

Helen of Troy: representing absolute beauty in language

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ABSTRACT

Helen of Troy is famous for two things: her abduction from Sparta to Troy by the Trojan prince, Paris, and her beauty. In this article I consider the interest taken in these two topics by Renaissance writers. 1) 'Rape' was a term which was being redefined in the 1590s when Helen's story received several innovative retellings and reinterpretations; I argue that changes in rape law gave this old mythological story of abduction a newly urgent topicality. 2) As the most beautiful woman in the world Helen of Troy is an absolute – the paradigm, the standard of beauty. Representing her in language is therefore difficult, if not impossible, since language is, by definition, plural and relative. The Renaissance were aware of this conflict. I consider the responses of narrative and dramatic representation to the challenge which Helen's beauty presented.

KEYWORDS: rape, beauty, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Dr Faustus*, Helen of Troy

Beauty, says the eponymous protagonist in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, is the 'mother to the Muses' (5.1.144), a statement borne out by every anthology of English verse. This apparently uncontroversial observation proves problematic, however, as we see in *Tamburlaine*'s anaphoric conditional conclusion. 'If all the pens that ever poets held', inspired by beauty; 'if all the quintessence' poets try to turn into poetry; if these resulted in just one poem about beauty – yet, *Tamburlaine* concludes ruefully, beauty would remain something 'which into words no virtue can digest' (5.1.173). Poetry cannot represent beauty; beauty cannot be contained in language.

In this essay I want to consider the difficulty literature (both narrative and dramatic) has in representing the beauty of Helen of Troy.

1. Representing beauty

Helen of Troy enters Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy* by association: the Widow Wadman is a sexually predatory female character who is associated with Helen of Troy from early in the novel (Telotte 1989: 121). When he comes to describe the beautiful widow, Sterne gives us a blank page, and enjoins the reader:

Call for pen and ink – here's paper ready to your hand. – Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind – as like your mistress as you can – as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you – (Sterne 1760, VI, 450-51)

Then, after the blank page, he rhapsodises: 'Was ever anything in Nature so sweet! – so exquisite.'

Sterne is not just behaving in typically Shandean, meta-textual fashion; he is continuing a tradition that begins with Homer, a refusal to describe Helen of Troy. What Homer gives us are impressions and reactions. In Book 3 of *The Iliad* the seven old men, elders of the people, sit by the Skaian gates, opining that Helen should be returned to Greece. Their complaints are softened however when they see her: 'Surely there is no blame on Trojans and strong-greaved Achaians if for long time they suffer hardship for a woman like this' (Homer 1951: 104).

This tradition of presenting beautiful women in terms of their effect on others is surprisingly constant in literature. In Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* Hero affects not just men – who think on her and straightway die – but gods (Apollo sees her hair and offers her his throne as a dowry, and Cupid becomes blind by looking in her face) and the world of nature: her breath is so beautiful that bees mistake it for honey, the winds delight in playing upon her hands because they can't keep away from her beauty, and Nature herself weeps because Hero has bankrupted her of beauty: the reason half the world is black is because Hero received their allotted fairness. (Leander, by contrast, is presented in terms of his physical beauty: his neck surpassed 'The white of Pelops' shoulder. I could tell ye / How smooth his breast was and how white his belly'.¹) In Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* Philargus suspects his wife of infidelity, and repeatedly threatens her with death: by drowning, by burning, by

¹ On the association of Hero with her clothes, and others' reactions to her, see Donno (1987); for a continuation of the tradition of representing Helen by reaction, see Walcott *Omeros* (1990).

being dragged naked through thorn bushes. But when he catches sight of her breast ('a most heavenly breast') he stands stock-still in admiration and offers his wife a two-day reprieve to confess (Wroth 1995, Book 1, 18). Aristophanes gives a similar example of male reaction to beauty in *Lysistrata*. After the fall of Troy Menelaus intends to kill Helen. But 'one glimpse' of her breasts' was enough to make him change his mind (Aristophanes 1985: 185). Hecuba anticipates this reaction in *The Trojan Women*. She tries to dissuade Menelaus from returning to Sparta in the same ship as Helen because she knows his thoughts of vengeance will evaporate when he gazes on Helen's beauty.

Marked changes in mortals' reactions and attitudes are the signs in Homer of another kind of beauty: divinity. Characters know when a god has been with them (or someone else) because of the change in them: 'He felt the change and was overcome with awe for he realised a god had been with him'; 'It is obvious that the gods are teaching you this bold and haughty way of speaking'; (*Odyssey* Book I). What is true of humans and gods is true of other sites of beauty too: effect is more illustrative than description. Sidney's *Arcadia* tells us: 'we can better consider the sun's beauty by marking how he gilds these waters and mountains' (63).² Displacement or reaction is more reliable than representation because it does not disappoint.

A sixteenth-century chronicler anticipated Sterne in using blank space to stand in for the unrepresentable. In the manuscript *Vita Henrici VII* from his *Historia Regis Henrici Septimi* (c.1500-1502) Bernard Andreas confesses himself unable to represent the epic battle of Bosworth, and gives us one-and-a-half blank pages instead: 'inalbo relinquo' (32). Andreas was blind, possibly from infancy, and often draws attention to his inability to describe fully events which he had not seen; but nowhere else does he offer a paragraph of apology ('Auctoris excusatio') and leave blank pages. A parallel episode of non-representability in art history occurs with the following complaint about artists: 'not able to make their pictures beautiful, they make them rich – as Apelles said to one of his students who had made a picture of Helen adorned with much gold' (Williams 203). Virginia Woolf followed this tradition of non-representation in *Orlando* when she presented the wittiest man of the early 1700s, Alexander Pope.

² This tradition is Platonic in origin: beauty is the reflected splendour of the divine countenance (see Rogers 1988: 67, citing Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Symposium*).

... the little gentleman said.

He said next,

He said finally.

Here, it cannot be denied, was true wit, true wisdom, true profundity. The company was thrown into complete disarray. One such saying was bad enough; but three, one after another, on the same evening! No society could survive it.

'Mr Pope', said old Lady R, ... You are pleased to be witty.

(Woolf 1970: 142)

As with extremes of beauty in literature, so with wit or epic: they defy representation in narrative.

Faced with extremes, literature's recurrent tactic is the blank space of non-representation. Andreas, Sterne and Woolf offer this literally but many texts approach it by calling attention to absence. In *Historia Destructionis Troiae* (1287) Guido delle Colonne says 'it would be useless effort to explain her appearance in particular details since she surpassed ... the beauty of all other women' (Meek 86). The author of the *Laud Troy* book (c.1400) also gives up on narrating Polyxena's beauty: 'There is no man that is on lyue/ Hir fairnesse that might discryue' (lines 12,007-08, Wülfing 1902: 354). What is consistent in descriptions of Helen of Troy is lack of description, absence of specifics. Homer describes Helen as having 'the face of immortal goddesses'; she wears 'shimmering garments'; she has glistening or shining hair. In Virgil she wears silver robes and has hyacinthine curls. That is as detailed as we get, and the lack of specificity makes sense: if Helen is indisputably the most beautiful woman in the world, as soon as you provide details you make her beauty disputable.

In Shakespeare, characters, in traditional literary fashion, abandon the attempt to describe exceptional beauty. Cassio says Desdemona is 'a maid/ That paragons description and wild fame;/ One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,/ And in th'essential vesture of creation/ Does tire the ingener' (2.1.61-5). In *Antony and Cleopatra* Enobarbus is able to describe everything around Cleopatra, and influenced by her, in sumptuous and erotic detail. The winds which fan her are lovesick; the water on which she floats is amorous; but for the fact that nature abhors a vacuum the air would have gone to gaze on Cleopatra. But Enobarbus is unable to describe Cleopatra's actual person: 'For her own person,/ It beggared all description' (2.2.197-8). Shakespeare is being ingenuous, of course.

For Homer, as for Sterne, not to describe is not to represent. But drama cannot *not* represent. Drama is representation. And what cannot be described –Desdemona, Cleopatra, Helen – still has to be represented.

Of the several plays that feature a Helen character, I want to mention four that have a documentable stage tradition: Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, and Jean Giraudoux's *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place* (written in 1935 but not produced in London or New York until 1955 when it appeared under the title *Tiger at the Gates*). Kenneth Tynan reviewed the first London production of *Tiger at the Gates* in 1955: Diane Cilento [Helen of Troy] was 'fetchingly got up in what I can best describe as a Freudian slip' (1970: 156). Helen's sexuality was also to the fore in a production of *The Trojan Women* at the National Theatre in 1995, directed by Annie Castledine; in this modern-dress production Helen was a Marilyn Monroe look-alike who made her first entrance descending a ladder from the Trojan battlements where the stage's hot air system recreated the famous New York subway-grating pose.

Three RSC productions of *Troilus and Cressida* provide striking images. Lindsay Duncan's Helen of Troy, in 1985, with her alabaster skin and regal deportment, looked every inch a serene princess, in contrast to the anguished vulnerability of Juliet Stevenson's more impulsively kinetic Cressida; in 1968, by contrast, Helen and Cressida were visually indistinguishable blondes, an important casting decision which underlined the play's debate about value as subjective and relative. In 1990 Sally Dexter's voluptuous Helen entered borne aloft on an enormous cushion, wrapped in shining gold fabric, reminding us of her reification as a valuable 'prize'.

Reviews of twentieth-century productions of *Dr Faustus* rarely mention Helen of Troy, probably because productions infrequently attempt verisimilitude. Helen of Troy is recognizably a devil in disguise, like the whore-wife of Act 1, and often the devil who represented the wife at the beginning represents Helen of Troy at the end. At the other extreme is the classical beauty of Jennifer Coverdale (1946): she merits a photograph in the Shakespeare Centre archives (Stratford on Avon) but still no mention in reviews.

The sole Helen to attract attention was the 24-year-old Maggie Wright in 1968, but she was singled out, not for her acting, or for her part in Faustus' damnation, but for her costume: she didn't wear one. Stratford's first naked actress had a long blonde ponytail, a

tiara, and a Max Factor fake tan. Not only was this Helen mentioned in all the reviews but she was a front-page news item in most national and local papers. The director, Clifford Williams, explained that nudity 'was the best way to portray an image of physical beauty' (quoted in anonymous review in *Reading Evening Post* 28 June 1968).⁴ If language is the dress of thought, a naked Helen is a Helen who can't be described.⁵

2. Abducting Helen

Narratives of Helen of Troy talk about 'the rape of Helen,' but what does rape mean in the early modern period? *1 Tamburlaine* illustrates the difficulties which that question poses. Zenocrate, engaged to the Prince of Arabia, is kidnapped by Tamburlaine, who unambiguously seeks her to 'grace his bed' (1.2.36). Agydas later refers to Zenocrate's 'offensive rape by Tamburlaine' (3.2.6). Mary Beth Rose writes that Tamburlaine wins Zenocrate 'by kidnapping and raping her, a little noticed fact'. Her two verbs make it clear that she is using rape in the sense of sexual violation not abduction (which she distinguishes as 'kidnapping'). She underlines her point by repeating it immediately in a footnote: 'I have not yet encountered any discussion of the fact that Tamburlaine 'wins' Zenocrate by raping her' (Rose 1988: 106). But Agydas's use of the noun 'rape' is a variant of 'rapine' with the same meaning as in 1.2 where Zenocrate begs the marauding Tamburlaine 'not to enrich thy followers/ By lawless rapine from silly maid' (1.2.10). Both nouns come from the Latin *rapere*, to seize. It is inconvenient for us, although no doubt convenient for the early modern legal system, that rape could mean both abduction and sexual violation. At the end of the play Tamburlaine assures the on-stage audience that he has not violated Zenocrate's virginity: 'for all blot of foul in chastity,/ I record heaven, her heavenly self is clear' (5.1.486-7). By this stage, in fact, Zenocrate has fallen in love with her captor and the two prepare to wed. The action is still legally rape however, a category in which female consent (or lack of it) is irrelevant, for the crime is not against the woman's body but against the owner of the woman's body – her father or her fiancé, and his lack of agreement defines an act of

⁴ Cf. Marston's 'The Metamorphosis of Pigmalion's Image,' lines 23-4: 'her nakedness, each beauteous shape contains./ All beautie in her nakednes remains.'

⁵ On the European equation of nakedness with 'absence or deficiency of language' see Neill (2000: 411-12).

abduction or sexual violation as rape. (If this is what Rose has in mind, she does not make it clear.)

Tamburlaine distinguishes between rape (as sexual violation) and abduction, but other early modern texts, literary and legal, philosophical and theological, are as likely to conflate the terms as they are to clarify them; and this semantic obfuscation is paralleled conceptually by the overlapping stages in the spectrum from force to desire. Sir Philip Sidney's *Old Arcadia* initially seems clear: 'although he ravisht her not from herself, yet he ravished her from him that owed her, which was her father' (406). The first verb apparently refers to Pamela's body as an entity to be violated, the second to Pamela's legal status as a property to be stolen. Elsewhere, however, as Jocelyn Catty observes, the *Old Arcadia* offers five senses of ravishment 'which it distinguishes and conflates' (Catty 1999: 42): rape, attempted rape, illicit consensual sex, the violent effect of love, and emotional rapture. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is similarly complicated. Lust lives on 'ravin and on rape.' The nouns seem to designate separate not synonymous activities with the former denoting abduction, the latter sexual violence. But as in Sidney, the clarity is short-lived: the 'rape' of Hellenore by Paridell is defined as abduction or seduction (III. x. Argument.1; Catty 1999: 76). The first few pages of Heywood's 'Oenone and Paris' offer little specificity (see stanzas 4, 12, 16). Legal texts are no more consistent. T.E.'s *Laws Resolution of Women's Rights* (1632), a work frequently dependent on medieval legal authority, makes 'little if any distinction ... between seduction and rape; coercion operates within both' (Baines 1998: 76).

Christian ethics, dating back to Augustine, introduced a division between consent of the mind and consent of the body (the former being a sin) but this mind/body division was complicated by Galenic theory which held that a woman could not conceive unless she experienced orgasm; any rape resulting in pregnancy was ipso facto not a rape. In the *Old Arcadia* Cecropia argues 'Do you think Theseus should ever have gotten Antiope with sighing and crossing his arms? He ravished her ... But having ravished her, he got a child of her – and I say no more, but that, they say, is not gotten without consent of both sides' (Sidney 1987: 402).

The concept of consent was further problematic. If a woman yielded to threats or force, she technically consented. Busyrane's tapestry in *The Faerie Queene* 'depicts the rapes of women by gods in a way that blurs the issue of consent' (Catty 1999: 81). Angelo in *Measure for Measure* wants Isabella's agreement to her own violation.

The series of obstacles – doors, bolts – which obligingly ‘yield’ to Tarquin in Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece* as he makes his symbolic journey from outside to inside, from Ardea to Rome, from guest bedroom to Lucrece’s chamber, not only enact rape but raise the troublingly ambiguous question of Lucrece’s consent (Fineman 1991: 165-221). This was an issue which had long occupied commentators. If Lucrece was innocent, why did she commit suicide? Hence the frequent conclusion that she enjoyed Tarquin’s violence. So morally ambiguous was Lucrece’s story that, like Helen’s, it became a topic for formal disputation (Donaldson 1982: 40).

Consent was thus a blurred issue in early modern England. With ambiguities and confusions of language and ideology it is little wonder that some writers were driven to qualify their terms in ways that seem to us tautological. Barbara Baines surveys legal texts across four centuries and explains that ‘when unwilling (involuntary) carnal pleasure is defined by such phrases as “consent of the body” or “the will of the body,” then the phrase “consent of the mind” becomes necessary to represent what the word “consent” alone should signify. “Consent of the mind” is, however, as redundant as “forcible rape” or “rape with force”’ (Baines 1998: 91).

Consent is a key concept in most texts about Helen as we see in four Shakespearean texts: *1 and 2 Henry 4*, *Henry 5* and *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The issue of consent is raised obliquely in relation to Helen of Troy in *Henry 4* and *Henry 5*. Nell was a common (and not pejorative) abbreviation for Helen, and so Nell Quickly clearly merits inclusion in any discussion of Helen of Troy. She is fought over by two suitors, Nym and Pistol; like Helen, she engages in needlework, living (euphemistically) by the prick of her needle;⁶ when she and Doll Tearsheet face arrest we are told, in an ambiguity of personal pronoun which could apply to either woman, ‘there hath been a man or two kill’d about her’ (*2 Henry 4* 5.4.6). In fact, in an apt textual crux, Nell the wife is conflated with the whore. ‘News have I that my Doll is dead’ says Pistol in *Henry 5* 5.1.81, presumably intending his lawful loving wife but giving her the name of the prostitute who accompanies her.⁷ Of particular interest then is the Hostess’s unusual collocation in *Henry 5* 2.1 when Nym and Pistol,

⁶ On Helen and weaving, see Blundell (1985); Bergren (1979). On weaving generally see Cunningham ‘Yarn’ and ‘Having a Clue’ (forthcoming).

⁷ The Riverside editor speculates that in revising the play Shakespeare transferred to Pistol business and lines originally given to Falstaff, but failed to alter Falstaff’s Doll to Pistol’s Nell (‘Note on the text’ 972).

her rival suitors draw: 'O welliday, Lady, if he be not hewn now, we shall see willful adultery and murther committed' (2.1.36-8). The Riverside gloss suggests that 'the Hostess here perpetrates a double blunder, intending *assaultery*, her own version of *assault and battery*' (2.1.37n). This gloss is based on the assumption that 'wilful adultery' (=consenting adultery) is both a malapropism and a tautology. The first it may be, but the second is only valid in contemporary terms where we take for granted that the *OED* definition of adultery – 'violation of the marriage bed' – refers to voluntary violation ('the voluntary sexual intercourse of a married person with one of the opposite sex'; *OED* adultery 1). Involuntary violation goes by another name: rape. But in early modern times, the question of consent is irrelevant legally, if not emotionally. In T.E.'s *Laws Resolution of Women's Rights* T.E. devotes a section to adultery with and without consent, yet classifies both as rape (390; Catty 1999: 13). Although T.E.'s text is seventeenth-century, much of its legal authority derives from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, and there is no sense that his definition here is novel.

Like rape and abduction, the concepts of rape and adultery were inextricably intertwined in the early modern period: what the law has joined together critics cannot put asunder. But early modern women, like Nell Quickly, can. For women the two categories – wilful and unwilful adultery – are inevitably distinct. Mistress Quickly, in the linguistically feminized space of the tavern, re-appropriates for herself the Adamic power of naming. Chris Cannon sees the legal problem of raptus/rape/abduction as one of renaming: 'the crucial distinction between an act and the names that might be given it' (82). We see this most obviously in a statute change of 1597 which separated abduction from rape. Rape was no longer a crime of property, a crime against male owners, but a crime against the female body. This indirectly introduced a concept (and a word) which has become key in rape law and debate ever since: consent.⁸

⁸ The issue of consent had been raised earlier: in a statute of 1555; in Sir William Staunford's *Exposition* (1567); in William Lambard's *Eirenarcha* (1588), 257; and it continued to occupy Michael Dalton in *The Country Justice* (1618) and T. E. in *The Law's Resolution of Women's Rights* (1632). For good discussions of literature in relation to the law on this topic – and the enduring imprecision, and the apparent tautology and contradiction, of terminology – see Baines; Walker; Garrett; Catty; Belsey; Porter 217; Brownmiller; Wynne-Davies. After the statute change of 1597, public thought and practice did not change overnight, however: historians document a gradual shift and

Shakespeare's work in the 1590s shows a recurrent interest in consent, and it is hard not to see this as a topical concern. In *Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, he is interested less in the formal conclusion of marriage (as he later is in *Two Noble Kinsmen*) than in the ambiguous nature of consent which precedes it. The sundered Fairy King and Queen are of most interest in this respect: marital reunion is conditional on female submission ('give me that boy, and I will go with thee', demands Oberon at 2.1.143). The condition is obtained by magic (a metaphor, as Jean Roberts points out, for male power; Roberts 1987-8: 63⁹) and accompanied by unnecessary humiliation. Oberon relates the (to him) positive outcome of a meeting with Titania:

When I had at my pleasure *taunted* her,
And she in mild terms begged my patience,
I then did ask of her her changeling child;
Which straight she gave me. (4.1.57-60; my emphasis)

The nature of Hippolyta's consent is similarly compromised. Elizabeth Fowler's statement about Chaucer's Amazon queen is applicable to Shakespeare's: 'if we wonder what Ypolita thinks of her marriage, knowing what she said under the pressure of Theseus's sword would hardly satisfy us' (Fowler 1998: 60). The issue of consent is also to the fore in Hermia's matrimonial independence. Egeus's anger is caused less by his daughter's choice of husband than by her attempt to deny him authority:

They would have stol'n away, they would, Demetrius,
Thereby to have defeated you and me:
You of your wife, and me of my consent,
Of my consent that she should be your wife. (4.1.156-59)

Even in the romantic world of reciprocal love we are offered the sophisticated riddles of Lysander's attempts to get into Hermia's bed: 'One turf shall serve as pillow for us both, / One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth' (2.2.41-2). Hermia twice has to ask Lysander to 'lie further off' (44, 57). Contemporary productions have long

Nazife Bashir goes so far as to say that the 'same medieval laws applied for the period 1558-1700' (1983: 41).

⁹ Jocelyn Catty points out that in the *Faerie Queene*, for both Acrasia and Busyrane, 'enchantment is a substitute for physical force' (1991: 82).

since ceased to play this as prissiness on Hermia's part, seeing it instead as part of the atmosphere of threat which characterizes the wood. Hermia's attempts to evade pre-marital sex are the thin end of a wedge which leads to Helen of Troy's raptus.¹⁰ The minatory tone becomes most overt in Demetrius's threats to the rejected Helena: he progresses from leaving her to the 'mercy of wild beasts' (2.1.228) to becoming a beast himself: 'I shall do thee mischief in the wood' (2.1.237).¹¹

The play's grounding in legal terminology seems relevant here. Athens is the home of law and the play is full of legal allusions. Demetrius asks his rival to 'yield/ Thy crazed title to my certain right' (91-2); Hermia 'plead[s]' her 'case' (61-3); Lysander defends his entitlement to 'prosecute my right' (105); Egeus claims ownership of his daughter 'and all my right of her/ I do estate unto Demetrius' (97-8).¹² In the wood law and love are continually associated: Puck describes the mortal wooing as 'pleading for a lover's fee' (3.2.113); Lysander challenges Demetrius 'to try whose right,/ Of thine or mine, is most in Helena' (3.2.336-7). The mechanicals are concerned lest their dramatic representation fall foul of the Athenian law: 'that were enough to hang us all' (1.2.76-7). The lists which typify characters' speeches throughout *Midsummer Night's Dream* function as if evidence in a court of law. Egeus takes eight lines to itemise Lysander's incriminating 'love tokens' (1.1.28-35). Titania takes thirty-six to list environmental damage (2.1.82-117). Even Peter Quince piles up three persuasive descriptive phrases to convince Bottom to play Pyramus: 'for Pyramus is a sweet faced man; a proper man as one shall see in a summer's day; a most lovely gentlemanlike man' (1.2.85-8). Quince offers a verbal contract to his actors, adopting a pseudo-legalese series of synonyms: 'Here are your parts, and I am to entreat you, request you, and desire you to con them by tomorrow night' (1.2.99-101). Convince, we remember, comes from *vincere*, to conquer (in fact, a sixteenth-century meaning of the verb was to 'overcome, conquer, vanquish; *fig.* to overpower');

¹⁰ This theme was developed gratuitously in Robert Le Page's production at the National Theatre in 1992 where Puck raped the First Fairy in act 2 scene 1.

¹¹ In a logic not untypical of cultural history, Helen is being punished sexually for the crime of sex (she risks her virginity pursuing Demetrius to the wood). See C. S. Lewis, 'After Ten Years' (1966) and Catty (1999) 84-6 on rape as a punishment for 'erring females' in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

¹² Edward Rocklin (1990) describes an acting exercise in which students focused their interpretation of 1.1 on one significant prop: a volume of *The Laws of Athens* (156-7).

OED convince 1.1), and the play's sexual and linguistic conquests are linked.

The concept of consent has long been a key issue in the Helen of Troy myth, where the crucial question from antiquity was: did Helen go willingly or was she abducted? In the 1590s questions about abduction and rape, wilful and unwilful adultery, coercion and desire were in the air. Marion Wynne-Davies notes that the very fact of new rape legislation in 1597 'after a century's inactivity reveals a peak of interest in, and concern about, sexual assault' (Wynne-Davies 1991: 131). It was a highly appropriate time to reexamine the myth of Helen.

3. Beauty and language

It is fitting that the Elizabethan poet who in his life most tested the notion of limit should dramatise the Helen of Troy story in a narrative about boundaries: *Dr Faustus*. For Marlowe Helen becomes a story about the limits of language.

Two related episodes in *Doctor Faustus* and *Tamburlaine* cement the link between Helen of Troy and language. The first is the unexpected moment at the end of *1 Tamburlaine* when Tamburlaine, a physical character if ever there was one, pauses during the battle for Damascus to deliver a lengthy metaphysical meditation on beauty. Contrast this with the physical reaction of Faustus, a metaphysical scholar, to beauty: he asks Mephistopheles to give him 'unto my paramour/ That heavenly Helen which I saw of late' (5.1.84-5). There is nothing untoward about theologians (or academics) desiring sex (Berowne defends his divagation from study as empirically educative: women's eyes are 'the books, the academes'; *LLL* 4.3.299), and if the aim of study is, as the King of Navarre asserts, 'that to know which else we should not know' (1.1.56), then sex is the original forbidden knowledge (an equation made later in *Love's Labour's Lost* in Berowne's image of women's eyes as 'Promethean fire'; 4.3.300). Faustus's desire for Helen is perhaps just a reification of his traffic with the forbidden:

Faustus I gave them [Lucifer and Mephistopheles] my soul for my cunning.

All God forbid!

Faustus God forbade it indeed. (5.2.36-9)

But Faustus's reaction to beauty is noticeably uncerebral. If we put Faustus's reaction next to Tamburlaine's, we see a common denominator: not the forbidden but the unattainable.

Tamburlaine begins with the specific beauty of Zenocrate ('ah, fair Zenocrate, divine Zenocrate!/ Fair is too foul an epithet for thee'), contemplates the relation between beauty and creative artistry ('Beauty, mother to the Muses'), then equates beauty with suffering, the suffering of the writer as he realizes that beauty cannot be digested into words (5.1.160 ff). Alexander Leggatt points out that Tamburlaine's frustrations with beauty parallel his frustrations with world conquest: the inability to conquer it with a pen (Leggatt 1973: 29). Faustus's difficulty is similarly one of limits, whether of the university quadrivium ('Is to dispute well logic's chiefest end?/ ... / Then read no more, thou hast attained that [B-text: the] end') or of political power: 'Emperors and kings/ Are but obeyed in their several provinces,/ ... / But his dominion that exceeds in this [magic]/ Stretcheth as far doth the mind of man' (1.1.59-62).¹³ Faustus wants 'the whole extent,' 'all that is possible.' These are the *OED* definitions of 'all', an adjective recurrent in Faustus's vocabulary:

All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command (1.1.58-9)
Resolve me of all ambiguities (1.1.82)
[S]earch all corners of the new found world (1.1.86)
[T]ell the secrets of all foreign kings (1.1.89)
I'll have them wall all Germany with brass (1.1.90)
[R]eign sole king of all our provinces (1.1.96)¹⁴

Collapsing limits was, in many respects, a humanist project: the bringing of the past into the present, the resurrecting the classics through translation. Faustus is a humanist scholar but he is, in all

¹³ Damnation, then, as defined by Mephistopheles, would seem to have attractions: 'Hell hath no limits' (2.1.124). Hell in short is a metaphysicians' (or at least a Faustian) paradise.

¹⁴ By the end of the play, however, in an unsurprising theophobic volte face, Faustus will be begging for the re-imposition of limits:

Oh God,/ ... / Impose some end to my incessant pain.
Let Faustus live in Hell a thousand years,
A hundred thousand, and at last be saved.
No end is limited to damned souls (5.2.98, 101-04).

respects, a bad humanist scholar (Bevington and Rasmussen 1973: 17). He translates Helen of Troy into the present not for the purpose of study but for sex.

Faustus rejects theology for necromancy. The rejection is not just spiritual but linguistic, for in a post-Adamic world, where language and meaning have lost their one-to-one correspondence, necromancy enables the magician to regain Adamic power: '*ipse nunc...* / I see there's virtue in my heavenly words. ... / Such is the force of magic and my spells' (1.3.22-3, 28, 32). Magic's power to do what language cannot do, to 'abolish the gap between sign and referent' (Forsyth 1987: 13) is dramatically exemplified in a seventeenth-century story of the extra devil who appeared on stage at a performance of *Faustus* (Bevington and Rasmussen 1973: 50). The play ceased to be a representation, becoming itself a spell.

It is not magic that is dangerous, it is language, and Helen is a metaphor for language. 'Be silent then, for danger is in words' (5.1.25), Faustus warns the scholars just before he brings in Helen of Troy. The geminary structure of the scene, in which everything to do with Helen is doubled (she appears twice, between two cupids [in the B text], and is herself a double, a devil impersonating Helen; Forsyth 1987: 12) illustrates the danger Marlowe has in mind: the duplicity of language. Marlowe exploits the *eidolon* tradition¹⁵ and does so in a way which emphasizes Helen's role as an emblem for a sign system in which you do not get what you seek but a substitute for it. Faustus's encounter with Helen replays his first encounter with women in the play (he asks for a wife and is given (and rejects) 'a hot whore') and indeed all his encounters in the play – with intellectual questions, with travel, in which he never gets what he asked for. The Young Vic production of the play in 2002, starring Jude Law as Faustus, underlined this point by staging Helen as an optical illusion, created by lights and mirrors.

This returns us to the topic with which I began – the problem of representing beauty – which links to the second topic: the rape of Helen. The common denominator is language. Poetic language, like rape, is about violent coupling.¹⁶ Metaphoric language asserts that two different things are actually the same and brings them together

¹⁵ In the sixth century BCE the Greek-Sicilian Stesichorus inaugurated a variant tradition in which Helen did not accompany Paris to Troy; instead the gods sent an *eidolon* – a phantom or image of her – and Helen spent the war in Egypt.

¹⁶ For the material in this and the following three paragraphs I am indebted to my research student and colleague, Ben Morgan.

in a momentary, violent union. To compare two like things would result in tautology or linguistic redundancy, a problem illustrated by Spenser (a poet fascinated by beauty, language, unity and doubleness) in Book 1 of the *Faerie Queene* when he compares Morpheus, the god of sleep, to someone who is asleep: 'as one then in a dreame' (I.1.42, line 7). But Morpheus cannot be *like* someone who is asleep because he *is* the god of sleep. Morpheus is therefore the standard of 'asleepness'; he is the absolute of dormancy. As such he is beyond language, which relies on the relative, on their being two positions, on a momentary fix between two separate things (whether in poetic metaphor or in structuralist theory). Like Spenser's Morpheus, Milton's God is beyond language: God simply *is*, he is transparent, and so Milton's God speaks without metaphor (which may be theologically and philosophically responsible but is poetically disastrous, as generations of readers of *Paradise Lost* have registered). And like Morpheus or God, Helen too is beyond language and for the same reason: as the paradigm of beauty she is absolute, an absolute, the absolute.

The absolute is a term (and a concept) beloved by Thomas Heywood. When Edward IV sees and falls in love with Jane Shore he says 'I never did behold/ A woman euerie way so absolute' (*1 Edward 4*, D4r). In *A Challenge for Beauty* (Q 1636), the vain and arrogant Queen Isabella believes that for beauty she is a *non pareille*. The honest courtier Lord Bonavida disputes this on the grounds that nature does not deal in absolutes:

Nature hath yeelded none so absolute,
To whom she made no fellow. First for beautie,
If *Greece* afforded a fayre *Hellen*, *Troy*
Her paralleled with a *Polyxena*. (B1v)¹⁷

Lord Bonavida's speech reveals Heywood's medieval reading here in which Helen is only the most beautiful woman in *Greece*, *Polyxena*

¹⁷ Lord Bonavida unwisely concludes:

Madam though I confesse you rare, ...
Yet not so choice a piece, but the wide world
May yeeld you a competitor. (B1v)

Queen Isabella issues the challenge for beauty of the play's title, and Lord Bonavida finds a more beautiful woman in England. The same thing happens in Peele's much earlier *Arraignement of Paris* where Juno and Pallas Athena appeal to Jove for a retrial and Venus (and Helen) lose the restaged beauty contest because Paris had not yet seen Queen Elizabeth.

is the most beautiful woman in Troy.¹⁸ It is this parallel which Chaucer has in mind when he says that Criseyde is more beautiful than either Helen or Polyxena, the two paradigms of Western and Asian beauty (*Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 1, lines 454-55). (And his comparison subtly foreshadows Troilus's destiny: the men who love these women are doomed.)

Narrative often persuades readers to accept the omission of descriptions by inviting them to think of the consequences of inclusion. This is a favourite tactic of Lydgate's. His pen would split if he should describe woe:

For alle her sorwes 3if I shulde telle
In this story, and her wo discribe,
Mi penne shuld of verray routhe rive (Book 4, lines 6374-76)

And if he said more we would be moved: 'Me liste no more of hir wo endite ... / Which wolde meve to compassioun' (Book 4, lines 3710, 3714). The implication in both these examples is that the poet could describe but has decided not to. More often, however, the problem is inability – not just the poet's but the inability of language itself to perform the task which is being requested of it. Faced with the beauty of Helen, Lydgate says

And certeynly, 3if I schal reherse
Hir schap, hir forme, and feturis by & by
As Gwydo doth by ordre ceryously, ...
From hed to foot, clearly to devise,
I han non englysche that ther-to may suffyse;
It wil not be, oure tonge is not lyke. (Book 2, lines 3674-6, 3678-9)

In oher words: 'I can't describe all her features like Guido does; English is not up to it.' Lydgate implies that the problem is with the English language (Latin can manage it). In fact, Latin can't: Guido may have an extended description but his details tell us little more about Helen than does Lydgate. The problem lies not with a particular language; the problem lies with language generally. Extremes of any kind are one, absolute, fixed; language is plural and relative.

¹⁸ Some medieval versions (the anonymous *Seege at Troy*, Caxton's *Recuyell*, the *Laud Troy Book*) offer the alternative tradition – the tradition which was to become the dominant one – that Helen is the most beautiful woman in the world.

Lucian had introduced the problem of absolute beauty in the second century AD: 'Now we looking not simply for beauty but for the great beauty ... ; we are in search of a definite thing, the supreme beauty, which must necessarily be *one*' (*Hermotimus* in Fowler and Fowler (1905), II, 67). Absolute beauty is singular – 'one' – but language is not: language is plural. To talk about Helen, the absolute of beauty, one has to force her into a relative position (as Morgan points out, personal communication). Mythological and literary narrative has numerous ways of doing this. It can double her (the *eidolon* of Greek tradition, the calque of Shakespeare's Cressida¹⁹). It can sexualize her and abduct her, thereby forcing her body into a system of physical relations, moving her from the absolute to the real. Throughout the Middle Ages, the many versions of the Troy story present Helen's abduction as a kind of narrative foreplay: it is always outwith the main body of the text. The *Laud Troy* book makes this explicit: over 3000 lines into the book, having described Helen's abduction, the poet says 'Herkenes now, both grete and smale! For now begynnes al this tale' (3293-4). The tale *begins*? What does he think he has been doing for 3000 lines? But he realises that only with abduction can Helen be narrated.

So, literature can double her or abduct her. Or it can damage her: this, I think, is what lies behind the otherwise inexplicable Renaissance innovation of making Helen physically flawed by giving her a scar on her chin. In *Euphues* (1578) Lyly includes this detail in a list of items whose beauty is enhanced by imperfection:

the sweetest rose hath his prickle, the finest velvet his brack, the fairest flour his bran ... And true it is ... that in all perfect shapes, a blemish bringeth rather a liking every way to the eyes than a loathing any way to the mind. Venus had her mole in her cheek, which made her more amiable, Helen her scar on her chin which Paris called *cos amoris*, the whetstone of love, Aristippus his wart, Lycurgus his wenne. (Lyly 2003, 3).²⁰

¹⁹ Almost all commentators on Chaucer's *Criseyde* and Shakespeare's *Cressida* agree that *Criseyde's/Cressida's* situation is an action replay of Helen's, *mutatis mutandis*.

²⁰ Lyly's detail is not an error: when he revised his text, he kept this paragraph intact. This might be a detail he made up: there are also no known references to Aristippus's wart or Lycurgus's wen, which seem therefore to be Lyly's invention. It is significant that all Renaissance references to Helen's scar postdate *Euphues* and are either direct quotes from *Euphues* or paraphrases which make it clear that the source is *Euphues*.

No classical authority mentions Helen as scarred, nor is there any need to: the *eidolon* tradition serves the same purpose, providing something against which to measure Helen. Marring her beauty in this way forces it into a relative position, one which can then be iterated. (And this, perhaps, is why drama has less trouble in representing Helen: drama is already a form of doubling, as we are aware of the actor representing the character.)

Helen's story, according to Morgan, is a story of containment and disruption, of movement from outside to inside, of invasion (like the story of rape). This is visible at every stage of the Trojan war narrative. It begins with Paris expelled only to return. Hecuba had dreamed that she would give birth to a firebrand which would destroy Troy; when Paris was born he was abandoned on a hillside. Rescued and raised by shepherds, he is later identified and welcomed back into the Trojan royal family. The Spartan Helen is captured, brought from Greece to Troy. In defense of her, the Greeks enter the Trojan horse; the Trojan horse enters Troy. This movement from outside to inside is recapitulated repeatedly in the narrative, which can be read as a parable of containment and excess, of controlled space and disruption of that space.

At the centre of that narrative is Helen who, as an absolute of beauty, is linguistically disruptive: she halts the narrative. This is true of all literature's indescribably beautiful females, from the divinely lit Britomart to the ruttishly luscious Cleopatra. Faced with the absolute, the narrative pauses and indulges in rapt reaction. The fabric of the play/poem/plot comes momentarily apart at the seams because to be an absolute is to be outside time – to be loose, free, apart, separate. 'Loose', 'free', 'apart', 'separate' are all meanings of absolute, which derives from the Latin verb *absolvere*, to loosen. The prefix is odd, however: since *solvere* on its own means to loosen, the 'ab' in *absolvere* functions as an intensifier, emphasising the irreversibility of the separation (and giving rise to the OED meaning [11.2] of *absolute* as 'complete, entire'). *Absolvere*, Morgan reminds me, is emphatic about the completeness of the action it denotes, an irreversibility which can be viewed as a refusal to belong to a sequence of actions. *Absolvere* is premised on the possibility of an action which can conclude sequence altogether and begin time afresh. ('Absolution' has the same root; the absolution ensures that the sinner is entirely apart from his/her previous actions and from the past narrative sequence in which they occurred.) As an absolute, Helen is separate: outside time, space, corporeality. Her story is

about attempts to contain her, to relativize her, to bring her into language.

Franz Rosenzweig writes that 'with the proper name, the rigid wall of objectness has been breached. That which has a name of its own can no longer be a thing ... It is incapable of utter absorption into the category for there can be no category for it to belong to; it is its own category' (quoted in Natanson 533). As the absolute of beauty Helen becomes her own category. Helen's story thus reflects the problem of figurative language itself. Language is always in a Parisian state of libido, for more or less the same reason: it is reaching out for an absolute. Metaphoric language, like Paris, is in love with the absolute; and the product of this coupling is a thrilling violence. Nowadays we call this violence the pleasure of the text.

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