

## **Helen's *Eidola* in nineteenth-century European imagination**

### ***Eidola de Helena na imaginação Europeia do século XIX***

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**Abstract:** Nineteenth-century European culture reimagines Helen of Troy and her forbidden love with obsessive interest. Starting with her first appearance in the *Iliad*, Helen displays her beauty to reluctant yet mesmerized audiences. Over millennia, scenes depicting a Helen-like woman as the object of gaze, contradictory feelings, and judgment occupy crucial places in literary works. My essay will examine how the spoofy version of Helen in Offenbach's *La belle Hélène* relates to two tragic reflections, heroines in the novels of Zola and Tolstoy, *Nana* and, respectively, *Anna Karenina*, who are both explicitly linked to the Trojan saga. The focus will be on the narrative accounts in which crowds look at the beautiful heroine, while deriding or condemning her.

**Keywords:** Helen in the *Iliad* 3; Offenbach's *La belle Hélène*; Zola's *Nana*; Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*; feminine beauty; male gaze; silenced voices of women.

**Resumo:** A cultura europeia do século XIX reimagina Helena de Troia e seu amor proibido com um interesse obsessivo. Começando com sua primeira aparência, na *Iliada*, Helena mostra sua beleza para plateias relutantes, ainda que encantadas. Ao longo de milênios, cenas retratando uma mulher qual Helena como objeto do olhar, objeto de sentimentos contraditórios e de julgamento ocupam lugares cruciais em obras

literárias. Meu ensaio examinará como a versão caricata de Helena em *La belle Hélène*, de Offenbach, se relaciona a duas imagens trágicas, as heroínas nos romances de Zola e Tolstói, *Nana* e *Anna Karenina*, respectivamente, ambas ligadas explicitamente à saga de Troia. O foco será nos relatos narrativos em que a multidão olha para a bela heroína, condenando-a ou ridicularizando-a.

**Palavras-chave:** Helena na *Iliada*, III; *La Belle Hélène*, de Offenbach; *Nana*, de Zola; *Anna Karenina*, de Tolstói; beleza feminina; olhar masculino; vozes silenciadas das mulheres.

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## 1 A prelude: Helen on the heights and the Trojan elders, in Homer's *Iliad* 3

Despite the notorious misogyny of archaic Greek myth, one feminine figure towers above all others in beauty, mystery, and intangibility: Helen of Troy.<sup>1</sup> Seen as the cause of the Trojan War, she has a chance to return to her old life with impunity after the fall of Troy and even to experience divine afterlife.<sup>2</sup> The heroine appears to be a complex figure already in *Iliad* 3, in which she is the object of both disapproval and admiration.<sup>3</sup> Summoned by the goddess Iris, Helen goes to the citadel's ramparts to watch the single battle (*monomachia*) between her husband, Menelaus, and her lover, Paris. There she meets her audience, consisting of old Trojan men, sitting with Priam on the tower:

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<sup>1</sup> Zeitlin (1996, p. 53-171) provides the standard analysis of misogyny in archaic and classical Greek myth. Blondell (2013, p. IX-XI; p. 1-27) well highlights the special place that Helen occupies in ancient Greek culture, with a survey of the previous scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes Helen is taken to heaven in a sort of apotheosis, so, for example, Euripides' tragedy *Orestes*. The differences in the treatment of the character of Helen in Euripides' plays, particularly *Orestes* and *Helen*, are well pointed out by Wright (2008, p. 82-83).

<sup>3</sup> Blondell (2013, p. 53-72) examines in detail the complexity of the voices judging Helen's blame regarding the Trojan War in the *Iliad*.

These were seated by the Skaian gates, elders of the people.  
Now through old age these fought no longer, yet they were excellent  
Speakers still, and clear, like cicadas who through the forest  
Settle on trees, to issue their delicate voice of singing.  
Such were they who sat on the tower, chief men of the Trojans.  
And these, as they saw Helen along the tower approaching,  
Murmuring softly to each other uttered their winged words:  
'Surely there is no blame on the Trojans and strong-greaved Achaians  
if for long time they suffer hardship for a woman like this one.  
Terrible is the likeness of her face to immortal goddesses.  
Still, though she be such, let her go away in the ships, lest  
She be left behind, a grief to us and to our children.'

(*Il.* 3.149-159, Lattimore translator)

These rather harmless, old men have their wits left and are able of clear speech, though they seem to have lost the strength of their voices, sounding like delicate cicadas. Similar to the weakness of the voice is the faint blame they place on Helen. Their words do not openly sound accusatory, but signal a problem obliquely: the opposing armies are *not* to blame, and Helen's beauty is praiseworthy, but she should nevertheless go away. Admiration, veiled condemnation, and fear of future destruction sum up the feelings of this first audience of Helen. Who has caused the citadel's plight? Neither the Greeks nor the Trojans can be blamed – nor Helen herself should be condemned, for she looks so ravishing. Then who? No one, only that she ought not remain there in Troy. Like her blame, Helen's beauty is also indirectly indicated, with no specifics (likened to an immortal goddess, 3.157). This ought to give us a sense of awe because the term of comparison is impossible to define, for, after all, Helen resembles the divine.

This is a relatively tame crowd gazing at Helen, composed of men lacking virility, no longer fighting, not daring to either desire her or blame her openly. And yet, these elderly Trojans pose a potential danger, implying that Priam should drive her away. Priam, the chief of this group, however, responds with kindness. He calls Helen to stand beside him, clearly states that he is not blaming her (3.164), and asks her to identify the Greeks whom they can see from the heights of the city walls. He simply ignores the suggestion of banishment. In turn,

Helen addresses Priam kindly,<sup>4</sup> wishing she had not followed his son successfully (3.172-176), then proceeds to describe the warriors from the opposite camp: Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Ajax. Helen enjoys therefore a protective environment in this episode. The elderly viewers, though dazzled by Helen's beauty, shyly murmur that she should leave, but Priam, their leader, ignores them and further places her in control. She shows the decrepit male viewers who praise her looks the virile enemy warriors below who came to fight for her sake but cannot see her. The Trojan men remain under her charm, unable to harm her or expel her, as she directs their gaze to a different target, down below, where the imminent threat lurks.

My purpose here is not to apply theories of male gaze to the *Iliad*,<sup>5</sup> but to underscore the position of Helen in front of her first Homeric audience. Both Helen's beauty and blame remain veiled in ambiguity, while she moves from being the target to being the director of men's eyes. Scenes in which crowds gaze at heroines who resemble Helen of Troy and then judge her occur in nineteenth-century novels at crucial narrative points. Though not directly inspired by the *Iliad*, the comparison to this Homeric scene will provide us with a fascinating point of reference for further analysis.

## 2 Helen's Nineteen-Century Eidola

*La belle Hélène* (1864) comically deals with Paris' abduction of Helen. The place of this operetta in the nineteenth-century reception of the Trojan War has been discussed (GIER, 2002; EVERIST, 2009). However, the relationship between this operetta and two famous contemporary novels, Zola's *Nana* (1880) and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877) has not been analyzed closely and will be explored next in my paper. Allusions to

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<sup>4</sup> As Roisman (2006, p. 12-17) rightly points out, Helen first speaks in the *Iliad* in this particular scene with Priam (3.161-242), in which she generally assumes a humble pose, proper to her gender and situation; she further appears to be suffering from homesickness and guilt. While I agree with this assessment, my emphasis is on the weakness of her immediate Trojan male audience, which places Helen in a relatively strong and sheltered position.

<sup>5</sup> After the seminal article of Mulvey (1975) the critical analysis of the male gaze in film, visual media, and literature has gained extraordinary popularity. It is beyond the purpose of this paper to discuss the various theoretical takes on the topic.

*La belle Hélène* occur in both Zola's *Nana* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. *Nana*, a character based on real-life operatic prima donnas, sings in *La blonde Vénus*. Anna's husband, Alexei Karenin, finds solace in that he is not the only deceived husband in the world, tracing the origin of his plight back to Menelaus, of whom a new popular operetta has reminded everyone. Such references to Offenbach are not superficial footnotes to popular culture but reflect the novelists' preoccupation with the motif of the seductive Helen, also central to the operetta. Both Zola and Tolstoy place a Helen-like figure amidst contemporary realities. Like the mythical Helen, *Nana* mercilessly exercises her power of seduction over men, and Anna leaves her husband for her lover. Troy does not fall in the novels – the erring heroine does instead. *Nana* dies disfigured from smallpox. Anna commits suicide. Unlike their luckier mythological – and, for that matter, musical – models, the literary heroines tragically exemplify the consequences of women's trespassing social norms. Finally, both writers invest their 'Helens' with political symbolism. For the French writer, *Nana* represents the corrupted nature of the Second Empire. For the Russian, the political aspect is less prominent, but Anna and Vronsky, resembling Helen and Paris, reflect to an extent the weaknesses of an aristocracy unable to resist temptation.

## 2.1 Helen in Offenbach's Operetta

Offenbach's *La belle Hélène* (1864), on a libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, was the composer's second operetta on a classical subject, after his successful *Orphée*.<sup>6</sup> It treated parodically Paris' abduction of Helen before the Trojan War and it enjoyed success (YON, 2000). Details of the initial production of this operetta are relevant for a contemporary literary response in Zola's novel. Hortense Schneider, a renowned singer of the time, was the glamorous first interpreter of Helen. Her debut in the premiere of the operetta was both remarkable and tumultuous. First, she was about to leave Paris at a difficult point in her love life, when Offenbach begged her to remain in the capital and accept the role. Second, tensions continued during rehearsals, because of her rivalry with another celebrity of the initial cast, mezzo-soprano

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<sup>6</sup> On the relationship between these operettas and classical myth, see Munteanu (2012).

Lea Silly, playing Orestes.<sup>7</sup> Schneider, or a similar singer connected with Offenbach's operetta, appears to have become a model of inspiration for the title character of Zola's novel, *Nana*.<sup>8</sup> However, if the French writer chose Schneider as the main inspiration, he did not depict her with accuracy: she was in her thirties when she interpreted the role, while Zola's heroine is only in her teens; her voice was trained and professional, unlike *Nana*'s.<sup>9</sup>

The plot of the operetta revolves around Paris trying to take Helen away from her husband, after she was already promised to him by Venus. The interactions between the two lovers are reminiscent of Ovid's *Heroides* (16 and 17): as Paris openly courts the queen, Helen responds with some reluctance.<sup>10</sup> The Offenbachian Helen appears immediately in love with the stranger but somewhat reluctant to accept his advances at first. She finds a convenient excuse in *C'est le ciel qui m'envoie* (It's heaven that sends me) as she lets herself seduced, believing that Paris is visiting her only in a dream:

Hélène: Pâris près de moi!

Pâris: Oui, Pâris.

Hélène: À cette heure! e e peut être qu'un évê...

Pâris (à part) Qu'est – cequ'elle dit?

Hélène: Oui, c'est e revê que tout à l'heure e demandais à Calchas...

Pâris (à part): Un rêve? Parfait! Si e pouvais passer pour un évê.

Helen: Paris before me!

Paris: Yes, Paris.

Helen: At this hour! It can only be a dream...

<sup>7</sup> Harding (1980, p. 150-154) provides an analysis of the circumstances surrounding the first production.

<sup>8</sup> Contemporaries counted this prima donna as one of chief sources of inspiration for Zola. However, other singers, actresses, and popular *cocottes*, such as Blanche D'Antigny or Valtesse de La Bigne, most of them connected in some way with Offenbach, were counted among the possible sources of inspiration for *Nana* (MCLEAVE, 2001, p. 114).

<sup>9</sup> Clarke (2014) discusses this problem very well and entertains the hypothesis that *Nana* may have been also modeled after another character of the operetta, Venus, played by a young woman, Méry Laurent, who played Venus in Offenbach's operetta and came out of a golden shell on the stage.

<sup>10</sup> I have briefly noted the correspondences between Offenbach's libretto and the Ovidian letters (2012, p. 94-97).

Paris (aside): What did she say?

Helen: Yes, it must be the dream that I've just requested from Calchas.

Paris (aside): A dream? Perfect if I could pass for a dream.

Absolved of any responsibility, Helen happily yields to this dream-like Paris. The entire scene can be taken as an amusing counterpoint to the ancient tradition of Stesichorus, followed in Euripides' play *Helen*, according to which Helen never went to Troy. In the Euripidean play, only a phantom, dream-like image, an *eidolon* created by gods, which is Helen's double, went to Troy, while the real queen was transported to Egypt, where she remained faithful to Menelaus. In the operetta the dream-like creature, similar to an *eidolon*, is Paris not Helen. An ambiguity existent both in the ancient sources and in the operetta concerns Helen's desires and behavior. From Homer until Ovid, Helen does not say clearly what she wants, rejecting Paris at times, if only to save the appearances.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in the operetta, Helen is sure that it is her destiny to go with Paris, but does not accept him without hesitation. Initially, she refuses the lover, accepting him only in her sleep state until her husband discovers the two. However, predictably, Helen leaves with Paris in a departure that resembles an apotheosis at the end of the last act. Paris, disguised as a priest of Venus, requests from Menelaus the presence of Helen on his ship in order to perform a sea ritual to appease the goddess. This end may be loosely modeled after Euripides' escape tragedies, especially his *Helen*.<sup>12</sup> In that play, the heroine and her husband in disguise escape from Egypt, by pretending that they have to perform a funeral ritual (for the supposedly dead Menelaus) on a ship at sea. Offenbach's final scene reverses some dramatic devices. In Euripides, Helen plans skillfully all the details of her escape, whereas Paris leads the successful plan in the operetta.

So what are the characteristics of Helen in Offenbach's light musical re-creation of the Greek myth? As in the classical sources, she hesitates to admit openly her erotic desires. There is no serious blame placed on this fluffy, careless, beautiful creature. This may appear surprising to us. In the classical myth, even in the Euripidean version supporting the innocence of Helen, the heroine's reputation always

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<sup>11</sup> Fulkerson (2011) explores Helen's reluctance to acknowledge her own desire and, after her departure with Paris, her guilt in various ancient texts.

<sup>12</sup> I have briefly suggested this in the earlier article (MUNTEANU, 2012, p. 96).

carries a shadow of shame and needs to be properly restored (although the ill repute is falsely caused by the *eidolon*). An easy explanation lies in the narrative moment chosen by the librettists: a time before Helen's departure from Sparta. Moreover, this Helen, less formidable than most embodiments in the classical Greek versions, seems to lack initiative, as she simply follows Paris. Her beauty appears to be less fascinating to the crowds, as well as less mysterious than in the classical versions. In the final scene, the eyes of the audience do not have to focus exclusively on Helen, but rather on the eloping couple as well as on the comic of the situation. For the contemporary audience, therefore, this operatic Helen may look harmless if not guiltless. She disappears from the life of her husband and from the stage without causing any obvious harm to others, though the fall of Troy may be tacitly anticipated in the minds of the viewers. Let us keep in mind the last tableaux of the operetta, in which Helen flees with her lover, under the eyes of the dismayed crowd. In some productions she sails above everyone's heads. This is an important moment! It captures the gaze of the crowds looking at Helen as object of beauty and deceit, but she is together with her partner, fading into a happily ever-after end of the story. The literary heroines of Zola and Tolstoy maybe linked to the operatic Helen, but they tread a different path, as we shall see.

## 2.2 Second Helen on the Heights: Zola's Nana

Zola thought of a novel centered around an operetta singer protagonist as a direct result of seeing *La belle Hélène*. The writer's dislike of Offenbach's music in general has been well documented; also, a link has been recognized between the opening scene of his novel, *Nana*, and the contemporary operatic shows, which the writer criticizes in other essays (GRIFFITHS, 2009, p. 62). In the first chapter of the novel, we witness the performance of *La Blonde Venus*, a spoof on classical antiquity, which literary critics call "a parody of a parody": the writer's parody of Offenbach's operetta, which is in itself a parody of classical antiquity, and of the regime of Napoleon III). The heroine, Nana, plays Venus, inspired by the interpreters of Offenbach's Helen, at the *Theatre of Variety*. I would like to concentrate next on this first chapter of the novel, for my comparative analysis, without discussing in detail the rest of the novel. Suffice to say that Nana, the prototype of a Parisian cocotte, after climbing the social scale thanks to her looks, ruins a great



number of men. Fate strikes her, however, and she dies from a horrible disfiguring disease, smallpox. Most critics take the end of the novel as a political parable, signaling the demise of the corrupt Second Empire.

Let us return to the opening pages of the novel and examine the entrance of the heroine and her audience. A narrative description of a silly operetta, with its plot in Olympus, culminates with the appearance of the lead female singer:<sup>13</sup>

At that moment, the clouds at the back of the scene parted and Venus appeared. Dressed as a goddess in a white tunic, with her long blonde hair hanging completely loose over her shoulders, Nana was very tall and sturdy for her eighteen years. With complete self-assurance, she advanced laughing towards the footlights and launched into her big aria: ‘When Venus goes prowling at night...’

She barely reached the second line before the audience started exchanging glances. Was this a joke, one of Bordenave’s<sup>14</sup> calculated risks? They never heard a worse trained voice, nor one singing more out of tune. Her manager summed her up exactly: she sang like a cornrake. And she didn’t even know how to hold herself on the stage – she was flinging her arms about in front of herself and swaying in a way that seemed both graceless and inappropriate. (ZOLA, 1992, p. 13-14)

The audience, undefined for now, but, as we will soon see mostly composed of men, sees Nana above on the stage. Unlike the Homeric Helen, this Venus like-creature receives a detailed description: long blond hair, well built, and nonchalant. But like Helen in book three of the *Iliad*, Nana is in danger of being banished, not because of her morals, or of an army waging war against Troy, but because of her voice. Strangely, as Priam ‘saves’ Helen from being expelled, so a male figure saves Nana from embarrassment, and so she can continue her performance:

Oohs and ahs were coming from the pit and the cheaper seats, and people began quietly hissing; then a cracked voice, like a moulting cockerel’s, in the orchestra stalls called out enthusiastically:

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<sup>13</sup> All citations in English are from the translation of Parmée.

<sup>14</sup> Bordenave is the name of the director and manager of the operetta in the novel.

Fantastic! (*Très chic* in Fr. Original)

The whole house gaped. It was the cherub, the schoolboy playing truant, with his eyes popping out of his head, his face pale with excitement at the sight of Nana (ZOLA, 1992, p. 14).

The boy breaks the bad spell and everyone afterwards bursts into laughter. An interesting contrast: Priam, the old king, takes the side of Helen in the *Iliad*, as the elderly mumble, whereas here the youngest and most inexperienced audience member makes his approval known. Immediately afterwards Nana takes full control over the audiences, dominating them with her sexuality. Of course, I am not suggesting here that Zola has constructed this scene thinking precisely of the *Iliad* 3, but I argue that there is an eerie resemblance in the way in which the narrative proceeds: a superb woman appears, men mumble (with admiration yet with disapproval), a single voice takes her side, then she takes control over the crowd. At the same time, the differences of nuance run deep. In Homer everything about Helen's beauty remains veiled and merely implied (we, external audiences do not 'see' her directly but only hear the comments of the elderly; we do not hear about how she may excite the listeners sexually while she points to the Greek warriors). Quite the opposite in Zola, we are told in detail how the woman looks like, and then what her viewers experience, why they are appeased, and how they forget about her awful voice. Nothing could be more explicit:

A murmur spread and every opera-glass was focused on Venus. Gradually Nana had asserted her domination over the audience and now she held every man at her mercy. She was like an animal on heat whose ruttishness has permeated the whole theatre. Her slightest movement aroused lust; a jerk of her little finger was sexy. Men were leaning forward with their backs twitching, as if their nerves were being vibrated by invisible violin bows, the warm breath of some mysterious woman was straying over the napes of their necks and setting the wisps of hair quivering. (ZOLA, 1992, p. 26)

Who is then in control? Clearly Nana mesmerizes her male audience: even in the absence of a good voice, her mere sight produces a musical effect similar to a violin. But is she in a position of safety and

control in the same way in which the Homeric Helen appeared to be? Nana's male viewers, unlike the Homeric elderly who compare Helen's beauty to a divinity's, may appear subdued but are certainly sexually aroused, disturbed, and ready to 'attack' her as if she were a prey; she is in fact compared to an animal. The lack of mystery regarding Nana's charms suggests to us her vulnerability, since her power lies in a transitory moment of sexual glow. Her beauty protects her temporarily, but the ugliness of her voice already predicts her fall. Nobody cares about her song, or even worse, men learn to endure her singing for the sake of her looks. As some have pointed out, the final horrific death of Nana, maimed by illness, could be interpreted as Zola's patriarchal misogyny – this is not to say that he does not rebuke men's lust and greed, all socially accepted.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, what Nana says, or, more precisely, how she sings, does not have any importance. She remains an object for the male gaze, with no authority, no significant voice, and far removed from the Homeric Helen who uses her voice to impart knowledge. The beautiful woman on the heights has no longer the authority of her speech.

### **2.3 Third Helen on the Heights: Tolstoy's Anna**

While Zola's ties to Offenbach's operetta in *Nana* appear obvious, it may not be well known that Tolstoy also alludes to *La belle Hélène* in his novel, *Anna Karenina*. Furthermore, if the French Nana relates to Helen in a general way, as an object of sexual attraction, the Russian Anna lives a story that matches well the ancient legend of the most beautiful woman: she runs away with her lover (Vronsky/Paris), leaving behind her husband (Karenin/Menelaus) and her child. I will examine here two passages: first, one in which Tolstoy's novel alludes to Offenbach operetta and, second, a tremendous description of Anna at the opera, yet another "Helen" on the heights.

Here is the first, somewhat humorous passage, in which Anna's husband, Alexey Alexandrovitch Karenin, entertains suspicions about his wife's behavior. We hear a monologue, in which this middle-aged man, very concerned with his social position – and not deeply preoccupied with losing spousal affection – tries to console himself, in case he has been cheated on:

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<sup>15</sup> Minogue (2007, p. 133-134) presents the idea with accompanying scholarship.

‘I have only to find the best way out of the difficult position in which she has placed me. And I shall find it’ he said to himself, frowning more and more. ‘I’m not the first nor the last.’ And to say nothing of historical instances dating from the ‘Fair Helen’ of Menelaus,<sup>16</sup> recently revived in the memory of all, a whole list of contemporary examples of husbands with unfaithful wives in the highest society rose before Alexey Alexandrovitch’s imagination. ‘Daryalov, Poltavsky, Prince Karibanov, Count Paskudin, Dram... Yes, even Dram, such an honest, capable fellow, Semyonov, Tchagin, Sigonin,’ Alexey Alexandrovitch remembered. ‘Admitting that a certain quite irrational *ridicule* falls to the lot of these men, yet I never saw anything but a misfortune in it, and I always felt sympathy for it.’ Alexei Alexandrovitch said to himself, though indeed it was not the fact, and he had never felt sympathy for the misfortunes of that kind, but the more frequently he had heard of unfaithful wives betraying their husbands, the more highly he had thought of himself. ‘It is a misfortune which may befall anyone. And this misfortune has befallen me. The only thing to be done is to make the best of the position.’ (TOLSTOY, 2003, part 3, chapter 13, p. 260)

A few details here seem relevant to our discussion. Karenin starts thinking of his situation through a mythical paradigm: Menelaus and Helen, following the recent theatrical production of Offenbach’s operetta. This example triggers a series of recent real cases, and perhaps the long list is in itself amusing, as is the effort to accept the position of a cheated husband by placing oneself on a long list of respectable noblemen who endure the same ordeal. The narrator’s aside, however, undermines for us Karenin’s efforts to appear in a good light in his own eyes – he tells himself that he has felt sympathy for these other men, but this is not true, it is simply a convenient story, made up on the spot. Anna’s husband appears thus to be a self-centered, weak type of ‘Menelaus’, who, if we continue to document his behavior later the end of the novel, appears to be a coward. He remains unwilling and unable to fight for his wife and only fosters petty concerns for his honor.

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<sup>16</sup> The reference is precisely to Offenbach’s operetta.

Who is the audience ready to banish Anna? The second tableaux I would like to examine here occurs toward the end of the novel. Though not directly connected with Offenbach's *Helen*, or with Homer's *Iliad*, we witness a familiar scene: a gorgeous, Helen-like woman on the heights, in a theatrical context. After leaving her husband to live with her lover, Vronsky, and after going abroad for a while, Anna returns to St. Petersburg. She decides to go to see an opera, despite knowing very well that everyone will judge her, and despite her lover's pleas to remain home. Although she is not on the stage, like Nana, she becomes the center of everyone's attention, up in her theater box.

With a most poignant twist, the narrator takes us to witness the scene not through the eyes of male viewers, as we do in Zola, but, more narrowly, through the eyes of Vronsky himself, who should have been Anna's protector. Though a valiant officer, and not afraid to die for Anna, he cowardly decides not to join her at the opera, surely fearing public opprobrium.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, he cannot stay away but it is drawn to the theater: upon entering toward the end of the second act, nothing extraordinary happens on the stage, and nothing appears to him remarkable in the musical execution (the staccato of a female voice receives mention). Everyone's eyes are diverted from the stage, as they fix Anna:

Vronsky had not yet seen Anna. He purposely avoided looking in her direction. But he knew by the direction of people's eyes where she was. (TOLSTOY, 2003, part 5, chapter 33, p. 504)

Let us imagine seeing Helen humiliated through the eyes of Paris who does not do anything to save her from a vicious Trojan crowd.<sup>18</sup> The moment in which Vronsky finally dares to notice Anna in her opera box remains, in my view, one of the most memorable of the novel:

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<sup>17</sup> Evans (1999, p. 271-272) interestingly notes that, from a social point of view, Vronsky is caught in a permanent relationship of courtship, which should normally end for men once they marry the woman they desire. His social position appears therefore odd, if not as blamable as hers: he is trapped and unable to return to his normal male life, which may explain his cowardice in this scene.

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it is worth noting here that the Homeric Helen always has the upper hand: *she* admonishes a humiliated Paris, unable to defeat her former husband on the battlefield.

Vronsky listening with one ear, moved his opera-glass from the stalls and scanned the boxes. Near a lady in a turban and a bald old man [...] Vronsky suddenly caught sight of Anna's head, proud, strikingly beautiful, and smiling in the frame of lace. She was in the fifth box, twenty paces from him. She was sitting in front, and slightly turning, was saying something to Yashvin. The setting of her head on her handsome, broad shoulders, and the restrained excitement and brilliance of her eyes and her whole face reminded him of her just as he had seen her at the ball in Moscow. But he felt utterly different toward her beauty now. In his feeling for her now there was no element of mystery, and so her beauty, though it attracted him even more intensely than before, gave him now a sense of injury. She was not looking in his direction, but Vronsky felt that she had seen him already. (TOLSTOY, 2003, part 5, chapter 33, p. 505).

We read about physical attributes of the heroine: gorgeous posture and eyes, but with a twist. For the lover watching Anna as an object of the spectators' contempt, she has lost her mystery, though she still remains attractive. The vulnerability of beauty appears to be here even more poignant than in the case of Zola's character. Nana was adored for her beauty but had no depth to support the loss of charms in the future. Her horrible disfiguring death seals the ephemeral nature of her beauty. By contrast, Anna remains still stunning, but no longer appears intangible and mysterious to her lover. Nothing has changed in her appearance from the first time Vronsky saw her to this moment toward the end of the affair, except the way in which other people see Anna. The contempt in other people's gaze alone distorts the beauty of the heroine even in the eyes of her lover. Anna has thus become an imperfect *eidolon* of her former self. Such vulnerability of beauty that looms over the nineteenth-century heroines does not appear to affect the figure of Helen in archaic and classical Greece. Her choice may come into question, so may the sincerity of her remorse, Paris' abilities to fight, Menelaus' decision to forgive her, but Helen's beauty never fades.

Who is then in control when the crowd watches and judges the beauty of the woman on the heights? In Tolstoy's novel, all through the eyes of Vronski, we see what happens in the neighboring boxes. Princess Varvara looked red in the face and kept laughing unnaturally, which made

Yashvin, a loyal friend of Anna, uneasy (i.e. having the expression he used to when loosing at cards). Interestingly, as in all the other scenes, there is a male protector of the heroine, in this case Yashvin. Unlike Priam, who has authority, or the young boy in Zola, who wins the crowds because of his enthusiasm, however, Yashvin does not have a voice that can be heard in Tolstoy. Madame Kartasova, an acquaintance, also in that box, got up and left while talking in an agitated manner. Her husband Kartasov, a fat bald man, was trying to appease his wife, then attempted to apologize to Anna afterwards:

Vronsky could not understand exactly what had passed between the Kartasovs and Anna, but he saw that something humiliating for Anna had happened. He knew this both from what he had seen, and most of all from the face of Anna, who, he could see, was taking every nerve to carry through the part she had taken up. And in maintaining this attitude of external composure she was completely successful. And one who did not know her and her circle, who had not heard all the utterances of the women expressive of commiseration, indignation, and amazement, she should show herself in society, and show herself so conspicuously with her lace and her beauty, would have admired the serenity and loveliness of this woman without a suspicion that she was undergoing the sensations of a man in the stocks.” (TOLSTOY, 2003, part 5, chapter 33, p. 505-506).

In the gallery of gorgeous women on the heights, Anna occupies the unhappiest position. Far from Helen’s dominating display, or even from Nana’s temporary victory over her viewers, Anna is silenced, humiliated, and diminished in the eyes of her lover. No one takes her side successfully, in spite of the timid attempts from Yashvin. The crowd’s fascination with the heroine, always based in Western tradition on the ambiguous combination of admiration and condemnation, changes here into an attitude of utter disapproval. Worst of all, moral blame from the crowd distorts the heroine’s beauty even in the eyes of her most ardent lover. The Homeric Helen has an authoritative voice, describing the Greeks to the Trojan elders. The operatic Helen of Offenbach sings carefree, escaping the eyes of the crowds with her Paris. Among her nineteenth-century literary *eidola*, Nana sings, with no delightful voice, but her

sight compensates at first for her lack of vocal talent in Zola's novel, and Anna's voice remains unheard, though the heroine attempts to mask her pain by keeping her splendid posture in Tolstoy. There is a gradation of silence and pain, in which beauty cannot hold on in the absence of words.

In conclusion, with his popular operetta, Offenbach rekindled the myth of Helen in the imagination of the nineteenth-century audiences. The parody remained light in tone with respect to both music and libretto, portraying a careless heroine who celebrates her new love, and leaves the scene eloping with Paris. Echoes of this operetta can be recognized in two very famous contemporary novels, in two different parts of Europe. But the literary copies of Helen carry darker reflections of the ancient model. I have tried to show how each work alludes to the operetta, and then focused on a particular scene in which the heroine is presented in theatrical context. Perhaps both the French and the Russian novels reflect the social anxieties over the emancipation of women,<sup>19</sup> as both depict the destruction of the woman who reigns supreme through her sexual enticement, or abandons her family for a lover. In independent letters and comments, Zola openly links Nana's fall to politics, while Tolstoy relates Anna's fall to morals.<sup>20</sup> In each case the heroines are too complex to be reduced to figures that provide moralistic lessons to their readers, but each has her character analyzed, her beauty demystified, and her choice criticized. These nineteenth-century Helens may ruin men, but they ultimately ruin themselves, unable to retain the mystical invulnerability of the Homeric model. In ancient Greek culture, there is something about Helen that surpasses the common ideas of femininity:<sup>21</sup> invulnerability. Love does not destroy her as she herself embodies divine erotic desire and

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<sup>19</sup> On this see the various essays in Paletschek and Pietrow-Ennker (2004).

<sup>20</sup> Best analysis of the complexity of this subject is that of Mandelker (1994, p. 36-37), who contrasts Tolstoy's own theoretical views about the morality of arts with the possibilities of interpreting the social and political nuances of his work, even when those were not acknowledged; on pages 38-44 she further presents the critical controversies regarding the interpretation of Anna Karenina, through feminist, anti-feminist, or post-feminist studies. Orwin (2013, p. 177-178), underscores that the contemporaries already noted the contrast – one suggesting a subtle moral message – between Anna, with her unfortunate love, and Levin, the strong, honest farmer, with his happy-ending love story.

<sup>21</sup> As Blondell (2013) shows convincingly, the mysterious beauty of Helen is not only Homeric but extends to many other ancient Greek authors and genres, and, despite the variation in tone, she is always invested with a fascinating voice.



is thus allowed to exit from scenes of destruction unscathed. Above all, she retains the ability to speak with dignity, even in difficult circumstances. In ancient Greek sources, Helen's beauty never fades: it is as infallible as the desire she inspires.<sup>22</sup> Her nineteenth-century literary *eidola* do not enjoy the same privileges. The beauty of the Helen-like heroines either disappears or diminishes, and the voice either fails to charm, or appears to have been muted by public condemnation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> On the link between beauty and desire generally in archaic and classical Greece, see the excellent recent analysis of Konstan (2014, p. 62-71).

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps these nineteenth-century literary *eidola* of Helen can still be recognized in some advertising of feminine mystique in modern Western culture, such as the 'model,' in which the gorgeous woman on the heights has to be admired and judged, often without having an audible voice.

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