

The Odyssean Helen as Anti-Hero in *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018)

In its opening credits, the recent BBC/Netflix series *Troy: Fall of a City* cites “Homer and the Greek myths” as the inspiration for its eight-episode retelling of the Trojan War. As expected, the series draws significantly from the *Iliad*, with a notable exception: its depiction of Helen. The series’ Helen has no interaction with Aphrodite, although not only Paris but also Hector and Hecuba are visited by the goddess; nor does she speak at Hector’s funeral, where she is notably silent and withdrawn; nor does she revile Paris as a lesser man than Menelaus, nor herself as the “shameless bitch” whose ill-considered abandonment of her home she has come to regret. The Helen of the *Odyssey*, however, is clearly legible beneath the series’ imagining of the Trojan embassy to Sparta in Episode 1 (“Black Blood”) and continues to surface over the course of Helen’s time in Troy. This paper examines how the series borrows from Helen’s appearance in *Odyssey* Book 4 to shape these earlier events, and how its reliance upon the Odyssean Helen supports its presentation of her as an anti-hero.

Troy: Fall of a City derives three major themes from *Odyssey* Book 4. First, Helen’s anomalous visual and verbal assertiveness, through which she disrupts and shapes the hospitality protocol being enacted for Telemachus, is transposed to the scene in which Menelaus welcomes Paris to Sparta with a formal state dinner. Second, Helen’s association with exotic sorcery and the uncanny, in drugging the wine with an Egyptian potion and in Menelaus’ tale of her production of uncanny voices beneath the Trojan Horse, is played out through an eerie chant for the dead that she performs while bathing naked, her own drug use in the nocturnal seraglio over which she presides in Sparta, and a subplot in which the childless Andromache finally conceives after Helen gives her a “fortified wine.” Third, her possible treason against Troy, highlighted in her story of concealing the disguised Odysseus when he infiltrated the city, manifests in her

concealment of Achilles' infiltration of her bedroom to retrieve her by force. This major inflection point for Helen's character arc showcases her uncanny ability to turn adverse situations in her favor by convincing Achilles to not only leave without her but also ensure her ongoing protection but also inadvertently causes the destruction of Andromache's native city, a key Trojan ally, and incites suspicions of a spy in the royal palace that contributes to the deteriorating morale in the besieged city.

Rather than depicting her as a straightforward villain, however, *Troy: Fall of a City* shapes its Helen after the current vogue for anti-heroes: protagonists whom the audience is expected to feel sympathy and even root for despite their committing characteristically self-serving actions that harm those around them. The anti-hero's success is abetted by a powerful charisma that leads both internal and external audiences to admire and even desire the anti-hero. This charisma, enhanced by cunning, also assists the anti-hero in evading attempts by the unenchanted to convince others of the threat that he or she poses. Anti-heroes are adept at fending off remorse by convincing themselves of the necessity of their ends; audiences too are urged to excuse the anti-hero's sociopathic behavior by revealing a pitiable past or present circumstance that drives these choices. Nevertheless, the anti-hero is no victim, but the author of their own story; thus *Troy: Fall of a City* has no place for Aphrodite's rough enforcement of Helen's subservience. In fact, its Helen is the engineer of her own escape from a loathsome forced marriage to Menelaus; proves assertive, even audacious, in her insistence on inserting herself into the business of the Trojan royal family in order to protect her own interests; and clings doggedly to her claims of love for Paris, up to the moment when her actions lead to his brutal killing before her eyes.

The self-blame and remorse expressed by the Iliadic Helen would act at cross-purposes with the anti-hero's psychological need to fend off self-awareness of the morally repugnant nature and damaging outcomes of their choices. By contrast, the Odyssean Helen is strikingly capable not only of surviving the ravages of the war seemingly unchanged, but also of continuing to manipulate those around her, even when faced with testimony to her traitorous deeds. The *Odyssey* thus provides a congenial basis for the series' conceptualization of Helen as both blameworthy and sympathetic, repulsive and enchanting.