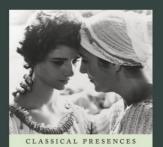Edited by KONSTANTINOS
P. NIKOLOUTSOS

# ANCIENT
# GREEK WOMEN
# IN FILM

# CLASSICAL PRESENCES

*General Editors*

Lorna Hardwick     James I. Porter

# CLASSICAL PRESENCES

Attempts to receive the texts, images, and material culture of ancient Greece and Rome inevitably run the risk of appropriating the past in order to authenticate the present. Exploring the ways in which the classical past has been mapped over the centuries allows us to trace the avowal and disavowal of values and identities, old and new. Classical Presences brings the latest scholarship to bear on the contexts, theory, and practice of such use, and abuse, of the classical past.

# Ancient Greek Women in Film

Edited by
KONSTANTINOS P. NIKOLOUTSOS

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*Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos*
*Philadelphia*
*15 October 2012*

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commentary, of Euripides' *Helen*, in *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides* (1999), *Events That Changed Ancient Greece* (2002), *Daughters of Gaia: Women in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (2007/2008), *Helen: Ancient and Modern Icon of Femininity and Poetic Creation* (forthcoming).

# Introduction[1]

## Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos

This collection examines cinematic representations of women from the realms of ancient Greek myth and history. The chapters discuss how female figures from these two domains are resurrected on the big screen at different historical junctures and are embedded in a narrative that serves different purposes (artistic, commercial, political) depending on the director of the film, its screenwriter(s), the studio, the country of its origin, and the time of its production. Nearly all the chapters included in this volume engage in a comparative analysis of ancient accounts and their cinematic adaptations, but expand the scope of their search beyond the question of whether or not filmic recreations of antiquity are faithful reproductions of the details of the source text(s). Employing a diverse array of hermeneutic approaches (gender theory, feminist criticism, gaze theory, psychoanalysis, sociological theories of religion, film history, viewer-response theory, and personal voice criticism), the essays assembled here aim to cast light on cinema's investments in the classical past and decode the mechanisms whereby the female figures under examination are extracted from their original context and are brought to life to serve as vehicles for the articulation of modern ideas, concerns, and cultural trends. The goal of the collection as a whole is to explore not only how antiquity on the screen represents and in this process often distorts, compresses, contests, and revises antiquity on the page but also, most importantly, why cinema reconstructs the classical past in a frequently eclectic fashion.

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Written by established and emerging authorities in classical reception studies from across the globe, the thirteen essays that make up this volume examine a wide range of films (in terms of genres, budget, distribution, and audience appeal) produced in different countries[2] during a period of ninety years (1917–2007). The volume discusses both big studio features and independent productions. The films fall into the following categories: silent, black-and-white, epic, peplum, action, adventure, drama, comedy, made-for-television, art house, and poetry films. These are either films set in Greek antiquity or reworkings of ancient themes situated in a modern setting. The commercial success and critical acclaim of individual films are of interest here insofar as they can illuminate the social, economic, and cultural context of a film's production and reception.

The book is divided into five sections. The first three are devoted to Helen, Medea, and Penelope respectively. These female figures have captivated the imagination of many directors from both sides of the Atlantic and are therefore granted a special place in the collection. The fourth part examines representations of women from the realm of Greek myth that have received a lesser degree of attention in the medium, but nonetheless carry a high cultural, artistic, and political charge. The list of these mythical figures includes Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Iole, Deianeira, Omphale, Io, and the Nereids. The last section of the collection focuses on three historical figures: Gorgo, Olympias, and Cleopatra.

## *ANCIENT GREEK WOMEN IN FILM* AND CLASSICAL RECEPTION STUDIES

The study of ancient Greek women on the screen has not received adequate attention in current scholarship on the reception of classical antiquity in cinema and on television.[3] This book aims to fill this critical vacuum and make an original contribution to this field by enriching our

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[2] Most of the films are American, Greek, and Italian productions or co-productions. The volume also examines films from Denmark, France, Germany, and Great Britain.

[3] This is the first collection devoted entirely to a topic that has been treated sporadically in recent scholarship on classics in film. Previous studies include McDonald (2001: 90–1, 95–6, 98–100); Cyrino (2007b); Allen (2007); Cavallini (2008); Roisman (2008); Blondell (2009); Potter (2009); Shahabudin (2009: 206–14); Winkler (2009: 210–50); Carney (2010); Niko-loutsos (2010); Bakogianni (2011: 153–94); Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011: 73–5; 118–21; 210–13). This is by no means an exhaustive list of works on the topic. See also the essays in this volume for further bibliography. I regret I have been unable to consider Michelakis (2013) as well as the various essays in Renger and Solomon (2012) and Cyrino (2013). These publications were not available by the time the final typescript of this volume was sent to press.

knowledge of the ways in which the ancient world is recreated, used, and (almost always) abused in modern popular culture. The arrangement of the essays in thematic units allows the readers of the collection to trace the reception history of Greek women in the medium across time, region, and genre, and obtain a clear picture of the commonalities, variations, and cultural patterns involved in their filmic transplantation. One of the collection's main objectives in examining representations of the same female characters in films produced in different countries and historical periods is to illustrate not only their enduring appeal and polysemous role in the narratives in which they are inserted but also the mutability and continuous adaptability of their screen image. As the essays illustrate, this image is not static, or consistent with the features that these women are attributed in ancient literary and visual sources. It changes, in most cases radically, according to the sociocultural norms and stereotypes of the time in which the film is produced; the economic and technological conditions of its production; the political climate in which it is made; the vision of the producer, director, and screenwriter; the star image and nationality of the actress who plays the part, as well as her physical characteristics that are often taken advantage of in order to connote issues of power and transgression; the aesthetic expectations and moral sensibilities of the audience; and the stylistic and other conventions of the genre through which ancient female figures are revived on the big screen.

These parameters determine both the way ancient Greek women look and the way they act on screen. For example, as Bella Vivante discusses in her essay, in conforming to stereotypes of female beauty in post-World War II American society, the Helen of Robert Wise's 1956 epic film *Helen of Troy* is cast as a platinum blonde, fair-skinned bombshell, projecting onto Homer's heroine the glamour and sex appeal of a pin-up girl. By contrast, in Michael Cacoyannis' 1971 adaptation of Euripides' *Trojan Women* Helen has olive skin and jet-black hair as an embodiment of Mediterranean femininity, passion, and sensuality. Cacoyannis' film builds Helen's screen image upon a fundamental principle in the history of classical reception, that of repetition with difference. In keeping with the textual tradition, it acknowledges Helen's power to victimize men with her looks; at the same time, the film exploits her iconic attraction on a metacinematic level by casting a Greek actress, Irene Papas, in the role of classical antiquity's most notorious femme fatale, thereby making a statement about ethnic continuity between ancient and modern Greece. Drawn from the pages of Athenian tragedy, Helen is fashioned in accordance with, and operates as a vehicle for the propagation of, notions of popular history, memory, and the nation. *The Trojan Women* is one of several case studies examined in this collection which illustrate that

filmic recreations of the classical past are not neutral or disinterested. They have affective dimensions, and are deeply implicated in contemporary cultural and political discourses.

Arthur Pomeroy's essay shows how similar popular perceptions about hair colour, body type, and national identity inform the portrayal of female characters who surround Hercules in Italian peplum films. For example, the role of Antea, the sexually voracious, vampy queen of the Amazons, in Pietro Francisci's *Le Fatiche di Ercole* (1958) is played by Gianna Maria Canale, whose dark black hair and curvaceous figure fit the stereotypical look of the southern Italian woman, termed *maggiorata fisica* (buxom beauty),[4] which was popularized by physically imposing actresses, such as Sofia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida. By contrast, Iole, the princess from Iolcus who is rescued by the mythical hero and falls in love with him, is cast as a slender, delicate girl played by Sylva Koscina. Her light hair and fair complexion suggest to the viewer either an American-style 'girl next door', most typically portrayed in cinema by stars like Doris Day and even sometimes by Marilyn Monroe, or an upper class Italian lady, since in Italy these features were traditionally associated with the affluent north or the Frankish aristocracy of the south. Antea is dark-haired and looks demonic; Iole has light auburn hair and looks angelic.

The examples discussed by Pomeroy show that identifying the multiple influences (industrial, technological, aesthetic, sociocultural) that shape celluloid antiquity requires methods and approaches other than the purely philological. Tracing these influences will help us develop a critical idiom for analysing cinematic versions of the classical past and investigate, more effectively, the complex ways in which they are produced to function as commentaries on the present. The image of the women who populate peplum films about Hercules and his adventures is not informed only by Italian history and geography. It is also symptomatic of American cultural hegemony and media imperialism in the age of globalization, which started in the 1920s and reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s (and continues to this day). Extracted from the world of ancient Greek myth, the women of Hercules are reanimated on the big screen and are allocated a hybrid look that bears testimony to the blurring of artistic boundaries between Europe and the United States in the post-war era and to the transcontinental dissemination and fusion of cultural elements and aesthetic trends caused by the massive migration of people at the time.

My own essay also investigates how antiquity and modernity intersect with each other on the big screen. Filmed at the height of the Cold War,

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[4] For this trend in Italian cinema, see Celli and Cottino-Jones (2007: 81–82).

Rudolph Maté's *The 300 Spartans* (1962) implicates Gorgo in the US ideology of 'Containment' and homemaker lifestyle of the 1950s and early 1960s, projecting an image of her as a loving mother and wife who is devoted to her family and tends to her domestic duties. Almost half a century later, when Gorgo is resurrected on screen through Zack Snyder's smash hit *300* (2007), she is fashioned to suit the rhetoric of gender equality and is depicted as a dynamic queen who is actively involved in public life, despite the very fact that there was no such office for royal women in fifth century BC Sparta. My analysis shows that at different historical moments the same female figure from ancient Greek history is deployed in the medium to advance completely different modern positions.[5] This method of character reconstruction, termed *neo-mythologism* by Italian director Vittorio Cottafavi,[6] finds a parallel in ancient tragedy, in which female characters were appropriated from the realm of epic and were adjusted to serve the agendas of the playwrights and reflect the values and attitudes of Athenian society. Some of the surviving tragedies preserve different and sometimes even contradictory versions of the same myth. Electra, for example, continues to live at the palace at Mycenae and enjoy her royal status after the murder of her father, Agamemnon, in Sophocles' tragedy. Euripides, by contrast, portrays her as a peasant who is dressed in rags and lives in a poor household in his own play. Tragedy, the popular culture of fifth century BC Athens, undermines the idea of a canonical story with fixed details. The films examined in this volume form part of the same artistic tradition of reimagining and reinventing the ancient world for popular consumption.

In classical literature, this discursive method of refiguration applies to historical persons as well. In the aftermath of her defeat at the battle of Actium in 31 BC, Cleopatra VII Philopator is divested of her political powers and titles as a Ptolemaic ruler and enters the poetry of the early Augustan period in the form of a mistress from the dissolute East charged with an extraordinary amount of erotic allure and perversity. From protective queen of a powerful kingdom, as her public image is promoted on coins, inscriptions, and other visual material from pre-Roman Egypt, she is transformed into a barbarian whore in the work of Propertius, Horace, and Virgil, as Maria Wyke has most notably shown.[7]

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[5] See also Martindale (2006: 4) and Kallendorf (2007: 3).
[6] See Winkler (2005); (2009: 16).
[7] Wyke (2002: 195–243).

In the last essay of the collection, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones traces a similar process of identity erasure in Hollywood recreations of the life of Cleopatra. With the exception of Joseph Mankiewicz's 1963 film, where her Greekness is acknowledged, albeit briefly and in jest, US filmmakers in general subdue her Macedonian ancestry and portray her, in terms of both narrative and costumes, as a Pharaonic monarch, thereby exploiting, for aesthetic and commercial reasons, the exotic and glamorous aspects of her Egyptian connection. The Hellenistic world that Cleopatra inhabited is anachronistically replaced on screen by buildings, symbols, and dresses from the time of the Egyptian New Kingdom.

Llewellyn-Jones' chapter calls attention to the conditioned and mediated character of cinematic antiquity. Although in promotion material they cultivate the expectation of a historically accurate portrait, Hollywood films perpetuate an identification of Cleopatra with Pharaonic Egypt, which has been firmly established in the western imagination since the mid-nineteenth century. Sold to audiences as accessible versions of ancient history, the Cleopatra biopics reproduce modern myths, clichés, and misconceptions about her, thereby proving to be a form of entertainment that pretends to offer high art, but in reality surrenders to the temptation of popular acceptance and profit. This treatment of Cleopatra reflects the attitudes of Hollywood producers and directors during the studio era toward what constitutes ancient history: a combination of folklore and factual information loaded with visual opulence, operatic music, and narrative ellipses, disjunctions, and eclecticism. This is not the history of Hellenistic Egypt, but rather a collage of fragments or 'sheets'[8] of history from different epochs.

Many of the films examined in this volume have been inspired by, and respond to, specific contemporary political events. The female characters in them are shaped to serve the propagation of the director's view about these events. Anastasia Bakogianni examines how modern Greek history informs Michael Cacoyannis' third adaptation of a Euripidean tragedy titled *Iphigenia* (1977). She argues that the film, produced in the aftermath of the collapse of the Greek dictatorship and the retaliatory Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, places renewed emphasis on the intersection between the public and the private spheres in Euripides' play by depicting the longing of men for war and power as a catalyst for the severing of the strong mother–daughter bond that characterizes the relationship between Clytemnestra and Iphigenia. The annihilation of the family and the forcible separation of the mother from her child in the

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[8]  I borrow the term from Landy (1996a: 153).

mythic past are, according to Bakogianni's reading of the film, a powerful allegory for the suffering of the Greek-Cypriot nation in the present and the images of thousands of mothers, shown in the media at the time, who were mourning the loss of their dead and missing children in the wake of the 'Attila' operation.

As Bakogianni's essay demonstrates, cinema extends tragedy's project of blurring the boundaries between myth and national history, thus pointing out the manifold ways in which the classical past can be used to shed light on and problematize the present. Hallie Rebecca Marshall builds an argument along similar lines in her essay on Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*, a film/poem in which the British writer draws on Aeschylus' play, as well as the reception of Prometheus in later European literary tradition, to discuss both the legacy of the coal mine closures that precipitated the bitter strike of 1984 by the National Union of Mineworkers in the UK and the concurrent collapse of the socialist dream in Eastern Europe. Investigating how and for what purpose Harrison reshapes the female figures of *Prometheus Bound*, Marshall argues that the chorus of the anonymous Nereids is used to express communal suffering. Io, on the other hand, becomes a symbol for the destruction of a single household due to severe economic hardship. Past and present are interblended on the big screen to provide a critique about social identity and political change.

This recontextualization of ancient Greek myth and its employment as a powerful tool whereby to expose and condemn political decisions and social practices at moments of national crisis illustrate the central position that classical antiquity occupies in modern artistic imagination. This, however, is hardly a new finding, for almost every publication in classical reception studies has sought to link the past to the present under the rubric of 'cultural continuity' and by identifying parallel constructed versions of myth and history in ancient and modern media. Charles Martindale has, alarmingly, pointed out this 'wider [scholarly] trend to collapse reception into cultural studies'.[9] This collection responds to this concern and shows that, as much as it is legitimate, it is also reductive to treat filmic reenactments of the ancient Greek world as a form of art that is filtered only through the lens of contemporary sociopolitical reality. A number of the films examined here do not draw, directly or exclusively, on ancient sources. Rather, they are responses to, and often symptoms of, modern appropriations of the ancient Greek world in film or fiction. These receptions form an important intertext that cannot be ignored in critical analysis.

For example, Zack Snyder's *300* is based on Frank Miller's 1998 comic book of the same title, which was in turn inspired by the 1962 historical

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[9] Martindale (2006: 9).

epic *The 300 Spartans*. In other words, the 2007 blockbuster is the most
recent in a 'chain of receptions'[10] of the battle of Thermopylae in
contemporary popular culture. Snyder's Gorgo, as I show in my essay,
cannot be examined in isolation from this artistic framework and be
compared only to her Herodotean counterpart, since she is also con-
structed to evoke her cinematic and graphic precursors. Similarly, as
Annette Baertschi demonstrates, Lars von Trier's 1988 telefilm *Medea* is
not directly informed by Euripides' homonymous tragedy, but is based
on its modern reception transmitted through a mediating text, the script
of an unrealized film by renowned Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer.
Dreyer, who drew loosely on the Greek play, had planned *Medea* to be
his first film in colour and had allegedly travelled to Paris to offer the title
role to Maria Callas, but he suddenly died of pneumonia in 1968, a year
before the famous soprano played the part in Pasolini's film. Von Trier
resurrects Medea on Danish television by reproducing both the themat-
ics and the aesthetics of his master's script.

Baertschi's essay shows that an investigation of the reception of Greek
antiquity in the medium needs to take into full consideration the history
of a film's production—in particular the various routes through which
ancient texts, images, and ideas have travelled, physically and metaphor-
ically, across time, place, and media, and have come to influence modern
directors and scriptwriters. Tracing these routes can shed light upon the
artistic trends and stylistic innovations that shape antiquity on screen
and can explain the shifts, variations, and inconsistencies in the recep-
tion history of its iconic figures within specific national contexts. As
Lorna Hardwick has cogently put it, acknowledging the diasporic nature
of classical texts:

> ... recognizes the shaping forces of the subsequent filters that have condi-
> tioned understanding of the texts without assuming that only one set of
> filters matters. It leaves room for investigating why any particular ante-text
> re-emerges under particular cultural conditions and for considering the
> extent to which the dynamics of its relationship with its ancient context are
> replicated or revised.[11]

Susan Shapiro, in turn, makes an eloquent case for the need to consider
context when we examine cinematic reconstructions of the classical
world. Her essay discusses Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea* (1969) and
illustrates that the film is a synthesis of dominant theoretical approaches

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[10]  I borrow the term from Jauss (1982: 20). For the use of the term in classical reception
studies, see, Kallendorf (2007: 2); Martindale (2007: 300); Paul (2010a: 15) and (2010b: 148).
[11]  Hardwick (2007: 47). See also Hardwick (2003: 4, 32).

to myth and religion, advanced by some of the most influential philosophers of the last two centuries, such as Karl Marx, Sir James Frazer, Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Antonio Gramsci. Informed by these theories, Pasolini casts Medea as both innocent victim and vengeful sorceress. On the one hand, she represents the beneficent powers of nature and fertility and, on the other, the destructive forces of retribution and irrationality. The belief in and veneration of these elements are characteristics of the religious systems of archaic civilizations, as well as of those of the African nations, which were considered to be primitive civilizations in economically developed countries at the time of the film's production.[12] As Shapiro maintains, Medea and the Colchians symbolize the people of pre-industrialized societies who were forced to submit to the colonial powers of the modern world, as portrayed by Jason and the Argonauts. Pasolini appropriates the myth of Medea from classical literature and (in keeping with ancient mythopoeic practices) he transforms it into a new foundation story. Produced at the end of a decade that witnessed the collapse of European colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa, the film 'decolonizes' Medea's story and antiquity in general. It liberates them from the normative epic style in which Hollywood studios—a multimillion-dollar empire—sought to portray the classical world in the 1950s and early 1960s, and opens them up to innovative, counter-hegemonic interpretations.

The essays outlined above illustrate two interrelated aspects of the reception of ancient Greek women in the medium. First, their screen image is the product of a process of hybridization between ancient depictions and modern cultural trends and ideologies. Second, their refiguration takes place at a particular historical moment, and the pastiches that make up their cinematic portrait are contingent upon that moment. The plasticity and adaptability that directors perceive as the very characteristic of the women of Greek myth and history undermine the expectation of a faithful rendition of the source text that some classicists may have[13] and illustrate a 'fusion of horizons'[14] that opens up new pathways for research into the diverse ways in which cinema draws on and transforms the classical world. For, in addition to films that recreate

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[12] On the interpretation of Greek tragedy with primitive rituals in postcolonial contexts, see also Nikoloutsos (2010: 95–103).

[13] As Winkler (2009: 247) astutely remarks regarding the attitude of classical scholars to judge films set in the classical world on the basis of their historical or literary accuracy: 'Scholars who despair over the extent to which modern media distort the supposed truth of ancient myth or dismiss such versions as hopelessly inaccurate and therefore *infra dig* might do better to remember the ancients.' See also Paul (2010b: 146–47); Nikoloutsos (2013: 282–3).

[14] I borrow the term from Gadamer (1991): 306–7, 374–75.

episodes from Greek mythology and history, or update them to modern times, there are also motion pictures seemingly unrelated to classical antiquity in which, nonetheless, classical themes can be traced and echoes of the classical past can be heard. This is precisely the point that Edith Hall makes in the second half of her essay, where she examines both direct and 'masked' descendants of Penelope in films as diverse as Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (English title: *Contempt*, 1963), Jon Hiller's *Penelope* (1966), Barry Levinson's *The Natural* (1984), Jon Amierl's *Sommersby* (1993), Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993), Theodoros Angelopoulos' *Το βλέμμα του Οδυσσέα* (English title: *Ulysses' Gaze*, 1995), Joel and Ethan Coen's *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000), Anthony Minghella's *Cold Mountain* (2003), and Wim Wenders' *Don't Come Knocking* (2005), among other titles.

Films like the above merit consideration here not only because they illustrate the catalytic influence of Penelope's figure upon contemporary artistic imagination and her employment as a model for the construction of the ideal wife in European and American film narrative. They also invite a reassessment of the role of the Homeric heroine in the world of the *Odyssey* by shedding light on certain aspects of her character that have been underexplored in classical scholarship. This does not mean that we will be able to retrieve the Penelope of the epic poem, as 'Homer' visualized her and ancient audiences understood her; the context of her original conception and reception is forever lost and irrecoverable. An exploration of her cinematic offspring, however, will enable us to identify and rethink the 'accretions',[15] perceptions, and misconceptions that have been embedded in and have shaped her image through centuries of continuous appropriation and reinterpretation. This, of course, is an epistemological benefit that the reader of the collection will gain from the analyses in the rest of the chapters.

## ANCIENT GREEK WOMEN IN FILM AND GENDER STUDIES

The essays outlined above demonstrate that ancient Greek women are revived in various shapes in cinema and that the examination of their reception in the medium is a complex venture that leads to conclusions

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[15] On 'accretions' and classical reception studies, see Hardwick (2003: 107); Martindale (2006: 12).

important for more than one interdisciplinary field. The second such area in which the collection inscribes itself is gender studies. From Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous to Luce Irigaray and Jacques Lacan, twentieth-century French criticism has regularly used ancient Greek myth as a particularly useful tool with which to theorize sexual desire and analyse gender categories. Such appropriations of antiquity continue to provide impetus, such as in the recent collection edited by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard under the title *Laughing with Medusa*. The anthology focuses, *inter alia*, on the importance of Greek myth and its female inhabitants for the development of post-1970 feminist thought, and investigates how the stories of these mythic figures have been revised and retold in order to destabilize the hierarchies that uphold the symbolic systems and institutions of western societies.

This collection pursues the same line of inquiry in a different discursive terrain, by exploring the instrumentalization of the women of ancient Greek myth and history in a medium defined, predominantly, as male. The producers, directors, and screenwriters of the films under examination here are all male. As a result, the films reflect the patriarchal value system of their time and, as the essays demonstrate, employ women as conduits for the propagation of dominant ideologies of femininity and as paradigms of the intersection of gender and politics in contemporary European and American culture. In this respect, the films that the collection places under critical scrutiny are important not only from an artistic but also from a socio-historical point of view. Although they have nothing new to contribute to our knowledge of gender and sexuality in the ancient world, they constitute a valuable source of information about the variations and changes in perceptions of, and attitudes to, these issues in recent decades.

Joanna Paul examines Mario Camerini's *Ulisse* (1954) and shows that the film is far from providing an accurate picture of the role of women in Homeric society. Camerini hired the same Italian actress, Silvana Mangano, to play the roles of both Penelope and Circe; Mangano also lends her voice to the Sirens. Paul explains this artistic innovation by situating the film within its sociopolitical context. Produced in the aftermath of World War II and during the war in Indochina, which led to the war in Vietnam in 1955, the film casts Odysseus as a figure for the soldier who roams away from his country. Mangano, in turn, symbolizes both the loyal wife who patiently awaits the return of her husband home and the

foreign ('other') woman who might lure that man away from his mission and thus endanger the nuclear family and by extension the nation. The Madonna/whore dichotomy that informs the representation of the central female characters in *Ulisse*, an Italian-US co-production, is in line with the rhetoric of the restoration of traditional gender roles in post-war America and Europe, which entailed the confinement of women in the domestic sphere and the return of men to the role of the breadwinner. Cinema and television, its competitor in the 1950s, did not provide just a popular form of mass entertainment; they also served as vehicles for the idealization and endorsement of the patriarchal life style. Penelope and Circe, as Paul's essay illustrates, are revived on the big screen in order to reproduce in an ancient Greek garment, and thus validate in the eyes of their spectators, stereotypes of femininity on both sides of the Atlantic— the roles, that is, that women had to perform in order to gain social acceptance or rejection. *Ulisse* also invites us to rethink the parameters, determinants, and subject matters of filmic recreations of Greek antiquity in the years following the collapse of the Third Reich and the division of the world into spheres of influence during the Cold War era. For, as Wyke has shown about films set in ancient Rome,[16] so too films based on Greek myth or history reflect, and at the same time seek to deflect, the traumas of war and fascism, as well as the paranoia of the West about the spread of Communism beyond its borders. In her role as Circe, Mangano destabilizes, but as Penelope she ultimately reinforces ideas about power, male identity, hierarchy, and homeland security.

Although the films examined here do not provide an accurate picture of the role of women in Greek society, their storylines replicate the male bias of the ancient sources. As Ruby Blondell argues in her essay, the supreme beauty that Helen possesses makes her an extremely dangerous woman. Most Greek authors respond to the threat that she poses by limiting her power and denying her agency. Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004) extends the Greek project of disempowering Helen. Instead of celebrating the lethal powers of female beauty, the film reduces Helen to an everygirl and, as is the case of the *Iliad*, relegates her to the margins of the narrative in order to keep her from outshining the real star, Achilles/ Brad Pitt. A similar representational strategy is followed in Don Chaffey's *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963). As Kirk Ormand shows, Medea's inclusion in the film is unavoidable; she is a central figure in the Golden Fleece quest in classical literature and thus cannot be ignored. Although she possesses extraordinary powers as a sorceress—powers on which Jason

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[16] Wyke (1997).

depends to accomplish his mission—her role in the film is diminished significantly, and she is cast as a passive object of desire without clear self-motivation. The narrative of Chaffey's film is purely androcentric, revolving around the adventures of Jason and the Argonauts.[17] Medea appears in a few scenes only to add a romantic touch to the story. Her identity is voided of the dynamism and transgressiveness that characterize her in ancient literary sources. This suppression of female agency allows Jason to emerge, in the eyes of his male viewers, as a true hero who can achieve his goal and obtain the Golden Fleece without the help of a superwoman, no matter how many obstacles are put in front of him. Medea is evoked but then 'contained' in order for male ambition and potency to triumph.

The marginalization of women in filmic recreations of Greek antiquity that focus on the deeds of men is also the subject of Edith Hall's essay. Hall examines the portrayal of Penelope in various cinematic and tele-visual excursions into the world of the *Odyssey*, as well as in films that reinscribe Penelope's archetypal character in modern settings. She shows that, whereas we might have expected Homer's heroine to emancipate herself from the patriarchal constraints of her archaic plotline and be refigured in the wake of feminist activism, her reception in the medium during the period 1963—2007 demonstrates a regression of her image in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment. Penelope's screen substitute in Hollywood productions is deprived of the complexity and moral agency that her Homeric counterpart possessed and reaffirms modern male fantasies of the female psyche as masochistic, depressive, or even hysterical. The films examined in Hall's essay celebrate an iconic woman from Greek myth, as well as modern perceptions of Penelope as an ideal wife/mother and a symbol of conjugal devotion in narrative trajectories that deny her individuality.

An exception to this Hollywood rule is the depiction of Olympias in two historical epics, Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* (1956) and Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004). As Kirsten Day's essay illustrates, both directors portray Alexander's mother as a strong, ambitious woman who pursues power by manipulating information, taking advantage of her sexuality, and capitalizing on her relationship with her son. While both films attempt to offer insight into the power and gender dynamics at Alexander's time, they nonetheless provide a picture of the position of elite women in fourth century BC Macedonia that is filtered through modern beliefs and understandings. Thus, Rossen's film suffers from

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[17] Most of the plot involves the journey of the Argonauts before they arrive at Colchis. As opposed to Medea, Hera receives prominent attention in the plot.

an imposition of a post-World War II intolerance of female individuality and dynamism, and erases Olympias from the narrative once Alexander decides to step into Asia to wage war against the Persian Empire. Stone's biopic, on the other hand, psychoanalyses Olympias' relationship with Alexander and attaches to it Oedipal overtones. Films like these, as Day points out, are most productively viewed as dialogues between the past and the present. Not only do they illustrate why Greek antiquity continues to engage modern film-makers and audiences. They also offer us an opportunity to learn about the present by examining 'the veneer of modern social and artistic agendas superimposed on historical realities'.

The purpose of this introductory chapter has been to delineate the theoretical and methodological approaches used in the volume as a whole and provide an overview of the rest of the chapters in order to demonstrate the contribution of the collection to two major interdisciplinary fields: classical reception studies and gender studies. The book does not aim by any means to offer an exhaustive treatment of the subject. Cinematic depictions of Antigone, Electra, and Phaedra, for example, are not considered here, though we do hope that the analyses that follow will generate critical interest in them as well.[18] The goal of the collection is to restore to visibility the polysemous role of the women of Greek myth and history in the films under examination and to explore, through some notable case studies, the interplay and coalescence of tradition and innovation—or 'the dialectic of continuity and rupture', to borrow terminology from literary theorist and critic Fredric Jameson[19]—that characterizes their appropriation in the cinema. The collection, thus, will appeal both to classical scholars who are interested in knowing the ways in which the ancient world has been used, and abused, in contemporary mass culture and to film historians who seek to trace the impact of classical antiquity on the medium. The book is also meant to reach a wider audience of academics and students in various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, such as women's studies, history (European or American), Italian studies, Modern Greek studies, and cultural studies.

The essays identify and address new issues—theoretical as well as practical—and thus add a significant dimension to research on the reception of the classical world in the cinema. Although there are several similarities in the cinematic portrayals of the various female figures under consideration, each film and heroine represent a distinct case. One of the main goals of the book is to concentrate on individual films

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[18] For Electra in the cinema, see Bakogianni (2011: 153–94).

[19] Jameson (2002: 23). On 'temporal continuity and disjunction' in classical reception, see Brockliss et al. (2012: 5).

or characters in order to avoid generalizations and develop a theoretical framework based on specific examples that could apply to a wider range of films set in the classical world. Binding the different case studies together is the common goal to investigate the diverse ways in which the classical past is reanimated on the screen in order to suit the ideological, technological, aesthetic, and commercial needs of its cinematic narration. As the essays that follow demonstrate, once they are transplanted into film, the women of ancient Greek myth and history are no longer ancient or Greek, but become the property of an international community of directors, screenwriters, producers, viewers, and academics, all of whom seek to impose different meanings and interpretations upon them.

# Part I

# HELEN

# 1

## Gazing at Helen: Helen as Polysemous Icon in Robert Wise's *Helen of Troy* and Michael Cacoyannis' *The Trojan Women*

### Bella Vivante

> Avoid looking at her, lest she seize you with desire.
> For she captures the eyes of men.[1]
>
> Eur. *Trojan Women* 891–2,
> Hecuba speaking to Menelaus about Helen

Hecuba's words from Euripides' play locate Helen's power of seduction through the eyes of the men who look upon her. This gaze is dangerous, like looking upon Medusa, but instead of turning men to stone, gazing at Helen melts men, causing them to become impotent, understood polysemously.[2] The popularity of the fifth-century vase paintings that show Menelaus with sword raised rushing to kill Helen on one side while on the other, in pre-Freudian symbolism, he drops his sword upon sight of her, visually testifies to this power attributed to Helen when men look at her.[3] Interestingly, while Greek pottery depicts Helen as clothed in these scenes, Euripides refers to Menelaus' melting at sight of her bare breasts.[4] This concept of the male gaze contrasts sharply with the typical configuration of the gaze in film criticism. Since the publication of Laura Mulvey's foundational 1975 article, 'the gaze' has been posited as that of the male spectator by and for whom most images, especially those of the

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[1] All translations from the Ancient Greek are my own. I wish to thank Martin Winkler and especially the volume editor Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos for their valuable comments on this chapter.

[2] More on Helen and Medusa below. Blondell (this volume) asserts that Helen 'exercises supreme erotic power through her blinding impact on men's eyes', but she does not pursue this line of inquiry further.

[3] Kahil (1988: 542–4, image numbers 260–77, pp. 337–41).

[4] *Andr.* 629; cf. the scholiast on this passage = Ibycus 296 PMG.

female, are fashioned. Images of women in cinema and other media are shaped to gratify heterosexual male (sexual) desire. Examples of female figures constructed according to male projections and to fulfill male desires are rife from ancient Greece to modern western literature and art. Helen, as she is conceptualized in both ancient and modern media, epitomizes the '*to-be-looked-at-ness* [of] ... woman displayed as the sexual object ... of erotic spectacle'.[5] Hecuba's warning suggests a different approach to the male gaze, one that constructs it as vulnerable, weak and powerless when sighted on the immense power of the female. With the attribution of this power over the male gaze to her, the figure of Helen may be seen as focalizing three different constructs of the gaze. First, throughout the western cultural tradition she has served as the iconic female to be gazed upon to stir men's desire. Second, she evokes the danger men risk from gazing upon a sensual, sexually potent female. Third, through Helen we shall also witness the power of the female gaze.

My goal in this paper is to examine how the depictions of ancient Greek Helen in two films produced in the third quarter of the twentieth century cinematically display these three concepts of the gaze: Robert Wise's 1956 *Helen of Troy*,[6] starring Rossana Podestà, and Michael Cacoyannis' 1971 *The Trojan Women*, an adaptation of Euripides' eponymous tragedy, with Irene Papas as Helen.[7] Both directors underscore the first meaning of the gaze, as the cameras repeatedly display for the spectators' view virtual still shots of the iconically beautiful Helen. Cacoyannis, more than Wise, explores the danger of gazing upon Helen, although Wise alludes to this danger, and Cacoyannis vividly dramatizes the power of Helen's own gaze. Despite being based on the same ancient Greek figure, these two films portray Helen's physical appearance and conduct very differently. Both use skin and hair colour, hairstyle, and costume to convey their messages about Helen's status and her thematic and social significations. Furthermore, both films accentuate these concepts of gazing upon Helen by dramatizing key aspects of ancient Greek Helen: foremost, in most ancient sources, as the icon of beauty and eroticism; as a goddess associated with the cycle of vegetation and adolescent girls' transitions; as a

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[5] Mulvey (1975: 11). See also Berger (1972). On feminist and gendered film criticism on the gaze, often as coinciding with western hegemonic imperial gaze, see Kaplan (1997: 67–93), (2000), Bean and Negra (2002), MacKinnon (2002).

[6] Since the film was produced in 1955 and officially released in 1956, both dates occur in references.

[7] Scholarly interest in cinematic Helens has skyrocketed in the last decade, especially on Helen in Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*: Cyrino (2007b), Roisman (2008), Blondell (this volume, first published in 2009).

member of Sparta's royal lineage; and morally as a woman capable of transgressing gender and social boundaries with relative impunity. The diverse ways in which Wise and Cacoyannis incorporate these ancient characteristics into their cinematic Helens, and particularly the two actresses who are respectively cast to perform Helen, deliver distinctive messages about women and sexuality. Helen is fashioned by one director in general accord with the gender stereotypes of his time and by the other as a figure through which to interrogate accepted ideas about femininity and female sexuality. The respective cinematic conceptualizations of Helen and the films within which they are set offer comments, whether deliberate or not, on current political issues, including women's placement in larger political movements.[8] Despite their many differences, these two films form an interesting comparative pair. Distinguished, first, from the other major English-language film portrayals of Helen by their closer proximity in date—between one in 1927, Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, and two in the early 2000s: John Kent Harrison's 2003 cable tv production, *Helen of Troy*, and Wolfgang Petersen's 2004 *Troy*— these two films stand out for portraying Helen as a complex, multi-layered figure of power, however differently each film projects her power.[9]

## ROBERT WISE'S *HELEN OF TROY*

Impelled by the success of the biblical dramas *Quo Vadis?* (dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1951) and *The Robe* (dir. Henry Koster, 1953), Warner Brothers released *Helen of Troy* in a mid-decade wave of films on ancient Greek themes, and concurrently with Cecil B. DeMille's biblical blockbuster *The Ten Commandments* (1956).[10] Filmed in Cinemascope, the new

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[8] Scholars have noted cinema's crucial role as a new medium for political commentary. See, e.g., Negra (2002: 375), Ross (2002: 4), and Russell (2007: 31, 45).

[9] I list the major productions only; for brief overviews of films featuring Helen, see Pomeroy (2008: 61–2), Roisman (2008: 127–8).

[10] See Solomon (2001a), Russell (2007), Pomeroy (2008), and Paul (2013) for a discussion of historical epic films from the beginning of cinema. Following almost a decade of no films drawing on classical antiquity, the late 1940s saw a resurgence of films featuring ancient Greek themes, including Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (dir. Dudley Nichols, 1947). The films produced during the 1950s, the 'golden age of historical epic' (Russell, 2007: 5) when 40 per cent of films were set in the past (Russell, 2007: 24), include *Orphée* (dir. Jean Cocteau, 1950), *Alexander the Great* (dir. Robert Rossen, 1956) starring Richard Burton, *Ulisse* (dir. Mario Camerini, 1954) starring Kirk Douglas, *Hercules* (Pietro Francisci, 1958) starring Steve Reeves, and the brilliant Brazilian film *Orfeu Negro* (dir. Marcel Camus, 1959) starring Bruno Mello.

technology for historical epics first used in 1953, the film was Wise's only foray into the epic genre.[11] Because it is a US-Italian co-production made in Rome's Cinecittà studios, like *Ulisse* (dir. Mario Camerini, 1954), scholars consider *Helen of Troy* a precursor to the Italian peplum films produced by the hundreds in the period 1958–65.[12] In the peplum films, the muscle-bound male hero is on display for much of the film, bare-chested and in skimpy tunic—available for the (conscious or not) homo-erotic gaze of the male spectators—complemented by comparable displays of the female lead, who can conversely appeal to all audience segments.[13] According to the codes devised by Italian director Duccio Tessari about peplum films, preferable plotlines favour an erotic triangle of two men pursuing one woman; colour should be used to convey a character's moral qualities—white or yellow for 'good' characters, red or black for the 'bad'.[14] While these are conventional, that is, patriarchal, social and cinematic features, *Helen of Troy*'s dramatization of a good female heroine rather than the masculinist heroics of its male lead radically differentiates its plot and dramatic focus from the later peplum films. Scholars interpret the preponderance of visual imagery over dialogue in the peplum films as glorifying brawn over intellect and as an attempt to appeal to less educated, lower socio-economic classes.[15] In sharp contrast to peplum films, *Helen of Troy* plays to a putatively educated audience open to learning and who would respond favourably to the intellectual subtleties of the film.[16]

*Helen of Troy* illustrates two significant cinematic trends of the 1950s: a focus on historicity and a concern with contemporary social attitudes, especially in regard to women's roles and images.[17] In its pre-release

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[11] Russell (2007: 10–11) notes the unique connection established between historical event and cinematic spectacle by filming historical epics in the new Cinemascope technologies.

[12] Günsberg (2005: 101); Pomeroy (2008: 61). In general on pepla, see Günsberg (2005: 97–132), Nisbet (2006: 47–55), Pomeroy (2008: 29–59), Nikoloutsos (2013), and Paul and Pomeroy (both this volume).

[13] Dyer (1997: 145–83), MacKinnon (2002), Günsberg (2005: 102, 130–1), Turner (2009).

[14] On the erotic triangle, see e.g., Shahabudin (2009) and Pomeroy (this volume). See Günsberg (2005: 103) for the colour associations.

[15] Günsberg (2005: 101–4), Pomeroy (2008: 33), Nikoloutsos (2013: 264–72).

[16] '*Helen of Troy* particularly shines as a thoughtful, literate screenplay' (Nisbet 2006: 33). Nisbet adds that screenwriter Hugh Gray's handling of some ancient features provides 'treats for classicists' (34).

[17] Regarding social signification, Ross (2002: Introduction) observes that since their inception in the 1890s movies have always exerted a major influence on social values and customs, both conforming to dominant social trends as well as advancing alternative ideas. Most feminist and gendered film criticism addresses how cinematic portrayals of female

promotion Warner Brothers touted the film's historical importance in perpetuating the myth and history of the Trojan legend into a new generation.[18] According with the cinematic spirit of the time, the film's opening minute-plus establishes the story's historical background. While the voiceover presents a historically credible foundation, the film's historicity is contested. As in most films set in ancient Greece, the architecture, costumes, and hairstyle are an inauthentic amalgam of Hollywood set and costume designers' vision of classical antiquity that suggests ancient Greece by any, more often Roman, ancient-like image.[19] Troy, as in Petersen's 2004 film, is modelled on the ancient Minoan city of Knossos on Crete, replete with Minoan-style downward tapering columns, myriad 'horns of consecration', and Minoan and Mycenaean-like wall paintings; however, the statuary within the Trojan palace suggests sixth–fifth century Greek sculpture.[20] While many of the men's costumes and armour are not authentic, Helen's outfits in her opening scenes are reminiscent of ancient Spartan women's dress: short and long sleeveless tunics fastened on one or both shoulders (more below), scarf (rather than veil) covering head and shoulders, and a simple cloak covering head and body when she goes out.[21] Finally, her royal robe at Sparta echoes that of apparently royal women on some Mycenaean wall paintings.[22]

More subtly, knowledge of ancient Athenian drama and literary portrayals of Helen permeate the film in imaginative ways, as the opening scenes richly illustrate. Evoking the tale of the judgement of Paris, statues of the three goddesses, Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena stand prominently in the Trojan palace room. Paris is chided for worshipping Aphrodite too much and ignoring Athena, thereby echoing, though with different goddesses, Euripides' *Hippolytus* and its protagonist's devotion to Artemis while neglecting Aphrodite.[23] Evoking the judgement's outcome, the

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figures advance or interrogate women's social and cultural roles. Sieglohr (2000: Introduction), Negra (2002: 377), and Gundle (2007: xvii–xxiii) discuss how female stars come to represent national identities.

[18] Pomeroy (2008: 61); Winkler (2009: 12) notes that from its beginning cinema has reincarnated Homeric epic. Russell (2007: 16, 42–5) discusses the role of 1950s epic filmmakers as public historians and the marketing publicity of historical epics as making serious social, educative, and spiritual comments.

[19] See Nisbet (2006: 34) on both set and costume designers' tendency to Romanize ancient Greek images in order to make them more 'familiar' and acceptable to American audiences. See further Nikoloutsos (2013: 272–8) and this volume.

[20] García (2008: 21–3).     [21] Pomeroy (2002: 31–2, 43, fig. 4).
[22] Cavallini (2005: 73, fig. 42).     [23] Nisbet (2006: 33–4).

shipwrecked Paris utters upon seeing Helen approach him through the surf, as she is arising out of the sea: 'Aphrodite'; the scene recalls both Hesiod's tale of Aphrodite being born from the foam of the sea (*Theog.* 191–7), and, probably more familiar to most modern spectators, Botticelli's painting of Venus floating up on the sea on a clamshell. Paris' unique arrival at Sparta in rags, shipwrecked on the coast (which of course justifies the extended cinematic focus on his almost nude body) invites multiple allusions, ancient and modern. It echoes, most immediately, Kirk Douglas' 1954 *Ulysses* washed up on the beach, lying face down (Paris lies face up) by a mast tangled in ropes, while Rossana Podestà as Nausicaa greets him.[24] At the same time, the scene alludes to Euripides' *Helen*, where Menelaus enters in rags fashioned from his shipwrecked sailcloth.[25] Regardless of how many ancient allusions modern audiences are able to recognize (on which see more below), their presence reveals the writers' (classicist Hugh Gray and John Twist) familiarity with the ancient material and Wise's ability to dramatically incorporate these allusions into a modern film.[26] As Gideon Nisbet remarks, Gray's script 'demonstrates its respect for the textual sources by engaging with them knowledgeably and creatively'.[27]

This idea of edification links the educational historical representations with the film's social messages. Based on an ancient Greek theme, rather than the more common Roman or biblical, especially Christian subjects, *Helen of Troy*, like other post-World War II American and European films, stressed the re-establishment of traditional gender roles.[28] In Wise's film, a blonde Rossana Podestà dramatizes Helen's story from her first meeting with Paris to the end of the Trojan War as a proud yet vulnerable American beauty, emblematic of female American screen stars. Consequently, despite portraying the most renowned adulteress in the western cultural tradition, Podestà's Helen projects the wholesome, good girl image typical of American films at the time. While she displays

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[24] Nisbet (2006: 34). In *Rosanna* Podestà also emerges out of the sea in a skimpy two-piece costume and has a steamy scene with her leading man, Crox Alvarado, on the beach, behind a fishing net with the sea lapping behind them. On the movie's IMDb site, a reviewer notes: 'Rossana Podestà epitomizes some kind of Goddess, of Eve before the fall. A Madonna's face but a sensual body and a false innocence: it was not surprising Robert Wise would cast her as Helen of Troy' [spelling, spacing, and punctuation of the original corrected] <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046233/> accessed 1 October 2012.

[25] Pomeroy (2008: 62) identifies Euripides' *Helen* as the basis for the 1964 Italian film, *Leone de Tebe* (*The Lion of Thebes*), called in France, *Hélène, reine de Troie*, directed by Giorgio Ferroni (Filmes).

[26] Gray was also the screenwriter for *Ulysses*.    [27] Nisbet (2006: 32).

[28] See Fraser (1988) and Sieglohr (2000).

the regal bearing of a queen of Sparta, Helen's sweet demeanour virtually obliterates the notoriety attached to her action of eloping with Paris.[29]

Perhaps surprising audiences familiar with dark-haired Podestà's beach scenes in *Rosanna* (dir. Emilio Fernández, 1953) and as Nausicaa in *Ulysses*, in *Helen of Troy* Podestà projects Helen as the (stereo-)typical 1950s image of female beauty that idealizes Nordic physical features: fair skin and blonde hair (Fig. 1.1). As if to underscore this stereotypical projection, Wise had Podestà dye her dark hair blonde for the role (likewise for Sernas as Paris), which she had not wanted to do.[30] From Korda's 1927 Helen to Harrison's and Petersen's more recent screen portrayals, and with the striking exception of Cacoyannis' Helen discussed below, the cinematic Helens have been blonde, which rests on a



**Figure 1.1** Helen (Rossana Podestà) in *Helen of Troy*, dir. Robert Wise. Credit: [THE KOBAL COLLECTION].

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[29] All interpreters note the stress on a moral Helen in Wise's, Harrison's, and Petersen's productions; Winkler (2009: 212) notes the requirement in American cinema for redemption of wayward protagonists.

[30] With rare exceptions, Podestà maintained her dark hair colour throughout her long film career.