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Helen of Troy: Senior Research Prospectus

By Melanie Vanderkolk

The infamous Helen of Troy makes one of her first appearances in Greek literature in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., yet her depiction is anything but coherent. In the *Iliad*, Homer describes her as a beautiful woman who is full of worth but acts as a child, knowing that she was wrong in having succumbed to Paris, who has stolen her from her husband, Menelaus. The *Odyssey*, however, shows Helen as a devoted wife of Menelaus, almost laughing at the "shameless whore that I was."<sup>1</sup> Instead of being the "wretched, headstrong girl" of the *Iliad*, Helen is now the "pearl of women."<sup>2</sup> In the Greek literature that follows, Aeschylus, Herodotus, Euripides, and Aristophanes provide various interpretations and portrayals of Helen and her character. The sources debate most over whether or not Helen went with Paris willingly. Aeschylus and Euripides show a Helen guilty of adultery and leaving her husband, while Aristophanes shows Helen as pure, and Herodotus claims she was in Egypt for the duration of the Trojan War and was not to blame for the destruction of Troy.<sup>3</sup> These inconsistencies in Helen's character have not gone unnoticed by modern scholars. Authors such as Norman Austin, Mihoko Suzuki, Ingrid Holmberg, Matthew Gumpert, and Robert Meagher have tried to make sense of the images by suggesting that Helen is a metaphor for cultural appropriation, and that Helen is dualistic in nature. These scholars, though, only focus their research on the portrayals of Greek authors.

In order to gain more understanding of the various images of Helen of Troy, I propose a study of her Roman portrayals. In essence, who was the Roman Helen? Primary sources including images of Helen are most prominent during the reign of

Augustus, and we must ask why this is the case. One reason is probably that Augustus claimed to be descended from Aeneas, a hero from the Trojan War, started by Helen. With this in mind, I will focus my research more succinctly on the question, how did the Augustan poets portray Helen?

This question raises further inquiry. For instance, what connotations does Helen bring with her? How do the individual Latin words used to create the portrayal contribute to her connotations? What are the patterns found in the language and images? What are the differences between the authors, and how do these differences affect the portrayals? How do these images contribute to the poem or work as a whole? To begin answering these questions, I will translate from the Latin excerpts from Ovid's *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Horace's *Odes* and *Epodes*, Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, and Propertius' *Elegies*. Each of these authors provides different versions and ways of approaching Helen as an individual. Ovid writes the longest of all the images, with his *Paris Helenae* and *Helene Paridi*, in which we read two letters written in the voice of Paris and Helen regarding their relationship.<sup>4</sup> His works are particularly useful in my research simply because they are using this direct address between Helen and Paris and will show their feelings towards one another. Propertius, on the other hand, uses brief images of Helen to make comparisons to his own lover and his own relationship, suggesting that Helen's influence was still well-known and common when he wrote the elegies between 28 and 22 B.C. Livy was not a client of Augustus', as the other authors were, but he was a contemporary of theirs. He, though only briefly, uses Helen and the Trojan War as a beginning point in his history of Rome.

Despite these differences in her types of portrayals, though, I predict patterns regarding the type of woman Helen was and her guilt or innocence will

<sup>1</sup> *Odys.*, Bk. IV, line 162.

<sup>2</sup> *Iliad.*, Bk. III, line 480. and *Odys.*, Bk. IV, line 342.

<sup>3</sup> As seen in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, and Herodotus' *The Histories*.

<sup>4</sup> *Heroides*, letters XVI and XVII.



arise. For instance, she is known most commonly as the daughter of Tyndareus: "Tyndaridi," "Tyndaris...bis rapta," "Tyndarida," "Tyndaridis facies invisa Lacaenae," "Lacaenae...adulterae," and as a Lacaenean woman, both titles defining Helen as an outsider.<sup>5</sup> Helen's beauty is also a prominent feature of her portrayals; she has a "digna quidem facies" and is "pulcherrima" with her "laudatam...formam."<sup>6</sup> It is this beauty that causes her to be a prize, "praemia magna quidem."<sup>7</sup> I will use Latin epitaphs and general descriptions such as these to decipher what each author wants his reader to remember or know about Helen.

It is from this literal knowledge of Helen in the primary texts that leads us to ask why each author would choose each word and image, as every author has the power to include or leave out any aspect of a character he wishes. In the *Aeneid*, for example, Helen seems to first be used to show that the gods are truly to blame for Aeneas and other soldiers fighting the Trojan War, and then later used in Deiphobus' story to show the destruction and maliciousness of the war.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, Virgil is choosing what attributes of hers to include at particular points in his epic, and which to use at other points.

Why an author would choose a specific image during the reign of Augustus, though, becomes more complicated because of the patron-client relationship and the college of poets under Maecenas, a chief of Augustus'. This relationship would involve a give-and-take atmosphere to make both individuals happy. Over the years, scholars have disagreed with the way in which this patron-client relationship affected the poets, though. With regards to Virgil, scholars such as Elizabeth Haight, Ronald Syme, and J.P. Sullivan suggest that Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* as a tribute to Augustus, while in

"Ovid and the Augustans," Brooks Otis debates whether or not Ovid could even be considered an Augustan poet because of his seemingly defiant nature. If the college of poets acted as a mouthpiece for the emperor, the uses of Helen would be very different than if, as R.Y. Tyrell suggests, the elegists were only writing about what they were passionate.<sup>9</sup> For my research, I will also look at more current scholars such as Jasper Griffin, W.R. Nethercut, Joseph Farrell, Kurt Raaflaub and Mark Toher, and Thomas Habinek. Like Habinek, Raaflaub and Toher believe a combination of the extreme theories of Augustan patronage. They believe that Augustus and Maecenas influenced the poets but allowed them to work in the propagandistic society with their own perspectives. These books and articles will further my knowledge of the lives of the authors and different views of how the authors would see their own work.

There can be no denial that being a member of Augustus' college of poets would have some effect on each work as a whole, and I will use the same sources mentioned above to define the history of Augustus' relationships with his poets. We can see some influence of Augustus if we consider his goals for his reign. The ideals Augustus wanted to spread at the time were ideals for "the land, the soldier, religion and morality, the heroic past, and the glorious present."<sup>10</sup> With the use of Helen in any poem, the author would be reminding the reader of the Trojan War and of Aeneas' piety in leaving Troy to found Rome. This story, known to all Romans, could possibly be the heroic past that Augustus, who claims to be a descendent of Aeneas, wants to be in the mind of the Romans. Questions that need to be considered when looking to the primary texts for answers regarding the poets' meanings and to these secondary sources for additional knowledge about the lives of these poets include: How seriously can scholars take these poets? What role did Augustus play in creating or forcing these

<sup>5</sup> Propertius, II.8, line 32., Ovid *Metamorphoses* Bk. XV, line 233., Virgil Bk. II, line 601., and Horace *Odes* III.3, line 25.

<sup>6</sup> Propertius II.3, line 39, *Heroides*, Letter VIII, line 99, and *Heroides* Letter XVI, line 132.

<sup>7</sup> *Heroides*, Letter XVI, line 19.

<sup>8</sup> Virgil, Bks. II and VI.

<sup>9</sup> Tyrell discusses the purpose and goals of each Augustan poet in his article, "Latin Poetry."

<sup>10</sup> Syme, Ronald. *The Roman Revolution*, pg. 460.



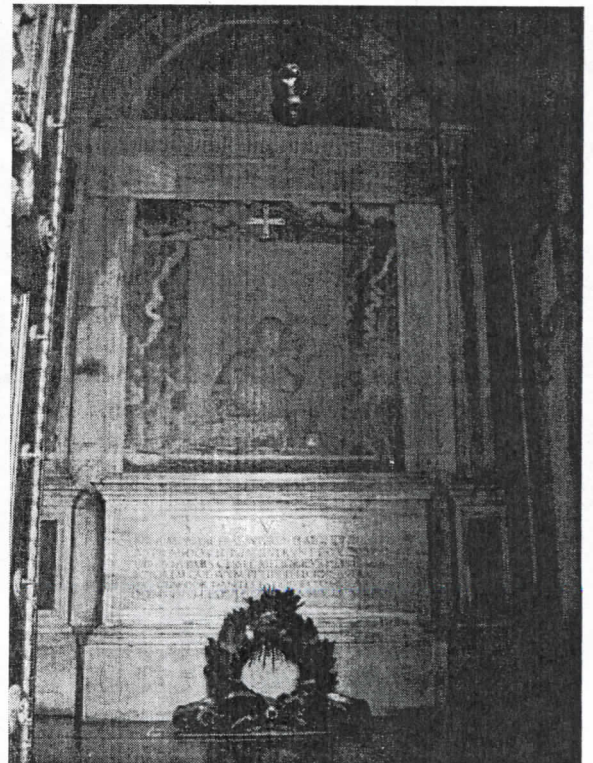
images upon the poets? Who would read these works, and, therefore, what influence would these portrayals of Helen really have?

The strength and influence of Helen's Roman images, I believe, cannot truly be tested until we look to the modern images of Helen and their similarities and differences from the Roman images, as I will do in my conclusion. For this section of my research, I plan to look carefully at the movies *Helen of Troy* (1955), *Lion of Thebes* (1964), *The Trojan Women* (originally made in 1971 but re-mastered for video in 1992), and *Helen of Troy* (2003). I will look at the dress and appearance of Helen, the words and attitudes used towards her, and her actions with regards to her relationship with Paris to make comparisons to the Roman literature. From this research, I will be able to see which attributes of Helen's have maintained strength throughout time. For example, the idea of Helen as a foreign and distinctively "other" woman, seen when the poets call her "Lacaenae" surfaces in *Lion of Thebes* and *The Trojan Women*, in which Helen has dark hair and exotic features. While the *Trojan Women* is ultimately based off of Euripides' play of the same title, this use of Helen's exoticism remains an example of Roman influence in her portrayal. Likewise, both *Helen of Troy* movies seem to coincide with Propertius' Helen, the "digna quidem facies," and "gloria Romanis."<sup>11</sup> These movies show Helen with long, blonde hair and very light features to emphasize her beauty, rather than her guilt. Interestingly enough, however, the *Helen* movies show Helen as a woman who willingly goes with Paris but is not the true cause of the war. One way to explain this fact may be to theorize that Helen's beauty empowered her to follow her will.

To further my research into these modern images, I will employ the studies of Martin Winkler, Maria Wyke, Sandra Joshel, and Jon Solomon, all of whom look at the how the ancient world is portrayed in modern cinema. While not exclusively discussing Helen in their studies, these

scholars look at the way American ideals are portrayed in these movies, as well as explain where certain movies could have been made closer to the original literature. I, however, will continue to look only at the way in which the Roman Helen is influential to these modern movies in terms of her portrayal.

After looking directly at the primary Latin texts as a whole, at the individual words used to make up each description of Helen, and at the possible influence of Augustus in these descriptions, I propose that I will find precisely what is found when looking at the Greek portrayals: the is no one coherent Helen. I suspect that trends will surface in the Latin itself and in the actions taken by Helen, but because the Augustan poets were writing at the same time, knew each other, and were often friends with Augustus, it is impossible to say exactly who influenced whom. However, I also suspect that there exist reasons for each portrayal that do not come directly from the influence of Augustus or the other poets. These are the reasons that I hope to uncover.



Dante's Tomb in Ravenna

<sup>11</sup> Propertius, II.3, line 39 and II.3, line 29.



*A Muse even in Exile: Ovid's Tristia Book I: Research Presentation at the Ohio  
Classical Conference Meeting at Kenyon College, October 2003*

By Garrett Jacobsen

In 8 CE Augustus condemned without trial the poet Ovid, who thus became "relegatus", banished from Rome, forced to live on the banks of the Danube and the Black Sea, but retaining property and citizenship. Ovid himself famously confesses to "carmen et error" (*Tristia* II.207) as the reason for exile, lamenting his ruin as citizen and poet. More curious about what the "error" may have been (the "carmen was no doubt the lascivious Ars Amatoria) and more interested in the autobiographical tidbits scattered throughout the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, until recently critics and readers have ignored the poetics of Ovid's exilic poetry, and they have accepted at face value the pose of poetic decline assumed by Ovid. It may be hoped that the following comments on reading the *Tristia*, Book I, contribute to the current scholarly rehabilitation of Ovid's reputation as poet in exile.

Parve—nec invideo—sine me, liber, ibis in urbem, ei mihi, quo domino non licet ire tuo! vade, sed incultus, qualem decet exulis esse; infelix habitum temporis huius habe. (Tr. I.1.1-4) (I.)

Thus, begins the poetry of Ovid's 'relegatio'. No Muses sing. No Cupids argue. Even the poet appears to disappear. Indeed much of *Tristia* I.1 portends Ovid's fall from grace both politically and poetically, its plaintive tone promising submissive flattery and hackneyed verses. If this first poem of exile is programmatic, then the reader may expect a book bereft of "ingenium," a book without "Amor", a book without Ovid. The final lines of poem 1 underscore this reading:

et si quae subeunt, tecum, liber, omnia ferres, sarcina laturo magna futurus eras. longa via est, propera! nobis habitabitur orbis ultimus, a terra terra remota mea. (Tr. I.1.125-128) (II.)

The separation of poet and text seems as profound as the distance between Roma and Tomi, and as sad as the mournful "ahs" ending the poem—a terra terra remota mea.

All that is left for Ovid now are versified meditations on exile—the storm-ridden journey, the memories of Rome, the loss of friends, the loyalty of his wife—topics perhaps better suited to prose than to poetry (witness the letters of Cicero from exile), and the final humiliation for a poet reduced to suppliant. It is a bleak future, and a heavy burden ("sarcina magna") to be borne by poet, book, and reader.

In *Tristia* I.7, addressed to those back in Rome who may be contemplating a bust of Ovid, the poet asserts that his "carmina," most particularly his *Metamorphoses*, are the "maior imago" of himself.

grata tua est pietas. sed carmina maior imago sunt mea, quae mando qualiacumque legas, carmina mutatas hominum dicentia formas, infelix domini quod fuga rupit opus. (Tr. I.7.11-14) (III.)

As at the beginning of the *Tristia*, Ovid reminds his readers that he is the "dominus" of his art and that "infelix" modifies appearance rather than identity. The reality of Ovid's exile may affect his poetry, but the poet remains the prime mover. Moreover, the allusion to the *Metamorphoses* as "maior imago" invites the reader to look beyond the surface of Ovid's language, becoming a possible "refutation of the pose of decline" as Gareth Williams has stated. The poet's imperative, his mastery in the realm of language, is expressed by the verb "mando" here in poem 7, paralleling its use in poem 1, also in reference to the *Metamorphoses*:

sunt quoque mutatae ter quinque volumina formae, nuper ab exequiis carmina rapta meis. his mando dicas, inter mutata referri fortunae vultum corpora posse meae.

(Tr. I.1.117-120) (IV.)

Ovid is giving the orders, whether to his "liber" or to the anonymous reader ("Siquis habes nostri similes in imagine vultus," I.7.1). Behind the "vultum" is the same poet of the *Metamorphoses* who invoked the Muses at the beginning of his epic, but only after establishing himself as



the guiding 'animus': In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora; di, coeptis—nam vos mutastis et illas) adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen! (Meta. I.1-4) (V.)

The same poet who, as if possessing the divine power of mutability so manifest throughout the epic, transformed himself into text and claimed immortality at epic's end,

quaque patet domitis Romana potentia terries, ore legar populi, perque omnia saecula fama, siquid habent veri vatum praesagia, vivam! (Meta. XV.877-879) (VI.)

This is indeed a "maior imago" and perhaps a smile begins to form on the reader's face, as the "infelix" trappings of the *Tristia* become just that, and the real Ovid steps forward.

On one level, Ovid has pointed to his own prosaic metamorphosis as the reason to read his epic as the portrait of an artist as a changed man, but on another level, Ovid is invoking the poetics of the *Metamorphoses*. He remains the master illusionist whose *Metamorphoses*, as Philip Hardie and others maintain, is above all else "a poem about language and about the power of language to create illusions of presence." The ironic, if not humorous, puzzle of how reading an epic narrative of Greco-Roman myth and legend provides a better image of the poet than the apparently autobiographical poetry of exile is solved by focusing on Ovid's art, not his politics. The language and imagery of *Tristia* I reveal Ovid's identity as a poet who understands the triumphal power of his art, and who subordinates even exile to poetic inspiration.

Ovid may not be a suppliant, but he knows how to play one, to borrow a turn of phrase from Richard Russo's novel, *Straight Man*. In poem 7, after calling attention to his "maior imago," Ovid resumes the role of penitent and echoes the pathos of his last night in Rome from poem 3:

sic ego non meritos mecum peritura libellos imposui rapidis viscera nostra rogis: vel quod eram Musas, ut crimina nostra, perosus vel quod adhuc crescens et rude carmen erat. (Tr. I.7.19-22) (VII.)

In sorrow Ovid put a copy of his *Metamorphoses* to fire, as if to reject his former life and talent. Yet here, too, the poet remains in control. Alluding to the end of the *Metamorphoses*, the "libellos" are truly "viscera nostra," but first and foremost they are "non meritos." If his books are innocent, then why not Ovid? The subtle transformation of the Muses from sources of "carmina" to "crimina," typical Ovidian word-play, recalls the superficial changes of so many characters in the *Metamorphoses* who retain their inner identity despite a new physical appearance. Have the Muses actually fallen from Ovid's favor, or is Ovid's ultimate concern still the artistic integrity implied by his pose of poetic decline, as he apparently dismisses the "crescens et rude" *Metamorphoses*, and no less his "incultus" *Tristia*? Is the poet asking the Princeps how can his "poor" verses threaten the reality of imperial power and Roman society as a way to mask the truth?

The subversive nature of Ovid's poetry is in the power of language, and certainly Greco-Roman culture recognized rhetoric as a fundamental force in society; a Roman's education centered on rhetoric, and Ovid was adept at this studies. In the twentieth century, Hans-Georg Gadamer published the influential *Truth and Method*, essentially proposing, among other things, that "language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all." According to Gadamer, moreover, learning a foreign language or poetry itself enables a greater knowledge of reality through the expansion of one's world-view. For Ovid whose exile depended on "carmen et error," on a text and an action in the 'real' world, his own experience is proof of Gadamer's assertion that the merging of the reader's perspective (Horizont) with the text is necessary for a truthful interpretation of the text (Gadamer's hermeneutics). Ovid's "parve liber," addressed in the first poem, may be more than just a poetic conceit to enable Ovid's metaphorical return to Rome:

vade, liber, verbisque meis loca grata saluta: contingam certe quo licet illa pede. (Tr. I.1.15-16) (VIII.)



Like Gadamer, Ovid cleverly implies that linguistic expression defines reality, and so the poet, conflating poem and self, truly does set "foot" in Rome again! Such poetics inform the 'Sturm und Drang' of *Tristia* I, but at the same time they also enable Ovid to transcend the sense of political and social alienation, both represented and engendered by the storms and hardships of his long journey into exile.

As Ovid creates the reality of his exile, he also redefines it. While complaining that circumstance has destroyed his "ingenium", he avers that Homer would have fared no better:

da mihi Maeoniden et tot circumice casus, ingenium tantis excidet omne malis.

(Tr. I.1.46-47) (IX.)

The epic is now a thing of Ovid's past. Yet the storm in poem 2 that christens Ovid's exile is of epic convention, the poet borrowing language and imagery directly from the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. Moreover in poem 5, Ovid's catalog of woe includes this admonishment:

pro duce Neritio docti mala nostra poetae, scribite: Neritio nam mala plura tuli

(Tr. I.5.57-58) (X.)

Ovid proposes that he is the better inspiration for poets since he has suffered so much more than Odysseus himself, and in poem 6, Ovid's own wife even becomes Penelope:

tu si Maeonium vatem sortita fuisses, Penelopes esset fama secunda tuae.

(Tr. I.6.21-22) (XI.)

Far from losing stature in exile, Ovid undergoes the striking metamorphosis of becoming an epic hero. Why Odysseus? Perhaps the "docti poetae" will have "docti lectores" who will remember that the Greek hero does return home, victorious over the Trojans and the wrath of a god, not too subtle a reminder of the Julian Emperor and his power. Perhaps more to the point Odysseus was "polutropon", as described by the "Maeonium vatem", denoting "much-traveled," but also connoting "many-sided", an apt comparison to our poet. But beneath the fiction of Odysseus lurks the 'vates', and in that guise Ovid promises immortality to his wife at the end of poem 6:

quantumcumque tamen praeconia nostra valebunt, carminibus vives tempus in omne meis. (Tr. I.6.35-36) (XII.)

The "vivam" of the *Metamorphoses* weds the "vives" of the *Tristia*, and the power of Ovid the poet surpasses the success of any epic hero.

While the storms and hardships of exile are manifold and all too real for Ovid, the imaginary world of his poetry may provide both solace and remedy, or as Claassen suggests, "escape and sublimation." In his poetry Ovid may transcend time and space, much like the Muses as described by Homer,

espete nun moi, Mousai Olympia domat' echousai--umeis gar theai este, pareste te, iste te panta (*Iliad* II. 484-485) (XIII.)

These goddesses at home on Olympus, present everywhere and knowing everything, are symbolic both of poetic inspiration and of the divine power of language to bring reality into being. For Ovid, this privileged status is exemplified in the final lines of *Tristia* I.11, the last poem of the first Book:

improba pugnat hiems indignaturque quod ausim scribere se rigidas incutiente minas. vincat hiems hominem! sed eodem tempore, quaeso, ipse modum statuam carminis, illa sui. (Tr. I.11.41-44) (XIV.)

Here Ovid proves himself the ultimate "dominus" within the construct of language and, in turn, he puts the finishing touch to what becomes the myth of his exile. The personified wrath of Augustus, the "hiems", whose 'dignitas' has been compromised, cannot prevent the poet from writing his myth, from creating a reality in which the storm rages only as long as Ovid permits. Ovid acknowledges the Olympian power of the Princeps, but so too does he extol the power of the Muses. The storm ends with the final word of the poet.

Jasper Griffin has written "not only does literature reflect, at whatever remove and with whatever stylization, the experiences of life, but also in its turn it affects actual behavior, and can do so with great force." If Ovid expected Augustus himself to read his poems as petitions for the poet's restoration to Rome, then he needed to demonstrate abject sorrow and the utmost humility. Ovid equates

"Caesaris ira" with "Iovis arma", no greater praise of power, and he depicts a seemingly endless litany of misfortunes. Whatever the truth, Ovid would have Augustus believe that he had suffered enough and that he deserved to return home. Just as the "di maris et caeli" in poem 2 grant Ovid's prayers to calm the storm, so may Augustus read "victaque mutati frangitur ira maris" at the end of that poem and undergo a similar change of heart, a very real possibility to the author of so many other metamorphoses.

But there are other readers, perhaps more discerning, certainly more mindful of the poet, as Ovid well knows.

siquis, ut in populo, nostri non immemor  
illic, siquis, qui, quid agam, forte requirat,  
erit, vivere me dices, salvum tamen esse  
negabis; id quoque, quod vivam, munus  
habere dei. (Tr. I.1.17-20) (XV.)

For those readers, Tristia I should say that Ovid is alive, but deny he is well, the "parve liber" collaborating in the poetic illusion. With this first nod to the Metamorphoses, Ovid reiterates "vivam" and then qualifies it by "munus dei". He may indeed owe his life to a god, but to what god? Is it Augustus, responsible for his transformation into political exile, or is it the god from the end of the Metamorphoses—the poet himself? For those other readers, Ovid creates a "parve liber" to be everywhere and to know everything.