s ending is tempered with doubt. Rabinowitz notes how Euripides tellingly suppresses the supernatural element of her nature. She argues:

Euripides might have made Medea a divinity from the first, like Aphrodite in *Hippolytus* or Dionysus in *The Bacchae*; their power is brutal, but the terror is of a different sort because it has not been brought into the human circle. Since he does not do so, it is commonly agreed that Euripides deemphasizes Medea’s role as a goddess. (133)

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<sup>11</sup> Mentioned in “The Taking of Oechalia”, in Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, trans. Evelyn-White.

<sup>12</sup> John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 89.

<sup>13</sup> Oliver Taplin, “The Pictorial Record”. in P. E. Easterling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997): 69-90, 78.



Thus Euripides tempers the divine Medea he inherited from earlier texts, and yet the solution she seeks for her wrongs, and the divinity that enables her to escape punishment, see her manifestly excluded from human society, despite her earlier attempts to ensure a refuge with Ageus. Medea has won victory over Jason at the expense of the audience's sympathy, and the extent of her power as both a woman and a goddess at the end of the play would be particularly difficult for a fifth-century Athenian audience to comprehend. While her divine lineage and fantastic escape serve to elevate her, the actions her power has given her the authority, courage and ability to undertake have at the same time rendered her strangely powerless. She is outside society as well as above it, and, as Jason exclaims, "She must surely hide herself below the earth or fly with winged body into the deep heaven if she is not to pay the penalty to the royal family" (1297-9). Although Sowerby has seen in *Medea* Euripides' sympathetic appreciation of the foreign female's plight, Rabinowitz convincingly argues that the play represents "the ability of the dominant order to construct the female and femininity in ways consistent with its needs" (153).<sup>14</sup> Even in this most apparently alarming rendering, then, Medea's power thus serves to undercut itself even as it is established. The play has set out to plumb the depths of her powerlessness, the impotence she feels as a woman, as a foreigner, as abandoned. Finally, too, for all her strength as a character, at the height of her triumph her power remains problematically tempered by her ongoing relation to the human (and particularly the masculine) world. These masculine solutions to her "problem", the conception of Medea as always enjoying a compromised power, remaining restricted by the patriarchal world she rails against (typified by her reliance on Ageus' sanctuary), are developed in the first century by Ovid and Seneca. Accordingly, the same solutions can be discerned in the much later, English rewritings that touch on the disturbing conclusion to Medea's story.

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<sup>14</sup> See also Durham, who argues "Euripides uses Medea to illustrate by contrast the Greek ideal of moderation". Durham, "Medea", 55.

## **Pindar's and Apollonius' Medeas: The Growth of a Romantic Tradition**

In contrast to Euripides' *Medea*, Pindar's *Fourth Pythian Ode* and Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* are concerned with the beginning of Medea's story, with the fatal love she feels for Jason rather than its tragic consequences. Both, too, give some account of Medea's magical power, and particularly how she bends it to Jason's service. As this would suggest, both poems, like Euripides' tragedy, portray Medea's power to a certain extent, but temper it with a powerful sense of doubt or anxiety, rendering the balance between Medea's power and impotence unstable, specifically because of her involvement with the male establishment. Pindar's *Pythian 4* dramatises the beginning of Medea and Jason's romantic relationship, and culminates with an account of their marriage: "they vowed sweet union in mutual wedlock" (p. 223).<sup>15</sup> Here, the romantic relationship serves at first to demonstrate Medea's power, since Pindar notes that Jason yoked the fire-breathing bulls "by grace of the counsels of the magic maiden" (p.225). Medea's assistance and her prophetic power mean that the men see her as a valuable member of the community. However, Pindar, like Euripides, also strives to suggest the extent to which love weakens Medea. Fritz Graf notes that Medea colluded in the flight from Colchis, but that "Pindar built tension into the character of Medea by refusing to give a simple answer to an important question: does Medea herself make the decision to flee with Jason or is she influenced by Aphrodite?"<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, it seems that once again Medea's power and agency are destabilised even as they are established. In fact, just as her magical power becomes simply the means by which she may serve the male community, what appears to be an autonomous determination to follow her desires becomes tempered with doubt. Medea's magical power notwithstanding, the reader cannot forget that it was Aphrodite

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<sup>15</sup> Pindar, *Odes*, trans. and ed. John Sandys (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1915).

<sup>16</sup> Fritz Graf, "Medea, the Enchantress from Afar: Remarks on a Well-Known Myth", in Clauss and Johnston, eds, *Medea*: 21-43, 29.

who “taught the son of Aeson the love of suppliant incantations, that so he might rob Medea of her reverence for her parents” (223).

Medea’s love for Jason is perhaps the most important element of the third-century BC *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes, and Richard Hunter draws attention to Apollonius’ reliance on Pindar’s *Pythian 4* in his account of Jason and Medea’s relationship.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Pindar, Apollonius recounts their first meeting (an episode that was to be popularised by Ovid, and became a crucial factor in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century accounts of Medea’s story). Eros shoots Medea, and she is overcome with love: “At one moment her soft cheeks were drained of colour, at another they blushed red, the control of her mind now gone” (Book 3, p. 73).<sup>18</sup> Here, though she is represented sympathetically, Medea very obviously lacks control. Shot by Eros at the command of Kypris, or Venus, due to the demands of Hera and Athene, Medea is at the mercy of the gods, despite Hunter’s assertion that here “It is human action which is foregrounded, and the gods work in the background, powerful, but merely guessed at” (xxvii). While the gods are less in evidence here than they in other renderings, they obviously compromise Medea’s power over her love. So, too, does Jason’s attitude to her. Though he is often depicted in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as being equally infatuated with Medea, here there is an implicit suggestion that Jason is using her, in the prophet Mopsos’ declaration that since only Medea can help them, “we should by every possible means seek to persuade the maiden” (Book 3 p. 79). When they meet, James J. Clauss notes how a parallel with the *Odyssey* (Jason, like Nausicaa, worries they will be seen together) in fact emphasises Jason’s commitment to the homosocial quest, rather than the heterosexual relationship Medea wants:

In the place of a young girl’s concern for her honor, Apollonius sets the hero’s fear of compromising his contest. This meeting is after all Jason’s real contest: charming the unconquered maiden.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica*, trans. and ed. Richard Hunter (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) xxi.

<sup>18</sup> Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica*, trans. and ed. Hunter.

<sup>19</sup> James J. Clauss, “Conquest of the Mephistophelian Nausicaa: Medea’s Role in Apollonius’ Redefinition of the Epic Hero”, in Clauss and Johnston, eds., *Medea*: 149-77, 172-3. Debra Hershkowitz notes the similarly ironic use of the *Odyssey* (and particularly of Nausicaa as a comparison for Medea) in Valerius Flaccus’ first-century Latin *Argonautica*. Debra

Later, too, Medea must furiously remind Jason of his responsibilities to her, when he appears swayed by the Argonauts' demands to return her so that they may avoid the wrath of the Colchian forces.

Medea's nephew Argos describes her power to the Argonauts, in terms that centuries later were adopted by Ovid: "she charms the blast of unwearying fire, stops still the flow of crashing rivers, and puts bonds on the stars and the holy paths of the moon" (Book 3 p. 78). This awesome power is reflected in her assistance with Jason's tasks. At points, it can scarcely be termed assistance, as when Medea subdues the dragon, while "Behind her followed the son of Aison, terrified" (Book 4 p. 102). However, while such help obviously compromises Jason, his fuller knowledge of the situation, and inherently higher status as a man and the commander of the Argonauts' mission, in fact gives him more power, and the reader can sense Jason's control over the situation strengthening, and Medea's being diminished, with each new transgressive act she performs for him. The murder of her brother, for example, is orchestrated by Medea (though performed by Jason), but Jan. N. Bremmer suggests that "Through Apsyrtus' murder, she simultaneously declared her independence from her family and forfeited her right to any protection from it".<sup>20</sup> Here, then, the reader sees Medea cutting herself off from other communities or places of sanctuary, even as her hold over Jason appears to be becoming more tenuous. The inherent instability of Medea's power, and the reality of her diminishing independence, is problematically stressed at the end of the poem as the pair seek help from Arete and Alkinoos (in another deliberate reference to the *Odyssey*). Much as Helen does in her tale to the Greek men in Book Four of Homer's epic, Medea appeals for clemency by taking on the ultimate in submissive female roles. While Helen argues she was under the malign influence of Aphrodite, Medea falsely claims "against my will did I leave my

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Hershkowitz, *Valerius Flaccus' 'Argonautica': Abbreviated Voyages in Silver Latin Epic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 97.

<sup>20</sup> Jan N. Bremmer, "Why Did Medea Kill Her Brother Apsyrtus?", in Clauss and Johnston, eds, *Medea*: 83-100, 100. In her review of the book, Jennifer R. March protests "This is not at all persuasive, for any kin-murder would have had the same effect". However, I agree with Bremmer that through the killing of her brother (rather than of her sister Chalcioppe, for example) Medea demonstrates a particularly alarming refusal to respect patriarchal mores and familial structures. Jennifer R. March, "Review of *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art* by James J. Clauss; Sarah Iles Johnston", *The Classical Review*, New Series, 49.2 (1999): 362-3, 363.

home in the company of foreign men; it was hateful fear which persuaded me to think of fleeing” (Book 4 p. 122). Finally, though she is able, through her deception of Arete and Alkinoos, to achieve her own ends and avoid being sent back to Aeetes, she is only able to do this by binding herself more closely to Jason and the Argonauts by agreeing to marry him. Like Pindar, Apollonius does not refer to the way this marriage will end. However, even if the reader is unaware of how dramatically Medea’s hopes for the future are to be frustrated, it seems obvious by the end of the poem that while her malign power has increased exponentially, the influence of the gods and of Jason himself mean that she is far from being entirely in control.

### **Resisting “the desire for the marvellous”: Rationalising Medea in Diodorus Siculus and Apollodorus.**

As the classical period progressed, writers began to experiment more with the facts of Medea’s story as they had been received. They did this either by collating the different threads of her life into overviews, or by adapting the received wisdom about Medea, and even the older texts themselves, for their own ends. In *The Library of History*, written in the first century BC, Diodorus Siculus attempts a rationalising account of Medea’s career.<sup>21</sup> The most important change to the traditional story is that Medea’s magic is continually explained and restricted. Medea’s skill seems to lie more in medicine rather than witchcraft, and she uses her powers for good rather than evil. Diodorus makes clear how far she bends her magical and diplomatic powers to the service of the men she meets, observing:

For she made a practise of rescuing from their perils the strangers who came to their shores, sometimes demanding from her father by entreaty and coaxing that the lives be spared of those who were to die, and sometimes herself releasing them from prison and then devising plans for the safety of the unfortunate men. (4.46 p. 487)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Graf identifies it as an adaptation of a prose version of Apollonius’ epic, by Dionysius Scythobranchion. Graf, “Medea”, in Clauss and Johnston, eds., *Medea*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Works*, Vol. 2, trans. C. H. Oldfather, 10 vols (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1933-67).

She meets and falls in love with Jason, and Graf notes that in his account of their affair, Diodorus ignores Apollonius' model, and rather "aligns with the euhemeristic rationalism of Dionysius Scythobrachion in excluding divine intervention".<sup>23</sup> He transforms the magical bulls and the dragon which guard the Fleece into human opponents, Taurians and a man called Dracon respectively, and elides Medea's murder of her brother. Though Diodorus does include her plot against Pelias, once more the supernatural elements are quashed. While he notes that "by means of certain drugs, Medea caused shapes of the dragons to appear, which she declared had brought the goddess through the air" (4.51, p. 507), she only pretends to rejuvenate a sheep, and in fact substitutes a lamb without her audience noticing. Moreover, when she sets in motion her plan to destroy Jason's uncle, her masquerade with a statue of Artemis is apparently impressive: by filling the figure with certain herbs, "she threw Pelias into such a state of superstitious fear and, by her magic arts, so terrified his daughters that they believed that the goddess was actually there in person to bring prosperity to the house of the king" (4.51, p. 505). However, to the reader this deception serves only to stress that she does not, in fact, enjoy the kind of power that the king and his daughters believe her to possess.

As a force apparently threatening to the natural order, then, Medea's magic is continually reduced and explained, a trend that was particularly apparent in the Middle Ages, as authors such as Guido and Lydgate attempted to explain how it only appeared that Medea commanded magical powers. Diodorus himself explains that "Speaking generally, it is because of the desire of the tragic poets for the marvellous that so varied and inconsistent an account of Medea has been given out" (4.5, p. 521). Diodorus' determination to resist "the marvellous" means that his Medea is firmly and unthreateningly rooted in the real world. She is a woman who betrays her family, and does kill her children, but though talented, she is a charlatan rather than a sorceress, and one who must, like Euripides' Medea, seek sanctuary with Ageus as a result of her crimes.

This final impulse to bring Medea under control is also evident in Apollodorus' first-century AD *Library of History*. In some ways, Apollodorus'

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<sup>23</sup> Graf, "Medea", in Clauss and Johnston, eds., *Medea*, 25.

account is more rooted in ancient versions of Medea's myth than is Diodorus'. Thus her love for Jason is influenced by the gods, and she gives him "potion" and "drugs" (1.9.23)<sup>24</sup> to assist him in his tasks. However, while he includes accounts of the murders of Apsyrtus and her children, Apollodorus, like the scholiast on Euripides before him, also suggests that the Corinthians may actually have been responsible for the murder of Medea's sons. More significantly, like Diodorus he makes a very obvious attempt to show Medea as back under male control at the end of his account. She returns to Colchis, and "finding that Aietes had been deprived of his kingdom by his brother Perses, she killed Perses and restored the throne to her father" (1.9.28). Her power is not in doubt, but once again, if she is to re-establish herself in society, it is clear that Apollodorus' Medea, like the Medea of Apollonius, must be willing to bend her power to the pursuit of male ends.

**"I had power to save, do you ask / have I power to destroy?" Latin Medea, from Ovid to Seneca**

Johnston notes that "The first century AD seems to have found Medea particularly compelling",<sup>25</sup> and the works of Ovid and Seneca the Younger show poet and dramatist returning to older works that deal with her story, even as they seek to innovate and question. Like Helen, Medea was a favourite of Ovid's, such an inspirational figure to the poet that he included her in his *Fasti*, *Tristia*, *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*, as well as making her the subject of a tragedy that has not survived.<sup>26</sup> The Medea found in the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* is a paradoxical figure, at once attractive due to the strength of her emotions and removed from the reader by the emphasis on her magic. In

<sup>24</sup> Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Johnston, "Introduction", in Clauss and Johnston, eds., *Medea*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Quintilian quotes from it in *Institutiones Oratoriae*. Medea demands *servare potui: perdere an possim rogas?* (8.5.6) ("I had power to save, do you ask / have I power to destroy?"). The similarity to her furious demands in Euripides, the *Heroides* and Seneca is obvious. Medea's avowal of her own agency (presumably in response to Jason's abandonment) highlights the constantly shifting balance between power and helplessness that has been key to her story since its earliest beginnings, and would remain so through the Middle Ages and into the seventeenth century. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, Vol. 3, ed. and trans. Donald A Russell, 5 vols (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classical, Harvard UP, 2001).

the *Heroides* Ovid introduces Medea's story with a letter from the woman who has been abandoned as a result of her seductive power. Hypsipyle can often come across as a passive and weak character, and many texts make no mention of the fact that Medea is not the first woman Jason has seduced (with the all-important promises of marriage) and then abandoned for his own gain. Here, Hypsipyle is a powerfully angry figure, and while much of her rage is directed against Medea, the *barbara paelax* (6.81) ("barbarian jade") who has stolen her husband, in fact the two women appear remarkably similar.<sup>27</sup> Thus Hypsipyle, like Medea, reminds Jason furiously of the oaths he swore to her, but at the same time is weakened, like Medea, by her inability to sustain her anger – she confesses *cor dolet, atque ira mixtus abundat amor* (6.76) ("My heart is sick, and surges with mingled wrath and love"). Moreover, there is the potential for violence contained in her ironic desire to take over Medea's murderous identity, evident as she exclaims *Medeae Medea forem!* (6.151) ("I would have been Medea to Medea!"). However, in reality Hypsipyle can only wish to emulate Medea's power. While the reader is able to discern numerous and deliberate parallels between the two women, Hypsipyle sees herself as occupying the far more traditional position of the abandoned woman who, unlike Medea, cannot have recourse to such methods to avenge her mistreatment.

Through Hypsipyle's eyes, Medea appears far from the tormented figure of Apollonius' *Argonautica* or even of Euripides' and Seneca's plays. Rather she exults in her evil power and seems intent on helping Jason in ways that Hypsipyle cannot. At the same time, though, the instability of their union is obvious. Remarking *adscribi factis procerumque tuisque / se facit, et titulo coniugis uxor obest* (6.99-100) ("she has her name writ in the record of your own and your heroes' exploits, and the wife obscures the glory of the husband"), Hypsipyle makes Medea seem more powerful than Jason, but once again Medea's agency is compromised, through Hypsipyle's point that, though impressive, her powers are used to serve the male community. Furthermore, Hypsipyle suggests that the stability Medea currently enjoys with Jason will

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Howard Jacobson suggests that Hypsipyle "goes, in her speech, farther beyond the bounds of "decency" than any heroine in Ovid, including Medea herself". Howard Jacobson, *Ovid's 'Heroides'* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974) 104.



not last, and undercuts her triumph at the last by prophetically wishing for Medea the violence, tragedy and exile that will follow when, enraged by Jason's treachery, she attempts to exert her power over him a final time. She exclaims

*utque ego destituor coniunx materque duorum,  
a totidem natis orba sit illa viro! [...]  
cum mare, cum terras consumpserit, aera temptet;  
erret inops, exspes, caede cruenta sua!* (6.155-62)

("as I am now left alone, wife and mother of two babes, so may she one day be left of as many babes, and of her husband [...] When she shall have no hope more of refuge by the sea or by the land, let her make trial of the air; let her wander, destitute, bereft of hope, stained red with the blood of her murders!")

Speaking of this ending, David J. Bloch points to Ovid's self-conscious use, in *Heroides* 6, of *Heroides* 12 and Euripides' tragedy, noting "Such irony is exuberant in the *Heroides*, but this use that arises from a three way exchange among a tragedy and two single epistles is unique".<sup>28</sup> The irony is that Medea's power is undermined in the future, in the ways Hypsipyle hopes, and in the 'present', as Hypsipyle writes, by the very fact that its limitations are being exposed. Here, as he does with Helen in *Heroides* 5, 16 and 17, Ovid exploits his readers' knowledge of the end of Medea's story, and the fact that she is to suffer the loss of her children and husband, even as she (and he) makes an exhibition of her power.

In fact, by the time she comes to write her own story, in *Heroides* 12, Medea has also been betrayed by her husband, and while the potential for a powerful revenge that Hypsipyle hints at is mentioned, the poet seeks to portray the doubt and grief that underpin the revenge a contemporary audience would have been so familiar with. Carole E. Newlands notes that this letter "skilfully combines the two temporal and spatial frameworks of Euripides and Apollonius – mother and girl, Corinth and Colchis".<sup>29</sup> Thus while Medea reproaches Jason angrily, she also makes affectingly clear the distress he has

<sup>28</sup> David J. Bloch, "Ovid's *Heroides* 6: Preliminary Scenes from the Life of an Intertextual Heroine", *Classical Quarterly* New Series 50.1 (2000): 197-209, 203.

<sup>29</sup> Carole E. Newlands, "The Metamorphosis of Ovid's Medea", in Clauss and Johnston, eds, *Medea*: 178-208, 179.

caused her, and as in Apollonius' *Argonautica* and at the beginning of Euripides' tragedy, her grief is specifically linked to her gender. As Bloch points out, "An ironic assumption Hypsipyle makes is that Medea's spells had the same efficacy on Jason's love as on his martial success; at 12.163ff Medea categorically denies just what her rival alleges".<sup>30</sup> Thus Medea depicts herself as the passive partner, captivated by Jason: *sic cito sum verbis capta puella tuis* (12.92) ("Thus quickly was I ensnared, girl that I was, by your words").<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Ovid picks up on Medea's weakened position as a foreigner. Jason has pointed to Medea's racial difference by agreeing to swear faith to her *si forte aliquos gens habet ista deos* (12.80) ("by the gods of that race of thine – if so be gods it have"). Now, however, abandoned in Corinth, bereft of this legitimate (and legitimising) relationship, she is merely a *barbara paelax* (6.81) ("barbarian jade"), who has agreed to leave her home and father, and has irreversibly broken ties with her country (just as the reader knows she is soon to break ties with Corinth). There is no mention in Ovid's poem of Medea's plan to flee to Hercules (as she does in Diodorus' account) or to Ageus, but the vulnerability that is apparent in her letter goes some way towards accounting for this kind of decision. Medea's magical powers cannot lessen her feelings of vulnerability, or soften the pain she feels at Jason's abandonment. In fact, she plays down her magic, contrasting the feats she performed in Colchis with her inability to hold him now: *serpentis igitur potui taurosque furentes; / unum non potui perdomuisse virum* (12.163-4) ("Dragons and maddened bulls, it seems, I could subdue; a man alone I could not"). Medea defiantly embraces specifically unfeminine forms of agency, claiming *dum ferrum flammaeque aderunt sucusque veneni, / hostis Medae nullus inultus erit!* (12.181-2) ("While sword and fire are at my hand, and the juice of poison, no foe of Medea shall go unpunished!"). Nevertheless, this second letter on the subject destabilises Medea's power, by portraying her as subject to the restrictions of her gender and race, and to the debilitating influence of the passion that first led her to realise her abilities.

<sup>30</sup> Bloch, "Ovid's *Heroides* 6", 202.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of later translators' and scribes' discomfort with 12.120, in which Medea further emphasises her weakness, asserting that she deserves to be punished for her *credulitas*, see Florence Verducci, *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart: 'Epistulae Heroidum'* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) 69.

The *Metamorphoses* provides a curious contrast to Ovid's rendering of Medea in the *Heroides*, as here Ovid's emphasis is on the magical power that he (through Medea) seems to downplay in *Heroides 12*. Though he describes her helpless love for Jason, in terms that are to become important to English renderings of her in the Middle Ages and beyond, Ovid's emphasis is on her transgressive deeds.<sup>32</sup> He focuses on her concoction of strange potions, the rejuvenation of Aeson (an episode frequently excluded from classical accounts) and the murder of Pelias, here recounted in grisly detail. Medea initially seems a strange choice for the *Metamorphoses*, as she undergoes no literal transformation like other women (and specifically other betrayed or suffering women) portrayed by the poet. In a way, though, Medea's transformation here is equally linear, as Ovid attempts to trace the move from the loving and innocent young girl of Apollonius, to the murderous witch of Euripides. Due to her love for Jason and her determination to pursue *notitiamque soli melioris et oppida, quorum / hic quoque fama viget, cultusque artesque locorum* (7.57-8) "acquaintance with a better land, cities, whose fame is mighty even here, the culture and arts of civilized countries"),<sup>33</sup> she embraces her power, and is then portrayed as becoming progressively darker and more ruthless. Medea's power increases as the poem progresses, and appears unassailable as she once more escapes male society's censure, evading punishment from Ageus for her attempts to poison Theseus. Finally, though, as in the *Heroides*, Medea's brutal power is compromised. As Janet Cowen argues, ultimately "the story shows her in the last analysis as subdued to and activated by passion".<sup>34</sup> Even as they read about her love for Jason and her alarming powers, Ovid invites his readers to read between the lines, to recall the Medea of *Heroides 12*, who bitterly regrets the services she did Jason, or Euripides' heroine, whose control over

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<sup>32</sup> Medea's famous lines, which recur again and again to striking effect in sixteenth- and particularly seventeenth-century English writing, are *video meliora proboque, / deteriora sequor*. (7.20-1) ("I see the better course and approve it, I follow the worse"). In the *Metamorphoses*, she utters them as she agonises over her love for Jason. For an account of how Ovid borrows the lines from Euripides' *Medea* 1078-9, but significantly changes their emphasis by putting them in the mouth of the young, innocent Medea (rather than Jason's murderous wife) see Newlands, "Metamorphosis", in Clauss and Johnston, eds., *Medea*, 182-3.

<sup>33</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols. (London, Loeb Classical: Heinemann, 1921). Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the *Metamorphoses* are from this edition.

<sup>34</sup> Janet Cowen, "Women as Exempla in Fifteenth-Century Verse of the Chaucerian Tradition", in Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen, eds., *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry* (London: Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, King's College London, 1991): 51-65, 54.

supernatural forces and growing estrangement from human society render her, finally, unable to exist in the world of the play.

The interplay of the Ovidian and Euripidean Medeas becomes particularly significant due to the influence they both exerted on Seneca, and on his re-rendering of Euripides' tragedy.<sup>35</sup> Hine notes that "Ovid provides a precedent [...] for the extended description of Medea's magical rituals" (16). However, Seneca also demonstrates her power in other, more original ways. Medea lists her grievances to the Nurse, complaining

*hoc facere Iason potuit, erepto patre  
patria atque regno sedibus solam exteris  
deserere durus? merita contempsit mea  
qui scelere flammam viderat vinci et mare?  
adeone credit omne consumptum nefas? (2.118-22)*

("Could Jason do this, after I was robbed of my father, my fatherland and kingdom too – could he abandon me all alone in a foreign land, cruel man? Has he paid no heed to my good services, he who saw flames and sea being overpowered by wickedness? Does he really believe that all my evil is exhausted?").<sup>36</sup>

Conversely, in Euripides' play the Nurse voices the speech which recounts Jason's betrayal, with Medea's initial passivity stressed by the fact she does not even appear on stage at the time. Here, she appears a dangerously powerful character from the play's outset, and seems to see few boundaries to her own potential, vowing *invadam deos / et cuncta quatiam* (3.424-5) ("I shall assault the gods / and throw the universe into turmoil").

As this last declaration would suggest, in Seneca's play, typically, Medea's power is defined in relation to the gods, and also, predictably, to her race and her gender. Though Hine argues that "the barbarian origin of M[edea] is not prominent in S[eneca]'s play" (131), it is prominent enough to be mentioned, and (to Seneca) to undermine her feeling that she has been

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<sup>35</sup> For Seneca's other likely sources, many no longer extant, see *Medea*, ed. and trans. Hine, p.17.

<sup>36</sup> Seneca, *Medea*, trans. Hine.

wronged. Thus the Senecan chorus feels Jason has had a lucky escape, telling him

*ereptus thalamis Phasidis horridi,  
effrenae solitus pectora coniugis  
invita trepidus prendere dextera,  
felix Aeoliam corripe virginem  
nunc primum soceris sponse volentibus.* (1.102-6)

(“Rescued from the marriage-chamber of the wild Phasis, accustomed to grasp an unbridled wife’s breasts fearfully with unwilling hand – fortunate man, seize the Aeolian girl; you are now, for the first time, betrothed with the consent of your parents-in-law”).

Emphasising, as they do, Medea’s status as a foreigner and her dangerous otherness, these lines also, inevitably and deliberately, underscore how, as an abandoned and foreign woman, Medea has nowhere to turn in Corinth, no hope of recourse once Jason has rejected her in favour of a more ‘suitable’ match. Predictably, too, Medea’s femininity compromises her power, even as, paradoxically, her distance from the feminine ‘norm’ appears to make this power more alarming. Initially, Seneca appears to present a Medea who does not feel at a disadvantage as a result of her gender. She stands up to Creon more forcefully than her Euripidean ancestor, and the king is dumbfounded by her seemingly undefinable sexual identity, seeing her as combining *feminae nequitia, ad audendum omnia / robur virile est, nulla famae memoria* (2.267-8) (“a woman’s wickedness, and, so that you will stop at nothing, / a man’s strength, and no thought of reputation”). Medea’s rejection of the typical norms of feminine, wifely and maternal favour is to bring her triumph in the play. Indeed, she urges herself *pelle femineos metus* (1.42) (“Drive out womanly fears”) in her pursuit of revenge. Inescapably, though, the legacy Seneca has inherited from his predecessors compels him to envisage in Medea a character whose sex undermines her even as she attempts to divorce herself from it. Playing deliberately on Creon’s sense of feminine weakness and passivity, Medea protests of Jason:

[...] *illi Pelia, non nobis iacet;*  
*fugam, rapinas adice, desertum patrem*  
*lacerumque fratrem, quidquid etiamnunc novas*  
*docet maritus coniuges, non est meum. (2.276-9)*

(“For *his* sake Pelias lies dead, not for mine;  
add running away, robbery, my deserted father,  
my mangled brother, whatever else that husband still  
teaches his new wives – it is not my responsibility”).

The play’s audience would be fully aware that these are Medea’s crimes, and that Creon underestimates her because of her gender to his own cost. It is telling, however, that Medea must (and does) acknowledge that, despite the violent and magical power that she slyly references here, because of her sex she will seemingly always be in a weaker social position than Jason (certainly in the eyes of other men) in the wake of their failed marriage. There is still no power, it seems, in Medea’s status as a woman, and the only way she can win power, and that crucial extra day in Corinth, is still to play on Creon’s prejudices about women’s essential weakness.

In one respect, though, Medea’s relationship with Jason has not echoed the passivity Seneca would have found in Apollonius or Pindar. Hine notes an important contrast between Seneca and his literary ancestors, in their differing accounts of how Medea came to love Jason:

[...] in Pindar, Aphrodite shows Jason how to win Medea’s love with a magic wheel, a form of love-charm. Later writers, too, stress the role of Aphrodite [...] but she is never mentioned in Seneca. He presents a more independent Medea who is not subject to the power of any god. (15)

While the accounts of Apollonius, Pindar and Valerius Flaccus suggest a Medea whose actions are governed by divine forces beyond her control, here she initially at least appears fully in control of her destiny, and calls on the *sceleris ultrices deae* (1.13) (“goddesses who avenge wickedness”) for assistance in her plotting. Typically, however, this alarming evidence of Medea’s power is undermined, and her relationship with the divine

problematised. Medea begins to waver in her will to revenge, and her doubts are presented in a powerfully original way, by her visions of the Furies and her brother Apsyrtus advancing on her to punish her,<sup>37</sup> and by her frenzied demands that Jupiter strike her and Jason down. Most famously, though, Medea's power here, the semi-divine status she seems to claim, is questioned at the last by Jason's assertion *testare nullos esse, qua veheris, deos* (5.1027) ("bear witness that wherever you go there are no gods"). Hine notes the ambiguity of this line, which could suggest that she has destroyed Jason's own belief in the gods: "One might [...] say that the ultimate triumph of Medea's revenge is to rob Jason not just of his new wife and his sons, but also of his metaphysical and religious certainties" (32). However, he suggests "The line is arguably more pointed and forceful if it means '...there are no gods where *you* are', a further attack on Medea personally" (32). This latter reading devastatingly undermines the links with the gods that Medea has referred to continually throughout the play, and which are apparently to prove her means of escape from Jason.

In Hyginus' *Fabulae*, Medea enjoys no such supernatural power, and accordingly the masculine community is always able to reject her and force her to move on. Thus she lives happily with Jason, until *obiciebatur ei hominem tam fortem ac formosum ac nobilem uxorem advenam atque veneficam habere* (XXV) ("It was put to him that a man so brave and handsome and noble had a foreign and poisonous wife"). He rejects her, and after killing the children she flees to Ageus, but is expelled again, as *postea sacerdos Dianae Medeam exagitare coepit, regique negabat sacra caste facere posse eo quod in ea civitate esset mulier venefica et scelerata* (XXVI) ("afterwards the priestess of Diana began to denounce Medea, and told the king she was not able to perform the holy rites properly on account of the fact that in that city there was a wicked and poisonous woman"). Here, though Medea is portrayed as

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<sup>37</sup> Hine notes "there is room for debate whether the Furies and the ghost would be played by non-speaking actors, or would simply be described by Medea's words" (23). If the figures do appear onstage, the spectacle of the demonically powerful Medea being challenged by a force that is, unlike her, wholly otherworldly, would be compelling. On the other hand, if the figures do not appear, the suggestion that Medea's sanity is being gradually eroded even as she attempts to establish her supremacy undermines her power in a different, but equally valid way. In reaching any decision, Hine cautions, "we should not assume that ancient tastes were the same as ours" (204-5).

threatening, the male community she threatens appears able to continually drive her out, and onwards. Conversely Seneca's Medea, unlike her counterparts in Euripides, Ovid and Hyginus, has no need to flee from man to man, boasting as she does of her divine connections. However, with Jason's deliberately ambiguous closing lines, it seems that the divine sanctuary she seeks at the play's conclusion, and the foundations on which she has grounded her own perception of her power, are suddenly in doubt.

The paradoxical blend of power, and of estrangement from it, that Medea enjoys in the Senecan tragedy is exemplified by the climactic murder of her children. At first, she rejoices in a kind of metatheatrical power, enjoying her moment of notoriety and refusing to kill her children until Jason has arrived. However, while this act (and the shocking nature of its portrayal onstage)<sup>38</sup> does endow her with the power of a woman who will stop at nothing, she is correspondingly dehumanised. Hine notes that the audience may sympathise with Medea's suffering even as they abhor her crimes. Moreover, he notes that the audience can only move from sympathy to admiration (a shift which would place the Senecan Medea in a far more powerful position) if they distance her, in their minds, from human society, make her a figure who is "unhindered by social and moral conventions".<sup>39</sup> Medea has the power to escape her husband, but inevitably the supernatural nature that allows her to flee the scene also distances her from both the audience's sympathy and from the society of the world she has left behind. At the same time, the alterations Seneca has made to his Euripidean source mean that Medea's supernatural sanctuary seems called into question. Unlike Euripides, Seneca deliberately avoids suggesting Medea's next move, and she is portrayed as exulting in a power that is horrifying and threatening, but at the same time, paradoxically, unstable.

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<sup>38</sup> Hine mentions controversy over whether Seneca wrote his *Medea* for the stage – some critics feel that the murder of her children onstage, in particular, was a taboo that would not have been acceptable. Famously, in his *Ars Poetica*, Horace opines *ne pueros coram populo Medea trucidet* (185) ("Medea is not to butcher her boys before the people"). Horace, '*Satires*', '*Epistles*' and '*Ars Poetica*', trans. and ed. H. Rushton Fairclough (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1929). All quotations from the *Ars Poetica* are from this edition. However, Hine argues "this should not be used as an argument against staging. Horace's injunction would presumably be unnecessary if there were no dramatists who portrayed murder on stage" (41).

<sup>39</sup> Seneca, *Medea*, trans. Hine, 24-5.



The Medeas of Euripides and Seneca are evoked or referenced repeatedly in late antiquity, by poets, rhetoricians and mythographers such as Juvenal, Quintilian, and Hyginus. Nevertheless, once again it is the Ovidian incarnation that arguably has the most influence on the literature of the English Middle Ages. In part, as with Helen, this was due to lack of knowledge of the Greek and Latin tragedies or histories between the twelfth and fourteenth-centuries, rather than because of any determined rejection of these other Medeas. In fact, despite the loss of his *Medea*, Ovid's *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* passed down to the Middle Ages much of the sense of the earlier works. Present are Medea's love for Jason, the fury that results from her abandonment, accounts of all her assistance, and references to her crimes. Present too is a sense of her debilitating despair, the distress at Jason's betrayal that seems to render her comfortingly human (and "feminine"). Absent are the classical historians' attempts to rationalise her crimes or reduce her threat, but Christian alarm at her transgressions meant that the Middle Ages was well able to supply such efforts. Medea's story was just as compelling as Helen's, but her power was far more alarming for the male establishment (pagan or Christian, classical, medieval or early modern). Later authorial efforts to represent but also undercut it, or turn it to misogynist or otherwise didactic ends, can thus constitute strikingly original reactions to her power as it was conceived by Euripides, Seneca and Ovid.

## Chapter Three: From Antiquity to the Middle Ages

The popular and often highly dramatic renderings of Helen and Medea's stories found in Homer, Euripides, Ovid and Seneca in particular meant that by the first century AD, both women were firmly ingrained in the cultural imagination of European society. Authors in the Middle Ages and Renaissance frequently drew on these classical representations, and the power of the stories of Helen and Medea is attested by frequent references to them in the thousand years that followed Ovid's composition of the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*. Indeed, a clear line of continuation can be discerned in the uses and representations of both women. As in the classical period, they are used between the first and eleventh centuries AD by poets and playwrights, but also by commentators, mythographers and historians. Most surprisingly, considering their status as pagans, and their by now notorious careers, both women were used as literary and/or historical examples by early Christian writers. In turn, this arguably validated the historicity of their stories, and the uses of these stories, by medieval poets such as Joseph of Exeter and Benoît de Sainte-Maure.

Authors living and writing after Seneca frequently display an easy familiarity with the details of the stories of Helen and/or Medea. In his *Life of Theseus*, Plutarch mentions both women, thus providing an early example of how their stories may be linked (Ovid links them earlier in the *Heroides*, having Helen hold up Medea as an example of a woman who suffered through eloping). Theseus' unseemly lust is proven by his abduction of Helen, while Medea poses a threat in her attempts to poison him (an episode that proves the climax to her story in the *Metamorphoses*).<sup>1</sup> He also repeats the Odyssean story of Helen adding drugs to the Greek wine in his *Morales* (this story is also given

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, Vol. 1, ed. and trans. Bernadotte Perrin, 11 vols (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1914-26).

by Pliny, in his *Natural History* 25.12, just after his mention of Medea as a famous sorceress).<sup>2</sup> In his *Satire 6*, Juvenal refers to Procne and Medea as *grandia monstra* (6.645) (“monsters of wickedness”),<sup>3</sup> and in his *Dialogues of the Dead* Lucian mocks both Helen’s beauty (as Menippus first fails to recognise her skull and then marvels at the destruction it engendered) and the Trojan War itself (as Aeacus, Menelaus, Protesilaus and Paris squabble over who is to blame for their deaths).<sup>4</sup> Quintilian, in his *Institutio Oratoriae*, refers not only to Ovid’s lost tragedy *Medea*, but also to Ennius’ of the same name.<sup>5</sup> Like Juvenal, Quintilian was clearly inspired by the fierce renderings of Euripides and Seneca, rather than the tormented girl he would have found in Apollonius Rhodius or Valerius Flaccus (though he does praise the latter poet). He uses his Medea as an example of how tragedians and tragic actors should make their masks reflect their characters: Medea must always be *atrox* (11.3.73) (fierce’). In Book Eight, meanwhile, his description of Helen is clearly inspired by the *Iliad*: he argues that her beauty is proved not by Paris’ abduction, but by the acknowledgement of it by the Trojan elders and Priam.

Predictably, references or reactions to the *Iliad* in the first and second centuries frequently make mention of Helen, as Quintilian’s use of her would suggest, and despite the fleeting nature of her appearances in the Greek epic. In Book Two of Statius’ *Achilleid*, Ulysses recounts the story of Helen’s abduction in an attempt to spur Achilles into action. The same episode shows Statius’ knowledge of Medea’s story, which he exploits for ironic purposes. Ulysses chides Achilles, pointing out *raptam Scythico de litore prolem / non tulit Aeetes ferroque et classe secutus / semideos reges et ituram in sidera puppim* (2.75-77) (“Aeëtes endured not his daughter’s ravishing from Scythia’s shore; with steel and ships he follows the princely demigods and the star-

<sup>2</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Vol 7, ed. and trans. W. H. S. Jones, 10 vols (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1938-63).

<sup>3</sup> Juvenal, *Satire VI*. In *Juvenal and Persius*, trans. G. G. Ramsay (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1918, rev. 1969). However, he contrasts Medea and Procne with women who commit murder for financial gain, and appears to find these two slightly less alarming (because more in line with his stereotypical view of women as naturally passionate and irrational).

<sup>4</sup> Lucian of Samosata, *Works*, Vol. 7, trans. M. D. MacLeod, 8 vols (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classical, Harvard UP, 1913-67).

<sup>5</sup> For the existing fragments of Ennius’ *Medea*, see E. H. Warmington, ed. and trans., *Remains of Old Latin, Vol. 1: Ennius and Caecilius*, 4 vols (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1979).

destined bark”).<sup>6</sup> However, Statius’ readers would presumably have been well aware of the bloody consequences of Aetes’ pursuit, which is used by Statius to foreshadow the tragic consequences of the Greek pursuit of Helen. (This ironic use of both women was to prove particularly popular in the sixteenth century, in both serious and archly comic references).

In his redaction of the *Iliad*, the *Ilias Latina*, which George A. Kennedy dates to “about A.D. 60”,<sup>7</sup> Baebius Italicus inevitably touches on Helen’s story, though when the poem is compared to its original, the elisions with regard to her are disappointing. Kennedy notes that Italicus elides “the scene in Book 3 where Helen appears on the walls of Troy with Priam” (10). In fact, though he chooses to abbreviate this section of it, Book Three constitutes Helen’s only appearance in the poem, and Italicus cuts all her later appearances in the *Iliad*. Most notably, the first-century redactor erases all her interactions with Hector, which often make her appear more sympathetic in Homer’s work. No mention is made of Helen’s regret that he is forced to fight for Paris’ unjust cause, she does not join with Hecuba and Andromache to ask him to stay out of battle, and perhaps most importantly, she does not address his dead body movingly, thanking him for his constant kindness and fearing for her own future, as she does in Book 24 of the Greek epic. It is tempting to suggest that Italicus seeks to create distance between the noble Hector and the notorious Helen through these elisions. In fact, though, he seems simply uninterested in her as a character, something that is particularly apparent during her only appearance, her address to Paris when Aphrodite (here Venus) brings him back from battle. Kennedy notes “Helen’s rebuke of Paris in *Iliad* 3.428-36 is sarcastic and unsympathetic; Italicus gives her speech a more pathetic tone” (n.40 p. 51). In fact, Italicus alters far more than this would suggest, and Helen’s speech stands in direct contrast to that of her Iliadic forebear. Homer’s Helen exclaims “Oh how I wish you had died there / beaten down by a stronger man, who was once my husband” (3.428-429); Italicus’ confesses *Nostraque* –

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<sup>6</sup> Statius, *Thebaid’ and Achilleid*, Vol. 2, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classical, Harvard UP, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> *The Latin Iliad*, trans. and ed. George A. Kennedy (Fort Collins, CO: G. A. Kennedy, 1998, rep. 2007) 7. Kennedy notes that the author was frequently identified as Homer in the Middle Ages, and the poem was also sometimes credited to Pindar of Thebes. For Baebius Italicus as the probable author of the poem, see Kennedy 7-9.

*me miseram! - timui ne Doricus ensis / oscula discuteret; totus mihi, mente revincta, / fugerat ore color sanguisque reliquerat artus* (324-6) (“Alas for me, I feared lest the Doric sword / would end our kisses; my mind was overcome, / all color fled my cheeks, and the blood had left my limbs”). Italicus’ Helen still cares deeply for Paris, and sees him as shamed only by Menelaus’ superior strength; her Iliadic predecessor sees him as diminished by the fact that he dared to engage her former husband in combat at all. Ultimately, though, Italicus does not find Helen (or any of the epic’s women) to be compelling characters, and it seems probable that his alterations here were geared towards resolving the problematic scene in the *Iliad* in which Helen angrily rebukes Paris but then retires to bed with him. Here there is no conflict, and Helen adopts an even more passive role, one that quite possibly influenced the accounts of later authors such as Dictys of Crete and Dares the Phrygian, who were keen to blacken Helen’s character and cast doubt on her innocence by stressing her desire for Paris. Kennedy notes the poem’s influence on Dictys and also Dracontius and Lactantius Placidus. More significant here, though, is its later influence. He notes there are “numerous [editions] [...] dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth century” (11-12), and finds that “from late antiquity until the Renaissance the *Ilias Latina* was the primary source for a knowledge in western Europe of the over-all contents and arrangement of the Greek *Iliad*, and of some incidents in it” (7). Importantly, he notes that the poem was used as a school text, and that it “complemented what could be read about the legends of the Trojan War in Virgil’s *Aeneid* and writings of Ovid and other Latin poets” (7). Kennedy suggests “to some extent it may have counteracted the popular but eccentric versions of the tradition found in late antique works attributed to Dares the Phrygian and Dictys of Crete” (7), but in Helen’s case there is no need for the work to act in this way. Baebius Italicus’ desirous, uncritical Helen does not contradict the conniving seductress of Virgil’s rendering, tallies well with the passionate woman Ovid introduced, and despite her passivity, paves the way for the calculating anti-heroine of Dictys and Dares.

The second century AD saw some brief but interesting accounts of Helen’s story in particular. Both Helen and Medea appear in Pausanias’ guide

to Greece (he recounts the seldom told story of Helen's death, and suggests that Medea may have been innocent of the deaths of her children). Perhaps because of this historicizing impulse (already seen in the earlier works of Diodorus Siculus and Apollodorus), or simply because of the notoriety that made her a useful referent, Helen makes surprising appearances in early Christian literature. In the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr, Justin condemns Rome's tolerance of the Gnostic Simon Magus, noting "almost all the Samaritans, and a few even in other nations, worship this man and confess him, as the first god, and a woman Helena who went about with him at that time, and had formerly been a public prostitute, they say was the first idea generated by him" (p. 40-41).<sup>8</sup> In *Against Heresies*, Iranaeus makes the same identification. In 1.23, "The Tenets and Practices of Simon Magus and Menander", he outlines Simon's argument that this woman was the "first Thought of his mind" (1.23.2), and that, sent by him, she created "Angels and Powers" (1.23.2), but subsequently was punished by her frequent and humiliating reincarnations:

[...] For example, she was in the famous Helen on account of whom the Trojan war was fought; for that reason Stesichorus who reviled her in his verses was struck blind, but after he repented and had written what are called palinodes, in which he sang her praises, his sight was restored (1.23.2).<sup>9</sup>

Iranaeus, like Justin, objects to Simon's practices, but what is fascinating here is the way in which first a pagan sect, and then Christian writers, have adopted and adapted Helen for their own ends. Here Simon, and through him Justin and Iranaeus, touch on several aspects of Helen's traditional characterisation: her beauty, her suffering at the hands of others, her passivity (particularly in relation to men) and, perhaps, her inherent danger. Similarly, Clement of Alexandria turns her story to his didactic purpose in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*. Though he references the *Iliad* extensively, in his attempt to prove the shortcomings of pagan gods he imagines the Iliadic Helen as powerful, and Aphrodite as merely serving her:

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<sup>8</sup> Justin Martyr, *The First and Second Apologies*, ed. and trans. Leslie William Barnard (New York: The Paulist Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Iranaeus, Saint, Bishop of Lyon, *Against the Heresies*, Vol. 1, trans and ed. Dominic J. Unger, rev. John J. Dillon (NY: Paulist Press, 1992).

We read of Aphrodite, how, like a wanton hussy, she brought the stool for Helen, and placed it in front of her paramour, in order that Helen might entice him to her arms. (Book 2, p. 75)<sup>10</sup>

*Iliad* 3.424 does contain a reference to Aphrodite fetching a seat for Helen so that she might speak to Paris, but the goddess is far more in control than Helen. Like Italicus, then, Clement rewrites the Iliadic Helen even as he claims to represent her. If the readers of the *Exhortation* or the *Ilias Latina* did not know the *Iliad* themselves, they would not pick up on the tension between source and rewriting, instead imagining a Helen who, passively or wantonly, submitted willingly to Paris.

Medea's story, too, enjoyed longer treatments in the period, though she is more likely to appear in literary than in Christian didactic works, perhaps due to the contentious nature of her crimes. She was the subject of a tragedy by Hosidius Geta,<sup>11</sup> tentatively dated by Nathan Dane to "just prior to 200 AD".<sup>12</sup> Once again, Geta follows the models Euripides and Seneca suggested, representing a Medea furious at her rejection and determined for revenge. In some ways, this Latin tragedy allies itself more closely to Seneca's model, most notably, perhaps, in its inclusion of the shade of Apsyrtus. If Seneca's influence is obvious, though, so too are the changes Geta has made. Medea's confrontation with Creon lacks the cold fury of the Senecan account, and here Creon appears more powerful, or at least less cowed by Medea. Most noticeably, though, Geta alters the final lines of Seneca's tragedy. After the murders of the children, his Medea has the final word, but her exclamation *Et longum, formose, vale, et quisquis amores / Aut metuet dulces aut experietur amaros* (460-1) ("And farewell at last, handsome one, and whoever will either fear sweet loves or endures bitter ones")<sup>13</sup> lacks the impact of Jason's final startling lines in Seneca. The elision of the Senecan lines may counteract

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<sup>10</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, *The Rich Man's Salvation*, and *the Fragment of an Address Entitled 'To the Newly Baptized'*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (London, Loeb Classical: Heinemann, 1919).

<sup>11</sup> W. Smith notes of the tragedy "It was at one time absurdly enough supposed to be the *Medea* of Ovid". W. Smith, ed., *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, 3 vols. (London: Taylor & Walton, 1844-49) 2.266.

<sup>12</sup> Nathan Dane, "The *Medea* of Hosidius Geta" *The Classical Journal* 46.2 (1950): 75-78, 76.

<sup>13</sup> Hosidius Geta, *Medea*, in E. Baehrens, ed. *Poetae Latini Minores*, Vol. 4, 5 vols (Leipzig: Teubner, 1882). The tragedy is reprinted on pages 219-37. Translations of Hosidius Geta's *Medea* are my own.

Seneca's suggestion that Medea is flying off to an uncertain future, deprived of the company of the gods she has referenced throughout the play (if that is what Seneca is suggesting). On the other hand, Medea's final focus on love and its effects (which Dane sees as quintessentially Ovidian,<sup>14</sup> and which is adapted from Virgil's third *Eclogue*)<sup>15</sup> surely undercuts the sense of a powerful fury that has been building throughout this play and its Greek and Roman forebears.

This dual impulse, to recreate Helen and Medea in new works, and for new readers, while also engaging (and sometimes conflicting) with well-established literary and historical models, continued into late antiquity. In his influential *Epitome of Trogus Pompeius' Philippic History*, which R. Develin notes was "much read in the Middle Ages, known and used by authors such as Chaucer and Petrarch",<sup>16</sup> the historian Justin attempts to "flatten" and historicise the alarming characterisation of Medea that he would have found in more sensational writers such as Ovid. Thus, ignoring the story told in the *Metamorphoses* and by Plutarch of Medea's attempt to murder Ageus' son Theseus, he explains how Medea divorced Ageus "when she saw she had a stepson who was now an adult" (2.6.14). Later, in Book 42, after a brief account of Pelias' enmity towards Jason and the quest for the Fleece (with no mention of Medea's help) the *Epitome* glosses over the end of her story. There is no mention of Creusa or the killing of the children, and in fact what is notable is the extent to which Jason's influence is privileged. Justin attributes the killing of Medea's brother (here Aegialus) to him. While other historians describe Medea as the driving force behind her father's restoration, here Jason is described as the benevolent hero who restores order in Medea's former kingdom. Medea's impact on empires (whether positive or negative) is thus reduced, and this decision to excise her pernicious influence on the kingdoms of Pelias, of Aetes and of Creon may have impacted on later conservative treatments of her. Chaucer, for example, was fully aware of the story that Medea killed her children, but it is possible that medieval reverence for ancient

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<sup>14</sup> Dane, "Medea", 78.

<sup>15</sup> See Virgil, 'Eclogues', 'Georgics', 'Aeneid I-VI', trans. H. Rushton-Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Harvard, Mass: Loeb Classical, Harvard UP, 1916, rev. 1999) 3.79, 3.109-110. Speaking of the tragedy, Dane points out "there are only two half-lines of its 461 verses that are not traceable directly to the three major works of Vergil". Dane, "Medea", 75.

<sup>16</sup> Justin, *Epitome of the 'Phillipic History' of Pompeius Trogus*, trans. J.C. Yardley, ed. R. Develin (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994) 2.



“history” (Dictys and Dares as well as Justin) contributed to his decision not to include it in the *Legend of Good Women*, his most sustained treatment of her.

Other brief uses of both women in the period include those of Libanius, who included in his *Declamations* a complaint of Menelaus about the abduction of Helen, and a speech of Medea admitting to the murders of her children. St. Jerome’s Latin translation of Eusebius’ *Chronicon* mentions both Helen’s abductions, and, like Justin, mentions the Argonautic voyage with no reference to Medea. Meanwhile, as Iranaeus had before him, St. Augustine turns pagan mythology to his own Christian ends. In Book Three of his *Confessions*, he uses the story of “Medea flying” (presumably the Medea of Euripides, Ovid or Seneca) as an example of fiction, safe to listen to because it is not believed, in contrast to the pernicious lies of men he credited in his youth:

*nam versus et carmen et Medea volans utiliores certe, quam quinque elementa, varie fucata propter quinque antra tenebrarum, quae omnino nulla sunt et occidunt credentem. nam versum et carmen etiam ad vera pulmenta transfero; volantem autem Medeam etsi cantabam, non asserebam, etsi cantari audiebam, non credebam: illa autem credidi (3.6)*

(“For their verses, and poems, and Medea flying, are more profitable surely, than these men’s Five Elements, oddly devised to answer the Five Dens of Darkness, which have at all no being, and which slay the believer. For verses and poems I can turn into true nourishment. But Medea flying, although I chanted sometimes, yet I maintained not the truth of; and though I heard it sung, I believed it not; but these phantasies I thoroughly believed”).<sup>17</sup>

Augustine’s most famous reference to Helen is better known (though equally dismissive of the power of the mythological woman, even as he paradoxically seems to stress it). In his *Epistle to Jerome*, Augustine fears that, in his exposition of St Paul’s letter to the Galatians, Jerome may have inadvertently suggested that Paul practised wilful deceit in his sympathetic attitude to the

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo, *Confessiones*, Vol 1, trans. William Watts, ed. W. H. D. Rouse, 2 vols (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1922-5). The English translation is William Watts’ 1631 rendering.

Jews. Augustine encourages Jerome to correct this potential misunderstanding, lest others grow to mistrust their faith. He maintains:

*Incomparabiliter enim pulchrior est veritas christianorum quam Helena Graecorum. Pro ista enim fortius nostri martyres adversus hanc Sodomam quam pro illa illi heroes adversus Troiam dimicaverunt.*<sup>18</sup>

(“The truth of Christians is incomparably more beautiful than the Helen of the Greeks. On behalf of it our martyrs have fought against this Sodom more bravely than those heroes fought against Troy”). (40.7)<sup>19</sup>

Augustine also mentions Helen’s legend in *De Civitate Dei*, referencing the Judgement of Paris, and Menelaus’ cuckolding. In his *Epistle*, though, Augustine reveals not only his own knowledge of Helen’s legend, but also his confidence that his readers will be similarly familiar with it, and thus will appreciate his comparison. In fact, here Augustine adopts Helen’s story in a way that was to become hugely popular in the sixteenth century. He expects his reader to recall Helen’s exquisite beauty, to equate this with a kind of value, before he tells them that she cannot measure up to what he really seeks to praise: here, Christian truth, in Elizabethan poetry, very often, a lady’s beauty or virtue. For his part, in his *Adversus Jovinianum*, Jerome criticises Helen as an example of classical vice ( he calls her “one foolish woman”), and Alcuin Blamires points to Jerome’s popularity in the Middle Ages, and particularly the way that his misogyny was seized on and recycled by medieval authors.<sup>20</sup>

Servius’ commentary on the *Aeneid* also demonstrates the period’s interest in rewriting or reconsidering earlier classical accounts of Helen and Medea, in using their stories rather than simply repeating them. He mentions (or indeed adds) the brief Virgilian reference to Helen in Book Two of the epic,

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<sup>18</sup> Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo, *Epistulae I-LV*, ed. Klaus D. Daur (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century Part 2, Letters, Vol. I, Letters 1-99*, trans. Roland Teske, ed. John E. Rotelle 4 vols (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, in Alcuin Blamires, ed, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 63, 74. Trans. W. H. Freemantle, rev. C. W. Marx.

explaining that it has been elided from some other manuscripts of the *Aeneid*.<sup>21</sup> In turn, his apparent expansion of Virgil is itself extended by a later commentator, writing in the seventh or eighth century and perhaps using Aelius Donatus' lost commentary on the epic.<sup>22</sup> This later commentator explains Helen's allegedly divine origins and her abduction by Theseus. Most notably, however, he picks up on Virgil's use of the phrase *facies invisā*. Glossing this, he notes *pulchritudo Helenae odiosa, id est, Helena* (p.467) ("The hateful beauty of Helen, that is, Helen").<sup>23</sup> Collocating Helen's beauty, power and identity in this way, the augments of the Servian commentary also demonstrates the instability of this power. He points out

*sane quidam 'invisā' figuratae dictum putant; adserunt enim ad Troiam Helenam non venisse, id est, non visam a Troianis, quia cum eam Paris rapuit, ad Aegyptum profectus dicitur, mutato itineris cursu ne a Graecis forte insequentibus comprehenderetur. ibi a Proteo receptus hospitio. sed cum Helena Proteo suam narrasset iniuriam, ab eo retenta est. tum sine ea Paris venit ad Troiam. [...] alii dicunt a Proteo quidem Helenam Paridi sublatam et quibusdam disciplinis phantasma in similitudinem Helenae Paridi datum, quam imaginem ille ad Troiam dicitur pertulisse. (p.464)*

("Of course, certain people think *invisā* to be a figure of speech; for they say that Helen did not come to Troy, that is, she was not seen by the Trojans, because when Paris seized her, it is said that he went to Egypt, having changed his course so that he would not be arrested by the Greeks following hard on his heels. There he was received by Proteus as a guest. But when Helen had told Proteus of her injury, she was kept back by him. Then without her Paris went to Troy [...] Others say that Helen was indeed taken from Paris by Proteus and by his certain arts a phantom in the shape of Helen was given to Paris, which image he is said to have conveyed to Troy").

<sup>21</sup> Servius, *In Vergilii Carmina Commentarii*, Vol. 1, ed. George Thilo and Hermann Hagen, 3 vols (Leipzig: Teubner, 1878-1902), commentary on 2.566. For the possibility that Servius either fabricated the reference to Helen or found it in another ancient source, see Goold, "Servius", esp. 133.

<sup>22</sup> See E. J. Kenney and W. V. Clausen, eds., *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature, Volume 2, Latin Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 769, and E. K. Rand, "Is Donatus' Commentary on Servius Lost?", *Classical Quarterly* 10 (1916): 158-64.

<sup>23</sup> Servius, *In Vergilii Carmina Commentariorum Editionis Harvardianae*, Vol. 2, ed. A. F. Stocker, A. H. Travis, Edward Kennard Rand, 3 vols (Lancaster, Penn.: American Philological Society, 1946). Translations of these commentaries are my own.

Playing on the word *invisa* in this way, and drawing on the suggestions of Herodotus and Euripides that Helen never went to Troy, the commentator obviously calls both her power and guilt into question, as these earlier writers have done. His commentary (and particularly the suggestion that Helen may not have gone to Troy) opens up his source text and raises intriguing questions, drawing his reader's attention to conflicting versions of the myth that underpinned the literature. Specifically, his suggestion that Helen did not go to Troy (and that a beautiful construct went in her place) seems to have influenced later writers who may not have had access to Euripides' Greek (although this augmented commentary on Servius, the so-called *Scholia Danielis*, was not published until 1600, after its rediscovery by Pierre Daniel).<sup>24</sup> The effect of the two commentaries on the *Aeneid* was certainly to underline the importance of Helen, particularly if Servius himself added her appearance in Book Two. The commentary's greater interest in Helen was to influence later writers, firstly by granting them access to Greek elements of her myth, and also by suggesting her as some kind of elemental force, that of destructive beauty.<sup>25</sup> Later, allegorical readings of Helen's myth (for example Bernard of Silvestris') were to imagine her in precisely this way, and Tudor and Elizabethan poets particularly leapt on Helen as a by-word for beauty.

Ignorance of ancient Greek in the Middle Ages made commentaries like that of Servius, which referred to versions of the legends other than those given in their source texts, particularly valuable. That said, the ancient Latin writers, both commentators and historians, seem to have been particularly eager to reference earlier Greek and Latin versions of the myths of both women, presumably to legitimise their writings (a trend that survives through the Middle Ages and Renaissance to seventeenth-century treatments of the classics). The Christian writer Firmianus Lactantius, for example, mentions Homer's Helen in his *Divine Institutes*, in his account of the fates of Castor and Pollux. Helen is imagined helplessly searching for a glimpse of her brothers from the walls of Troy, a detail that Lactantius would have found in the *Iliad*,

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<sup>24</sup> See L. D. Reynolds, *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford: Clarendon 1983) 385-8.

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds notes the influence of Servius' commentary on Isidore of Seville: so extensive was his borrowing that "in several passages Isidore may be regarded as having the authority of a very early manuscript of Servius" (385). For an account of the manuscript tradition of the *Scholia Danielis* in the ninth and tenth centuries in particular, see Reynolds 386-7.

but not the *Ilias Latina*.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile in the epitome of the *Metamorphoses* typically credited to Lactantius Placidus,<sup>27</sup> the author stresses how Medea was captivated by her desire for Jason: *pulchritudine sua perculit Medeam adversus parentem, ut sibi potius quam patri consuleret*. (7.1.3-5) (“by his beauty he turned Medea against her parent, so that she paid more heed to him than to her father”).<sup>28</sup> At the same time, as the works of Servius, Justin and Clement have made clear, a parallel impulse to augment, challenge or distort the by now well-established classical stories flourished in the period, as it was to flourish in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Helen’s story, and particularly Homer’s renderings of Helen’s story, seem to have been regarded a ripe for alteration. In his *Ephemeridos Belli Troiani Libri*, Dictys of Crete presents himself as fighting on the side of the Greeks during the war, and while, like Homer, he thus recounts events principally from the Greek point of view, this translates into a vicious opposition to Helen of a kind not seen in the earlier epic, or in many of the later accounts. Thus while he acknowledges that Paris takes her from Menelaus after *amore eius captus* (1.3.5)<sup>29</sup> (“falling desperately in love”),<sup>30</sup> he makes no mention of Venus granting Paris her blessing to take Helen, and here and throughout the poem tragic events seem far more a result of human fallibility and selfishness than divine intervention. For her part, Helen *ferunt dixisse neque se invitam navigasse, neque sibi / cum Menelai matrimonio convenire* (1.10.4-5) (“had not sailed, she said, unwillingly, for her marriage to Menelaus did not suit her”) – a self-serving attitude that seems very far from the Homeric Helen’s regret at leaving her husband. Accordingly, she appeals to Priam, speaking to him of the Greek forces (as she did in the *Iliad*) before begging not to be sent back to Menelaus (in obvious contrast to

<sup>26</sup> See Firmianus Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes, Books I-VII*, trans. Mary Francis McDonald (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic U of America P, 1964), Book 1 Chapter 10.

<sup>27</sup> Lactantius Placidus’ summary of Ovid, the *Narrationes Fabularum Ovidianarum*, is sometimes credited to the author of the *Divine Institutes*. However, see Hubert Cancik and Helmut Schneider, eds., *Brill’s New Pauly, Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World*, 10 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2002-) Vol 7, col. 153.

<sup>28</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoseon libri XV; Lactanti Placidi qui dicitur Narrationes Fabularum Ovidianarum*, ed. Hugo Magnus (Berlin, 1914). Lactantius Placidus’ summary is published after the Ovidian poem. Translations of Lactantius Placidus are my own.

<sup>29</sup> Dictys of Crete, *Ephemeridos Belli Troiani Libri*, ed. Werner Eisenhut (Leipzig: Teubner, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Dictys of Crete and Dares the Phrygian, ‘*Ephemeridos Belli Troiani Libri*’ and ‘*De Excidio Troiae Historia*’, trans. and ed. R. M. Frazer (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1966).

her feelings in the *Iliad*). Dictys is deeply sceptical about her desire to remain in Troy, observing *utrum inmodico amore / Alexandri, an poenarum metu, quas ob desertam / domum a coniuge metuebat, ita sibi consulere maluerit, parum constabat* (1.9.11-14) (“It was by no means clear why she preferred to look after her interests in this way. Was it because of her immodest love for Alexander, or because of her fear of the punishment her husband would exact for desertion?”).

While Priam supports Helen, as he did in the *Iliad*, more space is given to other Trojans’ opposition to her presence in the city. Dictys notes of Paris

*cuius adventu, tota civitas cum partim exemplum facinoris exsecrarentur, alii iniurias in Menelaum admissas dolerent, nullo omnium adprobante, postremo cunctis indignantibus tumultus ortus est* (1.7.20-4)

(“Upon his arrival, all of the people showed their disgust at what he had done: some cursed the evil precedent he had set; others bewailed the injustice Menelaus has suffered. And finally, disgusted and angry, they raised a revolt”).

Helen, then, is utterly divisive of male community, though she takes no action herself, and is destructive to the clearly defined and symbiotic relationship between rulers and subjects. She constitutes a significant threat to the Trojans, and one who uses gendered weapons – tears, flirtation and pleading – to inveigle her way into the community she then sets about destabilising. Despite her pleas to Priam about desiring to stay in Troy, she changes her mind rapidly after Paris’ death, and appeals to Antenor to speak well of her when he addresses the Greeks: *post Alexandri / interitum invisā ei apud Troiam fuere omnia desideratusque ad suos reditus* (5.4.25-1) (“Now that Alexander was dead, she hated all Troy [...] and wanted to return to her people”). For Dictys, the essence of Helen’s threat is the power she seems to have over Paris, but also over other noble men – Priam, Menelaus, Antenor – who should rightfully shun her for her role in the war. Dictys rewrites the Homeric story of Helen’s stay in Troy, aiming to lessen sympathy for her and stress the hand she had in the events of the war.

Quintus of Smyrna’s *Posthomerica* (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. AD) is another intriguing reaction to Homer’s works in the late antique period. He reworks

much of the Homeric story, and appears far more interested in Helen's role than does Italicus in the *Ilias Latina*. For example, Quintus reassigns Ulysses' attempt to test the Greek forces to Menelaus, and at the beginning of Book Six the Greek prince declares he is ready to give up his fight for "shameless Helen" (6.24)<sup>31</sup> now that Achilles and Ajax are dead. This negative characterisation of Helen is continued in Book Nine, as Quintus explicitly states that the Trojan women watched the bloodshed from the walls of the city, only to distance Helen from them (as so many of his predecessors had done) by noting "Only Helen stayed at home [...] kept there by her unspeakable shame" (9.143-4). Meanwhile, though this Helen may complain at Paris' death that "the gods have brought disaster to you and to my / Ill-fated self" (10.397-8), in fact once again Quintus alters his source, most notably in his decision to recount the end of Helen's time in Troy. He describes Menelaus, having killed Deiphobus, finding the fearful Helen "in the innermost part of the palace" (13.385). Intending to kill her, his mind is changed by Helen's beauty but specifically by "the Kyprian goddess" (13.401), who induces forgetfulness.<sup>32</sup> The pair return to Greece, and though Helen is ashamed of her conduct, her beauty (and Aphrodite's influence) are still potent forces:

[...] Round her the soldiers  
 Marveled at the sight of that flawless woman's  
 Splendid beauty and loveliness [...]  
 [...] They stared as though at a goddess,  
 With delight, for she was a sight they had all longed for [...]  
 Such was the mood the goddess of love produced in them all  
 As a favor to bright-eyed Helen and father Zeus. (14.57-70)

This power over men is underlined as she appeals to Menelaus to forgive her as the two lie in bed. She tells him "I did not leave your home and bed of my own accord, / But mighty Alexander and the sons of Troy / Came and snatched me away while you were far from home" (14.156-8). James notes Quintus' debt to

<sup>31</sup> Quintus of Smyrna, *The Trojan Epic: Posthomeric*, trans. and ed. Alan James (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> James (n.p.338) notes debts to the *Aeneid* and to Euripides' *Andromache*. In the latter's *Trojan Women*, too, Hecuba has foreseen the dangerous effect Helen's beauty will have on Menelaus.

Euripides' *Trojan Women* for Helen's excuses,<sup>33</sup> but Quintus also seems to be inviting his readers to once again recall Homer. Underlining her helplessness sorrowfully, Quintus' Helen enjoys an insidious and deceptive power over men, that ultimately allies her to her Odyssean, rather than her Iliadic, ancestor.

Writing in the same period, and according to James "very probably" (xix) influenced by Quintus' work, in *The Taking of Ilios* Tryphiodorus engages with both the Odyssean and the Iliadic Helens, as well as with Virgil's rendering. He recounts the story behind the accusation levelled at Helen in the *Odyssey*, describing how she approached the wooden horse: "Three times she walked round it and provoked the Argives, naming all the fair-tressed wives of the Achaeans with her clear voice" (p. 615).<sup>34</sup> Later, like her Virgilian forebear, she signals to the Greeks to take the city. However, both these apparent proofs of Helen's power are undermined by Tryphiodorus, who elects to show how the gods have influenced her transgressive behaviour. First he describes how Aphrodite disguises herself and tells Helen (who is by this point married to Deiphobus, as she was in the *Aeneid*) "heed no longer ancient Priam nor the other Trojans nor Deiphobus himself. For now I give thee to much enduring Menelaus" (p. 615). Angered by this trickery, Pallas comes to Helen and orders her "Withdraw and go up into thy upper room in the house and with kindly fire welcome the ships of the Achaeans" (p. 617). Here, Tryphiodorus uses the intervention of the goddesses to attempt to resolve two conflicting ancient stories about Helen: that she attempted to betray the Greeks' hiding place in the horse, but also that she signalled to them to take Troy. Thus, though he appears to invest her with threatening agency, Tryphiodorus ultimately has recourse to the popular solution of ascribing ultimate influence to the gods, and it is a powerless and chastened Helen who returns to Greece with Menelaus.

In his edition of both works, Mair notes Tryphiodorus' influence on Colluthus' fifth-century *Rape of Helen*.<sup>35</sup> Colluthus certainly picks up on Tryphiodorus' construction of a Helen who seems powerless, but in his rendering, as in Quintus', she appears more threatening, because deceptive. She is won over by Paris' flattery as he tells her "Not such as thou are women born

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.342.

<sup>34</sup> A. W. Mair, trans., *Oppian, Colluthus, Tryphiodorus* (London: Loeb Classical, Heinemann, 1928).

<sup>35</sup> Mair, trans., *Oppian, Colluthus, Tryphiodorus*, p. 576.



among the Argives; for they wax with meaner limbs and have the look of men and are but bastard women” (p. 565).<sup>36</sup> Later, though, she comes to her grieving daughter in a dream and, as she does in Quintus’ poem, stresses her own powerlessness, telling her “My sorrowful child, blame me not, who have suffered terrible things. The deceitful man who came yesterday hath carried me away!” (p. 569). To Colluthus, though, Helen is clearly destructive to Troy, “the source of her woe” (p. 571). The poem, which was to appear in English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through the translations of Thomas Watson and Edward Sherburne, is thus a reaction to the *Iliad* refracted through the works of Quintus (who influenced Tryphiodorus) and Tryphiodorus (who influenced Colluthus). Though the three authors invest her with varying degrees of agency over her abduction and her actions in Troy, all three have very obviously decided against the sympathetic and helpless Helen of the *Iliad*.

In the fifth century, the Christian writer Dracontius composed a *Medea* and a *De Raptu Helenae*, which are notable for their obvious use of earlier, classical renderings, and their concurrent reluctance to find Christian morals or teachings in the stories, which instead appear to be simply intended as sensational entertainment. In the *Medea*, the poet outlines her terrifying powers from the outset, and yet the influence of the *Argonautica* is also plainly apparent, particularly in Juno’s demand to Venus that she afflict Medea with love for Jason. Present too, though, are the Senecan and Euripidean senses of unbridled fury, the murders of Glauce, her brother and her children, and her appeal to the gods for assistance in her revenge. In fact, this Medea seems at once far more threatening than Apollonius’ (she is about to sacrifice the chained Jason, standing over him with a sword and urged on by her eager Nurse),<sup>37</sup> and yet also somehow a comic figure: struck by Cupid’s dart, she demands of the terrified Jason if he is single, and asks *vis ergo meus nunc esse maritus?* (253) (“Therefore do you desire now to be my husband?”).<sup>38</sup> There is no mention of the rejuvenation of Aeson or the killing of Pelias, and

<sup>36</sup> In Mair, trans., *Oppian, Colluthus, Tryphiodorus*.

<sup>37</sup> Graf notes that Dracontius is the first extant writer to record this episode, but cites W. H. Friedrich’s assertion that he “must have drawn on a tragedy of the fourth, or at least the third, century BC”. Graf, “Medea”, in Clauss and Johnston, eds., *Medea*, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Dracontius, *Medea*, in E. Baehrens, ed., *Poetae Latini Minores*, vol. 5, 5 vols (Leipzig: Teubner, 1883). *Medea* is reprinted on pages 192-214. Translations of Dracontius’ *Medea* are my own.

Dracontius moves quickly on to an account of the murders of the children and Glauce. As he begins his account, he has warned his readers of the horrors that await them, but there is no attempt to show Medea as subject to punishment or to God's power. Rather, like some of the medieval authors who followed him, Dracontius finds pagan myth a liberating excuse to present his readers with characters and situations that may appear alarming, but are comfortingly removed from their own experiences.

Predictably, then, the power of unrestrained passion is similarly potent in the same author's *De Raptu Helenae*, a work which, though not nearly as influential as that of Dares the Phrygian, seems intriguingly to foreshadow many medieval, and romantic, renderings of the story, while also, as Étienne Wolff notes, reflecting the poet's knowledge of Ovid, Virgil and others.<sup>39</sup> Dracontius describes Paris' arrival in Sparta, and notes that Helen is struck by Cupid's arrow, and the effects are immediate: she goes red and white, and *Fusus uterque color manifestum vulgat amorem* (501) ("Having spread throughout her, both colours spoke of obvious love").<sup>40</sup> These effects are also, as they become in the thirteenth-, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century renderings, destructive not only to her marriage but to the very tenets on which her society is based: Wolff notes "Le choix d'un temple comme lieu de première rencontre entre Pâris et Hélène est une innovation de Dracontius" (163),<sup>41</sup> and here Dracontius presumably aims to make their meeting all the more scandalous. Helen's controlling attitude is also alarming. She insists on their immediate elopement, telling him *pariter tua regna petamus, / Sis mihi tu coniunx et sim tibi dignior uxor* (533-4) ("Together let us make for your kingdom, / You be a husband to me and let me be a more fitting wife to you"). Typically, however, the account of Helen's power is undermined. She seems strangely incidental to the poem, appearing two-thirds of the way through, and only named once (at 440). Though she certainly desires Paris, she emphasises her own helplessness by telling him a second marriage has been ordained for her by the gods, and

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<sup>39</sup> Dracontius, *Oeuvres*, Vol. 4, ed and trans. Étienne Wolff, 4 vols (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1985-96) 114, 121, 124.

<sup>40</sup> Dracontius, *De Raptu Helenae*, in Baehrens, ed., *Poetae Latini Minores*, vol. 5. *De Raptu Helenae* is reprinted on pages 160-83. Translations of Dracontius' *De Raptu Helenae* are my own.

<sup>41</sup> ("The choice of a temple as the place of the first meeting between Paris and Helen is an innovation of Dracontius"). Translations of Wolff's notes are my own.

though she calms Paris' anxiety on the voyage home, even her destructive influence over Troy is played down, with both Hecuba and Paris more to blame, in Dracontius' eyes, for the adulterous relationship that will bring the suffering proleptically envisioned at the poem's close.

Yet another late antique re-rendering of the Iliadic story, the sixth-century *De Excidio Troiae Historia* of Dares the Phrygian, is broadly similar to Dictys', particularly with regard to its condemnatory attitude to Helen. Meanwhile Frazer, the modern translator of both Dictys and Dares, notes of Dares that "Sections 5 through 10 are based on [...] Dracontius" (12). Dracontius' sense of Helen as willing is certainly present, but Dares goes further in his condemnation of Helen, and in his refutation of the Iliadic Helen. So, for example, the Judgement of Paris is presented as merely a dream prophesying Trojan success, meaning that the gods cannot be held accountable for her abduction, and correspondingly she is more to blame. Helen was *non invitam* (10.23) ("not unwilling")<sup>42</sup> when Paris took her, and in fact the two had heard of one another and met previously, when they marvelled at one another's beauty. As in Dictys and Homer, some of the Trojans are opposed to Helen's presence in the city – Helenus, Cassandra and Panthus in particular make dire predictions as to Helen's links with the city's fate. Here, indeed, Achilles retreats from battle through frustration that Agamemnon will not consider making peace, and accordingly Helen, the woman Agamemnon insists they must continue to fight for, is figured as divisive to male community and obstructive to male peace. Helen grieves for Paris' death *magno ululatu* (35.8) ("with loud lamentations"), and, at the end of the war, *Agamemnon postquam profectus est, Helena post aliquot dies maesta magis quam quando venerat domum reportatur cum suo Menelao* (43.18-21) ("For several days after Agamemnon set sail, Helen, returning home with Menelaus, her husband, was grieved more deeply than when she had come"). While texts such as the *Heroides* present a Helen who seems genuinely torn over her conflicting feelings for Paris and Menelaus, Dares shows Helen caring only for her own safety, and with feelings for Menelaus and Paris that are deliberately ambiguous but hardly heartfelt. She appears a fickle and self-serving character

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<sup>42</sup> Dares the Phrygian, *De Excidio Troiae Historia*, ed. Ferdinand Meister (Leipzig: Teubner, 1873). English translations are from R. M. Frazer's edition, as at p. 75 above.

very far from the woman given a regretful and tormented voice during her moving appearances in the *Iliad*, *Heroides* or the plays of Euripides.

Clearly, between the first and sixth centuries references to Medea and Helen were frequent, and though accounts may often seem contradictory (for example over the extent of Medea's crimes, or the truth of Helen's attitude to the Greeks and Trojans), both women had become to one extent or another cultural icons, referenced fleetingly or at length by poets, historians, mythographers and moralisers alike. Particularly important are references to both women found in the works that influenced medieval and Renaissance representations. The contributions of Virgil, Ovid, Justin and Servius were especially significant in this respect, while the references contained in the Christian writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Augustine would have been widely read, even if their readers never had recourse to the original stories these authors cite.<sup>43</sup> Between the sixth and twelfth centuries, references to Helen and Medea continued to circulate on the continent – though often only brief mentions, these nevertheless legitimised the stories and made later English authors more likely to adopt them. Helen and Medea feature in some of the period's most well-known and influential works. In his seventh-century *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville notes *Alexander Helenam rapuit* (5.39.11-2) ("Alexander seized Helen"),<sup>44</sup> and refers briefly to Medea as the wife of Jason and father of Medus. In the eighth century, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede mentions Helen only to refuse to write about her (a decision that is particularly weighted since, as late as the seventeenth century, her abduction and the subsequent war were still being included in universal histories). In "A Hymn on the Aforesaid Holy Virgin", Bede exclaims *Carmina casta mihi, fedae non raptus Helenae; / luxus erit lubricis* (4.20) ("Chaste is my song, not wanton Helen's rape. / Leave lewdness to the lewd!").<sup>45</sup> More significantly, the so-called Vatican Mythographers collate earlier thinking on both women. The first Vatican

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<sup>43</sup> Though see Hexter, who suggests that "Ovid had not been nearly so intensively studied, at least at the elementary level, during the first millennium as he would be in the centuries immediately following" (4).

<sup>44</sup> Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, Vol. 1, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911). Translation my own.

<sup>45</sup> Saint Bede the Venerable, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, trans. Bertram Colgrave (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969, rep. 1972).

Mythographer recounts Helen's divine origins, and describes Medea as *summa veneficarum* (1.25.16) ("greatest of enchantresses").<sup>46</sup> He records her assistance of Jason, his desertion of her and her murder of Glauce (though not her children). He also recounts her flight from Athens after the unsuccessful attempt to kill Theseus. The second Vatican Mythographer argues that Helen's two abductions prove her immortality, before going on to describe her as unwilling to go with Paris: *Quae quum ei consentire noluisset, egressus ille, civitatem obsedit. Qua eversa, Helenam rapuit* (199.34-5) ("When she did not want to consent to him, he left, and besieged the city. Having overthrown it, he seized Helen"). He extends the account of Medea's assistance to Jason offered by the first Mythographer, and recounts the rejuvenation of Aeson, Jason's abandonment of Medea, and Medea's flight as they are recorded by the first Mythographer. However, to his account of her flight he adds the clause *suis Iasonisque natis interemtis* (138.35) ("having killed her sons by Jason"). The third Mythographer draws on his predecessors and also on the fifth-century mythographer Fulgentius, describing Helen as *seminarium scandali et discordiae* (6.18-19) ("seed-bed of scandal and discord"), allegorising her as *aliorum malivolentia et detractio* (7.32) ("ill-will and slander of others"), and again pointing to her immortality.<sup>47</sup> He is less interested in Medea, although he does grant her the divine status that was so important to earlier renderings of her story, explaining that she was one of the five granddaughters of the Sun, representative of the sense of hearing. The mythographer does not expand on this curious identification, but it becomes all the more interesting when it is considered that in classical, medieval and early modern texts, Medea's threat can often be connected with the power of her rhetoric, and the persuasive power she exerts over various men (Jason, Pelias, Creon).<sup>48</sup> The Vatican

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<sup>46</sup> Quotations from the Vatican Mythographers are from G. H. Bode, ed., *Scriptores Rerum Mythicarum Latini Tres Romae Nuper Reperti* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968). Translations are my own.

<sup>47</sup> See Charles S. F. Burnett, "A Note on the Origins of the Third Vatican Mythographer" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 44 (1981): 160-66, 160, 163. He notes that the author is usually identified as Alberic of London, and the work dated to "some time in the second half of the twelfth century" (160). However, he suggests that it may instead date from "at the latest, the first half of the twelfth century" (163), pointing out "A date earlier than that previously supposed would explain the possible influence of VMIII on [...] Bernardus Silvestris" (163).

<sup>48</sup> For the rhetorical power of the classical Medea, see J. O. De G. Hanson, "The Secret of Medea's Success", *Greece & Rome* Second Series 12.1 (1965): 54-61, 55. Meanwhile Lynn

Mythographers do not make original contributions to an understanding of Helen or Medea. Rather, like Servius, they become important because of their enduring legacy, the influence they had on medieval writers in particular, and their communication of elements of the legends that came from Greek (for example Medea's escape on a dragon-led chariot, or Theseus' abduction of Helen to Therapnae).

Despite these repeated (and repetitive) references to her story by the Vatican Mythographers, Medea seems to have fallen out of favour somewhat with the composers of original works, though the ever-increasing circulation of manuscripts of the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* meant that her story would have remained well-known. She features in Alexander Neckam's twelfth century commentary on Martianus Capella's fifth-century work, the *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, in which Neckam uses Fulgentius to expand on Capella's reference to Colchis, explaining that she was one of the five daughters of the Sun, and *potentissima incantatrix* (2.110, p. 193) ("a most powerful sorceress").<sup>49</sup> In his twelfth-century commentary on the same text, Bernard Silvestris draws on the second Vatican Mythographer to explain how Medea turned her powers towards ridding a village from snakes.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile in the Italian Henry of Settimello's *Elegia de Diversitate Fortunae Philosophiae Consolatione*, he characterises Fortune as *noverca / Pessima, Medea dirior* (2.76-7) (a terrible stepmother, more dreadful than Medea).<sup>51</sup> Clearly, by this point the savage and semi-divine Medea of the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* was well known, and authors were able to use her, as they used Helen, as a kind of short-hand to illustrate a point: here, the extent to which the writer feels oppressed and threatened by Fortune.

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Shutters finds that in Lydgate's *Troy Book*, "Medea's craftiness and deception of those around her resembles the rhetorical skills possessed by both Antenor and the falsifying poets from Lydgate's Prologue". In the text, she finds that "duplicitous women are depicted as language itself, or a rhetorically dressed text that conceals a 'couert wil' under 'wordis faire glosed'". Lynn Shutters, "Truth, Translation and the *Troy Book* Women", *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 32.4 (2001): 69-98, 81-2.

<sup>49</sup> Alexander Neckam, *Commentum Super Martianum*, ed. Christopher J. McDonough (Florence: Sismel, 2006). Translations of Neckam are my own.

<sup>50</sup> Bernardus Silvestris (Bernard Silvestris), *The Commentary on Martianus Capella's 'De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii' Attributed to Bernardus Silvestris*, ed. Haijo Jan Westra (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986).

<sup>51</sup> Henry of Settimello (Henricus Septimellensis), *Elegia de Diversitate Fortunae Philosophiae Consolatione*, in *PL* 204, col. 0851D. Translations of Henry of Settimello are my own.

More interestingly, Medea is mentioned several times by the English writer Walter Map in his *De Nugis Curialium*. The work's editors note that while Map was "moderately well known in the later Middle Ages and in early modern times",<sup>52</sup> this work, which they date to the 1180s, was not. Accordingly, though Medea and Circe are mentioned briefly as murderers, more significant is Medea's inclusion in Map's *Dissuasion of Valerius to Rufinus the Philosopher, That He Should Not Take A Wife*. This piece circulated separately in the Middle Ages, and thus influenced later authors as the rest of *De Nugis* could not.<sup>53</sup> Though he does not hold Medea up as an example of a bad wife, Map uses her as an example of self-destructive passion, with Valerius telling Rufinus *tibi consulis ut spreta Medea; tibi misereris ut equor naufragis* (4. c.3, pp. 298-9) ("You are as wise in your own interest as Medea when she was cast off; you have as much mercy on yourself as the sea has on wrecked sailors"). Here, Map is relying on his reader to know Medea's story, to recognise that she harmed herself through her destructive behaviour after Jason's abandonment. Map seems to see Medea as weakened by the irrational course she chooses to take after Jason's abandonment, and his refusal to ascribe any positive agency to her whatsoever is shown as he uses Jason's success in the tasks as an example of the rewards that may be won with hard effort:

*Arta enim est via que ducit ad vitam, nec est semita plana qua itur ad gaudia plena; immo eciam ad mediocria per salebras evadimus. Audivit Iason quod per mare adhuc tunc nullis devirginatum ratibus aut remis, et per tauros sulfureos, et per toxicate serpentis vigilias sibi viandum esset ad aureum vellus; et sano consilio licet non suavi usus abiit et rediit et optabilem thesaurum rettulit* (4.cc.4, pp. 310-11)

("Strait is the way that leadeth to life, and it is no smooth road which you must travel to reach the fullness of joy; nay, even to gain moderate advantages we have to pass through rough places. Jason was told that to reach the golden fleece he must journey by the sea, virgin as yet to any bark or oar, and by the sulphurous bulls, and by the wakeful venomous serpent, and he took advice that was wholesome though not pleasant, and went and returned and brought home the coveted treasure").

<sup>52</sup> Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, ed. and trans. M. R. James, rev. C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983) xx. Quotations from *De Nugis* and the *Dissuasion* are from this edition.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi, xlvi.

Here, as seventeenth-century authors including Thomas Heywood, Anthony Munday and Richard Brathwaite were to do, Map rewrites the quest for the Fleece as a wholly male success, ignoring Medea's involvement. If they do not believe him, Map urges his readers to turn to Ovid's *Medea*, telling them *vix pauca invenies impossibilia mulieri* (4.cc.4.p. 311) ("you will find that there are hardly even a few things impossible to woman"). As the editors note, this advice was impossible to follow, since Ovid's tragedy was long lost by the twelfth century.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the editors note the *Metamorphoses* as one of Map's sources for the *Dissuasion*, and here Map may be manipulating the representation of Medea he found in his classical sources, eliding all the troubling magical agency he found in Ovid's poem, and sending his interested readers to chase after the spurious tragedy instead.

By contrast, John of Garland's mid-thirteenth-century commentary on the *Metamorphoses* engages enthusiastically with Ovid's extant rendering of Medea's magical power. Presumably picking up on Ovid's description of her as Jason's *spolia altera* ("other prize"), he notes *Auratam vellus Medeam dicimus ipsam. / Auro preda fuit hec speciosa magis* (297-8) ("We speak of Medea herself as the golden fleece. She was a more precious prize than this gold").<sup>55</sup> As Kathryn L. McKinley notes, "Here Garland represents Medea as a glittering prize, a type of faint praise suggesting Jason's perception of her as a useful means to his own ends".<sup>56</sup> Such praise of Medea, which seems to objectify her, to emphasise her worth as a status symbol (and to ally her more closely with Helen, who is very frequently characterised as a prize won by Paris), also foreshadows later medieval accounts which focus reductively on those attributes (beauty, grace, charm) that make her an attractive partner for Jason. John notes *Virginis est custos draco vel bos, virginis arte / Virgine subducta, premia victor habet* (299-300) ("The guard of the virgin is a dragon or ox, with the virgin having been abducted by the virgin's art, the victor has the prize"). Here, Medea's desire for Jason and the help she gives him are

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>55</sup> Giovanni di Garlandia (John of Garland), *Integumenta Ovidii: Poemetto Inedito del Secolo XIII*, ed. Fausto Ghisalberti (Messina: Giuseppe Principato, 1933). Translations of John of Garland are my own.

<sup>56</sup> Kathryn L. McKinley, *Reading the Ovidian Heroine: 'Metamorphoses' Commentaries 1100-1618* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) 70.



mentioned, but at the same time she is equated with the Fleece, and becomes another prize that Jason has won.

On the continent, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *Le Roman de la Rose* and Pierre Bersuire's fourteenth-century *Ovidius Moralizatus* both mention Medea, and Giovanni del Vergilio provides another allegorical commentary on the *Metamorphoses*: Nicola McDonald notes that Medea is criticised for her killing of Pelias and her attack on Theseus, whom del Vergilio allegorises as virtue.<sup>57</sup> *Le Roman de la Rose* refers to her killing of her children, while Bersuire's rerendering of Ovid explains Medea as either Jason's helpmate, a physical manifestation of *sapientiam cunctis artibus eruditam* (VII. Fol.LV) ("erudite knowledge of all arts"), or as a hellish force, whose example should encourage parents to exercise control over their children, and men to choose their wives carefully.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile Alain de Lille references her in his *Liber de Planctu Naturae*, using her alongside Helen to exemplify the dangerous effects of love, and explaining how she was torn between her instincts to act as a mother and as a stepmother (that is, between being loving and cruel towards her children).<sup>59</sup> Clearly, then, literary references to Medea in the early Middle Ages retain a certain duality, touching on the help she gave Jason, but also willing to reference her supernatural powers and murderous threat, and to link these to her femininity as a caution to men.

Predictably, due to her greater popularity during late antiquity, and to the general popularity of the "Matter of Troy", brief or more extended treatments of Helen from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries are easier to identify. John M. Fyler notes Baudri of Bourgeuil's "exact imitations" of the Ovidian epistles of Paris and Helen,<sup>60</sup> and Bettany Hughes identifies these two Ovidian epistles as circulating in European convents during the Middle Ages, where they were translated by nuns.<sup>61</sup> Like Medea, she is referenced in Martianus' *De Nuptiis Philologiae* and its commentaries (with Neckam

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<sup>57</sup> Nicola McDonald, " 'Diverse Folk Diversely They Seyde': A Study of the Figure of Medea in Medieval Literature" (DPhil. Thesis: Oxford University, 1994) 72-3.

<sup>58</sup> Pierre Bersuire, *Metamorphosis Ovidiana moraliter ... explanata : Paris, 1509*, ed. Stephen Orgel (New York: Garland, 1979). Translation my own.

<sup>59</sup> Alanus de Insulis (Alain de Lille), *Liber de Planctu Naturae*, in *PL* 210, col. 0455D.

<sup>60</sup> John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 19.

<sup>61</sup> Bettany Hughes, *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* (London: Pimlico, 2006) 9. See also M. W. Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986) 220.

drawing on Fulgentius and the Third Vatican Mythographer to give an account of her birth and the Judgement of Paris). Such late antique and early medieval accounts of her story continue to impact on her representations throughout the twelfth century. In the commentary on the *Aeneid* which has been ascribed to Bernard of Silvestris, the author identifies Dares the Phrygian as an accurate historical source, and cautions his readers not to set too much store in Virgil's rendering, since in Book Two they should find evidence of the power of speech to move Dido: *Est enim historia quod Greci Troiam devicerunt; quod vero Enee probitas enarratur fabula est. Narrat enim Frigius Dares Eneam civitatem prodidisse* (p. 15) ("For it is history that the Greeks overcame Troy; but what is related about the probity of Aeneas is fiction. For Dares Phrygius tells that Aeneas betrayed the city").<sup>62</sup> As this reliance on Dares might suggest, Helen is portrayed critically. In his discussion of Book Six, the author explains her marriage to Deiphobus and his death at the hands of Menelaus. He goes on to give a lengthy account of how Helen passes from husband to husband. She represents *terrena opulentia que in terra et in terrenis habitat et dominatur* (p. 99) ("earthly wealth which inhabits the earth and governs earthly affairs"). As the collocation of Helen with wealth would suggest, she is seen as a pernicious force, but enjoys little power herself. She is clearly viewed critically for leaving Menelaus (who represents virtue) for Paris (sensuality). The commentator stresses she did so willingly, and notes *Inde etiam philosophi probant eam malam esse quia improbis frequentius solet adherere* (p. 99) ("From this philosophers judge her to be bad, since she is frequently accustomed to adhere to the unworthy"). He explains how Helen next joins herself to Deiphobus (public terror) before briefly describing how virtue finally subdues earthly wealth, and Helen assisted in Deiphobus' murder to help Menelaus. Helen appears a kind of potent force here, and the author of the commentary greatly extends what he has found of her in the *Aeneid*. However, her power is firstly dangerous and misleading, and secondly not really hers. Like being beautiful, being identified with wealth lends Helen an unstable

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<sup>62</sup> Bernard Silvestris, *The Commentary on the First Six Books of the 'Aeneid' of Vergil, Commonly Attributed to Bernardus Silvestris*, ed. Julian Ward Jones and Elizabeth Frances Jones (Lincoln, Nebraska: U of Nebraska P, 1977). Translations of Bernard's commentary are my own. For Jones and Jones' discussion of the authorship of the commentary, see ix-xi.

power, rendering her only powerful when she is desired, but really a vice to be resisted.

As such commentaries, and the wide circulation of the *Aeneid* itself would suggest, Virgil's poem was well-known by the early Middle Ages. Christopher Baswell notes that "Shorter Latin poems retelling the matter of Troy and its victims are very widespread in the high Middle Ages, especially during the twelfth century, and circulate widely thereafter".<sup>63</sup> However, such poems do not always condemn Helen as harshly as they might, and can present her as powerless in the face of Paris' desire. In Simon Capra Aurea's *Ilias*, for example, the poet appeals to Paris to forsake his desire for Helen, asking *Cur coniuncta viro mulier? Cur regia coniunx? [...] Cur tibi Graeca placet?* (56-7) ("Why a woman joined to a husband? Why the wife of a king? [...] Why does a Greek woman please you?").<sup>64</sup> Here, though the love is condemned, Helen is scarcely mentioned: the poet's focus is on Paris, and even on other figures such as Hecuba, who may be blamed for the fall of Troy. Elsewhere in such poems she is made far more the cause of the city's woes. Baswell cites "Viribus, arte, minis", which he credits to Pierre de Saintes, as an example of such a work. Baswell argues that in this account of the Trojan war, since Dido is absent, sexual guilt becomes refocused on Helen.<sup>65</sup> She is certainly attacked, for example in the lines *Sic facies Helenae fuit exitus urbis amoenae / Crines, colla, genae, cunctaque compta bene / Quam facit audaces amor in sua damna procaces!* (175-7) ("In this way the pleasing face of Helen becomes the end of the city. / Hair, neck, cheeks, and everything presented well / How bold Love makes those who are just asking for their own damnation!").<sup>66</sup> Lines 175-6, condemning Helen's physical appearance, and connecting it to the fall of Troy, also appear in "Pergama flere volo", otherwise known as *Carmina Burana 101*,

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<sup>63</sup> Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the 'Aeneid' from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 24 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995, rep. 1996) 177.

<sup>64</sup> In Polycarp Leyser, ed., *Historia Poetarum et Poematum Medii Aevi* (Halae: Magdeb[ergicae]1721). Translation my own.

<sup>65</sup> Baswell, *Virgil*, 178.

<sup>66</sup> In Leyser, ed., *Historia Poetarum*. Translation my own. Leyser reprints Simon Capra Aurea's *Ilias* and "Viribus, arte, minis" as one continuous piece, on pages 398-408. See Baswell, *Virgil*, p.379. Leyser tentatively attributes the whole work to Hildebert, Archbishop of Tours, though Édélestand du Ménil finds that he does so « sans aucune raison » (« without any reason »). Édélestand du Ménil, ed., *Poésies Populaires Latines Antérieures au Douzième Siècle* (Paris: Brockhaus et Avenarius, 1843) n.3 p. 313. Translations of du Ménil's notes are my own.

which condemns Helen as *femina fatalis, femina foeta malis* (p.313) (“fatal woman, woman pregnant with wickedness”).<sup>67</sup> In an anonymous complaint of Dido, *Carmina Burana* 100, she exclaims to her sister that she will be insulted by comparison to Helen: her enemies will say of her *Dido se fecit Helenam / regina nostra gremio / Troianum fovit advenam!* (4b. 6-8) (“Our queen makes herself a Helen, and fondles a Trojan arrival in her lap!”).<sup>68</sup>

It is clear that the passionate, conniving and blameworthy Helen they found in Ovid, Virgil and Dictys and Dares appealed to male poets and historians in the period. Specifically, the apparent historicity of these latter two texts, and accordingly of their portrayals of Helen, meant that Dictys and particularly Dares were hugely influential in the Middle Ages, although they were often known only through adaptations.<sup>69</sup> Just as Bernard of Silvestris preferred Dares to Virgil as a true account of the Trojan War, both writers were often favoured over the abridged and redacted versions of Homer that were known at the time. In fact, in the introduction to his twelfth-century *Iliad* (not a translation of Homer, but rather his own version of the Troy story),<sup>70</sup> Joseph of Exeter explicitly rejects the versions of the earlier classical authors in favour of Dares, his principal source. He asks:

*meoniumne senem, mirer, Latiumne Maronem  
an vatem Phrygium Martem cui certior index  
explicuit presens oculus, quem fabula nescit?* (1.24-6)

<sup>67</sup> In du Ménil, ed., *Poésies Populaires*. Translation my own. See also *Benedictbeuern Poems: Carmina Burana* Vol 1 Part 2, ed. Alfons Hilka and Otto Schumann, 4 vols (Heidelberg: Carl Winter’s UP, 1930-70) pp. 139-141. du Ménil prints “Pergama flere volo” and “Viribus, arte, minis” separately, though he notes further similarities between the two poems. The popularity of such pieces, and their criticism of Helen, is evidenced by the fact that a condemnation of Helen as *Meretrix exicialis, femina letalis, femina plena malis* is appended to Caxton’s fifteenth century translation of Raoul Lefèvre’s *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troy*. Noted in John S. P. Tatlock, “The Siege of Troy in Elizabethan Literature, Especially in Shakespeare and Heywood”. *PMLA* 30.4 (1915): 673-770, n.86, p.765. However, Tatlock merely records the lines as evidence of medieval condemnation of Helen, and does not note their relation to earlier Troy-poems of this type.

<sup>68</sup> Probably an allusion to Iarbas’ angry condemnation of Aeneas as *ille Paris* (4.215) (“this Paris”), itself a reference to Aeneas and Dido’s close sexual relationship, which Iarbas sees as adversely affecting Carthage. *Benedictbeuern Poems: Carmina Burana* Vol 1 Part 2, ed. Alfons Hilka and Otto Schumann, 4 vols (Heidelberg: Carl Winter’s UP, 1930-70) pp.135-6. Translation my own.

<sup>69</sup> See Nathaniel E. Griffin, ed., “*The Sege of Troy*”, *PMLA* 22.1 (1907): 157-200, n.4, p.168.

<sup>70</sup> The full title of Joseph’s work is sometimes given as *The Iliad of Dares Phrygius*, and otherwise as *De Bello Troiano*, or *The Trojan War*.

(“Should I admire Homer, the old man from Maeonia, or Virgil from Latium, or Dares, the Phrygian master who was present as an eye-witness – a surer witness to describe the war that fable does not really know?”)<sup>71</sup>

The magisterial reputation enjoyed by Dictys and Dares in the Middle Ages was due to the use of the Latin texts by Joseph of Exeter and by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, French author of the *Roman de Troie*. Both authors, writing apparently independently of one another in the mid- to late twelfth century,<sup>72</sup> reworked the late antique material they had inherited, and in so doing radically re-imagined Helen.

Joseph’s piece is often ferociously critical of Helen, far more so than Dictys and Dares, portraying her as avaricious, sexually insatiable and devious. He makes Helen utterly complicit in her abduction, and once she had arrived in Troy, he demands:

[...] *quid nomine sacro  
incestum phalerare iuvat? pretendit operta  
bracteolam caries, agnum lupus, ulcera bissum,  
sed Famam fraus nulla later. non una duorum  
esse potest; nam prima fidem dum federa debent,  
alterius non uxor erit, sed preda cubilis.* (3.393-8)

(“What is the good of dressing up adultery in a holy name? Hidden dry rot hides itself under gold leaf, the wolf under the guise of a sheep, a running sore under fine linen, but no deceit can escape Rumour. One woman cannot belong to two husbands; for while her first vows have validity she will not be the wife of another, only his bedroom spoils”).

These grotesque images of decay and rot superficially covered with either finery (gold leaf and linen), or the appearance of innocence (a lamb’s fleece), recall the Virgilian image of Helen as an insidious threat, a prefiguring of the Trojan horse, attractive without but fatally threatening within. Joseph appears to find Helen’s sexuality deeply alarming – picking up on the hints contained

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<sup>71</sup> Joseph of Exeter, *The Trojan War I-III*, ed. and trans. A. K. Bate (Warminster: Aris & Philips, 1986).

<sup>72</sup> Benoît’s work is generally dated to the 1160s, and Joseph’s to the 1180s. Bate notes that “It would be tempting to think that Joseph was influenced by Benoît in view of their links with the court of Henry II” (21), but cautions “it would probably be a mistake” (21).

in their flirtatious exchange of letters in the *Heroides*, and Dictys' and Dares' accounts of their voyage back to Troy, he includes a description of the couple's first encounter onboard Paris' ship. In its account of Helen's avarice and her wanton desire and control over Paris, this episode seems to epitomise her negative characterisation in the piece. Joseph notes of Paris:

[...] *ebur aggerat Indum,  
thura Sabea, Mide fluvios et vellera Serum.  
ac mundi maioris opes, quodque educat aer  
iocundum, pontus clarum vel fertile tellus,  
hec faciles emere thoros, domuere rebelles  
amplexus, pepigere fidem. non iam oscula reddit,  
non reddenda negat Helene, sed pectore toto  
incumbens gremium solvit, permit ore, latentem  
furatur Venerem, iamque exspirante Dione  
conscia secretos testatur purpura rores.  
proh scelus! an tantis potuisti, pessima, votis  
indulsisse moras exspectabatque voluptas  
emptorem? o teneri miranda potentia sexus!  
precipitem in lucrum suspendit femina luxum  
nec nisi conducto dignatur gaudia risu.* (3.324-38)

("He adds Indian ivory, Arabian incense, rivers of gold and Chinese silk. The riches of Asia, whatever delights the sky or the clear sea or the fertile earth produce, all these bought an easy seduction, overcame any resistance to his embraces and guaranteed her fidelity. Helen now not only kisses him first but does not hold back if kissed first. Lying on him with her whole body, she opens her legs, presses him with her mouth and robs him of his semen. And as his ardour abates the purple bedlinen that was privy to their sin bears witness to his unseen dew. What evil! O wicked woman, were you able to put a check on such passionate desire? Was your lust waiting for a purchaser? What marvellous power in the gentle sex! Woman holds back her precipitate lust to obtain wealth and does not deign to give joy unless her smile has been paid for!")

Joseph is very obviously picking up firstly on the negative light the *Aeneid* and *Heroides* cast on Helen's character, and secondly on the explicitly-critical accounts of Dictys and Dares. At the same time, he reworks even these critical accounts, making them more negative, and arguably reflective of his own

anxiety about supposedly 'typical' feminine traits (avarice and lasciviousness), and how devastatingly these traits were to impact on the male communities of Greece and particularly Troy. Indeed, George A. Kennedy argues that in their first sexual encounter here, "it is Helen who rapes Paris", a role-reversal that in many ways epitomises what would have been, to the medieval male reader, a deeply disturbing example of female sexual power.<sup>73</sup>

However, the weight that Joseph's work, and the twelfth-century Troy poems, lend to Helen's looks and sexual desires hints that, while the viciously condemnatory attitude towards her survives, so too does the image of Helen as beautiful and a desired object. She is included in "Ganymede and Helen", a twelfth-century dream-vision, arguing with Ganymede over the merits of heterosexual versus homosexual love. The author's choice of Helen as representative of heterosexual passion underscores the extent to which she was a readily-recognisable character in the period's literature. Moreover, despite Joseph's attack on the pernicious effects of her sexuality, here it seems the reader is not meant to dwell on the negative connotations of Helen's allure for men, although Ganymede attacks her wanton sexuality, exclaiming "Find someone else to fool, someone who does not know you. / I know whom you have offered your bosom to, lying on your back" (205-6).<sup>74</sup> John Boswell notes "there is no punishment or penance at the end for the defeated Ganymede" (260), and suggests the poet may have sympathised with his stance. However, Mathew Kuefler sees Ganymede's capitulation to Helen at the end of the debate as representative of the poet's desire to privilege heterosexual love over male "love of boys".<sup>75</sup> At the poem's conclusion, even the gods who had previously agreed with Ganymede are won over by Helen's arguments, and the dreamer wakes and exclaims "This vision befell me by the will of God. / Let the Sodomites blush, the Gomorrhans weep. / Let everyone guilty of this deed repent" (267-9). Here, as she would be in the sixteenth century, Helen is used to caution the reader. In this piece, though, it is her behaviour that is

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<sup>73</sup> George A. Kennedy, "Helen's Husbands and Lovers: A Query", *The Classical Journal* 82.2 (1986-7): 152-3, 152.

<sup>74</sup> In John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980). Boswell's translation of the poem is printed on pages 381-89.

<sup>75</sup> Mathew Kuefler, "Male Friendship and the Suspicion of Sodomy in Twelfth-Century France" in Mathew Kuefler, ed., *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on "Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality"* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006): 179-214, 190.

commended, while in Elizabethan complaints Helen often exemplifies wanton sexual behaviour that is to be avoided, particularly by women. Thus in choosing a woman whose heterosexual desire was so notorious and destructive, the author seems to be making sport of Helen's reputation, even as he writes her as the victor: he may be suggesting that heterosexual love is preferable to "love of boys", but equally, his use of Helen appears to constitute a sly nod towards the trouble caused by male desire for women. Elsewhere, in *Carmina Burana* 77, the speaker characterises his lover as *Blanziflor et Helena, / Venus generosa* ("Blanchefleur and Helen, / high-born Venus").<sup>76</sup> Anne J. Duggan suggests "the *Carmina Burana* reflect a youth culture [...] The collection is full of that excitement, that daring, that laughing-at-convention which characterizes independently minded youth".<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, such a mix of classical and medieval references is probably tongue-in-cheek, as is the later verse in which the author exclaims

*'Deus, Deus meus !  
estne illa Helena  
Vel est dea Venus ?*

("God, my God!  
Is this woman Helen  
Or is she the goddess Venus?")<sup>78</sup>

Peter Dronke quotes Wilhelm Meyer's observation on the attraction of classical myth to the authors of the *Carmina Burana*, that "the medieval poets created a freer path for themselves by setting their love-songs in the realm of ancient

<sup>76</sup> In *Benedictbeuern Poems: Carmina Burana* Vol 1 Part 2, ed. Alfons Hilka and Otto Schumann, 4 vols (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's UP, 1930-70) pp. 53-6. Translation my own.

<sup>77</sup> Anne J. Duggan, "The World of the *Carmina Burana*", in Martin H. Jones, ed, *The 'Carmina Burana': Four Essays* (London: King's College London Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 2000): 1-23, 11.

<sup>78</sup> In *Benedictbeuern Poems: Carmina Burana* Vol 1 Part 2, ed. Alfons Hilka and Otto Schumann, 4 vols (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's UP, 1930-70) pp. 53-6. Translation my own. The collocation of Helen and Venus (seen too in Simon Capra Aurea's *Ilias*) is noteworthy, particularly when it is considered alongside Helen's oft-used argument that she is helpless to withstand Venus' will. Here, the reference may be intended to recall the compliment Paris pays Helen in the *Heroides* 16.139-40, when he tells her that he would have judged her the victor if she had been present at the judgement.



mythology”.<sup>79</sup> The classical texts gave these poets the freedom to detail the profane or otherwise risqué (an opportunity which Joseph of Exeter and the author of “Ganymede and Helen” certainly seized). Here, the author may be employing a use of Helen that was much-loved by Elizabethan poets: a starry-eyed speaker compares his lady to Helen, and the poet intends to raise a wry smile among those of his readers who recognise that she represents not only beauty, but infidelity. However, the use of Helen as an image of surpassing beauty is obvious, as it is in *Carmina Burana 111*, in which the speaker exclaims that his love is one *pro qua non curasset Paris / Helene consortium* (“for whose sake, Paris would no longer care for the company of Helen”).<sup>80</sup> Likewise, the “Love Ron” of Friar Thomas de Hales (dated by Carleton Brown to “before 1272”)<sup>81</sup> uses her as a brief example of a famous lover, noting “Hwer is paris & heleyne / Pat weren so bryht & feyre on bleo” (65-6).<sup>82</sup> However, here the poet’s theme is the love of God, and its superiority to earthly love, and thus it seems that the pair are used ironically, and are indicative of the destructive effects of earthly passion. This usage of Helen (and Medea), one that plays on the tension between their reputations as lovers and the disasters that their passion precipitated, was to become particularly popular in the English dream visions of the later Middle Ages. It is apparent, however, that whether or not it is employed ironically, the image of Helen as a famous lover had clearly survived the frequent misogynist attacks of the classical period, of late antiquity and of the early Middle Ages.

### **Romantic Retellings: Helen and Medea in Benoît de Sainte-Maure**

This image of Helen as a lover, rather than as a malign force bent on Troy’s destruction, informs the French poem that was to become, indirectly, the most important influence on many English representations of Helen in the Middle Ages. Though he uses many of the same sources as Joseph, Benoît de Sainte-

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Peter Dronke, “Latin Songs in the *Carmina Burana*: Profane Love and Satire”, in Jones, ed., *The ‘Carmina Burana’*: 25-40, 35.

<sup>80</sup> In *Benedictbeuern Poems: Carmina Burana Vol 1 Part 2*, ed. Alfons Hilka and Otto Schumann, 4 vols (Heidelberg: Carl Winter’s UP, 1930-70) pp. 53-6. Translation my own.

<sup>81</sup> In Carleton Brown, ed. *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932, rep. 1950) 198.

<sup>82</sup> In Brown, ed., *English Lyrics*.

Maure's *Roman de Troie* reworks the model provided by Dares in an intriguingly different way. Barbara Nolan points out that, despite the fondness displayed by late antique authors for mentions of Medea and particularly of Helen:

Because the details of the Troy story are little known to most of his twelfth-century audience (who are not versed in Latin literature), Benoît is not bound by prior expectations. He is therefore free to invent and embellish for his own purposes.<sup>83</sup>

Meanwhile, Paul Strohm notes that despite its title, the text

[...] presents itself as a *roman* only in regard to its vernacular language, and otherwise as an *estoire*. [...] Benoît remains silent about his own substantial additions to the story, evidently feeling that the pretence and outward appearance of historicity were vital to his success.<sup>84</sup>

Benoît, then, like Dictys, Dares and the later authors who so self-consciously use these names as authorities, attempts to legitimise what is actually a new and innovative rendering by representing it merely as a translation of an eyewitness account into the vernacular. In fact, though, he adds and alters far more than he translates, and despite Strohm's observation that the author himself seems keen to avoid the characterisation of his story as a romance, possibly to avoid compromising its veracity, additions such as lengthy descriptions of nature, digressions on his characters' private feelings and reflections, and some stock romantic imagery mean that the story is frequently characterised as such.<sup>85</sup>

Predictably, his interest in the narrative as well as the historical elements of the story means that Benoît draws on the *Heroides* as well as Dares in his lengthy account of Paris and Helen's first meeting. He may also have drawn on Dracontius, whose *De Raptu Helenae*, itself inspired by Ovid, seems far more interested in the tropes and conventions of romance - long sea

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<sup>83</sup> Barbara Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the 'Roman Antique'* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 64.

<sup>84</sup> Paul Strohm, "Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie: Generic Distinctions in the Middle English Troy Narratives", *Speculum* 46.2 (1971): 348-59, 349.

<sup>85</sup> For example, see Margaret J. Ehrhart, *The Judgement of the Trojan Prince Paris in Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1987) 44.

voyages, descriptions of the lovers, and their desires, accounts of Helen's beauty – than do the critical, determinedly “historical” accounts of Dictys and Dares. Benoît includes what Wolff has noted as a Dracontian innovation, that the pair meet in “Un riche temple merveillos, / Mout anciën e precios” (1.4261-2) (“A marvellous rich temple, very ancient and ornate”).<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, echoes of Dracontius, Ovid and Dares are found in Benoît's observation that the pair are quickly infatuated: “Navra Amors e lui e li” (1.4357) (“Love wounded them both him and her”). Ovidian too is Benoît's observation that Helen “Bien fist semblant del consentir” (1.4506) (“seemed to consent well”). What does not seem classical, however, is Benoît's suggestion that Helen “fortment plorot e duel faiseit, / E doucement se complaigneit. / Son seignor regretot sovent” (1.4641-3) (“Cried loudly and showed her grief, / And softly complained / She missed her lord often”).<sup>87</sup> Dares notes very briefly that Helen was sad when she left Troy, and Paris attempted to raise her spirits. However, here, and later when Paris comforts her, Benoît is embellishing his earlier models, heightening the emotional impact of the narrative and writing Helen in accordance with romance ideals. As this would suggest, Benoît's Helen is often more passive than her classical predecessors. When Paris attempts to comfort her, himself adopting the role of chivalric hero and assuring her “Dame [...] vostre voleir / Sera si fait e acompli” (1.4730-1) (“My lady, your wishes will thus be done and accomplished”), Helen wilfully rejects power (particularly the power she enjoyed on the Dracontian voyage), occupying her generically appropriate role as romance heroine and conquered woman, and telling Paris that her only power, now, lies in acceding to his wishes. Later too, she stands on the city's walls watching the battle, but appears even less powerful than her Iliadic counterpart, who watches the Greeks arrive and names them for Priam. In the *Roman*, “Heleine i fu mout paorose / Et mout pensive et mout dotose” (1.8085-6) (Helen was very fearful, / And very thoughtful and sorrowful”), but is permitted no speech, or agency beyond her own silent regret. This said, Benoît's Helen retains echoes of the selfish and conniving woman that the

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<sup>86</sup> Benoît de Saint-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie*, ed. Leopold Constans, 6 vols (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1908). Translations of the *Roman de Troie* are my own.

<sup>87</sup> Ovid's Helen tells Paris she is happy with Menelaus: however, she also tells him she had to contain her laughter when Menelaus charged her with taking care of Paris. There is thus little sense that she will genuinely regret leaving her husband.

French poet would have found in Dares, and thus while her concern for her husband and child would be appropriate in the eyes of Benoît's audience, when she leaves Greece she also mourns for "Sa joie, s'onor, sa richece, / E sa beauté e sa hautece" (1.4647-8) ("Her happiness, her honour, her wealth, / And her beauty and her eminence"). Here the reference to Helen's concern for her lost "hautece" but also her "onor" (which can be translated as "honour", but also as "distinction" or "status") makes her seem unflatteringly self-engrossed, and is a reminder of Dares' unremittingly negative characterisation of Helen.

By the mid-twelfth century, Benoît clearly had ample precedent for a romanticised rendering of Helen, though he also makes recourse to the more critical account he would have found in Dares. With Medea, his task proved more difficult, since despite the evidence of tormented love he would have found in the *Metamorphoses*, his literary predecessors such as Dracontius and Hosidius Geta were also interested in the tragic and alarming consequences of Jason and Medea's love affair. Important too is the fact that Benoît had fewer precedents for his representation of Medea, and particularly of Medea as a romance heroine. Despite her lengthy and important appearances in Apollonius' *Argonautica* and in the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*, and these texts' interest in her passion for Jason, in late antiquity and the early medieval period Medea is far more likely to appear (if she appears at all) as a murderous poisoner. Importantly too, Medea is conspicuous in the accounts of Dares, Dictys and Joseph of Exeter only by her absence. Dictys makes no mention of the Argonautic voyage at all, and though Dares finds room to record that Jason succeeded in his quest, he does not mention Medea. Meanwhile Joseph follows Dares in his blunt observation that *ignis virtuti cedit et ensis / eripiturque emptum summo discrimine vellus* (1.185-6) ("Fire yielded to courage, as did the sword, while the fleece that was earned by such signal combat was removed").

Clearly, and although Medea's role is sometimes ignored, connections had already been made in antiquity between the Argonautic voyage and the sack of Troy, (in the *Odyssey*, the voyage of the Argonauts is "of interest to everyone")<sup>88</sup> and some vestiges of these connections survived into the Middle

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<sup>88</sup> *Od.*12.70.

Ages. Where Benoît innovates, though, is in his far fuller merging of the two tales, in his romanticising preference, and particularly in his representation of Medea as a romantic figure and as a woman at once peripherally and irrevocably tangled in the matter of the Trojan War. For his Medea, Nolan notes that Benoît “draws heavily on Ovid, using the *Heroides* as well as the *Metamorphoses* to augment his Dares and Dictys and develop his own arguments” (19). Rosemarie Jones concurs, noting that when the texts do diverge, “differences are mainly in the portrayal of the character of Medea, and would suggest, not that Benoît did not use Ovid as his source, but rather that he did use Ovid, and made deliberate changes in the story”.<sup>89</sup> As the prominence of these two models would suggest, Benoît is primarily interested in Medea as a woman who is undeniably magical and powerful, but who is utterly overthrown by the strength of her own feelings for Jason. Concurrently, as he does with Helen, Benoît attempts to graft onto the ‘historical’ story of the Argonauts a romanticised Medea, inspired by Ovid but reflecting twelfth-century literary tastes. In this account, she is struck by Jason immediately, and suffers the physical changes medieval readers would expect from a romance heroine – going red and white, hot and cold as she looks at him. Benoît notes of her father “C’est une fille qu’il aveit, / Que de mout grant beauté esteit” (1.1213-5) (“It was a daughter that he had / Who was of the greatest beauty”), and Medea’s relations with the two male figures of the story, Jason and Aeetes, are very clearly in line with the preferences of chivalric narrative. She is used by her father as a young woman in romance would expect to be, dining with the men and receiving them as a gracious hostess, while all the time concealing her growing feelings for Jason: Benoît observes that Medea, “que d’amor esprent, / S’en vient a eus mout vergodose” (1.1308-9) (“who burned with love, / came to them very ashamed”). Equally, an account of Medea’s magical abilities finishes with a reference to her beauty: “el país ne el regné / N’aveit dame de sa beauté” (1.1247-8) (“There was nobody of her beauty in the country or kingdom”).

Here, Benoît is clearly endeavouring to flesh out the Medea he found in the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*, who launches immediately into impassioned

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<sup>89</sup> Rosemarie Jones, *The Theme of Love in the ‘Romans d’Antiquité’* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1972) 44.

accounts of her feelings for Jason before she herself has been fully characterised. Thus, though Benoît provides a lengthy account of Jason's success on the tasks (which is contained in the *Metamorphoses*), Medea's role is underscored by their long conversation which precedes the tasks, and which is absent from the *Metamorphoses* (there, Medea speaks only to herself, to debate the wisdom of saving Jason). During their night together in the *Roman*, Medea describes in detail what Jason must do to overcome his obstacles, and gives him a ring and magic potion to ensure success. Here, Benoît seems to take his inspiration from the *Heroides*, both in his account of Jason's tasks, and in the very clear sense that Jason owes his success to Medea.<sup>90</sup>

After Jason's triumph, however, Benoît abruptly cuts short the story, disingenuously observing "Ne Daires plus n'en voust escrire, / Ne Beneiez pas ne l'alonge" (1.2064-5) ("As Dares does not wish to write any longer, so Benoît will not elaborate"). Though the pair return to Iolcos in triumph, Benoît does not describe the killing of Apsyrtus or Pelias, the rejuvenation of Aeson, or Medea's final abandonment and revenge. Benoît's primary intention is to tell the story of the Trojan War, and like Dares he follows his account of Jason's triumph with a description of Hesione's ravishment and the first sack of Troy. His determined ignoring of the grisly events he would have found amply referenced in the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* is noticeable, and notable. It is a rare account of Medea that, like Garland's later explanation of the *Metamorphoses*, elects to stress her achievements without recounting any of her future crimes. However, this elision, instantly obvious to those of his readers who might have recourse to Ovid, is problematic, betraying Benoît's desire to construct a Medea who is powerful, but whose power serves male interests in a productive way. Benoît's account, like Chaucer's "Legend of Medea", paradoxically draws attention to the better-known details of Medea's story even as it elides them. Successive English writers, however, drawing on Benoît's redactors and on their own knowledge of the classics, expanded on his account of the end of Medea's life, and in doing so struggled with a Medea who is far more obviously threatening to the masculine community.

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<sup>90</sup> However, see McDonald, who points out that Medea is made less alarming since "[her] powers are seen to derive from diligent study" (112), rather than from an inherent affinity with the supernatural. Later, male magicians (Marlowe's Faustus and Shakespeare's Prospero) appear less alarming for the same reason.

### Misogynist Rewriting: Helen and Medea in Guido de Columnis.

Despite the French author's willingness to incorporate into the *Roman* some of the negative characteristics of Helen that he would have found in his classical and late antique sources, Benoît's heroine, like her counterpart in the *Heroides*, comes across as a relatively sympathetic character (although she is far from the central one she is in the *Heroides*). Similarly, Benoît's Medea is represented sympathetically due to the space Benoît gives to her articulation of her own desires (and because of his elision of her crimes). Ruth Morse points to the shift in women's literary significance that can be discerned in Benoît's work:

He projected the texts' larger problems (of loyalty and betrayal, of the behaviour of guests, of the legitimacy of rulers and rule) onto women, who ought to be the most private of citizens; he showed those private citizens as participating in public events, which they see from their own points of view.<sup>91</sup>

Benoît's version of the story was itself popular – Françoise Vielliard, in her edition of one of the thirteenth-century French prose versions of the poem, points to the popularity of such redactions.<sup>92</sup> However, the enduring legacy of the piece, particularly with regard to the presentation of Helen and Medea, is its impact on the Latin work of Guido de Columnis. Despite his emphasis on Helen and Medea's sensitivity, and his refusal to dwell on the most negative aspects of their characterisation, ironically, Benoît's account provides the model for one of the most concerted attacks on both women in the Middle Ages, Guido's deeply misogynist *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, completed in 1287. The *Historia* is a Latin translation of Benoît's work (though it does not advertise itself as such, claiming instead to draw directly on Dares). It is a

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<sup>91</sup> Ruth Morse, *The Medieval Medea* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996) 89.

<sup>92</sup> *Le Roman de Troie en Prose*, ed. Françoise Vielliard (Cologne-Genève: Martin Bodmer, 1979) 8. See also Kathleen Chesney, who suggests that Guido may have used a prose redaction of the *Roman*, rather than Benoît's verse. Kathleen Chesney, "A Neglected Prose Version of the *Roman de Troie*", *Medium Aevum* 11 (1942): 46-67.

translation with significant additions and alterations, however, and once again a new Helen and a new Medea emerge with a new text. Specifically, though he follows the basic outline of the story that he inherits from Benoît, Guido makes critical and often virulently misogynist additions to Benoît's observations.<sup>93</sup>

For example, Judy Kem notes the subtlety of Guido's attack on Helen's looks:

Like Benoît, Guido describes Helen's beauty but in greater detail. However, Guido's misogynistic attitudes surface in his surprisingly negative description. In Book Seven, he praises Helen by negation, as though she were beautiful only because she was not ugly [...] In Book 23, Guido describes the innocent Polyxena at greater length and in much more complimentary terms than he does Helen.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, Kem notes the different treatments Benoît and Guido give to the pair's first meeting. In Guido's *Historia*, even the romance elements he feels he must include provide fertile ground for an attack on Helen and women in general:

Benoît describes a feast in celebration of Venus on the island of Cythera [...] Guido, though, censures Helen by beginning the love story with a long diatribe against attending dances and festive celebrations. (37)

Guido, in fact, deviates from his description of their meeting to deliver an extensive polemic on women's place, not only condemning their propensity to transgress physical and moral boundaries, but also comparing the ideal woman to a ship, an inanimate object controlled by men:

*O quam grati feminis esse debent earum domorum termini et honestatis earum fines et limites conservare! Nunquam enim navis sentiret dissuta naufragium si continuo suo staret in portu, in partes non navigans alienas.* (p. 71)<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> For an illuminating account of Benoît and Guido's differing attitudes to the same women, see R. M. Lumiansky, "The Story of Troilus and Briseida According to Benoît and Guido", *Speculum* 29.4 (1954): 727-33.

<sup>94</sup> Judy Kem, *Jean Lemaire de Belges's 'Les Illustrations de Gaule et singularitez de Troye': The Trojan Legend in the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance*, Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures 15 (NY: Peter Lang, 1994) 34-5.

<sup>95</sup> Guido de Columnis, *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, ed. Nathaniel Edward Griffin (Cambridge, Mass: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936).



("Oh how pleasing to women should be the walls of their homes, how pleasing the limits and restraints of their honor! For an unrigged ship would never know shipwreck if it stayed continually in port and did not sail to foreign parts "). (7.136-40)<sup>96</sup>

As these examples suggest, like Joseph, Guido finds Helen's attractiveness, her transgressive desire for Paris, and her refusal to be bound by the ties of her marriage to Menelaus, to be deeply troubling and worthy of criticism. Thus, his reworking of the model Benoît's story provides reflects this anxiety. Though the attacks on Helen may seem intensely personal, in fact they are not so – rather Guido is taking a notorious classical woman, and a medieval text that purports to represent true events, and, using an existing framework, is rewriting these two models for his own didactic ends.

If Guido finds in Helen a target ripe for misogynist criticism, he finds a similarly satisfactory target in Medea. While Benoît links the two women through their involvements with the heroes of Troy and the Trojan War, Guido challenges and augments the romanticised representations he found in the French poem, and in the case of both women he radically extends any criticism he may have found in the *Roman*. For her part, Medea is criticised for the secrecy of her relationship with Jason, and for her deception of Aeetes. (It is significant, though, that Aeetes is also the focus of criticism, for his failure to foresee Medea's transgression and impose proper limits on his daughter). Though Medea's sexual relationship with Jason is not knowingly adulterous, as Helen's is, it is alarming for other reasons, principally because of the betrayal it motivates, and because of Medea's own passionate desire for Jason. Morse points to Apollonius Rhodius' emphasis on Medea's desire for Jason, his "establishment of an erotic Medea" (35). Ovid builds on Apollonius' creation, and in turn, the medieval representation builds on the classical. While Benoît suggested an intimate and passionate relationship, Guido makes this far more explicit. He characterises Medea as in control and sexually insatiable, and, as Derek Pearsall notes, describes their first night together "with doctrinaire relish":<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Guido delle Colonne (Guido de Columnis), *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1974).

<sup>97</sup> Derek Pearsall, "Gower's Narrative Art", in Peter Nicholson, ed. *Gower's 'Confessio Amantis': A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991): 62-108, n.24, p. 76.

*Medea licet sui voti satisfactionem impleverit per viriles amplexus et optatos actus vener eos a Iasone, propterea non evanuit scintilla cupidinis in eadem; immo per expertos actos postea graviora concepit incendia quam per facinus ante commissum.* (p. 25)

(“although Medea enjoyed the satisfaction of her wishes through the manly embraces and longed for acts of love by Jason, still the spark of lust did not die down in her; on the contrary, when the acts were finished, she conceived a more intense passion than she had before the thing was done”). (3.117-121)

As he does with Helen, Guido extends his criticism of Medea into an attack on all women, as he criticises her willingness to deceive her father (and herself) over the nature of her desire for Jason:

*Omnium enim mulierum semper est moris ut cum inhonesto desiderio virum aliquem appetunt, sub alicuius honestatis velamine suas excusationes intendant.* (p. 18)

(“For it is always the custom of women, that when they yearn for some man with immodest desire, they veil their excuses under some sort of modesty”). (2.294-6)

Guido’s inspiration for these lines may be the *Metamorphoses*, in which Medea wonders *coniugiumne vocas speciosaque nomina culpae / inponis, Medea, tuae?* (7.69-70) (“But do you call it marriage, Medea, and do you give fair-seeming names to your fault?”) In Guido’s rendering, Medea clearly deludes herself that her desire for Jason is chaste, and her ability to follow what would be, to a medieval readership, clearly the “wrong” course of action makes her peculiarly alarming.<sup>98</sup>

Importantly too, Guido seeks to undermine the magical power that Benoît has suggested, and which he finds so threatening. After including Benoît’s description of Medea’s powers, Guido feels driven to include a lengthy explanation of how Medea could not really have enjoyed the power over God and nature that Benoît ascribes to her. Guido attributes such stories to

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<sup>98</sup> Similarly, Virgil’s Dido (modelled, as critics have frequently noted, on Apollonius’ Medea) trusts the oaths of a foreign man, and uses what she sees as their marriage to excuse their sexual relationship. See *Aen.* 4.172.

*fabularis Sulmonensis Ovidius* (p. 16) (“that storytelling Ovid of Sulmo”) (2.206-7) and makes clear that he includes such accounts only grudgingly:

*Hoc autem de Medea secundum fabulas ideo ponitur quoniam sic de ea fabulose fuisse presens ystoria non obmittit, cum et ipsam fuisse in astronomia et nigromantia peritissimam non negetur.* (p. 17)

(“[...] all this about Medea is therefore set forth according to the legends, although the present history does not omit the fact that this material about her was legendary, since it is not to be denied that she was extremely skillful in astrology and witchcraft”).

(2.230-4)

Later he feels driven to further undermine the power he has described, pointing out that Medea ultimately proves unable to foresee her own undoing:

*Sed certum est astronomie iudicia super incerto firmata, de quo manifestum exemplum potenter et patenter in te elicitur, que tibi providere per ea nullatenus potuisti [...] In quibus nullus deprehenditur futurorum effectus, nisi a casu forte contingat, cum solius Dei sit, in cuius manu sunt posita scire tempora temporum et momenta.* (pp. 24-5)

(“It is certain the judgements of astronomy are based upon uncertainty, of which the manifest example is most powerfully and plainly seen in you, who were in no way able to see into the future through astronomy. [...] In these things no effect of the future is to be discovered, unless perhaps it is touched upon by chance, since it is of God alone, in whose hand is the knowledge of times and the moments of times”).

(3.103-11)

Like Benoît, Guido ends his account of Medea once the pair leave Colchis, observing of her: *Sane diceris pervenisse in Thesaliam, ubi per Thesalum Iasonem, civibus inveneranda Thesalicis, occulta nece post multa detestanda discrimina vitam legeris finivisse.* (p. 32) (“You are said to have arrived in Thessaly where, on account of Thessalian Jason you are described as having finished your life with an obscure death, despised by the Thessalian citizens, after many detestable adventures”) (3.379-82). This final sense of Medea as somehow powerless, despite all her achievements, is echoed by his observation that when they return to Pelias, Medea cannot even hold Jason to his promise

of marriage: *Iason [...] habitam de aureo vellere tam gloriosam victoriam parum curans, postponens etiam tamquam ingratus quicquid promissione agere debuit in Medea* (p. 32) (“Jason [...] cared little that he had the great and glorious victory of the Golden Fleece, and even put off ungratefully whatever he ought to have done according to his promise with regard to Medea”) (3.401-4).

Lisa J. Kiser notes that in the medieval period “Mastering the art of the “retold tale”, especially the classical tale, was central to a poet’s education”.<sup>99</sup> However, she points out that

“translation” was presumably a much more loosely defined activity for medieval poets than it is for us, since literal renderings of literary texts from one language to another are comparatively rare. (142)

Guido’s account was hugely popular and influential in the Middle Ages – as with Dares’ and Benoît’s texts, its claims to historical accuracy legitimised it, while the romance touches that survived from Benoît’s version, the vein of misogynist criticism, and the importance of themes such as male honour and warfare meant that it accorded with medieval literary taste. Guido’s critical representation of both women influenced European authors such as Boccaccio, who as Glenda McLeod observes, used Helen and her sexual desire to exemplify “the ill effects of unchastity to the state”.<sup>100</sup> Guido’s text also provided a model for English representations of the Troy story, and of both women, into the fifteenth century. Meanwhile, since Guido relies so heavily on Benoît, the French poet’s interest in romance is often sustained in Middle English accounts of both women.

The influence of Benoît and Guido is most obviously apparent in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century determination to connect Helen and Medea with one another, and with the story of Troy. As it had been from the time of Homer onward, the issue of how to translate or otherwise to rework earlier material was obviously of interest in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in the

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<sup>99</sup> Lisa J. Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the ‘Legend of Good Women’* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1983) 142.

<sup>100</sup> Glenda McLeod, *Virtue and Venom: Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1991) 69.

works of Joseph, Benoît and Guido: as Seneca rewrote Euripides' Medea, or Ovid responded to Homer's Helen, these authors reconsidered the two alarming classical women in light of their own (romanticised, misogynist, and often restrictive) perceptions of womanhood. These dual interests, in rewriting prior incarnations and in attempting to deal with the threats Helen and Medea posed, continued and gathered force in the English works of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Familiar with Ovid and Guido in particular, canonical English authors including Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate engage enthusiastically with Helen and Medea's stories and threats. In so doing, they reveal not only an interest in the classical past and their literary ancestors, but also a determination to contain these alarming women on some level, and show them to be subject to the male community, despite the tragic and well-documented effects of their desires and their power.

## Chapter Four: Helen in the English Middle Ages

In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, the circulation of Ovid, Virgil, and Guido, and possibly Benoît and Dares, would have had a significant impact on perceptions of Helen's character and role, as the early attempts of English authors (Bede, Joseph of Exeter) to represent her would suggest. Key to her representation, in the Middle Ages as in the classical period and the English Renaissance, was the perception of Helen as a beautiful but unchaste woman, whose fascination and threat were rooted in the femininity that, paradoxically, might seem to make her easier to contain in a literary work. Nicola McDonald points to Barry Wimsatt and Reinhard Strohm's observations that, from the fourteenth century onwards, brief classical references became far more popular in literary works: and especially widespread was a tendency to liken classical figures to the men or women the poet took as his subject.<sup>1</sup> Still popular, however, were works that took either woman as subject (rather than as brief comparative example). Just as the most influential thirteenth-century account of their lives (Guido's *Historia*) was the most critical, one of the most widely-read and influential continental fourteenth-century writers was similarly determined to attack them both. In his *De Genealogia Deorum Gentilium Libri*, Boccaccio gives a full account of Helen's story, from her first abduction by Theseus to her return to Greece with Menelaus. Clearly influenced by the Vatican Mythographers and particularly by the negative accounts of Helen he had read, he notes that Paris took Helen *ea volente* (11.7, p. 548) ("with her consent"),<sup>2</sup> and also records the Virgilian story that she gave the signal to attack Troy to the waiting Greeks. In *De Claris Mulieribus* he is even more critical, complaining that "All Greece was aroused by Helen's wantonness"

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<sup>1</sup> McDonald, " 'Diverse Folk' ", 11-13, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium Libri*, Vol 2, ed. Vincenzo Romano, 2 vols (Bari: Gius Laterza & Figli, 1951). Translations of *De Genealogia* are my own.

(p.75),<sup>3</sup> and rewriting her appearance in the *Iliad* to portray her looking down from the walls of Troy and exulting in the destruction she has caused:

From the walls of the besieged city, Helen was able to see of what value her beauty was, seeing the whole shore filled with the enemy and everything destroyed with iron and fire, the people fighting and dying striking each other, and everything stained with the blood of the Trojans as well as the Greeks. (p.75)

By the late fourteenth century, the existence of the accounts of Joseph of Exeter, Benoît de Sainte-Maure, Guido de Columnis and Boccaccio, as well as the increased circulation of manuscripts of the *Aeneid* and *Heroides*, and the medieval taste for commentaries on classical texts, meant that authors had multiple subtly different manifestations of Helen to draw upon. Some writers, including John Lydgate and John Clerk, aimed at refining and rewriting these earlier accounts (particularly that of Guido). As always, though, subtle differences between source text and new creation betray the desire to rework and remodel Helen's representation, along with the story as a whole. Concurrent to this, in the fourteenth century authors including Gower, Chaucer and the anonymous English author of *The Seege or Batayle of Troye* do not aim simply to re-render Guido's, Benoît's or Dares' stories. Rather they take the themes these earlier stories have suggested, the framework they have provided and the historical accuracy they have promised, and rework both story and character in innovative ways. In doing so, they undermine or question Helen's power in a variety of ways, either pointing up her pernicious influence to serve a misogynist agenda, or portaying her as more helpless and subject to the desires and machinations of the male establishment.

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<sup>3</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964).

**“the fairest of feturs formyt in erthe”: Chaucer, Gower and the English tales of Troy**

*The Seege or Batayle of Troye* is dated by Mary Elizabeth Barnicle to “the first quarter of the fourteenth century” (xxx).<sup>4</sup> This makes it the first English narrative of the Trojan War, and as the French and Latin writers before him had done, the author of the *Seege* casts around for textual authorities to legitimise his tale. Barnicle suggests that the *Seege* owes a debt to Dares’ account of the war.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, certain aspects of the *Seege* (particularly its reliance on the pagan gods which Dictys and Dares excise so determinedly in their pursuit of historical verisimilitude, and which are accordingly absent from Benoît and Guido) must either be authorial innovations, or must spring from another source. Bate suggests that “The *Excidium Troiae*, or a text very similar to it [...] lies behind the fourteenth-century English *Seege of Troy*”.<sup>6</sup> Elmer Bagby Atwood and Virgil K. Whitaker, the modern editors of the anonymous Latin *Excidium Troiae*, concur, and disagree with Barnicle’s suggestion that the author of the *Seege* may have used an extended, now lost version of *Le Roman de Troie* to supply episodes not contained in Dares.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, they refute the suggestion that the author went directly to Latin texts to find elements of the story not present in Dares. Speaking of the author of the *Seege* and also the compositors of other European Troy-stories that contain the same elements, such as the *Historia Troyana*, *Istorietta Trojana* or the *Trojanische Krieg*, they argue that “the supposition that these writers drew their information from the Latin classics would place upon them a burden of scholarship which the author of the *Seege*, at least, is unable to bear” (xxvi). They suggest some form of the *Excidium Troiae* or the *Compendium Historia Troiana-Romanae* as a source for the *Seege*.<sup>8</sup> However if, as Atwood and

<sup>4</sup> Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, ed., *The Seege or Batayle of Troye* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1927) xxx.

<sup>5</sup> Barnicle, ed., *The Seege*, lvii-lviii.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph of Exeter, *Trojan War I-III*, ed. and trans. Bate, 19.

<sup>7</sup> E. Bagby Atwood and Virgil K. Whitaker, eds., *Excidium Troiae* (Cambridge, Mass: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1944, rep. 1971) xxv. Of the surviving version of the *Excidium Troiae*, the editors note “[it] is clearly a redaction and not an original medieval work” (xxx) – that is, it is evidence of an earlier narrative which included all the details that feature in the *Seege* and other medieval Troy-narratives, but are not in Dares or Benoît.

<sup>8</sup> Atwood and Whitaker, eds., *Excidium Troiae*, xxvi, xxxi. Elsewhere, Atwood suggests “the *Excidium Troie* [sic] was almost certainly intended as a textbook to be used in schools”. Accordingly, it may well have been a familiar and formative influence on such texts. Elmer



Whitaker argue, the author of the *Seege* does use the *Excidium Troiae* as a text that conveniently drew together details he was unlikely to have found separately elsewhere, he has done so judiciously in his representation of Helen. For example, in the *Excidium Troiae*, Venus is responsible for Helen's desire, and accordingly, like the Iliadic Helen, the Helen of the *Excidium Troiae* may seem similarly helpless. However, she tells Paris forthrightly *Vellem, si etiam et tu vis, me hinc uxorem duceres* (p.8) ("If you desire it also, I should like you to take me as your wife"),<sup>9</sup> explains how he may "abduct" her, and tells him that her servants will help them load the ship with Menelaus' treasure. Paris tells her *Et si hoc placet regine, compleatur desiderium utrorumque* (p.8) ("And if this pleases the queen, the desire of everybody is satisfied"). In Guido, Paris makes a similar pronouncement. In the *Excidium Troiae*, however, Helen is far more obviously in control, and Paris' assurance has a very different emphasis, underlining his complicity rather than his control over the situation. The author of the *Seege* rejects this text's controlling and self-assured Helen in favour of the more passive Helen of Guido or Benoît, who goes with Paris willingly, but does not exhibit quite such a worrying degree of control over the situation. Present in the *Seege*, and in Guido and Benoît, but not in Dares, is the extended scene where Helen and Paris meet and are attracted to one another: Helen "þou3te hire heorte wolde to-sprynge, / So was heo cau3t in love longynge" (715-6).<sup>10</sup> In his rendering, the author of the *Seege* seems to follow the more conservative author of the *Compendium*,<sup>11</sup> who has little interest in representing Helen's words, and still less allowing her to assume control. The author of the *Compendium* notes

*Ut autem Menelaus recessit, Paris adulatoriis verbis, et ut proprie est consuetudo laxivis, Elene loqui coepit. Illa sibi suadento divitiis, et Paridi pulchritudine et verborum laxivorum multitudine, eius petitioni condescendit: secum Troiam perrexit.*  
(243)

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Bagby Atwood, "The Rawlinson *Excidium Troie*: A Study of Source Problems in Mediaeval Troy Literature", *Speculum* 9.4 (1934): 379-404, 388.

<sup>9</sup> Atwood and Whitaker, eds., *Excidium Troiae*. Translations are my own.

<sup>10</sup> Barnicle, ed., *The Seege or Batayle of Troye*. Barnicle presents four manuscripts of the text: unless otherwise stated, quotations are from the Lincoln's Inn manuscript (MS Lincoln 150).

<sup>11</sup> See E. Bagby Atwood, "The *Excidium Troie* and Medieval Troy Literature" *Modern Philology* 35.2 (1937): 115-28, 116, in which he dates the *Compendium* to the tenth century.

("But when Menelaus left, Paris with praising words, and, as was his peculiar custom, wanton words, began to speak to Helen. She, persuaded by his wealth, and by Paris' beauty and by the multitude of wanton words, agreed to his suit: she left Troy with him").<sup>12</sup>

Here, despite a brief reference to Helen's interest in Paris' wealth, the author of the *Compendium* is not interested in attacking Helen personally. This authorial decision, to omit direct criticism of Helen, is all the more striking when the close relationship between the *Compendium* and Book Two of the *Aeneid* is considered: after Paris has taken Helen, the author of the *Compendium* recounts the story of the Trojan horse and Aeneas' dream of Hector, and even the Greeks' response to a sign from the walls of Troy, with no mention of Helen's wrongdoing.<sup>13</sup> It seems that the author of the *Compendium*, like Baebius Italicus, author of the *Ilias Latina*, does not feel Helen merits an extensive depiction: but while Italicus leaves out examples of Helen's regret and self-disgust, the author of the *Compendium* leaves out Virgilian detail which makes Helen appear threatening, if not active. However, once again the parallels between the *Seege* and this potential source are not exact: the author of the *Seege* extends his account of Helen and Paris' meeting, and crucially Helen speaks of her desire to see Paris: "Never shal y blyþe beo / Til y him may wiþ ey3nen y-seo" (693-4) and later of her distress at leaving Troy. Typically, in building on his sources the author of the *Seege* can portray Helen negatively, despite rendering her more sympathetically than Dares. For example, his Helen weeps affectingly for Paris at his death, and yet her words, in clear contradiction of the facts of her abduction, undermine her grief and seem aimed at excusing her from blame:

"alisaunder, welaway,  
Why fattest þou me fro grece away  
Wiþ streynþe hider to beo þy wyf?"

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<sup>12</sup> H. Simonsfield, ed., *Compendium Historiae Troianae-Romanae*, in *Neues Archiv der Gesellschaft für Ältere Deutsche Geschichtskunde* 12 (1886): 241-51. References are to page numbers in the article, which reprints the text in full. Translations of the *Compendium* are my own.

<sup>13</sup> However, see Atwood and Whitaker, eds., *Excidium Troiae*, xxxi. Despite the author's imitation of such episodes, they find in the *Compendium* "no apparent direct dependence on Virgil".

While Helen's distress is initially affecting, especially in the context of an account that gives her so little voice, in fact the author manipulates an apparently positive portrayal of Helen. The poet's audience is aware that while Paris did take Helen "Wip streynþe" (1818), and she did grieve for her actions after the fact, this does not correspond to a lack of desire on her part. This curious departure from the facts as they have already been presented by the author may well be intended to make Helen appear worse, more deceptive and manipulative, or it may be the result of the author's confusing attempts to combine his multiple and contradictory sources to create a cohesive and recognisable Helen, palatable to a romance audience but reflective of the "history" of Dares.

Clearly, the author of the *Seege* adapts his sources rather than using them unquestioningly with regard to Helen. He softens the critical account of Dares, extends (probably with Benoît's help) the brevity of her appearance in the *Compendium*, and stifles the alarmingly forthright Helen he found in the *Excidium*. Though the poem is seldom praised, particularly in comparison to the more accomplished Troy-narratives of Lydgate or Chaucer, it constitutes a valuable early example of English literature's willingness to read and write Helen selectively, to make decisions about her characterisation that are then silently transmitted to the reader, rather than simply to translate her accurately. A similar impulse can be seen in the account of the abduction given by Robert Mannyng of Brunne in his mid-fourteenth-century *Story of England*. F. J. Furnivall notes that "There is but little in Robert of Brunne's English which is not a translation of Wace's French chronicle" (xxi).<sup>14</sup> However, he identifies the abduction episode as an addition, and Atwood and Whitaker point to Paris' disguise as a merchant to argue that Mannyng too may have drawn on the *Excidium Troiae* or the *Compendium*.<sup>15</sup> Like the author of the *Seege*, however, if he does draw on the *Excidium*, Mannyng reshapes the unsatisfactory Helen

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Manning (Robert Mannyng of Brunne), *The Story of England*, Vol. 1, ed. F. J. Furnivall, 2 vols (London: Printed for Her Majesty's Stationery Office, RER 87, 1887).

<sup>15</sup> Atwood and Whitakers, eds., *Excidium Troiae*, xxxi-xxxii.

he finds there. Mannyng's Helen is utterly passive – none of her words are recorded by the poet, and when Venus suggests to Paris that he might lure Helen onto his ship by promising to show her his treasure, she must beg for Menelaus' permission to make the visit: "Nyght & day sche dide hire peyne, / Of þe kyng to have grauntyse / To se þat ylke marchaundyse" (674-6). To Paris she is a possession, a prize deservedly won, and unlike many of his medieval counterparts the author pointedly refuses to comment on her own feelings at the success of Paris' underhanded trick, noting merely: "y kan nought sey of þat leuedy / Wheþer scheo was glad or sory" (699-700).

As these sometimes clumsy attempts to stifle the alarming Helens they came across in their reading may suggest, fourteenth-century authors continue to echo Guido in their willingness to create and rework as well as to suppress, in response to the different accounts of their source texts and to changes in literary taste. The problems of how to fit Helen into a romance narrative, and how to respond to the canonical texts that were widely circulated by this point, are addressed by Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Helen's role in the poem is not large, but it is charged with the weight of her previous literary incarnations. McKay Sundwall notes that Chaucer greatly extends the representation of Helen he found in his source, Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*.<sup>16</sup> There, Helen is merely incidental, a woman whose continued presence in Troy was unavoidable due to the Trojan refusal to give her up. In Chaucer's poem, she is a powerfully paradoxical figure – a warning to Criseyde about the devastating effects of unchecked passion, and yet seemingly an example of how a woman may adapt happily and successfully to apparently unfavourable circumstances imposed on her by men.

It is unsurprising, given how far representations of Helen often dwelt on her femininity, and her negative feminine characteristics, that her most important role in the poem sees her brought into contact with Criseyde. Christopher Baswell and Paul Beekman Taylor note Helen's personal involvement in *Troilus and Criseyde*'s relationship, and in the couple's

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<sup>16</sup> McKay Sundwall, "Deiphobus and Helen: A Tantalizing Hint", *Modern Philology* 73.2 (1975): 151-6, 152.

dilemma over their impending separation.<sup>17</sup> However, they point to the inescapably negative connotations of Helen's involvement in the love affair, arguing that

Criseyde is endowed with aspects of the Trojan queen's beauty but also burdened with implications of her infidelity and historical disastrousness.<sup>18</sup>

As a woman often in control of her own ravishment to a disturbing degree (or at the very least often complicit with it), here Helen encourages another woman to take similar control of her romantic destiny – Baswell and Taylor call her

[...] a reassuring if also enviable example for Criseyde of a woman at peace and secure with an immediate love, unconcerned with past attachments or the present conflicts issuing from them.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile through Troilus' eyes, Criseyde is described as one "that fairer was to sene / Than evere was Eleyne or Polixene" (1.454-5).<sup>20</sup> However, by this stage Helen has become such a weighted character, so burdened with her previous literary representations, that any use of her to encourage love or describe beauty is obviously (and intentionally) compromised. Much later, Shakespeare's Cressida will attempt to resist identification with Helen, but here, as there, the parallels between the two women, Trojan and Greek, are devastatingly apparent. Though Troilus rejects Pandarus' suggestion that he abduct Criseyde, exclaiming "It mooste be disclaundre to her name" (4.564), Helen's presence in the poem has already inscribed the path Criseyde will follow, as Shakespeare's Helen was to foreshadow the faithlessness of his Cressida. Unlike Shakespeare, Chaucer spends little time dwelling on the combat that is ultimately to tear Troilus and Criseyde apart, but Helen's existence in the city is a constant reminder of it, and *Troilus and Criseyde* itself

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<sup>17</sup>Christopher Baswell and Paul Beekman Taylor, "The 'Faire Queene Eleyne' in Chaucer's *Troilus*", *Speculum* 63.2 (1988): 293-311, 304.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>20</sup>Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987). All quotations from Chaucer's works are from this edition.

is an example of how medieval writers could assume knowledge of Helen's story, and accordingly manipulate her as a literary device.<sup>21</sup>

This tendency is also seen in Helen's frequent occurrence in literary catalogues in the Middle Ages. As she has from antiquity onwards, Helen appears in misogynist diatribes such as Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*, where she is used to condemn excessive lust, and sometimes in defences of women, such as Christine de Pisan's answer to Boccaccio, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (in which she appears as an example of a woman who has suffered for her beauty). Frequently, too, she and/or Paris are included in medieval texts among lists of famous lovers – examples include Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, and Lydgate's *Temple of Glass*, in which the dreamer sees a depiction of "Feyre Eleyne, the fresshe lusty qwene" (93).<sup>22</sup> However, even if the speaker in a medieval poem may represent Helen and Paris as simply examples of lovers, the extent to which their story was known by the Middle Ages means that they have often been chosen by the author to evoke specific associations in the medieval reader's mind. For example, in his Prologue, the Man of Law points his listeners in the direction of "the Seintes Legende of Cupide" (2.61), telling them that they will find there "The teeris of Eleyne [...] The crueltee of the, queene Medea" (2.70-72). Any reader of the *Legend of Good Women* would search in vain for a depiction of either Helen's tears or Medea's cruelty. Though the Man of Law's reference to Helen may suggest Chaucer's intention to include her in the *Legend of Good Women* (in the *Legend's* Prologue she appears as an example of beauty, alongside many classical women who do find their way in), it may also be a sly reference to her badness, to the qualities that prevent her inclusion. The reader is told that although Helen is beautiful, she is not as lovely as Alcestis, and this kind of undermining of Helen's desirability was to become particularly popular in Elizabethan England. The specificity of the Man of Law's reference, to Helen's tears, may recall Benoît's *Roman* or Guido's *Historia*, in which she mourns her departure from Greece: Stephen A. Barney notes that Chaucer "knew and directly used material from Virgil, Ovid,

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<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Sundwall suggests that Chaucer's reference to Helen and Deiphobus retiring into the garden together in Book Two may constitute an arch reference to their future marriage, or even to an affair that has already begun. Sundwall, "Deiphobus and Helen", 152-56.

<sup>22</sup> John Lydgate, *The Temple of Glass*, in Julia Boffey, ed., *Fifteenth-Century English Dream Visions: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003).

Benoît, and Guido”.<sup>23</sup> Here, then, she may be used ironically, as a counterpoint to the virtuous Custance, who leaves her husband and sails to foreign lands under very different circumstances. Such potentially ironised references, here and in *Troilus and Criseyde*, may be sly references to Helen’s notoriety, and to the full import of her story as a cautionary (or even didactic) example. Elsewhere, too, Chaucer seems to use her to foreshadow the consequences of unhappy love. In the *Book of the Duchess*, the speaker’s description of the story of Troy, and its depiction on his chamber windows, includes his notice of two of the unhappy pairs of lovers of the story: his windows speak “of Medea and of Jason, / Of Paris, [and] Eleyne” (330-31). Even here, though, their inclusion may be ironic – if Helen is implicitly contrasted with Custance through the Man of Law’s reference, she also seems contrasted with the man in black’s lady, who, as the dreamer notes, never betrayed him. Here then, the use of Medea and particularly of Helen serve to intensify Blanche’s goodness, and the depth of the knight’s loss, by comparison.

This use of Paris and Helen as a short-hand for the unhappy consequences of unwise love also appears towards the conclusion of John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, another poem which, like *Troilus and Criseyde* and the poems which refer to the pair only fleetingly, relies on the existence of previous models of Helen, and the resulting familiarity of her story. In contrast to these works, though, Gower’s didactic message is explicitly clear, and while he does retell a story of abduction and war that has become familiar, his authorial agenda once again affects his portrayal of Helen. Paris and Helen appear in Book Five of *Confessio Amantis*. The aim of the episode is to condemn the sin of avarice (frequently connected with Helen in the Middle Ages). Specifically, Amans is told, Paris’ worst sin was his theft of Helen from a temple, a crime which he augmented with the violent acquisition of Menelaus’ wealth. Accordingly, while Gower drew on Guido’s account of the Trojan War and of the story’s protagonists, his interest in criticising Paris means that Helen is not criticised as virulently as she is in some other versions of the story, and is not made the epitome of female wickedness that she is in

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<sup>23</sup> Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson, 472.

Joseph and Guido in particular. Gower includes the now traditional depictions of her beauty and her desire for Paris, observing that

[...] of his wordes such plesance  
Sche toke, that al hire aqueintance  
Als ferforth as the herte lay,  
He stal er that he wente away. (5.7515-8)<sup>24</sup>

Helen clearly consents to her relationship with Paris, and yet connected to this is none of the misogynist disgust evident in accounts that model themselves more closely on Guido's Latin. Here, for example, is the observation of John Clerk of Whalley, probable author of the alliterative *Destruction of Troy*, which George A. Panton and David Donaldson call "in all probability, the very first or earliest version of Benoît and Guido in our language".<sup>25</sup> Helen hears of Paris and longs to see him, "As wemen are wount in Wantonhede yet, / With a likyng full light in love for to falle" (7.2911-2912).<sup>26</sup> The poet viciously attacks Helen for going to the temple to pursue a man, and asks:

But þou Elan, þat haldyn was hede of all ladys,  
And the fairest of feturs formyt in erthe,  
What wrixlit þi wit & þi wille chaunget,  
In absens of þi soverayne, for saghes of pepull,  
To pas of þi palays & þi prise chamber,  
To loke on any lede of a londe straunge? (7.2951-2956)

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<sup>24</sup> John Gower, *The English Works*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899-1902).

<sup>25</sup> *The 'Gest Hystoriale' of the Destruction of Troy*, ed. George A. Panton and David Donaldson (London: Trübner and Co., EETS OS 39, 56, 1869-74) xi. The poem's composition has traditionally been dated to the last half of the fourteenth century. For a discussion of the date of the alliterative poem, which suggests it may postdate Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and even Lydgate's *Troy Book*, see McKay Sundwall, "The Destruction of Troy, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and Lydgate's *Troy Book*" *RES*, New Series 26.103 (1975): 313-17, 316. McDonald notes that the earliest surviving manuscript of the poem was copied in 1540 (139).

The nineteenth-century editors attribute the poem to Huchown of the Awle Ryale, but James Simpson points to a 1988 *Speculum* article by Thorlac Turville-Petre, which identifies the author of the poem as John Clerk of Whalley. James Simpson, "The Other Book of Troy: Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae* in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century England", *Speculum* 73.2 (1998): 397-423, n.34, p. 405. Thorlac Turville-Petre, "The Author of the *Destruction of Troy*", *Medium Aevum* 57 (1988): 264-6.

<sup>26</sup> Quotations from the alliterative *Destruction of Troy* are from Panton and Donaldson's edition of the poem.



Conversely, in *Confessio Amantis* Paris is characterised ironically and critically, with Gower assuring his readers “He was nocht armed natheles, / Bot as it were in lond of pes” (5.7491-2) – but Paris does not need to be armed to wreak havoc in Greece. Later, too, male violence rather than female wickedness is clearly described as Paris and his men burst into the temple to claim Helen:

And all at ones sette ascry  
In hem whiche in the temple were,  
For tho was mochel poeple there;  
Bot of defence was no bote,  
So soffren thei that soffre mote. (5.7546-50)

These lines may have their source in the *Heroides*, in which Paris exclaims on his desire for a military conflict by which he may win Helen legitimately. While the Ovidian Helen neatly punctures Paris’ boast, telling him *bella gerant fortes, tu, Pari, semper ama!* (17.254) (“Be the waging of wars for the valiant; for you, Paris, ever to love!”), Gower does allow his Paris an armed conflict, but one that subtly and devastatingly undermines him, re-allying him with the foolish and impetuous young man of Ovid’s rendering. Gower’s interest in the male perspective (reiterated in Book Eight, as Helen appears accompanying Paris, who is present to exemplify men who have suffered for their love affairs) means that Helen is not of central importance in this long poem, as she is (paradoxically) not of central importance in the huge English Troy-narratives of Clerk and Lydgate. However, once again it is apparent that in the Middle Ages an author may respect his classical and medieval sources, but may rework these models for his own ends.

It is important, too, to note that Helen is not only used as a romance heroine or an example of female inconstancy in the period. Though her literary incarnations are more significant and compelling, at this point she is still included as a historical figure in some works. Vielliard notes a French translation of Dares’ work by Jean de Flixécourt, and another by Jofroi de Waterford and Servais Copale, both made in the thirteenth century.<sup>27</sup> Dares is mentioned and used by Ranulf Higden in his fourteenth-century *Polychronicon*

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<sup>27</sup> Vielliard, ed., “*Le Roman*”, 8.

(translated from Latin into English by John Trevisa in the fourteenth century, and by Caxton and an anonymous scribe in the fifteenth). Though he did not find his mention of Helen's abduction by Theseus in Dares, Higden adheres closely to Dares in his account of Helen's ravishment. He notes *Helenam regis Menelai uxorem ad videndum Alexandri formam ibi occurentem Paris rapuit, domumque rediit* (2.Cap.24, p. 408-9) ("Helena kyng Menelaus his wif come forto see þe fairnesse of Paris, [and Paris] ravesched hire and took hir wiþ hym and torned home a3en").<sup>28</sup> Noticeably absent is Dares' insistence that Helen was *non invitam* ("not unwilling") when she went. Very close, however, is Higden's rendering of Achilles' complaint. Dares notes *Achilles queritur in vulgus, unius / mulieris Helenae causa totam Graeciam et Europam / covocatam esse, tanto tempore tot milia hominum perisse* (27.4-7) ("Achilles complained, to any and everyone, that for the sake of one woman, that is, Helen, all Europe and Greece were in arms, and now, for a very long time, thousands of men had been dying"). Higden observes Achilles *asserens iniquum fore propter raptum Helenae totam Europam conturbari* (2.Cap 24 pp. 412-13) ("seide þat it was evel i-doo forto destourbe al Europa for þe raveschyng of Helen"). Higden also follows Dares in his brief note that at the fall of Troy, *Helena cum suo Menelao domum redit* (2.Cap.24 pp. 416-17) ("Helen wente home a3en wiþ Menelaus"). If Helen is a compelling literary character in the Middle Ages, who often seems to escape the story of the war and appear simply as a brief illuminating example (for example of feminine beauty), Higden's *Polychronicon*, and the continued popularity of the long Troy-narratives, show that the medieval Helen can never escape the legacy of Dares, regardless of whether this representation is mediated through others such as those of Benoît or Guido. The medieval fascination with the story of Troy, though it kept her in vogue as literary trope, meant that Helen could never be an uncomplicated example of beauty, or of suffering, and the damaging

<sup>28</sup> Ranulf Higden, *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis: Together with the English Translations of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, Vol. 2, ed. Joseph Rawson Lumby and C. Babington, 9 vols (London: Longman, 1865-86). The English quoted here is Trevisa's fourteenth-century translation. The fifteenth-century translation (given alongside Trevisa's) does not include the word "ravesched", instead observing that "Paris toke away Helena, the wife of kyng Menelaus, commenge to mete Paris to behold his beawte" (p. 409).

consequences of her impropriety remain in the foreground of her literary and historical incarnations.

### **A model “of verray wommanhede”? Fifteenth-century English Helens**

In his *De Archana Deorum*, approximately dated by Robert A. van Kluvyne to “the first decade of the fifteenth century”,<sup>29</sup> Thomas Walsingham follows his continental predecessors in his careful collation of earlier classical and medieval sources: van Kluvyne notes Walsingham’s English translation and expansion of Dictys, his *Dites Ditatus*,<sup>30</sup> and in the *De Archana Deorum* he draws frequently on the Vatican Mythographers and Bersuire, among others, though Kluvyne notes that in the main the text is “a paraphrase and explication of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” (ix).<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, Helen is not a substantial presence, and her longer appearances in this text are not to be found in Ovid. Thus like the third Vatican Mythographer, Walsingham describes Helen as *seminarium scandali et discordie* (6.2.133-4) (“seed-bed of scandal and discord”),<sup>32</sup> and describes her divine origins and her eventual transformation into a constellation by Jupiter.

As this reliance on earlier mythographers and commentators would suggest, Walsingham’s project is not unusual, but his representation of Helen is noteworthy, since his interest in such explanations allies his work to the continental efforts of Bersuire, Boccaccio and the Vatican Mythographers, and crucially distances it from other fourteenth and fifteenth-century English vernacular treatments of Helen. These were interested in Helen only so far as she related to the fall of Troy, and were noticeably reluctant to engage with the question of her divine origins, or to allegorise her. Instead, other fifteenth-century English accounts continued to follow the trends set by Benoît and Guido. Helen’s ravishment is often prefaced by extensive debates on how best

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Walsingham, *De Archana Deorum*, ed. Robert A. van Kluvyne (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1968) x.

<sup>30</sup> Walsingham, *De Archana Deorum*, ed. van Kluvyne, x-xi.

<sup>31</sup> For Walsingham’s use of Bersuire, the Third Vatican Mythographer, and the commentary on the *Metamorphoses* by Arnulf of Orléans, see Walsingham, *De Archana Deorum*, ed. van Kluvyne, xiii-xv. Throughout his edition of the text, van Kluvyne lists parallels with these and other works in the margins.

<sup>32</sup> Walsingham, *De Archana Deorum*, ed. van Kluvyne. Parallel noted by van Kluvyne: translation my own.

to recover Priam's sister Hesione, and Helen's beauty and desire for Paris remain the important elements they were in the French and Latin poems. Notable too are the conflicting attitudes to women that spring from Guido's attempts to temper Benoît's romance narrative with more "realistic" criticism, and in fact, even when Helen is not criticised, her characterisation suffers. For example, C. David Benson notes that the author of the *Laud Troy Book* (c.1400)<sup>33</sup> "tries to appeal to the widest audience by using the form of romance",<sup>34</sup> but this does not result in the sensitive or considered portrayal that his chosen genre might suggest. Though Guido's misogynist asides are excised, Benson suggests this is because "the warriors' relations with women are just not important enough in the *Laud* to arouse resentment" (81). The author does allow his view of the ravishment to intrude as he details the number of dead, and exclaims

Alas, Paris, what hastow do,  
 When thow leddest away Eleyne !  
 So many gode knyghtes for hir schul be sclayne,  
 And alle thi kyn to dethe was brought. (3352-5)<sup>35</sup>

However, that the author of the *Laud Troy Book* (unlike Guido) is uninterested in condemning Helen, seems confirmed by his later exclamation

A noble Troye, that was rial,  
 A-doun is throwen with ston an[d] wal;  
 That made Paris and his evel wit.

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<sup>33</sup> J. Ernst Wülfing, the editor of the poem, dates it thus in his edition. However, see Dorothy Kempe, "A Middle English Tale of Troy", *Englische Studien* 29 (1901): 1-26, 5-6. Though she dates the surviving manuscript to the beginning of the fifteenth century, she suggests that the author's use of Brixaida (rather than some form of Criseyde) may mean that the poem predates *Troilus and Criseyde*.

<sup>34</sup> C. David Benson, *The History of Troy in Middle English Literature* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1980) 35.

<sup>35</sup> J. Ernst Wülfing, ed., *The Laud Troy Book* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, EETS OS 121-2, 1902).

And elles hit scholde have stonde 3it;  
As longe as Ierusalem,  
Ne hadde Paris ben and his fals drem.  
Now artow doun, and thi toures hye,  
For Paris ffals a-voutrye! (3373-80)

The emphasis is very clearly on male transgression and the poet seems to regard Helen as not powerful enough to be blameworthy. The (admittedly scant) examples of Helen's speech in Guido are excised from this poem, though the poet does allow numerous accounts of her tears (for herself, for Hermione, for Hector, for Paris) to remain. Kempe notes that virtually the only time Helen is allowed to take centre stage in the poem, it is because of the English author's failure to differentiate successfully between Latin abbreviations: in the *Laud Troy Book*, Helen, not Helenus, asks that Achilles' body be spared from the dishonour suffered by Hector.<sup>36</sup> Kempe notes the change in order to argue for the author's use of Guido rather than Benoît (the two names are easier to distinguish in the French). At the same time, though, the poet's error paradoxically underscores the lack of interest in Helen that seems to characterise this and other fifteenth-century Troy tales: she comes to the forefront only because of scribal error, and because of the author's determination to record Guido's facts. Though it does not purport to be an accurate English translation of Guido's *Historia* in the way that some of its predecessors and successors do, the *Laud Troy Book* follows the narrative, while utterly ignoring any sense of Helen as a threatening or powerful figure. Kempe suggests that "By far the most noteworthy additions to the tale in the English poem are those passages describing dress, armour, warfare, feasting, various customs of mediaeval life, giving a national colouring to the ancient Tale of Troy".<sup>37</sup> However, as Kempe's examples would suggest, such elaborations very often reveal the author's masculine focus. In the seventeenth century, Helen's and Medea's roles could be emphasised and even enthusiastically related to English culture and even to current events, by

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<sup>36</sup> Kempe, "A Middle English Tale", 10.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

authors such as Thomas Heywood, Anthony Munday and John Dryden. In his willingness to read his source critically and to make what changes he saw fit or fashionable, the *Laud* poet paves the way for his sixteenth- and seventeenth-century successors, but has little interest in Helen's power, and specifically in her alarming behaviour as it was represented in Guido.

Conversely, while he portrays her simply as an example of beauty in *A Wicked Tunge Wille Sey Amys* and the *Floure of Curtesy*, in his *Troy Book* John Lydgate is keen to include all Guido's attacks on Helen, and on women in general. Significantly, though, Lydgate attempts to distance himself from his Latin source's misogyny, protesting

Pus liketh Guydo of women for tendite.  
Allas, whi wolde he so cursedly write  
Ageyn[e]s hem, or with hem debate!  
I am ri3t sory in englische to translate  
Reprefe of hem, or any evel to seye. (1.2097-2101)<sup>38</sup>

However, he records and even silently extends Guido's criticisms.<sup>39</sup> In his disapproval of Helen's waywardness, for example, Guido exclaims

*Optasti ergo tu, Helena, tuam exire regiam et visere Cythaream ut sub pretextu voti  
solvendi virum posses videre barbaricum et ut pretextu liciti ad illicita declinares.  
Nam eius viri visio virus fuit quo infecta per te Grecia tota fuit, propter quod tot  
demum occubuerunt Danae et duris morsibus tot Frigii venenati.* (p. 71)

("You, Helen, wished to leave your palace and visit Cythera so that, under the pretext of fulfilling your vows, you might see the foreign man, and under the pretext of what is lawful, turn to what is unlawful. For the sight of this man was the venom by which you infected all Greece with the result that so many Danaï finally died and so many Phrygians were poisoned with severe pangs"). (7.140-6)

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<sup>38</sup> John Lydgate, *Troy Book*, ed. Henry Bergen, 4 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, EETS XS 97, 126, 1906-35).

<sup>39</sup> For Lydgate's attitude to his source texts, see Alain Renoir, *The Poetry of John Lydgate* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1967) 64-66. Renoir notes that while Lydgate can make clear to his readers that he is altering his source, he "is not always above flatly contradicting the author whom he translates and not giving the least indication thereof" (66).

Though he claims to be quoting Guido directly at this point, Lydgate's extension of his source is obvious. Having already extended the comparison of the ideal woman to a ship (by cataloguing in more detail the dangers that may await a disobedient woman), Lydgate observes

For who wil not occasiouns eschewe  
Nor dredip not pereil for to swe,  
He most among, of necessite,  
Or he be war, endure adversite;  
And who can nat hir fot fro trappis spare,  
Lat hir be war or sche falle in þe snare:  
For harme y-don to late is to compleine.  
For 3if whilom þe worþi quene Eleyne  
Hir silven had kepte at home in clos,  
Of hir þer nadde ben so wikke a loos  
Reported 3it, grene, fresche, and newe;  
Whos chaunce unhappi eche man ou3ht[e] rewe,  
Pat cause was of swiche destruccioun  
Of many worþi, and confusioun  
Of hir husbonde and many other mo  
On Grekis syde and [on] Troye also,  
In þis story as 3e schal after rede. (2.3615-31)

Elsewhere, however, Lydgate truncates his source, while once more making deliberate reference to it. Strangely, Lydgate claims he is unable to describe Helen's beauty, and refers his readers to Guido's original:

[...] I am nat a-queintid with no mwse  
Of alle nyne: þerfore I me excuse  
To 3ou echon, nat al of necligence  
But for defaut only of eloquence,  
And 3ou remitte to Guydo for to se  
How he discriveth bi ordre hir bewte;  
To take on me it were presumpcioun. (2.3685-3691)

Lynn Shutters sees Lydgate's avowal of his own authorial inadequacy here as further evidence of an anti-feminist stance: she suggests "this specific association of Helen with rhetoric [...] continues the general association of women with duplicity, treasonous behaviour, and rhetorically-dressed texts".<sup>40</sup> Earlier, Shutters has seen Medea's threat in the *Troy Book* as bound up with her command of rhetoric,<sup>41</sup> and it is ironic that Helen is associated with the same troubling power of language, though as a character she has very little to say in Lydgate's poem. Though he refuses to give a complete account of Helen's beauty, Lydgate does elect to stress her powerlessness after her abduction. Following Guido and Benoît, he notes that she consented to go with Paris, but on the journey to Troy, Lydgate's Helen despairs that she is "Solitarie in captivite" (2.3906), and is particularly distressed that she "Departid is from hir Menelaus" (2.3913). Lydgate seems here to hint that Helen has immediately changed her mind, but is unable to escape Paris – she complains that she is "In hold distreyned and captivite" (2.3964) and that it is hard for a woman "In straunge soille to stryven or rebelle" (2.3967).

However, despite his apparent determination to present an even more weakened Helen than Guido does, Lydgate feels able to repeatedly connect Helen and her transgression to the Trojan War. For example, in Book Thirty, in his account of the end of the war, Guido notes *Et Menelaus Helenam abstractam ab aula regia in qua erat letus aduxit* (p. 234) ("Menelaus joyfully led Helen away from the royal hall in which she was") (30.235-6). Lydgate includes these lines, but feels driven once more to make a moral pronouncement on the consequences of Helen's folly:

And Menelay toke þe quene Eleyne  
 In-to his garde, for whom so grete a peyne  
 Bood in his hert many day to-forn,  
 By whom, allas! Þe cite is now lorn. (4.6515-8)

Lydgate translates Helen's appearances in the *Historia* faithfully, but it is apparent that he saw in her the potential for moralising and didacticism, and therefore at points he augments her representation, or mentions of her, to speak

<sup>40</sup> Shutters, "Truth, Translation, and the *Troy Book* Women", 83.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.



more appealingly to the issues concerning his fifteenth-century readership.<sup>42</sup> For example, although Lydgate softens Guido's bloody account of the death of Paris at the hands of Ajax, and though he retains the Latin account of Helen's distress, he opts to emphasise the Greek's damning condemnation of the Trojan, with specific reference to Helen. Ajax tells Paris:

'in al haste I shal make a dyvos  
Atwixte þe and þe queen Eleyne,  
And twynne assonder eke þe false cheyne  
Whiche lynked was by colour of wedlok,  
And hath so longe be shet under loke  
Only by fraude & false engyn also'. (4.3550-3555)

Guido's Ajax only tells his opponent *Necesse enim est ut ab iniusto amore Helene, pro qua sunt tot nobiles interempti, illico separeris* (p.210) ("it is necessary that you be separated here and now from that unlawful love of Helen, for which so many nobles have been slain") (28.136-8). Lydgate's self-righteous speech, with its condemnation of an illicit relationship masquerading under the "colour of wedlock" (4.3553) points to a growing medieval interest in the nature and obligations of marriage and human morality, as well as in romance as a genre. Occasionally, Lydgate attempts to make Helen more sympathetic, because helpless, but generally takes every opportunity to expand on his sources and to connect her behaviour to the war which followed.

Conversely, in the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troy*, his redaction of Guido (and a translation of Raoul Lefèvre's French rendering), William Caxton adds little: he includes Helen as a focus of debate among the Greeks and Trojans, and includes both positive aspects of her characterisation (such as her mourning for Paris, or asking Hector not to go into battle), but also Guido's main criticism: her transgressive desire to see Paris and her willingness to go abroad without her husband's consent. More interesting is Caxton's omission of Helen from his redaction of Virgil, his *Eneydos* – the decision was perhaps motivated by the unsuitability of Aeneas' unheroic desire to punish a

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<sup>42</sup> As N. F. Blake puts it, "The idea of using the past as a guide to the present is very developed in the fifteenth century, though it finds particular expression in Lydgate". N.F. Blake, *William Caxton and English Literary Culture* (London: Hambledon, 1991) 173. See also Strohm, "Storie, Spelle, Geste", 352.

defenceless woman (which he himself presents as an ignoble impulse).<sup>43</sup> In fact, Caxton's interest in Helen (and in the story of Troy itself) seems paradoxically more apparent in his translation of the *Metamorphoses*. Only Books 10 to 15 are extant, but in them Caxton's anonymous French source extensively fleshes out Ovid's brief account of the Trojan War, and Caxton follows suit. Stephen Gaselee notes that "In some points, indeed, the Trojan legend tallied with the conventions of romance; Paris is the right mediaeval lover, who falls in love upon hearsay, and can tell his lady [...] that even before he had seen her he had set all his thought upon her".<sup>44</sup> He points to Helen's forwardness, but defends her, arguing "it is not fair to this Helen, nor to her age, to dismiss her with mere contempt; she is a natural result of the feudal system and the age of Crusades and Courts of Love" (xxxix). However, while Helen's boldness, and the delight with which she welcomes Menelaus' suggestion that she entertain Paris, are appealing to writers (and readers) of medieval fiction, much of the detail that is added here is taken from the *Heroides*. In particular, Caxton recounts the Judgement of Paris, which is only briefly described in Guido. As Paris judges the goddesses, Venus recommends Helen, telling Paris "In her is al beaute habundyng. there is no better paradys than to have a love to hys talent" (Book 11 Cap. 13<sup>o</sup>, p. 44). Although Pallas warns Paris "Thou shalt overdere bye this love For thou shalt not longe enjoye her. but thou shalt deye in sorowe. And / in lyke wyse alle thy frendes" (11. Cap. 16<sup>o</sup>, p. 45), Caxton's account elides the criticism of Helen included in Guido's *Historia*. Indeed, the account of her ravishment incorporates much material from Paris' letter to Helen in the *Heroides*. Present is Paris' assertion "A woman may not be fayre & Chaste, yf nature lye not" (12. Cap. 2<sup>o</sup>, p.64). Present too are his criticism of Menelaus' folly in leaving Helen, and his assurance that her husband will make no effort to recover her, and that if he does, he will be unsuccessful. Equally, Helen's reply incorporates many of her points from the *Heroides*, though it is significant that the French author and

<sup>43</sup> Though Victor Scholderer notes that Caxton was once again translating from a French source, which uses Boccaccio's *Fall of Princes* to supplement the *Aeneid*. His version is thus very far from an English rendering of Virgil's epic. Henrietta R. Palmer, *List of English Editions and Translations of Greek and Latin Classics Printed Before 1641* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1911) xiii. See William Caxton, trans., *Caxton's Eneydos*, ed. W. T. Culley and F. J. Furnivall (London: Oxford UP, 1890, rep. 1962).

<sup>44</sup> William Caxton, trans., *Ovyde hys Booke of Methamorphose X-XV*, ed. Stephen Gaselee and H. F. B. Brett-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1924) xxxvii.

Caxton foreshadow later translations or adaptations of Ovid's poem by prefacing Helen's reply with lines that make clear that she is only feigning modesty:

Parys had so moch leyzer that he dyscoveryd to the fayre Helayn alle hys playsyr & drewe her to his accorde: atte leste of herte. how wel that she wetsyd some what the contrary But in a woman is so moch trycherye Though she be never so desirous. That she wyl make her dangerouse. (12.Cap 2<sup>o</sup>, p. 65)

Helen's reply is a jumbled and at times confusing redaction of her Ovidian letter: she tells him unequivocally that she does not believe Venus judged her beautiful enough to be his prize, before exclaiming "I belive wyl that ye saye trouthe" (12.Cap 3<sup>o</sup> p. 66). However, the end of her speech is far more transgressive than the Ovidian Helen's letter to Paris. Ovid's Helen agrees that they should continue to correspond secretly, while the Helen of Caxton's *Metamorphoses* ends by telling him "Ye shall ravysse me lyke as it wer by force And so moch shall I have the lasse blame" (12.Cap 3<sup>o</sup>, p. 69). Paris takes Helen, "whych sembled for [...] feer to tremble And moche counterfeted thabasshement And made an escrye wyth an hye voys sayenge. Helpe. help good men. for they enforce me For goddis sake suffre not that I be defowled" (12.Cap 4<sup>o</sup>, pp. 69-70). Here, Caxton's French source apparently aims to raise a smile, and make a serious criticism of women at the same time, by augmenting the Ovidian Helen's disingenuous protestations with her other, matter-of-fact descriptions of how Paris may help her deceive her hapless husband.

However, even this critical representation of Helen's deceptive cunning, speaking so fully to the medieval desire to contain and control wives, is omitted from *The Sege of Troy* (1500). Griffin notes that the text is "in the main, an epitomised redaction of Guido",<sup>45</sup> and as far as Helen is concerned, it is interesting primarily because the author patently found her to be unworthy of notice. Though the author notes that Helen desires Paris, and "hit was fully appoynted and accorded bitwēn þeym two þat she shuld go with Parys to Troy" (189),<sup>46</sup> there is none of Guido's moralising. Equally, though, there are none of

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<sup>45</sup> Griffin, ed., "The Sege", 158.

<sup>46</sup> Quotations from the *Sege of Troy* refer to page numbers in Griffin's article, in which the complete text is reproduced.

the touches that made Helen appealing for a medieval audience: no account of her beauty, no mention of her distress on the journey from Troy, no description of her mourning for Paris or Hector. Helen is clearly of interest only insofar as she precipitates male action and interaction, and after her abduction she is only mentioned again at the end of the poem, when the traitors Aeneas and Antenor appeal for her to be returned home. Though Lydgate's *Troy Book* and Caxton's *Recuyell* remained popular through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, composing redactions of Guido became less so, partly because of the dominance of Chaucer, Caxton and Lydgate, and partly because of increased knowledge of older Greek texts that invited different or newly detailed interpretations or representations of both Helen and Medea. Certainly, the *Sege of Troy* aims at a workmanlike summary of Guido's argument, rather than a rereading or reconsideration. While its unimaginative prose may suggest why translations of Guido lost some of their vogue in the sixteenth century, it also, through its disinterest in Helen, suggests the extent to which the Trojan War was still regarded as the preserve of men, and thus that while Helen may be emphasised as a threat, equally she may be quickly passed over in favour of male-oriented action.

Helen was an iconic figure in medieval literature, directly or indirectly influencing many medieval romances that feature abduction as a motif. Her story was used to comment on the morality of war and on the standards of behaviour that women should adhere to, as well as social issues that were widely debated in the medieval period, such as how far women's autonomy should extend within marriage, and to what extent they were to be regarded as their husbands' property. Helen's negative portrayal is rooted in the constraints of her genre (as a romance heroine she must submit to Paris; as a woman in an historical account of warfare she can do nothing more than watch men fight), in the conflicting demands of these two genres, and in medieval misogynist attitudes, most notably the popular medieval perception of women as careful of their appearance, desirous of attention, and above all as a dangerous distraction to men. Helen can be portrayed sympathetically and appealingly by Benoît,

Guido and the authors who use their work, but at the same time her behaviour cannot be condoned, for, as H. David Brumble observes,

[...] Medieval and Renaissance Christians tended simply to regard Helen as culpable. She was thus “the adulteress [who] shatters both worlds with grief,” nothing less than a “seedbed of scandal and strife” (Fulgentius, *Mythologies*: 2.13).<sup>47</sup>

In fact, even Helen’s actions and life in and after Troy do not seem to hold much interest for the medieval authors, who are generally speaking more interested in the fall of the city and the portrayal of Greek and Trojan heroes. Meanwhile, Brumble’s reference to the fifth-century mythographer Fulgentius, whose condemnation of Helen had been repeated by the Third Vatican Mythographer and by Thomas Walsingham, illustrates the importance of late antique use and reuse of the classics. It highlights the impact that these late antique and early medieval texts had on English literature, particularly before the Greek classics became known in England. Though to some degree a compelling character and a focus for debate over the failings and virtues of her gender, Helen finds herself tellingly under-utilised in these medieval accounts of the Trojan War, used reductively more often than not, and certainly denied the voice and agency she enjoyed in many classical versions of her story. This medieval inclination, to underscore Helen’s wickedness while paradoxically using romance tropes to limit her agency, can also be discerned in English fourteenth- and fifteenth-century depictions of Medea, Helen’s far more alarming predecessor in classical accounts of the ancient world.

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<sup>47</sup> H. David Brumble, *Classical Myths and Legends in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: A Dictionary of Allegorical Meanings* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998) 153.

## **Chapter Five: Medea in the English Middle Ages**

As the reliance of medieval authors on Benoît and Guido would suggest, one of the most interesting differences between Medea's characterisation in the classical and medieval periods is the desire of many authors to reconnect her story with the story of Troy. All the longer English accounts of Medea's story from the medieval period see her story, and Jason's, as one of the first steps on the road that leads to the final fall of the city. Once again, as with accounts of the Trojan War, this essential similarity stems from the fact that Lydgate's *Troy Book*, the *Laud Troy Book*, the alliterative *Destruction of Troy*, *The Seege and Batayle of Troy* and *The Sege of Troy* all rely on the Latin and French works of Guido and Benoît respectively, who in turn point to Dares as their source. Thus, as with Helen, there is a degree of consistency in the medieval English portrayal of Medea, and again the period's interest in the genre of romance and in misogynist criticism can be discerned. However, Medea poses many more problems for medieval authors than does Helen. The notoriety of her actions made her an easy target for misogynist attacks, but her power (which does not stem, as Helen's does, from the value men place on her) is so threatening to the male-dominated institutions of family, government and law that male (and female) authors in the period find her difficult to deal with. Even in very similar accounts of her story there is widespread dissent over her motives and intentions, and medieval authors, like their classical predecessors, often find it almost impossible to reconcile Colchian and Corinthian Medea, her origins with her end. While classical authors often tried to account for Medea's power by emphasising her progression to supernatural being, medieval authors read and write her in accordance with their own social values, attempting to account for her actions while also showing how her power and threat may serve her patriarchal community.

**“al hir world on him sche sette”: Fourteenth-century Medea and the  
Suppression of Autonomy**

As they have been throughout the late antique period and the early Middle Ages, references to Medea are more difficult to locate than references to Helen, and she is frequently noticeable only by her absence. For example, the author of the *Seege or Batayle of Troy* follows Dares in his reference to the Argonautic voyage, and also in his elision of Medea. In a confusion of event that is somewhat typical of the poem, Pelias sends Jason to Troy to get the fleece from Laomedon, and when he refuses Jason and Hercules appeal to their Greek allies for help, lest the Trojans “Wolen holde us alle for losengeris” (108). Texts that pride themselves on their following of Guido’s model do include Medea, but once again augment their sources. Thus John Clerk, composer of the alliterative *Destruction of Troy*, notes the rejuvenation of Aeson, explaining “Ovid openly in Eydos tellus / How Medea the maiden made hym all new” (1.123-4). Panton and Donaldson identify “Eydos” as *Heroides 12* (n. p. 467), but in fact neither Hypsipyle nor Medea, in their letters, make mention of it, and if Clerk did go directly to Ovid for this detail, it must have been to the *Metamorphoses*.

However, despite this apparent determination to go beyond Guido, his principal source, in his representation of Medea’s power, elsewhere Clerk is similarly keen to play down her threat. McDonald notes his use of the word “clene” to describe Medea’s abilities, observing “the association of Medea’s magical skill with the ‘clene artis’ adds a level of ambiguity to her portrait that is absent from Guido’s version” (142). After his account of Medea’s troubling magical powers, where Guido invokes pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite to explain how only God can affect nature in this way, Clerk also connects the implausibility of the story to Medea’s gender: “Hit ys lelly not like, ne oure belefe askys / Þat suche ferlies shuld fale in a fraile woman” (1.420-1). As this disbelief in a woman’s abilities would suggest, elsewhere Clerk follows the misogynist example Guido has set. He connects Medea with the pernicious influence of love and desire, with “venus werkes [...] Þat sorily dessauis, & men to sorrow bringes” (3.753-4). Significantly, on Jason’s return from the tasks Medea “Kyst hym full curtesly” (3.975), while Guido notes *Cui, si*

*licuisset, in aspectu multorum multa per oscula blandimenta dedisset, et rege mandante iuxta Iasonem quasi pudibunda consedit.* (p.31) (“if she could have, she would have given him the pleasant reward of many kisses, in the sight of all these people, yet at the command of the king she sat next to Jason as if full of shyness”) (3.360-2). Then, however, Clerk follows Guido, making no mention of Medea’s future crimes and in fact, like Guido, specifically recording that Jason left Medea behind after they left Colchis, in order to besiege Troy with Hercules. McDonald notes how even the poem’s alliterative scheme impacts on Medea’s representation: “The M alliteration required for Medea produces “maiden” and “mylde”, as in “Medea þe maiden myldly” [...] a description at least somewhat at odds with her portrait as a learned enchantress who boldly, if virtuously, offers herself to a handsome Greek hero” (145). Here then, the demands of the poem seem to take precedence over the negative portrait drawn by Guido. Elsewhere, however, the poet’s disapproval of Medea’s magic drives him to downplay it even more comprehensively than Guido has done, connecting Medea’s impotence to her gender as well as to his audience’s Christian faith. Both impulses, to belittle Medea’s powers and to characterise her as more “mylde” than her Ovidian ancestor, aim at a reduction of her threat, and both survive into the fourteenth century and beyond.

In both the *Seege or Batayle of Troye* and the alliterative *Destruction of Troy*, Medea’s story has taken the form of a strangely truncated prequel to the Trojan War. Though the legacy of Benoît and Guido survived into fifteenth-century Troy-narratives, and remains apparent in the repeated uses of Helen, Medea, Criseyde and Polyxena as examples of suffering women throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period,<sup>1</sup> Medea, like Helen, also features in other genres as motif or example. Boccaccio uses Medea as a didactic example, a target for misogynist criticism, in *De Claris Mulieribus*. Medea is “quite beautiful and by far the best trained woman in evil-doing” (p. 37), and Boccaccio describes her control over nature, her murders of her brother and her children, and her attempt to poison Theseus. Finally though, Boccaccio demonstrates this power being subsumed back into the male

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<sup>1</sup> On the continent, for example, McDonald notes “Froissart, Machaut, Dechamps, and a number of anonymous poets and *ballade* composers all chose to include Medea in their lists of faithful women” (196).



community: Medea does not escape triumphantly as she does in Euripides and Seneca, but instead is reunited with Jason after her abortive marriage to Ageus, and “returned to Colchis and restored to the throne her father” (p.36). In *De Genealogia Deorum*, Boccaccio mentions many classical and late antique authorities on Medea: Apollonius Rhodius, Ovid, Seneca and Justin. However, in this work Boccaccio does not cast moral judgement on Medea, preferring to collate the facts of her story from his different sources (he records her divine lineage, for example, something that was generally skimmed over by medieval writers). Important too was his *De Casibus Virorum Illustribus*, which indirectly influenced Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes*, and thus his representations of both Helen and Medea. Boccaccio’s text details Medea’s crimes, but his description of her was greatly extended by Laurent de Premierfait in his French adaptation, *Du Cas Des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*, which is the text Lydgate renders into English as the *Fall of Princes*.<sup>2</sup> Laurent’s additions to his Latin text include criticisms of both women, and specifically of the threat they pose to male institutions, and these were enthusiastically taken up by Lydgate, particularly with reference to Medea.

Predictably, given his familiarity with Boccaccio, Chaucer uses and reuses Medea, both as a brief reference and, in the *Legend of Good Women*, as a more sustained example. As she is in the *House of Fame*, in the *Knight’s Tale* Medea is mentioned alongside Circe as an example of an enchantress, but, more significantly, she is depicted in Venus’ temple, alongside figures such as Narcissus, Hercules and Turnus, and thus is clearly included to reference the unhappy (and often bloody and tragic) effects of love. Speaking of such lists of brief examples, and in a comment that can equally well be applied to this kind of medieval use of Helen, Cowen cautions that “attention to the context of such lists can bring [...] singleness of interpretation into question”:<sup>3</sup> the reader would be ill-advised to ever read Medea (or Helen) merely as an example of unhappy love, since (particularly in Medea’s case) the consequences of that

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<sup>2</sup> See Renoir, *John Lydgate*, 64, and Patricia M. Gathercole, “The Manuscripts of Laurent de Premierfait’s *Du Cas des Nobles* (Boccaccio’s *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*)” *Italia* 32.1 (1955): 14-21, n.5, p.20. Gathercole notes that Lydgate used Premierfait’s second translation of Boccaccio, produced in 1409.

<sup>3</sup> Cowen, “Women as Exempla”, 57.

love are inescapable.<sup>4</sup> The *Book of the Duchess* seems at first to present the same unhappy Medea, including her in a list of those who featured in the story of Troy. Later though, Chaucer references the end of her story, cautioning the man in black against suicide, and warning him “Ye sholde be dampned in this cas / By as good ryght as Medea was, / That slough hir children for Jasoun” (725-7). Here, the dreamer displays his classical knowledge to caution a lover about excessive grief, and perhaps to underscore his point that the man in black has not suffered betrayal, as Medea did. Though the dreamer’s use of Medea may seem inappropriate to a modern reader, this use of her, to advocate temperance in one’s attitude to love and loss, or to illustrate the shocking consequences of male faithlessness, retained its popularity well into the sixteenth century.

Nicky Hallett argues that “Chaucer’s women come to their medieval readers ready-clad, as to their hapless writer, ready-written”.<sup>5</sup> However, it does not follow that Chaucer simply renders into his own verse all the details of a story that had come to him “ready-written”. Famously, when he comes to write the end of Medea’s story, in the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer includes none of her notorious crimes. He leaves Medea bereft and abandoned by Jason, in a decision that has provoked much critical debate. Priscilla Martin finds the indeterminate ending to be particularly unsatisfactory, describing Hypsipyle and Medea as lacking individual characterisation, becoming “heroines yoked together by common bond of betrayal by Jason”.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, Kiser finds the *Legend* to be a successful experiment at the expense of such classical women, arguing “Chaucer means for us to recognise and appreciate his dextrous (and very funny) avoidance of narrative material that might contradict the legendary’s commissioned goal – to tell of ‘good women’ ” (97).<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile Jill Mann sees Chaucer as within his rights to rewrite even such a notorious

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<sup>4</sup> In *The House of Fame*, for example, Medea is one of the dreamer’s examples of earthly fame: however, since her “fame” was more like notoriety, even by this early stage, it seems that Chaucer is aiming at irony in his usage of Medea: an irony that becomes most richly apparent in his *Legend of Good Women*.

<sup>5</sup> Nicky Hallett, “Women”, in Peter Brown, ed., *A Companion to Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 480-94, 482-3.

<sup>6</sup> Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer’s Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* (London: Macmillan, 1990) 205. See also R. M. Lumiansky “Chaucer and the Idea of Unfaithful Men”, *MLN* 62.8 (1947): 560-2, 561.

<sup>7</sup> See also Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, 103.

story, and argues that Chaucer's radical rewriting of Medea implies neither comic use of irony nor misogyny.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, Chaucer is not using his source material uncritically. Speaking of the *Heroides*, one of Chaucer's most obvious sources, Cowen notes that "In manuscripts such as Chaucer most probably used as a source the text was accompanied by prefaces and marginal glosses explaining and supplementing it". She finds that Medea would be used as an example of the effects of unwise love.<sup>9</sup> However, while Chaucer certainly retains this sense, what he excises utterly from the *Heroides* is Medea's anger, her reference to her power and her past crimes, and her grim hints of what is to come. It is true that neither the *Heroides* nor Guido's *Historia*, both of which Chaucer cites, actually tells the story of the murders. Additionally, in their notes to the poem, A. S. G. Edwards and M. C. E. Shaner attractively suggests that Chaucer's reference to the "Argonautycon" may betray first-hand knowledge of Valerius Flaccus' Latin *Argonautica*,<sup>10</sup> which does not portray the murders of the children, and presents a Medea whose weakened, "romanticised" character seems reflected here.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, despite his (perhaps deliberate) references to texts that do not present the murders, Chaucer was clearly aware of Medea's final crime. Robert K. Root notes the Man of Law's reference to the killings, but points out "when one turns to the 'Legend of Medea', one looks in vain for the promised bit of sensationalism".<sup>12</sup> He argues that the *Man of Law's Prologue* predates Chaucer's decision to elide the murders in the "Legend". He presents further textual evidence, from the *Roman de la Rose* as well as from *The Book of the Duchess*, that makes it clear that Chaucer was fully aware of Medea's crimes by the time he came to write the "Legend", and thus

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<sup>8</sup> Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002) 31. For further discussion of contrasting critical reactions to Chaucer's choice of contentious examples in the *Legend*, see Donald W. Rowe, "The Narrator as Translator", in Corinne Saunders, ed, *Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001): 115-21, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Cowen, "Women as Exempla", 52-3. See also Sanford Brown Meech, "Chaucer and an Italian Translation of the *Heroides*", *PMLA* 45.1 (1930): 110-28, 128.

<sup>10</sup> Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson, 1069.

<sup>11</sup> However, see McDonald, who argues that the Flavian *Argonautica* "suffered a prolonged oblivion until 1417, when the first three and a half books were rediscovered by the Italian humanist Poggio" (n.18 p. 43). She asserts that the epic does not influence any medieval renderings of the story.

<sup>12</sup> Robert K. Root, "Chaucer's 'Legend of Medea' ", *PMLA* 24.1 (1909): 124-53, 124.

presumably has deliberately chosen not to include them.<sup>13</sup> The critical controversy that Chaucer's Medea continues to excite is caused at least in part because in eliding the murders, and thus in making Medea far less alarming than many of her continental predecessors, Chaucer also elides the most famous example of her action and agency. Thus Chaucer seems to suggest that a woman's acceptability is linked to her passivity: a suggestion that has proved endlessly troublesome for critics ever since. It is important to note, though, that Chaucer does not just omit the murders: the rejuvenation of Aeson, the killing of Pelias and Apsyrtus, and Medea's magical powers are all determinedly excised (and all of these, except for the rejuvenation, are mentioned in the sources Chaucer specifically chooses to cite). Medea outlines the dangers Jason will face, as she does in Guido, but her help is of the most mundane variety imaginable, despite Chaucer's references to her sorcery elsewhere:

Tho gan this Medea to hym declare  
 The peril of this cas from poynt to poynt,  
 And of his batayle, and in what disjoynt  
 He mote stonde, of which no creature  
 Save only she ne myghte his lyf assure. (1629-33)

Medea is determinedly portrayed as a woman who is only able to help Jason because of her knowledge of her country, and of the safeguards her father has placed on the Fleece. Though Chaucer mentions briefly that Jason succeeds through "the sleighte of hire enchauntement" (1650), and thus he does make some reference to Medea's ability exceeding Jason's, Carolyn Dinshaw finds that Jason's victory demonstrates his greater control: it is "masculine appropriation of feminine story, or feminine wit and knowledge".<sup>14</sup> Chaucer's Medea is not criticised as Guido's is, but this is because all agency, threatening and helpful, seems elided: for example, while Guido may criticise Medea's

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<sup>13</sup> Root references Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, 14198-14200, which mentions the children's death by hanging, and the *Book of the Duchess* 724-31, which also identifies Medea as their murderer. The relevant lines of the *Book of the Duchess* are quoted at p.136 above. Root, "Chaucer's 'Legend of Medea'", 127, 131-2. See also G. L. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Medea and the Date of the *Legend of Good Women*", *PMLA* 24.2 (1909): 343-63, in which he criticises Root's dating of the *Legend*, and Root's response to Kittredge: Robert K. Root, "The Date of Chaucer's Medea" *PMLA* 25.2 (1910): 228-40.

<sup>14</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) 77.

intemperate lust, and her conniving to satisfy it, here Jason is the protagonist, arriving in Colchis determined “To don with gentil women his delyt” (1587).

Chaucer’s decision to include Hypsipyle (whom Guido ignores) is obviously influenced by the *Heroides* (and perhaps also by the *Argonautica*) and, as Martin notes, Chaucer (like Ovid) links the two women through their common betrayal. More than this, however, he splits the story of the quest for the fleece across the two narratives: in “Hypsipyle” Jason is sent on the quest by Pelias, and in “Medea” he realises his goal. Mapping the male-oriented quest across two legends of abandonment in this way, Chaucer emphasises the importance of the male quest, and the inconsequence, and impotence, of the women. Cowen notes that Medea’s story, in its many incarnations, “provides a particularly apt example of a story shaped to divergent ends within the classical and medieval texts which recount it”.<sup>15</sup> As the critical conflict briefly addressed here attests, Chaucer’s own brief rendering of Medea’s story in the *Legend* seems carefully shaped to such “divergent ends”. Chaucer may, as Kiser suggests, expect his readers to recognise that he is not telling them the full story. Equally, he may expect some of his readers to appreciate the ironic references to the *Heroides*, which give a full account of Medea’s first crimes and hint at the murders of the children, but may also be playing a joke at the expense of others, who would not realise how selectively he was reading his Ovid here. Whether or not Chaucer intends ironic subversion of the practice of classical adaptation, a sly commentary on the wisdom of relying on textual authorities, or on the possibility of finding a good woman; or whether he is attempting merely to show how any woman can suffer as a result of male actions, the truncation of Medea’s story at this point (instead of, for example, at the point that she and Jason elope) certainly compromises her agency. Moreover, it does so in a way that may well be deliberately contentious, in contrast to other accounts (for example that of Joseph of Exeter), which quietly omit some or all of her story, because they found her distasteful or otherwise irrelevant, and which do not seem to challenge their readers to consider the other Medeas that exist beyond their texts.

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<sup>15</sup> Cowen, “Women as Exempla”, 53.

If Chaucer attempts to romanticise Medea (either straightforwardly or ironically) in his emphasis on her abandonment and distress, Gower attempts a similarly sympathetic rendering, but one that does not always belittle Medea's power, and even represents her crimes. In *Confessio Amantis*, the Confessor criticises Jason for flouting his promise of faithfulness, while portraying Medea as relatively blameless, and Gower appears particularly keen to build on his sources in his portrayal of Medea's distress. She has behaved in a transgressive way by offering to help Jason win the Fleece in exchange for marriage, but when she has laid out her terms and explained what tasks Jason faces, "Sche fell, as sche that was thurgh nome / With love, and so fer overcome, / That al hir world on him sche sette" (5.3635-7). Morse notes, "This disjunction between what Medea appears to be and what she does both helps to control the reader's reaction, and also keeps her apparently disempowered despite her magic" (223). Indeed, Morse finds her portrayal here inherently reductive, and sees Gower as using "the clichés of romance [...] in order to push Medea towards a certain kind of heroine" (223).<sup>16</sup> However, if Gower does respond enthusiastically to the literary taste of the fourteenth century, and to the models provided by his classical and medieval predecessors, his romanticising impulse does not come, as Chaucer's seems to, at the expense of Medea's characterisation. Absent are both Guido's misogynist interpolations, and the attempts apparent in the *Historia*, in the *Legend of Good Women* and in the alliterative *Destruction of Troy* to downplay Medea's powers, through elision of them, or through reference to God's greater power or to her gender.<sup>17</sup> Gower describes her power and accomplishments in detail, but also attempts to render Medea a sympathetic character.

Thus, a significant omission from Gower's poem is Guido's scathing observation that Medea attempts to gratify her lust by pretending to herself that she desires marriage. Meanwhile, a significant addition are the words Medea speaks to herself as she watches Jason from her tower: "Sche preide, and seide,

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<sup>16</sup> Conversely, Pearsall sees in Gower's work the desire to limit these stereotypical romance images. Pearsall, "Gower's Narrative Art", 75.

<sup>17</sup> That Gower uses his Guido very differently to Chaucer is apparent in Gower's observation that Medea "gan fro point to point enforme / Of his bataile and al the forme / Which [...] he scholde finde there" (5.3501-3). In Guido and Gower, what follows is a detailed description, by Medea, of the dangers Jason will face. In Chaucer, Medea tells him where to stand, and the only reference to the specific tasks is by the narrator.

‘O, god him spede, / The kniht which hath mi maidenhiede!’ (5.3739-40). Here Medea seems sympathetic, but at the same time utterly powerless – in sleeping with Jason and giving him the secrets of how to obtain the Fleece she seems to have relinquished her hold over him, and finds herself at his mercy. This issue of Medea and Jason’s sexual relationship as it relates to Medea’s power, and to her status in relation to the masculine community, has been significant since some of the earliest existing classical texts (in Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, Medea recognises she must assure Arete and Alkinoos she has not slept with Jason if she is to maintain their sympathy), and remains so in medieval accounts. However, like Helen’s marriage to Menelaus, Medea’s sexual relationship with Jason obviously compromises medieval attempts to write her as a typical romance heroine, and the issue is addressed in strikingly different ways across different texts. Pearsall uses a comparison of Benoît and Gower to highlight the latter’s sympathetic attitude:

In Gower, Jason’s desire to be with Medea is devoid of calculation, and he waits eagerly for her maid to arrive to conduct him to Medea’s room. In Benoît, Medea soliloquises as she waits for him and, when half the night has passed, has to send her *vieille* (a much more sinister figure!) to fetch the laggard – who had to be woken up-while she prepares a rich bed for the reluctant lover. In the morning, it is Jason, according to Benoît, who recalls Medea’s attention to the essential business in hand, that of winning the fleece, and when he has got the information he wants, he departs abruptly. In Gower it is Medea who, with womanly practicality, arouses Jason to thoughts of the danger he is in, and, after the briefing, there follows a long and touching farewell scene.<sup>18</sup>

As this comparison would suggest, Gower certainly does not shy away from presenting a capable Medea, who, despite her fears for Jason, orchestrates his success. Gower even underlines that the fates of many men rest in Medea’s hands, noting

The Gregeis weren in gret doute,  
The whyle that here lord was oute:  
Thei wisten nocht what scholde tyde,  
Bot waiten evere upon the tyde,

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<sup>18</sup> Pearsall, “Gower’s Narrative Art”, 75-6.

However, Jason makes no mention or acknowledgment of the help he has received from Medea. Remaining constrained by her gender, she wants to congratulate Jason with a kiss, “Bot schame tornede hire agayn” (5.3790), and instead she displaces her feelings of happiness onto her female companion, in the privacy of her chamber – “And sche for joie hire Maide kiste” (5.3800). This detail seems to stem from the *Metamorphoses* – Ovid notes *tu quoque victorem complecti, barbaras velles: / obstitit incepto pudor, at complexa fuisses / sed te, ne faceres, tenuit reverentia famae* (7.144-6) (“You also, barbarian maiden, would gladly have embraced the victor; your modesty stood in the way”).<sup>19</sup> Colchis, like Troy, is a masculine community, and like Helen, Medea finds herself on its outskirts, neither able to praise or be praised. Once Jason has succeeded with her help, Medea is reduced to an object, another prize he has won: “Jason to Grece with his preie / Goth thurgh the See the rihte weie” (5.3927-8), and despite Medea’s abilities, the balance of power between them seems to have shifted back in his favour.

After the pair leave Colchis (with no account of the murder of Apsyrtus), Jason requests that Medea rejuvenate his father. Gower’s account draws heavily on the *Metamorphoses* in his description of Medea’s making the potion, her search for her ingredients, and even Medea’s appearance and her physical transgression - the way she runs wild and speaks in strange tongues. Gower seems to find Medea’s behaviour here representative of her difference, and dwells on it extensively:

[...] tho sche ran so up and doun,  
Sche made many a wonder soun,  
Somtime lich unto the cock,  
Sometime unto the Laverock,  
Sometime kacleth as a Hen,  
Somtime speketh as don the men:  
And riht so as hir jargoun strangeth,  
In sondri wise hir forme changeth,

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<sup>19</sup> It also appears in the *Historia*, but Guido gives it a typically unsympathetic emphasis, suggesting that Medea was only making pretence of modesty.



Sche semeth faie and no womman;  
For with the craftes that sche can  
Sche was, as who seith, a goddesse,  
And what hir liste, more or lesse,  
Sche dede, in bokes as we finde. (5.4097-4109)

Morse argues “There is still no sense that Medea is powerful in and of herself [...] consistent with Gower’s playing down of Medea’s own decisiveness, her magic is merely marvellous” (223). Nevertheless, there is power here: Medea is an uncontrolled force, who does “what hir liste, more or lesse” (5.4108). However, just as this “more or lesse” destabilises what, in the reader’s mind, would seem to be Medea’s independence, her characterisation in the passage demonstrates Gower’s attempts to contain or rationalise her power even as he describes it. She is described in a series of animal similes, from which she emerges periodically to “speketh as don the men” (5.4102), a significantly gendered choice of final noun. Even when she seems to utterly transcend these kinds of mortal boundaries, Gower creates distance between Medea and her femininity: she “semeth faie and no womman” (5.4105), and “was, as who seith, a goddesse” (5.4107). This theme of Gower carefully negotiating Medea’s power – showing how, as she becomes supremely powerful, she is no longer human, no longer a woman, no longer mortal – is echoed in his explanation of her motivation. While Jason may not ask her to perform the feats she does, she performs them because of the hold he (reassuringly for the masculine community) maintains over her:

Lo, what mihte eny man devise,  
A womman schewe in eny wise  
Mor hertly love in every stede,  
Than Medea to Jason dede?  
Ferst sche made him the flees to winne,  
And after that fro kiththe and kinne  
With gret tresor with him sche stal,  
And to his fader forth withal  
His Elde hath torned into youthe,  
Which thing non other woman couthe. (5.4175-84)

In the “Legend of Medea”, Chaucer makes a similar point when he concludes

This is the mede of lovyng and guerdoun  
That Medea receyved of Jasoun  
Ryght for hire trouthe and for hire kyndenesse,  
That lovede hym beter than hireself, I gesse. (1662-1665)

As Morse notes of Apollonius’ Medea (in a comment that can be applied to many of Medea’s medieval incarnations), whatever Medea’s power over Jason, “she is simultaneously weaker than he is because of her love for him” (38).

This fundamental “feminine” weakness is emphasised at Gower’s conclusion. Interestingly, Gower leaves out Medea’s murder of Pelias, noting only “King Peleüs his Em was ded, / Jason bar corone on his hed” (5.4187-8). This elision, like that of the murder of Apsyrtus, makes Medea appear slightly more sympathetic. More importantly, though, it makes Jason look worse, by depriving him of his traditional reason for abandoning Medea: his need to curry favour with King Creon in order to escape the anger of Pelias’ son Acastus. At first, it seems that Gower’s Medea will not react to abandonment like her Chaucerian counterpart: she poisons Creusa, kills her children and then rises “Unto Pallas the Court above” (5.4219) before Jason can touch her. However, as he has done previously with his observation that all her evil deeds were done for love of Jason, here Gower uses Jason’s hold over her to undermine Medea. She ends her appearance in the poem in some sort of afterlife (not identified as Christian Heaven), “Wher as sche pleigneth upon love” (5.4220), free from the threat of Jason’s revenge, but apparently as powerless over her circumstances as her deserted husband. Here, Gower foreshadows Elizabethan determination to see Medea as in some way weakened, to suggest some punishment for her crimes: if Medea is powerful, she must, finally, suffer for it. The limitations of Medea’s power, over Jason and over her own literary representations, are brought home as Amans promises to take on board the moral of the well-known story, assuring the Confessor “I have herde it ofte seie / Hou Jason tok the flees aweie / Fro Colchos” (5.4231-3). Despite Gower’s attempts to outline Medea’s powers, and the extent of her help, it appears that the story of the

Fleece remains Jason's story, and though Gower recounts both her horrifying crimes and her transgressive escape, though she leaves the poem apparently removed from earthly concerns, in fact Medea is still burdened and weakened by her love for Jason, and by her status as a woman in this kind of narrative.

In another of Gower's poems Medea's power is similarly manipulated. In *Traitié Pour Assembler Les Amanz Marietz*, Medea's power is represented clearly: she takes the boys, and "Devant les oels Jason ele ad tué" (8.3.19) ("She killed them before Jason's eyes"), but the marginal gloss reveals Gower's agenda. It reads *Qualiter Iason uxorem suam Medeam relinquens Creusam Creontis regis filiam sibi carnaliter copulavit; unde ipse cum duobus filiis suis postea infortunatus decessit* ("How Jason leaving his wife Medea, lustfully married Creusa, daughter of King Creon; as a result of which, afterwards this unfortunate man perished with his two sons").<sup>20</sup> With these lines, it becomes apparent that Gower's intention is to criticise Jason for failing to honour his marriage to Medea.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, while Gower records the revenge she wreaks on Jason, he sees forces beyond her control as really dictating punishment, "Ceo qu'en fuist fait pecché le fortuna; / Frenite espousaile dieus le vengera" (8.3.20-1) ("Such is the fortune of one who sins / With marriage broken the gods will punish him"). These last lines, which are a refrain throughout the account, exemplify one way that a medieval author may attempt to deal with Medea's murders: like Boccaccio and Lydgate (who portray Aetes' downfall as the result of a failure to keep his daughter under control), here Gower attempts to show Medea as the tool of some kind of higher power, and her actions as simply the fulfilment of divine will. In the *Traitié*, Helen is mentioned soon after Medea, and both women also made brief appearances in Gower's other French works, the *Mirour de L'Omme* and the *Cinkante Balades*. Very often, in the case of both women, Gower aims to represent them sympathetically, if not to praise them then at least not to

<sup>20</sup> John Gower, *The French Works*, in *The Complete Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899-1902). Translations are my own.

<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth Porter sees Medea's story in *Confessio Amantis* as deliberately contrasting with the principle of male "ethical self-governance", and, following this, honest marriage. Thus once again, Gower's Medea finds her story twisted to speak to male concerns, as she is used to educate Amans about male conduct. Elizabeth Porter, "Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm", in A. J. Minnis, ed., *Gower's 'Confessio Amantis': Responses and Reassessments* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983): 135-62, 145, 147.

condemn them as harshly as they are condemned elsewhere, and by other medieval authors.

In many medieval accounts, it is Medea's love for Jason which makes her somehow human and manageable in the eyes of male (and female) authors, and it is the depiction of Medea's feelings that renders her passive. Christine de Pisan, for example, observes in *The Book of the City of Ladies* that Medea "loved Jason with a too great and too constant love" (II.56.1, p.189),<sup>22</sup> and in *The Epistle of Othea* criticises her more harshly, connecting her feelings for Jason with her later suffering (with no mention, however, of her later crimes): "in lewde love sche suffrid hir to be maistried, so þat sche sette hir herte upon Jason and yaf him worschip, bodi and goodes; for þe which aftirward he yaf hir a ful yvil reward" (LVIII, p.72).<sup>23</sup> Like Chaucer, Christine aims to present a sympathetic, or even a praiseworthy Medea. However, Christine's repeated returns to Medea's story seem to suggest that though she wishes to construct a sympathetic woman, one who will refute the negative incarnations that have gone before, she can only do this by weakening Medea.<sup>24</sup> Thus *The Book of the City of Ladies* makes mention of Medea's learning and command of drugs, but *The Epistle of Othea* demonstrates the extent to which Medea, as a woman, has little essential power over Jason. In it, Christine notes that knights should repay favours done to them, but that Jason "fayled of his feip [& loved anothir]", "nat-wipstandinge sche was [of] sovereyne beaute" (LIV p.66-7). Medea's femininity and beauty is stressed, but concurrently Christine, like Chaucer, defends her by stressing that she is vulnerable to Jason's control over the situation.

The influence of Christine's determination to defend Medea can be discerned in later English poets. Thomas Hoccleve's *L'Epistre de Cupid*, completed in 1402, is an adaptation of Christine's *Epistre au Dieu D'Amours*.

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<sup>22</sup> Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (NY: Persea, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> The text here is the Middle English rendering of Stephen Scrope. Christine de Pisan, *The Epistle of Othea*, trans. Stephen Scrope, ed. Curt F. Bühler (London: Oxford UP, EETS OS 264, 1970).

<sup>24</sup> For a more positive assessment of Christine's treatments of classical women, including Medea, see Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 55, 79, 85-6.

In it, Christine points to women who have suffered men's faithlessness, and uses Medea as an example once again. Hoccleve renders her lines thus:

How freendly was Medea to Jasoun [...]  
In the conqueryng of the flees of gold.  
How falsly quitte he hir affeccion,  
By whom victorie he gat, as he hath wold.  
How may this man for shame be so bold  
To falsen hir pat from deeth and shame  
Him kepte, and gat him so greet prys and name? (302-8) <sup>25</sup>

The lines recall Gower's exclamation that Medea's love was proved by the labours she undertook for Jason – and her power is further undermined as Jason's abandonment of her is juxtaposed with the account of all she has done for him. In the classical tradition, for example in Ovid or Seneca, Medea invokes this assistance to chastise Jason for his faithlessness. Here, though, Hoccleve follows Christine in his elision of Medea's revenge on Jason (and of her previous crimes, which Medea mentions in the classical accounts). However, Hoccleve is also influenced by Chaucer's decision to elide the same reference: Walter W. Skeat identifies his mention of "our legende of martirs" (316), and his description of the suffering women undergo for love, as two of Hoccleve's most notable additions to Christine's text.<sup>26</sup> As always, though, authorial attempts to defend Medea by ignoring the harmful aspects of her agency are unsatisfactory, particularly when the reference to Jason's faithlessness is considered alongside the later pronouncement that men have little to fear from women:

Malice of wommen, what is it to drede?  
They slee no men, destroien no citees [...]  
Ne men byreve hir landes ne hir mees,  
Folk enpoysons or howses sette on fyre. (330-5)

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Hoccleve, *'My Complainte' and Other Poems*, ed. Roger Ellis (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> In Walter W. Skeat, ed., *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Vol. 7 (Supplement: Chaucerian and Other Pieces)* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1894-7), n. to lines 316-29.

Of course, this protest that women pose no threat to men, and are unjustly maligned, sits uncomfortably with the reference to Jason's abandonment of Medea. While Chaucer's decision to include this episode but to omit the end of Medea's story has frequently attracted criticism, and he has been charged with misogyny for his decision to include her in a catalogue of good women, Christine's positive representations of such women are read as straightforward, her defences genuine, although she knew as well as Chaucer the story of the children's murders. Inescapably, though, if Chaucer's treatment of Medea is an unsatisfactory defence (deliberately unsatisfactory or not), so too are Christine's and Hoccleve's representations. Christine's Medea can only be defended, made sympathetic, if she is reduced to an object of pity, her power bent to the service of an ungrateful man. Deliberately or not, these sympathetic Medeas, produced by Chaucer, Christine and Hoccleve, make demands on their audiences due to the gulf between the classical original and the medieval rewriting, or even between Guido's version and these later revisions. By contrast, and because she does not enjoy the same kind of murderous power, Helen's representations do not throw up the same difficulties (though an author must choose whether to have her conspire eagerly with Paris, or simply be abducted). The question of how to negotiate Medea's crimes (particularly the killing of her children) continues to trouble authors for the next three centuries. Although some effort to make Medea appear both active and sympathetic can be discerned in the *Laud Troy Book*, fifteenth-century English authors appear increasingly eager to leave such dilemmas behind them, and in the renderings of Caxton and Lydgate in particular, the choice to represent the worst of Medea's behaviour, and to make her utterly unsympathetic as a consequence, is clearly apparent.

### **How Do You Solve a Problem Like Medea? Negotiating Troublesome Feminine Power in Lydgate and Caxton.**

The author of the *Laud Troy Book* cites Guido, Dictys and Dares as his sources, but goes on to deviate from Guido in his presentation of Medea, if not in the

narrative as a whole. Like Guido, he is writing a very obviously male-oriented quest narrative: much room is given to Pelias' challenge to Jason, the Argonauts' arrival in Colchis and the descriptions of the perils Jason must face. Noticeably absent, however, are Guido's misogynist attacks on Medea, with which he embellished his rendering of Benoît. After his enumeration of Medea's skills, for example, the *Laud* poet exclaims

In al the world was no man  
So kunnyng of wit and wisdam -  
As seyn these autours and these clerkes  
As was Medee in here werkes. (637-40)

However, he pointedly ignores whatever writings of "these clerkes" do not please him, presumably in an effort to make Medea a more appealing character, rather than one reflective of the distasteful "reality" of women (the role Guido assigned her). He ignores Guido's references to Medea's lustful and deceptive nature, and in fact in some ways makes her a far more powerful character than she is in the Latin text. Kempe points out that "The English writer does not profess to be [sic] more than a "gestour", consequently he is at less pains to give verisimilitude to his tale".<sup>27</sup> Predictably, this has an impact on his representation of Medea's magic: unlike Guido and Lydgate (who relies on his Latin source far more closely), the *Laud* author does not feel the need to explain it away. However, the author's relative lack of interest in realism, coupled with an interest in continental romances that is noted by Kempe,<sup>28</sup> arguably contributes to his willingness to make Medea more powerful and helpful in other, more mundane ways, to make her more akin to the mysterious and beautiful helper-maiden found in the continental *lais* of Marie de France, and the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. Most noticeably, as he prepares for the tasks, Medea "an-oynted alle his body" (919) with her protective ointment, where usually Jason does this himself. Later too, the passive description of Medea helplessly watching Jason from her tower is left out, and the *Laud* poet writes

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<sup>27</sup> Kempe, "A Middle English Tale", 8.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

The tydynges thorow the Cete is ronne  
Many a man come him to see,  
Ther he was set by dame Medee. (1118-20)

The pair leave Colchis in triumph, and the narrative quickly switches to an account of the first fall of Troy, with no mention of Medea's later crimes. The *Laud Troy Book* constitutes an interesting example of how Medea may be presented as both powerful and sympathetic (though her main virtue, as always, is her willingness to bend her extraordinary powers to Jason's advantage). More importantly, it is an example of how medieval writers read their sources (even the magisterial Guido) critically, and rewrote them selectively. McDonald argues that Medea benefits from what she calls "The process of vernacularisation", noting that as a result of this process, "women become members of both the implied and real audiences, and there is a clearly evident shift towards an accommodation of their interests" (270-1). As far as Medea is concerned, McDonald finds the vernacular to be "a medium in which we generally find a sympathetic portrait of her" (266), and cites Gower, Chaucer, the *Ovide Moralisé* and the *Laud Troy Book* as such sympathetic vernacular renderings, with Lydgate's misogynist attacks on her constituting a surprising exception. Certainly, this vernacularisation meant that more women could have read Medea's story, and this may have resulted in less damning assessments of her. However, male authors may have sought to play up Medea's transgressive folly, as a way of educating and cautioning their female readership. The *Laud Troy Book* is a surprisingly uncritical account of Medea's early career (though as Benson notes, representation of women is scarcely the author's key concern). Meanwhile Gower does seem willing to present Medea sympathetically at the last (though she must be stripped of at least some of her troubling classical power). However, Chaucer's "Legend of Medea" can seem very far from straightforward praise, and it is also important to appreciate the extent to which authors such as Chaucer, Christine, Gower and the *Laud* poet feel driven to ignore key episodes in their attempts to write a sympathetic Medea. Moreover, in the sixteenth century and beyond, some of the most vehement English criticisms of Medea are specifically written for (and directed at) women, and thus an increasing number of female readers does not always



result in a more sympathetic representation of her by male authors: often, in fact, the reverse seems true. (Unsurprisingly, the same point may be made about early modern vernacular Helens: they are also often written with the specific intent of chastising a female readership). In the fifteenth century, meanwhile, the *History of Jason* is one of the period's most unsympathetic accounts of Medea's love for Jason, and one that is not only written in the vernacular by Raoul Lefèvre, but is translated from French to English by Caxton. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English writers, and their continental counterparts, were just as alarmed by Medea's magic and desire for Jason as was Guido, and thus while vernacular accounts may tone down his most stinging misogynist tirades, it does not necessarily follow that they represent Medea sympathetically.

As an author who presents himself as a translator, while very definitely altering his source texts, Lydgate's responses to Medea's myth are particularly intriguing, reflective as they are of his extensive reading, but also his own tastes and views. In *The Floure of Curtesey* and *A Wicked Tunge Wille Sey Amys*, Lydgate uses Helen and Medea as somehow exemplary women. In the *Floure*, his lover is equal "in fayrenesse to the quene Helayne" (191),<sup>29</sup> while Medea is paired with Dido as examples of women who "dyd outrage" (213), but only as a result of male betrayal. In *A Wicked Tunge*, Lydgate describes how women may be falsely accused, however manifold their virtues. Helen's beauty is once again the most remarkable thing about her, and in his use of Medea, too, Lydgate seems to resolutely ignore her notorious behaviour, those actions which may have deservedly attracted censure. A woman may have

Elenes beaute, the kyndnesse of Mede, [...]  
 3it dar I sain, & triste right well this,  
 Somme wicked tonge wole sey of hem a-mys. (115-9)

Here, Helen's and Medea's good qualities are those which are advantageous to men: Helen's beauty, which Paris found so appealing (reflective as it was of his own achievements) and the practical help Medea gave Jason. Both women are

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<sup>29</sup> Quotations from the *Floure* and *A Wicked Tunge* are from John Lydgate, *The Minor Poems*, vol 2, ed. Henry Noble McCracken, 2 vols (London: Oxford UP, EETS XS 107, OS 192, 1934, rep. 1961).

certainly good examples of women targeted by male criticism, but Lydgate's defence of them here appears disingenuous to say the least, partly because of his determined elision of their sins, but mainly because he himself is so quick to criticise both women.

As he did with Helen, in his presentation of Medea Lydgate augments his reading of Guido with the Latin classics, and this often results in extensive embellishment. Unlike the author of the *Laud Troy Book*, he retains Guido's dismissal of the pagan account of Medea's powers that was disseminated by Ovid. Similarly, he extends Guido's observation that Medea was *virgo nimium speciosa* (p. 15) "an extremely beautiful maiden" (2.175) (and uses typical romantic imagery as he does so):

[...] Medea with hir rosene hewe,  
And with freschenes of þe lyle white  
So entermedled of kynde be delite,  
Pat Nature made in hir face sprede  
So egally þe white with þe rede,  
Pat þe medelyng, in conclusioun,  
So was ennewed by proporcioun,  
Pat finally excesse was þer noon,  
Of never nouþer; for bothe two in oon  
So ioyned wer, longe to endure,  
By thempres þat callyd is Nature. (1.1578-88)

Oddly, Lydgate declares himself unequal to the task of describing Helen's beauty, despite his eagerness to embellish Medea's. However, as he does with Helen, Lydgate includes and even extends the famous misogynist criticisms of Guido. He sees Medea's adorning herself as being not just as a typical feminine trait, as Guido does, but as indicative of her attempts to disguise her character for the hapless Jason: "Fer al þe foule schal covertly be wried, / Pat no defaute outward be espied" (1.1813-4). Moreover, his emphasis on the perfect balance of Medea's beauty, his admiring observation that "excesse was þer noon" (1.1585) may be read ironically, in view of Medea's later rage and violence. Although, after Lydgate's descriptions of Medea's deceptive and transgressive desire for Jason, and of feminine inconstancy, he declares "Þus liketh Guydo of wommen for tendite" (1.2097) and claims "My purpos is nat hem to done

offence” (1.2104), as he does in his discussion of Helen, Lydgate includes Guido’s interpolations on feminine inconstancy and changeability at every opportunity. He even adds his own examples, opining “Hercules wer nat strong to bynde, / Nouthur Sampson, so as I bileve, / Wommannes herte to make it nat remeve” (1.1870-2).

At some points, Lydgate’s changes make Medea seem more of a victim: in Guido’s *Historia*, Medea seems to benefit from Fortune, who drives Aeetes to ask his daughter to entertain the Argonauts. In Lydgate’s poem, the account of how Medea is torn between Love and Shame is greatly extended, and she is described as confounded and led astray by “Fortune with hir doubleface” (1.2251) and “þe whirlyng of hir whele aboute” (1.2253): an addition presumably included to cater to fifteenth-century literary taste (in the same text, Lydgate also dwells at greater length on Helen’s suffering at the caprice of Fortune). Later too, Lydgate draws on Ovid, as Guido had done, but seems to regard Medea’s decision to sleep with Jason with far more sympathy, surmising “And 3et sche ment nat but honeste; / As I suppose, sche wende have ben his wyfe” (1.2940-1). (Guido remarks that Medea attempts to convince herself that she wants marriage, while really she desires only to satisfy her lust). Ultimately, though, Lydgate’s adherence to Guido means that he abandons Medea abruptly (although he does mention the murders of the children, and points his readers in the direction of texts such as the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*, that give a fuller account of her crimes). His reliance on the *Historia* is such that, though he sometimes plays down Medea’s threat by emphasising her own helplessness or honest delusion, like Helen she remains a troublesome incarnation of female desire and disobedience, and an attractive target for criticism.

Lydgate’s second extensive account of Medea, in *The Fall of Princes*, is another translation, this time of Laurent de Premierfait’s *Des Cas des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*, itself an expansion of Boccaccio’s *De Casibus Virorum Illustribus*. Lydgate’s determination to render both Guido and Laurent into English, coupled with his tendency to add to his source, means his characterisation of Medea, and description of her story, is unstable and sometimes downright contradictory. Most obviously, in his *Troy Book* Lydgate follows Guido, who notes that Medea was an only child. Lydgate writes that

Medea's father "hadde by ri3t[e] to succeed / Non eyr male þat I can of rede" (1.1597-8). (Nolan notes that this is in fact Benoît's innovation).<sup>30</sup> In *De Casibus*, conversely, Boccaccio includes Apsyrtus (though here he is called Aegialus), and Medea's murder of him, since his emphasis is on how Aeetes suffers and loses everything on the whim of Fortune.<sup>31</sup> Lydgate follows Boccaccio and Laurent in their accounts of the murder, but typically adds a moralising aside, as he exclaims "For who sauh ever or radde off such a-nothir, / To save a straunger list to slen hir brothir?" (1.2232-3).<sup>32</sup> If Medea is an only child, her desertion of Aeetes is in some ways more shocking, since she bears a responsibility to marry according to his wishes, and to produce an heir. If Apsyrtus is Aeetes' heir, though, Medea is a different kind of threat. Closer to her Greek and Roman incarnations than other less bloodthirsty medieval Medeas, who do not kill their young brothers, Lydgate's Medea is a woman with so little regard for the sanctity of family and the security of Aeetes' kingdom that she will kill not only her brother but her father's heir, in order that Jason may make his escape. Although he follows Laurent in such details, Lydgate continues to extend the Medea he has found here and in Guido, and depicted in the *Troy Book*.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, where Laurent expands the brief mentions he has found in Boccaccio to give a fuller account of Medea's story, Lydgate often adds a misogynist note of judgement, as he had done frequently in his rendering of Guido's Latin. Laurent's Medea is simply described as "la cruele femme" (1.7.5) ("the cruel woman")<sup>34</sup> when she kills her sons, whereas Lydgate's Medea does so "Withoute routhe or womanli pite" (1.2346).

<sup>30</sup> See Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the 'Roman Antique'*, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, 'De Casibus Illustrium Virorum', *A Facsimile Reproduction of the Paris Edition of 1520*, ed. Louis Brewer Hall (Gainesville, FLA: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1962).

<sup>32</sup> John Lydgate, *The Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, 4 vols (London: Oxford UP, EETS XS 121-4, 1924-7).

Interestingly, Lydgate again makes clear his use of other sources and authorities: in the *Troy Book* he claimed he could "nat rede" of any siblings, here he observes "She took hir brothir & slouh hym cruely, / And hym dismembrid, as bookis make mynde" (1.2217-8).

<sup>33</sup> For Laurent's expansion of Medea's story as he found it in Boccaccio, see Patricia M. Gathercole, "Laurent de Premierfait, The Translator of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*" *The French Review* 27.4 (1954): 245-52, 248-9. Gathercole points to what she calls Laurent's "passion to instruct" (249) though his additions tend to be factual, whereas Lydgate's are very often more judgemental.

<sup>34</sup> Laurent de Premierfait, *Laurent de Premierfait's 'Des Case des Nobles Hommes et Femmes', Book 1 : Translated From Boccaccio. A Critical Edition Based on Six MSS*, ed. Patricia M. Gathercole (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1968). Translations from Laurent de Premierfait are my own.

Similarly in Laurent's rendering she flees to Ageus when she has been rejected by Jason, and in Lydgate's the reader is told that she does so "void off shame & dreede" (1.2363). In Lydgate's translation of his French source, Medea's gender is repeatedly linked to her threat, as it has been in the *Troy Book*: like other women she is deceptive and vain, but in other ways she specifically deviates from accepted feminine behaviour or reactions, displaying no acceptable or expected emotions such as shame or pity. Accordingly, even though Medea is reconciled with Jason at the end of the account, this is scarcely an uncomplicated example of a woman being subsumed back into her rightfully subservient role. Other accounts (for example Justin's *Epitome*) that describe Jason taking her back emphasise his control, his pity for Medea, while in *De Claris Mulieribus* Boccaccio has described the reunion, but offered no explanation for it. For his part, Laurent notes that when her treachery was discerned by Ageus, Medea left and was reunited with Jason "par une maniere incogneue" (1.7.5) ("by uncertain means"). In the *Fall of Princes*, Medea's agency, and her manipulative threat, are emphasised further. Lydgate notes:

Whan that she sauh hir purpos most odible  
 Be kyng Egeus fulli was espied,  
 She hath hir herte & wittis newe applied,  
 As in ther bookis poetis han compiled,  
 A-geyn to Jason to be reconciled. (1.2376-80)

However, Lydgate acknowledges that poets do not mention how they are reconciled, and hypothesises "it were bi incantacioun" (1.2391).<sup>35</sup> As he has done in the *Troy Book*, Lydgate later mounts an unconvincing defence of women, opining "It is no resoun tatwiten women all, / Thouh on or too whilom dede faile" (1.6646-7). However, as Gower has done in his defence of marriage, here Lydgate, using Laurent and building on his French source's expansion of Boccaccio, points up Medea's threat as an example to men, of what can happen if they fail to exercise appropriate control over a troublesome woman.

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<sup>35</sup> He credits "Ovidius" and "Senec [...] In his tragedies" (1.2383-5) for the story that they were reconciled: of course, neither Ovid nor Seneca give any such account.

William Caxton's *History of Jason* is a more faithful translation of another French text, the *Histoire de Jason* of Raoul Lefèvre. Like Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, it is a male-focused narrative, though here Lefèvre's primary aim is to excuse male folly, rather than to underline its consequences. Morse gives Lefèvre's sources as Benoît, Guido, the *Ovide Moralisé*, and possibly Christine de Pisan. However, she points out that

[...] less than half of Lefèvre's work coincides with the legends as we have hitherto seen them. Not only are there large omissions in the Argonautic voyage itself, but there are expansions which are entirely invented. (167)

In the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troy*, Caxton notes that "Jason by the lernyng and Industrie of med[e]a conquered the sheep with the flees of gold whiche he bare with hym in to grece".<sup>36</sup> In the *History of Jason*, while "folowyng myn auctor as nygh as I can or may not chaungyng the sentence. ne presumyng to adde ne mynusshe ony thing otherwise than myne auctor hath made in Frensshe" (p.1),<sup>37</sup> Caxton gives a far longer account, and one that seems particularly interested in the sensational aspects of Medea's story. In the *Prologue* to the work, Caxton underscores the way that male interests underlie the narrative that is to follow. He notes that Philippe, Duke of Burgundy, has established a chivalric Order of the Golden Fleece, and claims that Jason came to him in a dream, complaining about his previous representations as a faithless seducer. Jason charges his author to clear his name (and in so doing, to make Philippe's Order appear more impressive). Predictably, as this evidence of linked male self-interest would suggest, in their efforts to redeem Jason, Caxton and Lefèvre emphasise the negative aspects of Medea's character, but also, finally, the extent to which she is subject to the male rule that informs and motivates the narrative.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Raoul Lefèvre, *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, trans. William Caxton, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bruges: William Caxton and [?] Colard Mansion, 1473-474). No pagination or signatures.

<sup>37</sup> Raoul Lefèvre, *L'Histoire de Jason*, trans. William Caxton, ed. John Munro (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, Ltd., and Oxford UP, EETS XS 111, 1913). McDonald notes that Caxton's translation is "remarkably close, virtually word-for word" (266) and that "For the most part Caxton's additions have no bearing on the portrayal of Medea" (267). Accordingly, I refer to Caxton and Lefèvre more or less interchangeably, save for when the English author makes a single interesting addition to his French source.

<sup>38</sup> See Ruth Morse, "Problems of Early Fiction: Raoul Lefèvre's *Histoire de Jason*", *MLR* 78.1 (1980): 34-45, 35. She notes that Philippe's choice of Jason as a kind of figurehead for the

Jason is presented very sympathetically, and the text's chivalric interests are clear from the outset. He goes on many adventures with Hercules, and the emphasis is always on the extent of his heroic (and unassisted) achievements, such as his defence of Mirro, Queen of Oliferne, who is being troubled by the attentions of the King of Sklavonye. Mirro is a hugely significant addition to the story. In some ways she echoes the "romanticised" Medea presented by Benoît and his redactors: for example, she and Jason lie in bed separately, each tormented by thoughts of the other, as Medea and Jason do in the *Roman*. In other respects, however, she is very different from Medea. They meet when Jason comes to her aid, and Mirro loves him for his bravery, while Medea takes advantage of his helplessness. He triumphs over fantastic opponents with no help from Mirro: rather, it his adversary who needs help. Crucially too, their romance is very different from Jason and Medea's. They speak openly (in contrast to Jason's furtive conversations with Medea) and Mirro is alarmed by his attention: "Jason began to beholde her so ardantly that she was ashamed how wel that she as wyse & discrete helde honeste manere" (p. 37). Here, Jason is presented very positively: strong where he has traditionally been characterised as weak, he is able to make his suit openly, and crucially the correct balance of power between the sexes is preserved. However, Lefèvre faces problems in his desire to recount the whole "Histoire" of Jason. Following Ovid and perhaps Apollonius, he describes Jason's encounters with Hypsipyle and Medea, and must make his hero appear weaker than these women (at least temporarily) in order to explain the necessity of Jason's abandonment of Mirro (the parallels with the medieval tendency to render both Medea and Helen sympathetic, because weak and powerless, are obvious). Jason attempts to resist Hypsipyle but is eventually overcome by her, and after Medea has heard of his quest, she lays out her terms in a far more uncompromising fashion than she has done in other texts, telling him bluntly that he has no choice but to forsake Mirro, since "if I be cause of savacion of your lyf. as to the regarde of me I wil enjoye you allone with out any other" (p.123). The reader is clearly intended to sympathise with Jason's predicament, and later any control over his decision to abandon Mirro is removed from his

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Order could well have invited ridicule, and that this informs Lefèvre's determined rewriting of his hero (and heroine).

hands utterly, as Medea's nurse bewitches Jason's bed and he falls in love with her.

In his desire to include the whole story, Lefèvre recounts the rejuvenation of Aeson and the killing of Pelias. However, as other authors, medieval and classical, have done before him, he betrays the desire to rationalise Medea's magical power. In his account of the assistance Medea gave Jason with his tasks, he explains that Medea's mother "taught her many enchantments" (p. 111), and gave her a bill explaining how the obstacles before the fleece may be conquered. Meanwhile her nurse (who has been a constant companion in Medea's evildoing) dies, but first describes to her the secrets of rejuvenation. In some ways, such explanations reduce Medea's magic – it is learnt, rather than inherently known, and it is significant that though the bill passes down the female line, these women cannot act on its information: the implication is that whoever holds the bill must wait for a man to accomplish what it advises. On the other hand, this idea of covertly powerful female communities is a threatening one, and Jason's lack of control over the situation is emphasised by the fact that, while in Ovid he asks Medea to rejuvenate Aeson, here the agreement is a private one between Aeson and Medea. What is particularly, and consistently, important here is Lefèvre's determination to make Jason oblivious to Medea's conniving power. Lefèvre is clearly keen to distance Jason from murderous behaviour or magic (except when he is the unwitting victim of the latter), but in making him a more sympathetic character, he unavoidably renders Jason weaker, and Medea more powerful.

Jason's only power, in relation to Medea, is reactive: after her murder of his uncle he rejects her furiously and marries Creusa. Medea feigns submissiveness, telling him "syn it is your plaisir that it so be. hit muste nedes be that it plese me. And so be it alway that youre plaisirs ben fulfillid" (p. 174). In an apparent echo of Seneca she asks him (rather than Creon) for her extra day in Colchis, promising to perform a trick for the couple. She conjures four dragons and appears to Jason and Creusa with one of their sons, and "toke him by the two legges & by the force of her armes Rente him in two pieces. & in that poynt cast him in the plater to fore Jason and Creusa" (p.175). Medea's power here is horrifying (Lefèvre's description is deliberately more graphic



than the brief factual accounts of the murders that have gone before). The power she gleans from her utter disregard for human mores is emphasised as Jason curses her, telling her he would kill her, if only she were a man, and she replies “Certes my dere love knowe ye for trouthe that I had lever see all the world deye. thenne I knewe that ye shold have habitacion with ony other woman thenne with me” (p.176). Lefèvre continues with his attempts to absolve Jason from blame, stressing his lack of control and Medea’s boundless wickedness: fleeing Medea, Jason meets Mirro, who uses a magical ring to lift the enchantments Medea cast on him. They marry, and although Medea finds him and appeals to him, stressing all she has done for him, he rejects her, driving her to kill her other son because of his resemblance to Jason (here Lefèvre is drawing on the *Heroides*: both Hypsipyle and Medea note their children’s resemblance to Jason, and hope it does not foretell their characters). After Mirro has been killed on Aetes’ instructions, and Medea has been abortively married to Ageus and then exiled, the two meet for the final time. Medea repents her sins, and swears subservience to Jason: “And thenne she sware to him & avowed that she sholde never medle more with sortes ne enchantements ne none other malefices ne of ony thing but first he sholde have the cognoissaunce and knowlech” (p. 198).<sup>39</sup> Following the traditional conservative end of their story, Lefèvre notes that they return to Colchis and restore Aetes to the throne, and “had many fayr children to gyder that regned after hem of whome I have founde none historie or sentence” (p.198). Finally, Caxton adds briefly to his source, giving an account of Boccaccio’s handling of the pair in his *Genealogia*, and by noting that Jason is frequently criticised for abandoning Medea, “but in this present boke ye may see the evydent causes why he so dyd” (p. 199).

In their attempts to defend Jason’s actions, Caxton and Lefèvre have chosen to emphasise Medea’s control, to detail her terrible crimes. However, Lefèvre is constrained by his readers’ knowledge of the story of Jason and Medea, and just as this impulse compels him to include episodes such as Jason’s encounter with Hypsipyle (which are frequently elided from medieval

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<sup>39</sup> McDonald (267) notes this as one of the only changes Caxton makes to Lefèvre in his representation of Medea: the whole passage quoted here is Caxton’s addition, and the nature of the addition more vigorously underscores Medea’s ceding of control to Jason.

accounts, and do not make Jason appear heroic or appealing), he is driven to record that Jason and Medea were reconciled. This is partly due to his desire to render the story as complete as possible, but is also arguably due to the fact that either of the other endings available (Medea fleeing to Ageus or rising up to the heavens) leaves Jason bereft, deprived of security in Corinth and unable to exact punishment on Medea. Lefèvre seems to deliberately and repeatedly emphasise Medea's power, building on his sources to stress her ruthless control over Jason and the bloody horror of her crimes. Finally and effectively, however, he undercuts Medea's power with one fell swoop, through her promise to submit utterly to Jason.<sup>40</sup> She becomes akin to Mirro, enjoying no magical power, and succumbing to Jason's will: as Morse puts it "Only by forswearing necromancy and by reducing herself to the level of unaccommodated man does Medea create a claim to regeneracy".<sup>41</sup> It is paradoxically by stressing Medea's evil power throughout the story that Lefèvre is able first to exonerate Jason, and even, finally, to suggest him as more powerful than Medea, because of her final repentance and submission to male control.

Griffin has noted the *Sege of Troy*'s debt to Dares, but as he does with Helen, the author does make some alterations to his primary source where Medea is concerned,<sup>42</sup> despite citing both Guido and Dares. Medea meets Jason and is attracted to him, but rather than expressing her worry over his quest (as she does in Benoît, Guido and Lydgate's *Troy Book*), she manipulates Jason, placing herself in the subservient feminine position and commenting on his virility and bravery:

To whom she yaf anshwere in maner as she þat had lost hir fraunchise and in maner stode under his power and he innocent and not knowing thereof, saying to him in þis wise: 'Hit is goode þat so noble and worthi as ye be to be right wele avised while ye

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<sup>40</sup> McDonald sees her wandering through the woods and her meagre diet (described as she regrets her previous crimes and wishes for reconciliation with Jason) as significant: "By subjugating the flesh [...] Medea is able to deny her *otherness* and can return to society and fulfil the role traditionally allotted to her as a woman" (260). She is also echoing the heroines of hagiography, and in so doing moves ever closer towards the kind of woman male authors could understand, and approve of. My thanks to Laura Jose for this suggestion.

<sup>41</sup> Morse, "Problems of Early Fiction", 43.

<sup>42</sup> As well as some bizarre mistakes: after being rejuvenated by unspecified enchantments, Aeson marries another woman called Medea, and fathers Jason.

stoned at large to take upon you so importable a charge which is un-likely and impossible for eny ertly man for to acheve'. (177-8)

Medea's admiration here is, paradoxically, more likely to have Jason asking for help. Once she has unsettled Jason, she offers him the typical bargain, telling him

"sith ye list in no wise to leve your journey for the grete worthinesse and manhode that I have herd of you, so that ye wol be ensured to me to be ruled and governed after me, I trust verely to shewe you suche menys and weyes that ye shall acheve youre purpos, and truly withoute me ye may never have your entent in the mater". (178)

In Caxton's *History*, Medea is similarly pleased at the impossibility of Jason's quest, recognising as she does the power it gives her. In the *Sege of Troy*, however, she appears particularly dominant, through her words (for example, her apparently ironic reference to the "grete worthinesse and manhode" that continue to motivate Jason) and through Jason's immediate and willing ceding of control to her. While he builds on Dares in his relation of Medea's story, the author seems reluctant to criticise Medea, or compromise her power as Guido has done. Like the anonymous author of the *Laud Troy Book* a century earlier, he ignores all Guido's criticisms of Medea's power, noting only that she has powers "that nowe bēn forbode" (177). Absent too is Guido's criticism of her sexual appetite. Equally, though, the author appears disinterested in romanticising her story. Thus she watches Jason perform his tasks almost as a judge, and certainly with none of the distress she feels in other texts, such as *Confessio Amantis*. The author gives a very brief account of Jason's desertion of Medea and the murder of the children, once more betraying some knowledge of the *Heroides* (direct or indirect) as he notes "by-cause they were so like Jason, Medea slewe hem bothe" (181). He has little interest, however, in either Medea or their relationship, and Jason's new marriage, and the murders of his children, seem no impediment to his heroic career. Indeed, unlike some authors, who include Hercules' expedition to Troy without making clear whether Jason accompanies him on his return from Colchis, the author of the *Sege* mentions Jason repeatedly, underlining the masculine focus of the narrative that is also apparent in his lack of interest in Medea or in Helen.

### **From Medieval to Early Modern: Helen and Medea after 1500**

Unsurprisingly, the introduction of movable type printing in the mid-fifteenth century had a profound effect on the dissemination of classical texts featuring Helen and Medea, both in England and on the continent. By the end of the fifteenth century, not only the works of Ovid and Virgil, but also editions and Latin translations of Homer's works (particularly the *Iliad*) had been repeatedly printed. In addition, Dictys and Dares' accounts of the Trojan War, Baebius Italicus' epitome of the *Iliad*, and Latin translations of Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca* and Isocrates' *Encomium* were all circulating. Euripides' *Medea* had appeared in 1495, alongside three of the dramatists' other tragedies, and Seneca's plays were frequently reprinted.<sup>43</sup> This increased availability of Greek and Latin texts presented English authors with many new authorities to draw on for both women, although it does not seem to have inspired much enthusiasm for English translations of these texts in the period, or in the first half of the sixteenth century.

F. M. Salter and H. L. R. Edwards point to John Skelton's translation of Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca Historia*, from the Latin of Poggio Bracciolini, as "one of the first English translations of the classics".<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, though she is mentioned in the description of the contents of Skelton's fifth book, his translation as it survives now breaks off before he reaches Medea.<sup>45</sup> However, as far as Helen is concerned, his translation does contain one important detail: the story told by "the famous poete Homere" (Book 2, p.132, lines 7-8) of "a pocyon or drynke that was gyven by fayr Heleyne of Grece unto Tholomache of purpoos that he shold be oblyvuous and forgete all thyngis done to-fore" (Book 2, p.132, lines 4-7). Skelton's translation was not printed,

<sup>43</sup> For details of these early continental editions of the classics, see Miroslav Flodr. *Incunabula Classicorum: Wiegendrucke der Griechischen und Römischen Literatur* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1973) 134-7, 171, 186-194, 195, 274-83, 310-23.

<sup>44</sup> They date it to c.1485-88. Diodorus Siculus, *The 'Bibliotheca Historia' of Diodorus Siculus*, trans. John Skelton, ed. F. M. Salter and H. L. R. Edwards, 2 vols (London: Oxford UP, 1957) 2.xxii, xxxii.

<sup>45</sup> For internal evidence from Skelton's own works that he did complete the translation, see Diodorus, *The "Bibliotheca"*, trans. Skelton, ed. Salter and Edwards, 1.xi n.3.

but his use of Poggio's Latin shows that, more than a century before George Chapman's English *Odyssey*, and decades before the appearance of the great sixteenth-century mythographies and reference works, this most alarming Homeric story about Helen was circulating in England. It seems that in the Middle Ages, it was impossible to refer to Helen and Medea's stories, still less to address their threatening power, without an engagement with an author's literary predecessors and models. This engagement can seem flat or derivative (as it may in the *Sege*, for example), but more often creates valuable and sometimes controversial renderings of well-known characters and stories (as it does in the works of Benoît and Guido, or of Chaucer, Lydgate and Caxton). Predictably, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century renderings of Helen and Medea followed the patterns laid down by English and continental authors in the Middle Ages and earlier, and indeed, these medieval texts remained popular, with Chaucer, Lydgate and Caxton in particular being reissued throughout the sixteenth century.<sup>46</sup>

However, despite the distaste for translation into the vernacular (noted by Salter and Edwards) in the first half of the sixteenth century,<sup>47</sup> as the period progressed direct and often faithful translation of classical texts into English became increasingly popular, though both Helen and Medea also continued to be used as brief illustrative or moralistic examples (either of the effects of love or of the pernicious influence of women). Moreover, J. E. Spingarn notes that in the Renaissance, "With the growth of the critical temper the necessity for a choice between the alternative methods of direct translation and of general imitation was more fully realized".<sup>48</sup> He observes that

In the Elizabethan age and the period immediately following it there were two distinct schools of translation. Jonson was the recognised exponent of the literal theory [...]

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<sup>46</sup> On Caxton's continued popularity in the sixteenth and seventeenth century see Robert K. Presson, *Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida" and the Legends of Troy* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1953) 3, 9, and F. P. Wilson and Bonamy Dobrée, eds., *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century: 1600-1660*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. and rev. Douglas Bush (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962) 53. Thomas Heywood's enthusiastic use of Lydgate is discussed below.

<sup>47</sup> Diodorus, *The "Bibliotheca"*, trans. Skelton, ed. Salter and Edwards, xxii-xxiii.

<sup>48</sup> J. E. Spingarn, ed., *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, Vol. 1, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1908) 3.xlix.

The opposing school, which echoed the Horatian protest against too literal translation,<sup>49</sup> was represented by Harington, Chapman, and others. (3.liv-lv)

Reliance on the classics, then, was as important as ever, but was undergoing a subtle change. Like their medieval predecessors, early modern authors might represent their sources faithfully, but they might only claim to do so, while making small but significant alterations. Equally, they might shun the idea of literal translation altogether, and even in their re-presentations of old texts might create new, and newly valuable, portraits of Helen and Medea. What is still apparent, too, is the abiding interest in connecting the two women with an alarming sexual or supernatural power that must often be quashed or compromised even as it is suggested by male authors, and by their classical and medieval models.

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<sup>49</sup> In his *Ars Poetica*, Horace recommends using older texts, but cautions that a degree of sensitivity is necessary to create a meaningful work:

*publica materies privati iuris erit, si / non circa vilem patulumque moraberis orbem, / nec  
verbo verbum curabis reddere fidus / interpres, nec desilies imitator in artum, unde pedem  
proferre pudor vetet aut operis lex.* (131-35)

(“In ground open to all you will win private rights, if you do not linger along the easy and open pathway, if you do not seek to render word for word as a slavish translator, and if in your copying you do not leap into the narrow well, out of which either shame or the laws of your task will keep you from stirring a step”).