

DIFFERING AESTHETICS: MULTIPLICITY AND JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID'S
PARIS AND HELEN

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ABSTRACT

ANDREW ERIC CURLEY: Differing Aesthetics: Multiplicity and Jacques-Louis David's *Paris and Helen*
(Under the direction of Mary Sheriff)

Jacques-Louis David's *The Loves of Paris and Helen* (1789), which depicts the lovers embracing in a secluded and sumptuous bedroom, differs from his previous work in its choice of amatory rather than heroic or didactic subject. David perceived this commission as an opportunity to explore new aesthetic terrain by focusing on the complexities of mythology as an intellectual category. Contemporary debate defined the duality of myth: *la fable* as the sum total of cultural products related to these stories and *la mythologie* as the complex psychological meanings behind the legends. David's painting is correspondingly bifocal. Primarily, he renders the lovers in a veristic and accurate setting, appropriating the mythological and erotic to his own contemporary aesthetic. Secondly, by drawing upon the deep literary and visual history behind this story, the artist displays the characters' ambiguity and offers a visual speculation on the psychological forces which lie behind their union.

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CHAPTER I MYTHOLOGICAL STUDY IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Few words penned by critics at the Salon of 1789 truly captured the depth and complexity of Jacques-Louis David's *The Love of Paris and Helen*. Rather than assessing the painting on its own merits, some chose to view it comparatively: "M. David proves in this painting of the love of Paris and Helen that he knows to render with the same ease voluptuous scenes as well as those that have great strength. He charms in the first as he engages us in the others."¹ Focused on superficial differences, they failed to see any reason behind David's use of an amatory and mythological subject.

The story of Paris and Helen is, at its foundation, a story of love. A single man, overwhelmed and forgetful of his responsibility to others, chooses himself and his new bride above all else. Tragedy, war and destruction follow in Paris' wake. Cognizant of the fate that may befall his family and people, this man is unable to forego love and sacrifice his happiness for the benefit of others. His story, which has been retold for almost three thousand years, has remained vibrant, illustrative and edifying in each retelling. Circumstances, language and geography have changed, but the moral remains the same. Yet, as centuries of artists, poets, playwrights and philosophers have made abundantly clear, the story is far more complex. What motivated Helen to leave her original husband and sail to

¹ *Observations sur le Salon tirées du journal de Paris*, Deloynes, no. 16, p. 306. (M. David prouve dans son tableau des amours de Pâris et d'Hélène qu'il sait rendre avec la même facilité les scenes voluptueuses et celles qui sont terribles. Il charme dans les premieres comme il sait interesser dans les autres. *Translation mine.*)

Troy? How could she tolerate watching thousands of men slaughter each other in her name? Was her love for Paris as strong as his for her?

David's offering in this discourse was unique in French art. Instead of focusing on an essential and emblematic part of their life story like Paris' judgment, the birth of Helen or the abduction of Helen, as his predecessors had done, he depicted a more generic moment to elucidate the complexities of this story. Paris has just returned from battle, signified by his discarded weapons, and attempts to inaugurate love making. Light bathes the couple and the canvas centers on their persons. Surrounding the pair is a detailed and carefully elaborated boudoir filled with ancient and accurate artifacts, many of which are cast in shadow. At first glance, we see that the painter draws observers immediately to the central characters and makes them assess these characters as individuals complicit in their choices. By rendering this specific moment, David challenges the viewer's understanding of the story and forces a reevaluation of the questions that surround this union.

In a larger sense, however, many in eighteenth century Europe grappled with mythology as a whole. While French intellectuals, artists and kings selectively appropriated stories from antiquity and saw themselves as modern Aristotles, Apelles or Apollos, their collective understanding about the meanings of myths were far from stable. Frank Manuel stated in his work *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* that "... myths are such vague and amorphous configurations that an epoch invariably tends to project itself into them"² but how those projections manifest themselves is complicated. In his seminal essay *Fable and Mythology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Jean Starobinski seeks to negotiate these difficulties by exposing the duality of myth during the waning years of the *ancien*

² Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 11 – 12.

regime.³ Myth, as an intellectual category, was divided into two subsets: *la fable* and *la mythologie*, headings derived directly from the two articles in the *Encyclopédie* that elucidate the complexity of mythological study.

La fable is defined as the sum total of cultural products that relate the allegorical correspondences, metamorphoses and legends of pagan deities. Understanding *la fable* enables an educated person to grasp the meaning of those artistic works that draw upon this corpus. Starobinski goes so far as to say that a conversancy in *la fable* was essential to education in the eighteenth century:

It can be argued that, during the eighteenth century, knowledge of mythology was a condition of cultural literacy, essential if one wanted to enter into those conversations in which every educated man would sooner or later be invited to participate... [Myth] was a pictorial language providing access to a specific discourse, the consequence of which was to facilitate social recognition among individuals who interpreted a universe of mythic fictions in the same way.⁴

Contemporaries understood the importance of myth in similar terms. The Chevalier de Jaucourt, in the *Encyclopédie*'s entry for *La Fable*, spoke plainly of the importance of understanding myth for "...it is impossible to ignore after a while without having to blush at this lack of education."⁵ If paintings and poems were filled with meaning and symbols in code, *la fable* was the means to decipher those hidden subjects.

Unlike the superficial and correlative function of *la fable*, Starobinski asserts that *la mythologie* is comprised of "*speculative* texts that attempt to elaborate a knowledge and

³ Jean Starobinski, "Fable and Mythology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Blessings in Disguise; or, the Morality of Evil*, Translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 169-193.

⁴ Pierre Rosenberg, "In Defense of Mythological Painting," chap. in *The Loves of the Gods: Mythological Painting from Watteau to D'Avignon* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 17.

⁵ *Encyclopédie*, 6 :343. ("... qu'il n'est pas possible de l'ignorer à un certain point, sans avoir à rougir de ce manque d'éducation...") Original text retrieved from the ARTFL project at <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/encyc/>.

science of myth” (italics mine).⁶ Those who delved into *la mythologie* attempted to ascertain the complexities, origins and nuanced meanings behind these stories ranging from the theological to psychological. These stories were complex and so full of detail that Jaucourt speculated they might never be fully parsed or understood. He wrote in his article on *La Mythologie* that “[Mythological] analysis is impossible. At least it will never be possible to arrive at a sufficiently scientific unraveling of the whole to permit us to discern the origin of every myth, and even less of all the details which make up each myth.”⁷ Art that encompassed mythology was therefore subjective as interpretations of these stories were always different, insufficient and ambiguous.

Despite the lively intellectual debate surrounding mythology, there remained great controversy over how those subjects were employed in both education and art. Like the meanings of these stories, the morals and lessons they supposedly provided and the type of exposure deemed appropriate for polite society was by no means universally agreed upon. Educators of certain religious beliefs disdained the inclusions of myth in curricula due to the description of licentious behavior on the part of both gods and mortals.⁸ Learning these stories might undermine the upstanding behavior extolled by approved Christian doctrine. Many *philosophes* objected to the use of mythology in public discourse as these stories were not true history and thus could hardly serve art in its role as didactic. Antiquarians found reason to object to paintings of mythological subjects because they were often less than

⁶ Starobinski, "Fable and Mythology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries" 169.

⁷ Denis Diderot, et al. *Encyclopedia: selections, Diderot, D'Alembert, and a society of men of letters*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 255.

⁸ Philippe Le Leyzour, "Myth and Enlightenment: On Mythology in the Eighteenth Century," chap. in *The Loves of the Gods: Mythological Painting from Watteau to David* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992) 27.

veristic and frequently the product of an active imagination.⁹ Finally, many intellectuals believed that myths provided clear insight into the thoughts of primitive man and, ultimately, revealed the true nature of religion itself.¹⁰

At the time of this debate over the role and prominence of mythology in art, Jacques-Louis David emerged triumphant and became the rising star of the French school. A man of great talent and greater ambition, David spent his early career defying academic strictures and becoming famous in the process. He entered paintings in all the Salons of the 1780s and after exhibiting the *Oath of the Horatii* at the Salon of 1785, he was hailed as a “brilliant and courageous imagination” and the painting was praised as “the most distinguished production to come from a French brush in many a year”.¹¹

In that year of great triumph when the *Oath* took the Salon by storm, the comte d’Artois solicited David for a commission. The subject of the painting, *The Loves of Paris and Helen* (Figure 1), is unique among David’s works of the 1780s and proves to be one of the most intellectually intriguing. Unlike his other history paintings of the 1780s (i.e. *Belasarius*, *Andromaque Mourning Hector*, *Oath of the Horatii*, *Death of Socrates* and the *Brutus*) this painting is not focused on the *exemplum virtutis* or the noble sacrifices that men have made for their *patrie*.¹² Instead, this canvas dwells upon the amatory escapades of two mythological figures. Although the *Andromaque* is similarly drawn from mythology (indeed

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, 6.

¹¹ Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 214. The above quotation is the author’s translation of piece in *Mercure*.

¹² For a complete examination David’s use of the *exemplum virtutis* in his works of the 1780s, see pp. 36 – 45 of Thomas Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

the same text as Artois' commission), *Paris and Helen* differs by not focusing on heroism, sacrifice or virtue. The goals of this new work are different.

The Loves of Paris and Helen is a fundamental work in the Davidian canon and the themes displayed resonate throughout the artist's career. Drawing upon this understood duality of mythology, David's goals are twofold. On the surface, the canvas is linked to the idea of *la fable*; the artist renders the *story* of Paris and Helen. David attempts to recreate visually this legend in a veristic and accurate setting, appropriating the mythological and erotic to his own new contemporary aesthetic. The second, much deeper and analytic side of the canvas is linked to the study of *la mythologie*. Here the artist displays the *ambiguity* of these characters and offers the viewer a visual *speculation* as to what psychological forces lay behind such a union. Any psychological essay on these characters must focus upon the immorality of their actions. By drawing upon the deep literary history behind the story of Paris and Helen, David opens the canvas to multiple interpretations and leaves viewers, ultimately, to make their own speculation.

CHAPTER II

LA FABLE: THE STORY OF PARIS AND HELEN

At its most fundamental *The Loves of Paris and Helen* is an attempt to appropriate and represent the story of Paris and Helen in the guise of a modern, neo-classical painting. It is essential, therefore, to begin by examining the primary textual source for the subject matter: the third book of Homer's *Iliad*. Having been educated at the Academy and introduced to the rigors of a classical education rooted in the study of both Greek and Latin, David would certainly have been familiar with this and other works essential to his thinking about this canvas.

The first mention of Helen in the history of Western literature occurs at the beginning of Book III. Her entrance upon the scene of epic poetry and culture is so important that there is a word specifically used to describe the moment: *teichoskopia*, literally meaning “the Look-Out on the Wall or the View from the Battlements”.¹³ At this moment in the poem the Argive and Trojan armies are fighting in the fields before Troy and those not engaged in fighting stand upon the ramparts of Ilium. Summoned by Iris disguised as her sister-in-law to witness the fighting before the city, Helen arrives on the scene splendid and beautiful. Catching sight of her beauty, the elders of Troy openly chastise her presence and justify their predicament. In their spoken lines, Homer captures the ambivalence that shrouds Helen's character throughout history:

¹³ Matthew Gumpert, *Grafting Helen: The Abduction of the Classical Past* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), xi.

Who on earth could blame them [i.e. those fighting]? Ah, no wonder
the men of Troy and Argives under arms have suffered
years of agony all for her, for such a woman.
Beauty, terrible beauty!
A deathless goddess – so she strikes our eyes!
But still,
Ravishing as she is, let her go home in the long ships
And not be left behind... for us and our children
down the years an irresistible sorrow.¹⁴

After being beckoned to sit next to Priam, king of Troy, Helen chastises herself for the
misery her life has wrought.

I revere you so, dear father, dread you too –
If only death had pleased me then, grim death,
That day I followed your son to Troy, forsaking
My marriage bed, my kinsman and my child,
My favorite, now full-grown
And the lovely comradeship of women my own age.
Death never came, so now I can only waste away in tears.¹⁵

Iris summons Helen to view the battle because Paris has just challenged Menelaus,
king of Sparta and rightful husband of Helen, to a duel. Both men agree that whomever shall
emerge triumphant, his side will declare victory and Helen will then have but one husband.
In the ensuing fight, it becomes evident to the goddess Aphrodite that her favorite, Paris, will
fall to the mightier hand of the Spartan king and, at the moment of imminent defeat, she
whisks Priam's son away from danger. He is brought to his bedroom where he eagerly
awaits the return of his bride. Aphrodite appears to Helen and urges her to return to Paris.

Quickly – Paris is calling for you, come back home!
There he is in the bedroom, the bed with inlaid rings –
He's glistening in all his beauty and his robes!
You'd never dream he's come from fighting a man...¹⁶

¹⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, Robert Fagles, trans (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), III: 186 - 194.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* III: 208 - 214.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* III: 450 - 453.

Helen does not play the willing slave to the goddess of love and vocalizes her anger at being nothing more than a powerless actor in a game to ruin the lives and fortunes of men.

Maddening one, my Goddess, oh what now?
Lusting to lure me to my ruin yet again?...
But why now?—
Because Menelaus has beaten your handsome Paris
And hateful as I am, he longs to take me home?
Is that why you beckon here besides me now
With all the immortal cunning in your heart?
Well, go to him yourself – *you* hover beside him!
Abandon the gods' high road and be a mortal!
Never set foot again on Mount Olympus, never! –
Suffer for Paris, protect Paris, for eternity...
Until he makes you his wedded wife – that or his slave.
Not I, I'll never go back again. It would be wrong,
disgraceful to share that coward's bed once more.
The women of Troy would scorn me down the years.
Oh the torment – never-ending heartbreak!¹⁷

Helen, however, eventually resigns herself to the will of the angered goddess and is led back to Paris' sumptuous halls. Yet her insolence does not subside and she rages against the man she blames for the tragedy at hand. "... So, home from the wars! / Oh would to god you'd died there, brought down / by that great soldier, my husband long ago."¹⁸ After her struggle and despite her rage she eventually succumbs to the will of the gods and Paris.

As has been noted by scholars, it is to this text that David attempts to remain true.¹⁹ Yet translating a poem into a painting is not a simple affair and the process lasted many years. Although the exact date and details of the commission are not well documented, it is clear that the idea for this painting sprouted from many seeds planted during David's two trips to Rome, the first from 1775-80 when he won the *Prix de Rome* and the second with his

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, III: 460 - 478.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, III: 499 - 501.

¹⁹ Colin Bailey, *The Loves of the Gods: Mythological Painting from Watteau to David* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 512.

star student Jean-Germaine Drouias from 1784-85. At this time, as can be seen from the variety of drawings that remain from those trips, David focused significantly on antique sculpture. In his renderings, historians can piece together what forms appealed to the artist. The manner in which he incorporated a few of them into *Paris and Helen* sheds light upon what his intentions might have been.

The first known drawing linked to *Paris and Helen* dates to 1780 and is a copy of a first century B.C. relief from the Grimani Altarpiece, given to Venice in 1587 and currently housed at the Museo Archeologico de Venise.²⁰ (Figures 2 and 3) Although there are great dissimilarities between the figures in this drawing and those in the final canvas, it is clear that the poses of these characters inspired David later in the decade. On the left is a young muscular boy leaning into a similarly aged girl with his left arm. She sits with her body at a ninety degree angle to the viewer while her head makes an almost impossible contortion turning back towards her partner. On her left leg, balanced by both of her hands, is a lyre that she appears to have momentarily ceased playing. Very little of her body rests on the seat and the bulk of her weight is shifted to the legs. Her right leg, disengaged from any of the lyre's weight, is extended forward and out, away from the body. The interaction between the young man and woman lacks intimacy as he is making a concerted effort to meet her eyes while she looks down and away. Physical closeness and ocular distance describe the tension between these figures and is a thematic central to David's final canvas and preparatory drawings. Although there is nothing to indicate that the two figures on the Grimani Altarpiece are implicitly or explicitly related to Paris and Helen, the tension between these two characters is a visual expression of the tension palpable in Homer's text. It is probable

²⁰ Pierre Rosenberg, *Jacques-Louis David, 1748 - 1825: Catalogue Raisonné Des Dessins* (Milan: Leonardo arte, 2002), 675.

that when David was searching for initial inspiration for the Artois' commission, the thematic present in the literary source would have drawn him back to this sketch or vice versa.

The first known drawing of *Paris and Helen* was completed sometime around 1784 (Figure 4).²¹ In this cursory sketch, David focuses only on the essential placement of the two characters in relation to each other. Paris, signified by his emblematic Phrygian cap, stands on the left and leans to the right with his forearm placed on the headboard of a bed. His other arm rests on his outwardly bent left hip forming a diamond-shaped hole between his arm and torso. He gazes downward and left toward his lover. David left out any rendering of the eyes so it is impossible to tell *exactly* where his glance falls, signifying that he had not yet made up his mind as to how or whether their eyes should meet. Helen, in contrast to the relaxed stance and attitude of her partner, eagerly thrusts her arms through his and pulls herself upward towards him. She unmistakably faces Paris; her body echoes her desire.

There are two other known sketches of this commission both of which are far more complete than the previous study. David began the first around 1786 and completed the latter shortly before commencing the final canvas in 1788 (Figures 5 and 6). In both drawings the position of the two bodies in relation to one another is set and is almost identical to that in the final canvas. By this time David chose to depict Helen standing and Paris seated, which significantly distinguishes his thoughts from those of the earlier drawing and original model. Indeed he has almost entirely abandoned the rough sketch of 1785 and has drawn significantly upon the Grimani Altarpiece. Paris grasps the lyre and his feet are placed identically to the seated woman in the 1780 drawing. Also like that female character, Paris impossibly contorts his body so that his head faces Helen with his left cheek in full profile. His eyes gaze directly towards hers to make complete eye contact. Finally, his

²¹ *Ibid.*, 440.

muscular right arm grasps her left arm and appears to be both bringing her closer and pulling her down. It is Paris' body that bespeaks desire and eagerness. Helen's pose, on the other hand, is languid and evokes no reciprocal desire. She stands half a head taller than the seated Paris even though her body is hunched over. With the exception of her legs and feet, which cross and subtly imply backward motion, the body is limp. Her arm is so carelessly draped over Paris' right shoulder that it appears she is unaware of the limb. Her eyes do not reciprocate Paris' glance and look blankly downward toward the ground. She lacks control of her movement and yields herself half-heartedly to the embrace of her lover. This scene represents the moment after which Paris has made his case to the resigned Helen in the Homeric text:

No more dear one—don't rake me with your taunts,
Myself and all my courage. This time, true,
Menelaus has won the day thanks to Athena.
I'll bring him down tomorrow.
Even we have gods who battle on our side.
But come—
Let's go to bed, let's lose ourselves in love!
Never has longing for you overwhelmed me so,
No, not even then, I tell you, that first time
When I swept you up from the lovely hills of Lacedaemon,
Sailed you off and away in the racing deep-sea ships
And we went and locked in love on Rocky Island...
That was nothing to how I hunger for you now—
Irresistible longing lays me low!²²

The essential and most important difference between these two final sketches is the presence of a Cupid figure in the 1786 drawing and its absence from the 1788 drawing. This allegorical figure undermines the artist's attempt at verism. It is a throwback to the paintings of David's predecessors who populated their less than realistic settings for mythological paintings with *putti* flying, shooting arrows or undressing their unwitting victims. In the

²² Homer, *The Iliad*, III: 511 - 520.

1786 drawing, Love lurks in the shadows behind the headboard of the bed redundantly reminding the viewer that this is an amatory painting and the two people are lovers.

A secondary but not insignificant difference between these two drawings is the lack of decision over what should comprise the setting for Paris' boudoir. One scholar has said of the décor in the 1788 sketch that "the martial is given precedence over the marital."²³ A spear and shield hang on an undecorated stone block wall directly behind the bed. Hardly a sumptuous and inviting space, its only decoration is a large urn or vase shoved off to the right side and partially cut off by the edge of the paper. There is a door on the far left that extends past the edge of this drawing and is covered by a carelessly arranged curtain. The floor is simple undecorated tile. This chamber seems more appropriate for a scene of great solemnity (perhaps the death of a hero) rather than one framing the erotic. Indeed, Pierre Rosenberg has stipulated that this interior is evocative of David's 1783 canvas *Andromaque Mourning Hector*.²⁴ The earlier drawing, which included the allegorical figure of Cupid, is more ornately decorated with patterned (marble?) flooring, a tall vase and urn. The room is much larger and has a barrel vaulted hallway connecting the room to the outside world. Suspended from a metal structure spanning the walls of the room is a loosely hung curtain. All of the walls have simple Doric capitals but no other decorative markings. In both sketches, the human action and emotion take precedence over any other part of the canvas and little preparation seems to have been made, as seen in the compositional sketches, for the type of decoration David would eventually include.

The final canvas, displayed at the Salon of 1789 though finished the previous year, is a work far more ambitious than any of his preliminary sketches. The positions of Paris and

²³ Bailey, *The Loves of the Gods*, 512.

²⁴ Rosenberg, *Jacques-Louis David, 1748 - 1825: Catalogue Raisonné Des Dessins*, 101.

Helen have remained fixed from the drawings but the amount of space the figures occupy on the canvas has shrunk considerably. The majority of the canvas is now devoted to the decorative accouterment and ornate interior. In many respects this painting, originally an essay on the story of these mythological characters, has become a *tour de force* of painting *à la antique*. It is here, with this canvas, that David begins to break the mold of eighteenth-century mythological understanding and incorporate the very exacting detail for which *philosophes* and antiquarians had long clamored. Indeed, in 1793 David revealed to a student that it was his conscious effort to make *Paris and Helen* “in the Greek and thoroughly antique manner.”²⁵

In an attempt to further classicize the painting and focus the work on embellishing *la fable*, David incorporates decorations that flesh out the subtleties and background of these characters while remaining true to the myth. Essential to the stories of Paris and Helen is the Judgment of Paris. The ill-fated union began when the goddesses Aphrodite, Athena and Hera approached Paris while tending his flocks on Mount Ida and implored him to choose the most beautiful of the three. Paris was given a golden fruit, known thereafter as the apple of Discord, to bestow upon the goddess of his choosing. Ultimately, Paris was compelled to select Aphrodite because of his promised prize, the most beautiful woman in the world: Helen of Sparta. David displays this story in two decorative motifs: on a medallion in the center of Paris’ lyre and through the inclusion of the *Venus Pudica* offering the fabled apple on top of a column on the left side of the canvas (Figures 7 and 8).

Helen’s story begins with an illicit union of its own: the seduction of Leda by Zeus in the guise of a swan. David does not devote much emphasis to this story but the significance is reinforced by its inclusion as a gilded relief on the lovers’ bed (Figure 9). This profane

²⁵ Bailey, *The Loves of the Gods*, 513.

union serves not only to relate the story of Helen's birth but also symbolizes debased love, a theme that marred Helen's birth and reemerged, in a different guise, as an adult.

Finally, David chooses to render Paris' uncaring attitude toward his manly and virtuous duties. Hanging from a column on the left side of the painting are Paris' instruments of war, namely a bow and quiver. Their presence further cements the fact that Paris has recently retired from the battlefield; but, as they are cast in shadow, David visually emphasizes the lack of importance that Paris places on his martial duties, choosing instead to focus on Helen and his lust.

The final canvas bestows upon Homer's words an accurate visual transcription. On display is the tension between Paris and Helen as clearly evoked by the poet's words. The ornate decoration of Paris' boudoir along with other visual elements firmly anchor the canvas in *la fable* of Paris and Helen and demonstrate David's intent to fulfill Homer's description while appropriating it to a new modern aesthetic appealing to those who had long denigrated mythological subjects in French painting.

CHAPTER III

LA MYTHOLOGIE : SPECULATION ON PARIS AND HELEN

In his article in the *Encyclopédie* on *La Fable*, Jaucourt concludes by encouraging further study into the complexities of mythology.

To extend one's curiosity to the point of attempting to penetrate the *various meanings* or mysteries of *la fable*, to understand the various systems of theology, to become familiar with the cults of the pagan divinities—this is a science reserved for a small number of scholars; and this science which covers a vast segment of *belles-lettres*, and which is absolutely necessary for comprehending the monuments of antiquity, is known as *la mythologie*. (italics mine)²⁶

Although the study of *la mythologie* encompassed a plethora of subjects that were beyond the scope of the artist, David focused his efforts on the “various meanings or mysteries” in *la fable* of Paris and Helen exemplified in its rich literary and visual past. By drawing upon these sources and incorporating their inherent ambiguity into his work, David created a nuanced and complicated painting that invited viewers to synthesize his work into this known corpus and make their own conjectures, conclusions and speculations.

With respect to *Paris and Helen*, the preconceived notions that observers would bring with them to view the painting must necessarily consist of the stories and works of art that preceded David. Although the Homeric epics were an essential foundation for the story, they

²⁶ Translation from Starobinski, "Fable and Mythology in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries", 173.

were by no means exclusive or exhaustive. The literary history alone contains various and contradictory conclusions about the virtue or immorality of Paris and Helen.

In this long literary lineage, one of the most significant characters is a poet about whom we know very little. Stesichorus, a Greek lyric poet from the sixth century B.C., is remembered almost exclusively for his oft quoted *Palinode*. Preserved by Plato in the Socratic dialogue *Phaedra* these three lines were dedicated to the deified Helen:

The story is not true
You did not board the well-benched ships,
You did not reach the towers of Troy.

Stesichorus wrote this *Palinode* (literally “song re-sung” or “song reversed”) as an apology to Helen. It is believed that the poet, in an unpreserved poem written previous to his *Palinode*, had vilified Helen and chastised her as the immoral character on whom the Trojan War could be blamed. Upon finishing this work Stesichorus was afflicted by the deified Helen and lost his eyesight. In an effort to regain his sight and absolve himself of his wrong-doing, he composed this *Palinode* and claimed that it was not Helen who had been Paris’ bride and taken across the Aegean but a specter that had assumed her corporeal guise. This phantom was the actual *causus belli* and Helen herself was blameless. After composing these lines, the poet regained his vision. This is the first time in the Greco-Roman canon that Helen was extolled as virtuous and absolved of moral culpability for those actions attributed to her.²⁷

Stesichorus was not the only ancient author who at first vilified then later exonerated the character of Helen. Euripides, the Athenian playwright of the 5th century B.C., presents drastically different views of Helen’s character in two plays. The earlier, *Trojan Women*,

²⁷ Norman Austin, *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), see Chapter 4.

was written and performed in Athens around 415 B.C.²⁸ As the drama opens, the Trojan War is finally over, the city burns and the victors are dividing the spoils. Among the most prized possessions are the wives and daughters of the fallen enemies. Claimed by the kings and heroes of the Greek army, the women of Troy lament their fate and despair for the future. The central Trojan voice is Hecuba, wife of Priam and mother to Paris. In her opening soliloquy, her scorn and anger toward Helen is unmistakable.

[Helen is] Menelaus'
hateful wife, who disgraces Castor
and brings ill fame upon the Eurotas.
She is the slayer
of Priam, father of fifty sons,
and has run me, unlucky Hecuba,
aground in utter destruction.²⁹

When Menelaus enters, he announces to Hecuba and the other women that the Greek army has allowed him to select his wife's fate. Dragged before her erstwhile husband, Helen pleads for her life claiming, as her character does in the *Iliad*, that her destiny was in the hands of the gods and beyond her control. Her beauty, something normally considered a blessing, has been nothing more than a curse since the judgment Paris made over ten years ago.

Hecuba implores Menelaus for the opportunity to rebut Helen's arguments and does so with impunity. First, she casts aspersions on whether Paris was ever called upon to judge the relative beauty of Hera, Aphrodite and Athena for none of them could have gained anything materially by participating in the "frivolous extravagance of a beauty contest."³⁰

²⁸ For the full history of this play, see the Introduction of Euripides, *Euripides: Trojan Women; Iphigenia among the Taurians; Ion*, Translated by David Kovacs (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

Second, it was more likely that Helen, a lover of fine things, was eager to flee the austere life imposed upon her in Sparta and enjoy the sumptuousness luxury of Troy. No witnesses testify that Helen was constrained or forcibly removed from Menelaus' palace nor is there any indication that she called upon her warrior brothers, Castor and Polydeuces, to save her from Paris. Finally, after being advised by Hecuba to flee Troy during the war, Helen refused to return to her former husband because, as Hecuba claims, she "wanted to indulge [her] haughtiness in Paris' palace" and "wanted the barbarians to make their obeisance before [her]."³¹ Concluding her rebuttal, Hecuba implores Menelaus to "crown Greece with glory by killing this woman... Establish this law for the rest of women: death to her who betrays her husband."³² After brief consideration and a final plea from Helen, Menelaus agrees to kill his wife after they return to Sparta. This, of course, does not happen as she makes an appearance almost ten years later in the *Odyssey* but Euripides makes no mention of this; in his play she dies for her unforgivable immorality.

Although there is no record of Euripides suddenly losing his eyesight after writing this play, the Athenian does significantly alter his characterization of Helen a few years later. In his second play, *Helen* of 411 B.C., he produces his own *palinode* and recasts Helen as virtuous.³³ This drama extends Stesichorus' ideas and similarly takes place in Egypt. As her phantom departed from Sparta with Paris to Troy, Helen was brought to the palace of Proteus, the honorable king of Egypt trusted by the gods to safeguard her virtue, while sitting out the war. The play begins shortly after the end of the Trojan War and Menelaus, on his

³¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

³² *Ibid.*, 113.

³³ For the history of Euripides play along with the text, see Euripides, *Euripides: Helen; Phoenician Women; Orestes*, Translated by David Kovacs (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

journey back to Sparta, becomes shipwrecked and seeks aid after floating ashore. While searching for help, he stumbles upon the real Helen and after a period of disbelief and confusion comes to the realization that this woman is indeed his true wife and that she has retained her virtue. At this moment of realization the specter of Helen, whom Menelaus had borne from Troy, disappears and the play ends with their joyful reunification and departure to Sparta.

Both authors introduce into the corpus of mythological literature the possibility of either a perfidious or absolutely moral Helen. The duality of her character relies upon the imagination and interpretation of the author and audience. The traditional view, begun and perpetuated by the Homeric epics, certainly held significant influence on the legend of Helen but the countervailing depiction established by Stesichorus was preserved by Euripides. Helen's duality necessitated an ambiguity surrounding her character and an uncertainty about whether she should be held accountable for the actions attributed to her. Therefore it is possible to argue that either Paris' recalcitrance in abdicating Helen to her rightful husband is the most immoral action or that Helen was right when she claimed in *Trojan Women* that it is all the fault of the gods and she has no control over those things for which she is blamed.

David's psychological analysis focuses on two aspects of the painting: the symbolic meaning contained within the decorations of Paris' bedroom and the position of the two characters in relation to one another. Both contain elements of ambiguity and are informed by personal, artistic and historic subjectivity. The lavish and ornamental background statuary, for example, could be viewed as a compass or map to the moral terrain of this painting. Supposedly modeled after the *Salle des Caryatids*, well known throughout the eighteenth century due to its prominence in the Louvre, these four statues would certainly

have been the object of interpretation for the Parisian observer. Caryatid statues had been prominent during classical antiquity and were known especially as the portico decoration on the Erechteion in Athens. As a type of column, both the ancients and antiquarians of the eighteenth century traced its origins to shortly after the Persian Wars. Vitruvius, one of the first architectural theorists, in his most famous monograph, *De Architectura*, reiterated the fabled origins of these statues:

Caria, a Peloponnesian state, conspired with the Persian enemy against Greece. Afterwards the Greeks, gloriously freed from war by their victory, with common purpose went on to declare war on the inhabitants of Caria. The town was captured; the men were killed; the state was humiliated. Their matrons were led away into slavery and were not allowed to lay aside their draperies and ornaments. In this way, and not at one time alone, were they led in triumph. Their slavery was an eternal warning. Insult crushed them. They seemed to pay a penalty for their fellow-citizens. And so the architects of that time designed for public buildings figures of matrons placed to carry burdens; in order that the punishment of the son of the Cariatid women might be known to posterity and historically recorded.³⁴

As symbols of punishment, they represent an allusion to the future. Not only Paris and Helen but all of Troy is punished for the amorous transgressions of the two lovers. More importantly, they are emblems of captivity. Both of the characters, especially Helen, are sentenced to their fate, not by their own choices but by the decisions and whims of others, most importantly the gods. Paris, to a certain extent, was allowed a level of choice in that he was called upon to judge the three goddesses. Helen, on the other hand, like the woman of Caria, was denied any meaningful opportunity to change her fate and was therefore subject to unwarranted humiliation and destruction.

The decorations that cement the connection to Homer's epics (i.e. the medallion in the center of the lyre, the *Venus Pudica* and the relief of Leda and the swan) also symbolize

³⁴ Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, Granger, Frank, trans (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), I. i. 5.

the powerlessness of Paris and Helen. The three goddesses manipulated Paris and overwhelmed him with temptations that no mortal could resist. All the events subsequent to Paris' judgment are thus inexorably connected to divine intervention and the fate of Troy is seemingly sealed by the apple of Discord. Helen, on the other hand, is condemned to her fate at birth for as the daughter of Zeus she becomes the most beautiful woman in the world. Both of these individuals are born or fated to circumstances beyond their control and David reinforces that understanding in the aforesaid mythological vignettes. David's allusions to these stories and the inherent meanings behind them would not have been lost on an eighteenth-century audience and, therefore, interpretation of the painting would be complicated and result in degrees of speculation.

As a visual analysis of David's preparatory drawings reveals, the characters of Paris and Helen have always been depicted as two individuals, physically close but visually distant. From his seminal sketch of the Grimani Altarpiece to the final canvas, David played with this motif and struggled to determine who would be the viewer and who would be the viewed. Gaze is central to understanding David's conception of how these two characters relate to each other. Reciprocation of the gaze would imply a reciprocation of feeling. Yet, in the painter's final rendering of *Paris and Helen*, gaze is never reciprocated. Thus, the feelings of these two characters in relation to each other appear to differ greatly. In David's original sketch for this commission, preliminary as it was, Helen gazes longingly towards Paris indicating that at this time, David conceived of her as the one who desired. As David's ideas for this canvas matured and developed, he switched the roles of Paris and Helen and decided that it was Paris who longed for illicit escapades and Helen who symbolized hesitation. David, however, does not display Helen as completely powerless for she is

standing and it is Paris who is forced to pull her closer. The hesitation present in the visual depiction of Helen signifies her disdain for either Paris or the situation in which she finds herself. Yet viewers of the painting, aware of Helen's ultimate decision, may not judge Helen favorably. Given the ambiguities surrounding Helen's literary presence and the background that comes previous to this moment in Homer's myth, the audience's judgment of Helen after viewing the final canvas requires speculation.

David introduces several layers of ambiguity involving numerous elements in the canvas. In doing so, he invites the viewer to speculate on the psychological forces behind the literary history of Paris and Helen. This canvas embraces the intellectual mandate proposed by Joucourt in his entry on *la mythologie* in the *Encyclopédie* by making plain the psychological complexities of Paris and Helen.

CHAPTER IV VISUAL JUXTAPOSITION AND COMPARATIVE SPECULATION

David never intended *The Loves of Paris and Helen* to be hung alone either at the Salon or after it was finally delivered to the comte d'Artois. He intended certain levels of meaning to derive from the works against which this painting was juxtaposed. Additionally, this canvas was to gain further resonance through its association to and dialogue with another recent painting of similar subject. These various juxtapositions, although not available simultaneously, each bore a unique nuanced understanding and allowed the viewer to speculate in different ways on the meanings that lay behind the myth and how the artist had brought focus to them.

The subject for the d'Artois' commission was unique in the history of French painting. Although there are numerous examples of paintings with related subject matter (i.e. *The Judgment of Paris*, *The Rape of Helen*, *Hector Admonishing Paris*) no French artist had ever chosen to focus exclusively on the private and erotic exploits of Paris and Helen. Perhaps this exclusivity appealed to David for it presented him with a unique opportunity to treat this canvas and subject as a virtual artistic blank slate. Within Paris there were no available direct comparisons. This is not to say that David was the original author of this subject. While on his voyages to Rome during the 1780s, it is almost certain that he

witnessed the creation or installation of Gavin Hamilton's work on the subject in the Galleria Borghese (Figure 10).³⁵

Compositionally and stylistically, David's finished product is quite different from Hamilton's although they both attempt to illustrate the same passage in the Homeric text. In Hamilton's work, we see Paris awaiting the return of Helen after he has been whisked off of the battlefield during his combat with Menelaus. His discarded arms, signifying his recent exit from war, are strewn across the floor at the bottom right of the canvas. Helen, less than eager to reunite with her cowardly lover, must be cajoled by Venus and her cherubic attendants to fulfill Paris' yearning. Although her hands are braced in a defensive posture, the visible forward motion of her legs and feet bespeak the truth of her resolve. She turns aside, unable to face her lover but Paris, cognizant of the immediate future, allows his hand to be brought toward Helen's by one of the *putti*. He understands their union is fated and inevitable.

Although the visual distance between the lovers is a significant point of similarity between the paintings, Hamilton's reliance upon allegorical figures marks the most obvious difference between the paintings. Venus floats on a cloud and glides in from the right side of the canvas, ushering Helen into Paris' arms. The bare breasted goddess is accompanied by three winged attendants. Two of them, as noted above, serve to draw the couple closer together physically and inaugurate their amorous escapades. The third Cupid bears aloft two garlands signifying the marital relations between the Trojan prince and Helen. Rather than implying certain levels of meaning through various decorative motifs, Hamilton renders those meanings through the use of overt allegorical symbolism. David had originally considered using an allegorical figure in his canvas but abandoned Cupid after completing

³⁵ Bailey, *The Loves of the Gods*, 512.

the first draft (Figure 5). David throughout the 1780s shied away from the depiction of allegory perhaps because incorporating those symbolic bodies would detract from the verism and jeopardize the purity of his *à la grec* style. It is important to note that when David did employ the allegorical figure in his 1786 sketch, he used it in a manner completely distinct from Hamilton. Rather than placing the character in the painting to affirm the amatory, David draws the boy entangled in his own bow (Figure 11). Instead of shooting his arrow or, at a minimum, admiring the events he has set in motion, Cupid is stuck and has become a symbol of folly rather than love.

By excluding any visual reference to the outside world, David focuses his painting on the action within Paris' secluded private bedroom, implying the prince's blind focus on his beloved. Weapons hung and armor removed, Paris cares little for anything outside this room. This compositional choice was perhaps a painterly retort to Hamilton work. In his painting, the Scotsman devoted a significant amount of the background to the distant walls of Troy and the mountains beyond. The bedroom overlooks empty fields, statuary, imposing edifices and distant mountains (perhaps Mount Ida where Paris tended to his flock during adolescence). Yet, nowhere in this landscape is there any reference to the struggle of arms that this union has wrought. Not only is the couple oblivious to the battle but their outlook over Troy, symbolic of Paris' civic responsibilities as prince to his people, is oddly devoid of any martial or destructive references. Hamilton has chosen to completely ignore the obvious negative externalities of the pairing in his painting. David's decision to forgo any visual reference to the outside world not only focuses his painting on the interiority and psychology of the lovers but also brings greater clarity to Paris' abdication of any public role, favoring his own lustful desires. David's discourse with Hamilton's work served more as an

intellectual starting point rather than as a side-by-side commentary and clearly the earlier painting influenced how David would later approach his own commission. Unfortunately, at no point have these two works been exhibited in the same place at the same time.

David's *Paris and Helen* was not intended as a stand-alone work but commissioned as part of a larger grouping all of which dealt with the psychological complexities of love. Although art historians are uncertain about the details, it is believed that Artois intended this canvas to be the centerpiece of an amorous triptych including *Rinaldo and Armida* by François-André Vincent and *Mars and Venus* by François-Guillaume Ménageot; these two canvases are unfortunately lost. It is known, however, that these works were all the same size and were likely intended for a cabinet in one of the comte's many residences, perhaps either the Palais du Temple or Bagatelle.³⁶

The subject of the former canvas derives from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, a late Renaissance Italian epic poem that describes the heroic deeds of the European armies during the First Crusade. Rinaldo is the Christian warrior *par excellence* and it is upon his sword that success against the Muslims is dependent. To distract him from achieving this success, Armida, an enchantress allied with the Arab defenders, seduces this warrior and removes Rinaldo from the battle by luring him to her island paradise. There Rinaldo is mesmerized by her beauty and lays aside his responsibilities and duties to the army.³⁷ Although it is impossible to give a detailed visual account of this canvas, we can make reasonable assumptions based on the textual source. The canvas would focus on

³⁶ Colin Bailey, "Les Clients de David." in *David Contre David*, Michel, Régis (Paris: La Documentation française, 1993), 157. See also Colin Bailey, "Artois, Mecene et Collectionneur" in *La Folle D'Artois* (Paris: Antiquaires à Paris, 1988), 75 – 77.

³⁷ Torquato Tasso, *Jerusalem Delivered*, Anthony Esolen, trans. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2000). Canto Sixteen describes the island of Armida and her imprisonment of Rinaldo.

Rinaldo, feminine and forgetful of his heroic responsibilities. As Tasso tells, both lovers would be gazing at Armida, she viewing herself in a mirror and he seeing her with lustful intent:

She with eyes laughing, he with eyes ablaze
in different objects see one object there:
she sees herself in the mirror, while he spies
himself in the calm reflection of her eyes.³⁸

Additionally, representative of Rinaldo's condition is "his dangling sword effeminate at his side, / prettified."³⁹ Close in date and likely similar in composition is Jean-François Louis Lagrenée's 1766 canvas of *Rinaldo and Armida* (Figure 12). The hero prostrates himself before the enchantress while eagerly trying to pull closer to her. With his left hand he reaches for her right; with his right, he clutches his chest in a sign of tenderness and affection. Behind the main characters are a number of cherubic figures, each of whom plays a small part in Armida's effort to emasculate the warrior. Two *putti* hoist his shield into a tree while another comically dons Rinaldo's helmet and reaches for that "prettified" sword.

Like Lagrenée's (and presumably Vincent's) canvas, Ménageot's *Mars and Venus* focuses on the opposing forces of love and war in the guise of a time-honored mythological subject. Mars, god of war and exemplar of Olympian masculinity, becomes enamored by the goddess of love and wife to Vulcan, craftsman of the gods. Their story, clearly symbolic of the emasculation that the feminine can induce, is related by Homer in the *Odyssey*.⁴⁰ The two lovers are discovered and ensnared by chains forged by Vulcan quickly becoming the laughing stock of Olympus. As with the aforementioned canvas, it is impossible to know

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁴⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Robert Fagles, trans. (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), III: 186 - 194.

what the canvas looked like but based upon the text and other paintings of the subject a fair conjecture can be made. Both characters are either naked or in the process of undressing. Venus' attendants might be present to speed along the process. Most importantly, there is likely a physical separation between Mars and his armaments, symbolic of his masculinity and responsibilities. As a god of war, he becomes an impotent symbol when deprived of his emblematic accoutrement. His arms may be replaced on the canvas by classical symbols of the feminine like flowers.

All three of the canvases commissioned by Artois are thematically linked and represent two heads of a single coin. On the one hand, they demonstrate the emasculating powers of the feminine. All three men are literally disarmed by love. The form of the feminine (the enchantress Armida, goddess of Love Venus or the most beautiful mortal in the world Helen) can conquer the form of the masculine (the warrior Rinaldo, god of War Mars or prince of Troy Paris). Temptations of the flesh can make men forget their responsibilities and the feminine can force them to behave irrationally. On the other hand, these canvases display the ultimate triumph of love. Despite the tragedy and misfortune that occur due to their acceptance of love over responsibility, the men are lost in a world of passion and, sometimes, cannot be recovered; Paris never gives up Helen and Rinaldo only comes to the realization of his folly when he beholds himself in a mirror. Interpreting David's *Paris and Helen* through the prism of these two thematics might lead a viewer to speculate that Paris is weak or, like other figures in mythology, simply incapable of overcoming the handicaps inherent in men. He is disarmed by Helen (or at least his overriding desire for Helen) but for some this may not be so terrible. He is a man and she is beautiful; what more could we expect?

At the Salon of 1787, David intended to exhibit *Paris and Helen* alongside the *Death of Socrates* (Figure 13). This comparison, however, never materialized. A critic at the Salon lamented this missed opportunity: “The public learned with much regret that severe illness has prevented this grand artist from finishing another painting whose gracious and amorous composition would contrast with the severity of the *Death of Socrates*; it is *Paris and Helen*.”⁴¹ As this writer astutely observed, these two canvases would have provided a stimulating dialogue. The similarity in size between these two paintings leads one to speculate that David had always intended to display these together at the Salon even though only one was commissioned by the comte d’Artois.

Presented in the *Death of Socrates* is a homo-social environment (excepting Socrates’ wife who makes a silent and barely noticeable exit from the scene in the left background) where the central character embraces his death sentence without question and with quiet solemnity. It is a moving scene; all know what is about to occur and few can withhold their emotions. Socrates commands their attention with a powerful upward gesture of his arm and demonstrates that neither he nor they should be afraid of the inevitable outcome. That outstretched index finger, unwavering in its certainty, centers the composition and along with the philosopher’s stern demeanor demonstrates the moral message; Socrates is the *exemplum virtutis* and David paints heroic brave action in classicized form. There is no such certainty or heroic compositional focus in *Paris and Helen*. Although the lovers occupy the center of the canvas and their action dominates the viewing of the painting, David emphasizes the destructive force of this love.

⁴¹ *L’Ami des Artistes au Salon*, 1787, Deloynes, no. 379, p. 37. (Le public apprendra avec bien de regrets qu’une longue maladie de ce grand Artiste l’a empêché de finir un autre Tableau, dont la composition gracieuse et galante auroit contrasté avec la sévérité de Socrate; c’est *Pâris et Hélène*. Translation mine.)

As noted above, *Paris and Helen* occurs within a sealed private sphere. There are no visible doors, windows or gateways between this world and the struggle for Troy. Socrates' death, however, is not only dictated by outside forces, but the staircase in the background provides a bridge between this private moment among dear friends and the world of the *polis*. In the juxtaposition of these two paintings, private illicit passions are contrasted to public virtue. Additionally, David embellishes Socrates' virtue by rendering this scene in a plain and unadorned room with walls that bear no markings. Paris' bedroom, in contrast, is richly and ornately fashioned to the point of femininity. Lush drapery dominates the middle ground while the bed is covered with supple and colorful fabric. Additionally, an inviting pool comprises the foreground and invites both the viewer and lovers to enter its gentle water.

Another illustrative point of comparison between these works is the different prominence that the lyre holds in the two compositions. For both these characters, the lyre was an important symbol. As related by Plutarch in his *Life of Alexander*, the Macedonian king refused to see Paris' lyre but instead was eager to hold Achilles' for it had been used, unlike Paris', "to sing of the glorious achievements of brave men."⁴² The Trojan's instrument, however, was perceived as a symbol of disgrace and emasculation. For Socrates, on the other hand, the lyre is a signifier for the righteous soul. In *Phaedo*, Plato writes of the lyre in terms of something greater than its materiality. Instead of simply being a carved pieced of wood with taut strings, it is a vehicle by which one can play and hear harmonies.⁴³ The lyre is therefore akin to the mortal body for as the body houses the soul, a more perfect thing, the lyre holds harmony. Socrates, as he takes his life into his hands, lays down the lyre in David's painting, symbolizing his abjuring of the material world in favor of a world which

⁴² Plutarch, *Live of the Noble Greeks*, Waterfield, Robin, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press), 324.

⁴³ Plato, *Complete Works*, Cooper, John, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), 75.

contains greater things. Socrates body may die, but his soul will continue and move on.

David successfully employs the lyre in both these paintings as compliments to and symbols for the men who bear them.

Although the hypothetical viewer at the Salon of 1787 could take away from viewing these paintings several different meanings, David appears to guide the viewer in a comparison between Socrates and Paris, extolling the former as upright and the latter as lacking virtue. David renders Paris as desirous of physical lust, separate from the public forum and pursuing a maddening and destructive love; Socrates embraces his responsibilities to the state despite the latter's suicidal mandate and, as depicted through a powerful gesture, demands that his students and friends accept the correctness of his actions.

When *Paris and Helen* was finally displayed at the Salon of 1789, it was hung in close proximity to David's sensational and highly praised *Lictors Delivering to Brutus the Bodies of His Dead Sons*. (Figures 14 and 15) Although this pairing was not planned, it is easy to imagine that many Salon visitors viewed these two paintings and analyzed them as a pair. In the *Brutus*, David creates a contrast between the female figures on the right and Brutus on the left. While the women lament the death of their brothers and sons, the father accepts the consequences of his decisions and grieves passively. His anguish is almost imperceptible and his person is bathed in shadow whereas the women openly gesticulate and are covered in raking light. Brutus exhibits the strength and rationality of the masculine mind while the women show their inability to understand the greater good of Brutus' decision and are only capable of overwhelming passionate response.

If viewers read the *Brutus* in this manner it would immediately influence their perceptions of *Paris and Helen* in terms of compositional differences. While the masculine

and feminine spheres in the *Brutus* are clear, in *Paris and Helen* the difference is elided. Helen wears a see-through chiton while Paris stares longingly at Helen having cast off his masculine implements of war. Additionally, an ornate interior and well used bedding are all indicative that Paris has abandoned any visual markers of masculinity and seeks only satisfaction of his desire. In terms of subject matter, the viewer might consider the reaction of the women in the *Brutus* as they are clearly consumed by an emotional attachment to their dead sons and brothers rather than restrained by patriotic ardor as Brutus is. Helen remaining in the arms of Paris may be interpreted as having contempt for the state equal to that of her lover. As a silent participant in this union, she is just as responsible for the continuation of the war. Hecuba had made a similar argument in Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Although Paris lacks the nobility of Brutus, he is at least nominally defending his country and protecting his dearly cherished prize.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

As fate would have it, the comte d'Artois would never see *Paris and Helen* displayed at the Salon; he fled the country a few days before the exhibit opened and his name, for political purposes, was withheld from the Salon *livret*.⁴⁴ Although overshadowed by *Brutus*, the painting was fairly well received and an influential foreigner in Parisian art circles commissioned a replica.⁴⁵ Yet, this painting did not immediately precede David's quest to appropriate mythology for a newer aesthetic. He, like almost all other French men of the time, was swept into the maelstrom of the Revolution and found himself serving the cause of the Republic within a few short months after the Salon. Gradually, he would rise to the summit of the French artistic-political world and focus all of his talents on advancing the messages of liberty and revolution. After the fall of Robespierre and despite his association with that hated name, David was not without clients for long. Less than a decade later, he would once again allow his art to serve politics by assuming the role of First Painter to Napoleon Bonaparte. It was not until after Waterloo in 1815 that David was forced to abandon politics for good; his exile in Brussels would last until his death in 1825. Exile served David well and would finally afford him the opportunity to explore new themes in

⁴⁴ Robert Herbert, *David Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution: An Essay in Art and Politics* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 61.

⁴⁵ This replica is the subject of the catalogue entry in Bailey, *The Loves of the Gods*, 510 - 519. For the collection of Salon criticism related to *Paris and Helen*, see Siefert, Helge. *Themen Aus Homers Ilias in Der Französischen Kunst (1750 – 1831)*. München: Scaneg, 1988.

painting. Rather than painting the power or ideas of others, David returned to those ideas long abandoned out of circumstance.

Dorothy Johnson in the last chapter of her book *Jacques-Louis David: Art in Metamorphosis* proposes a vigorous reinterpretation of David's Brussels corpus. Historically marginalized by art historians, especially when compared to his widely recognized and recognizable paintings of the 1780s and 90s, Johnson argues that during these last years, the painter pushed the boundaries of style and representation through a series of mythological canvases replete with psychological ambiguity and uncertainty. *Paris and Helen*, therefore can easily be interpreted as a fundamental work in David's career because it presaged what was to come late in life. It represents and is representative of a "liminal moment of transformation" for David and his art. In the 1788 canvas, he first begins to explore ambiguous and often contradictory psychological and emotional states through the use of mythological subjects.⁴⁶

The Loves of Paris and Helen successfully transformed mythological painting in France, focusing on two aspects of the genre. David appropriated *la fable* by portraying the story of Paris and Helen, painting the scene in a veristic and accurate setting using motifs and decoration from antiquity. Through the mythical underpinnings of the work (i.e. the Judgment of Paris depicted on the lyre and the relegation of Paris' battlements to the side) as well as a visual display of the ambiguous relationship between Paris and Helen, David is also able to render the subjectivity inherent in *la mythologie*. As such, the final canvas requires the active participation of the viewer, calling upon the audience to find multiple layers of understanding incorporated into the work in order to arrive at a deeper interpretation of the

⁴⁶ Dorothy Johnson, *Jacques-Louis David: Art in Metamorphosis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 231.

painting. This type of subjective participation underlies any study of *la mythologie*, as described in the *Encyclopédie*, and emphasizes David's attention to the requirements of mythological discourse in the eighteenth century.

The subjective understanding of *Paris and Helen* is further complicated by the rich literary history that describes the escapades of the two lovers. Not only is this history inconclusive, but it is also multi-faceted, grappling with varying and inconsistent retellings of the famous tale. Yet, in analyzing David's final canvas in relation to previous sketches and juxtaposing the painting with both its intended pairing at the Salon and Artois' commissioned triptych, the viewer must find Helen's argument, that she lacked control over the course of events for which she is so well known, at least somewhat compelling. The end result of any analysis will find that David has already predicted any subjective response to *Paris and Helen*. The painting was never meant to provide a clear-cut direction for the viewer. The meaning of the painting lies in the viewer's struggle, mimicking the struggles of both Paris and Helen within the Homeric text, to come to some understanding of the psychological underpinnings of this love.



1. Jacques-Louis David, *Paris and Helen*. 1788. Oil on canvas, 146 x 181 cm. Louvre, Paris



2. Jacques-Louis David, *Sketch of the Grimani Altarpiece*. ca. 1780. Charcoal, 15.4 x 211 cm. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.



3. Bas-Relief from Grimani Altarpiece. See Figure 2.



4. Jacques-Louis David, *Paris and Helen*. c. 1784. Drawing, pencil, 25 x 31.4 cm.
Nationalmuseum, Stockholm



5. Jacques-Louis David, *Sketch of Paris and Helen*. 1786. Pen with Black Ink, 18.3 x 22.9 cm. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



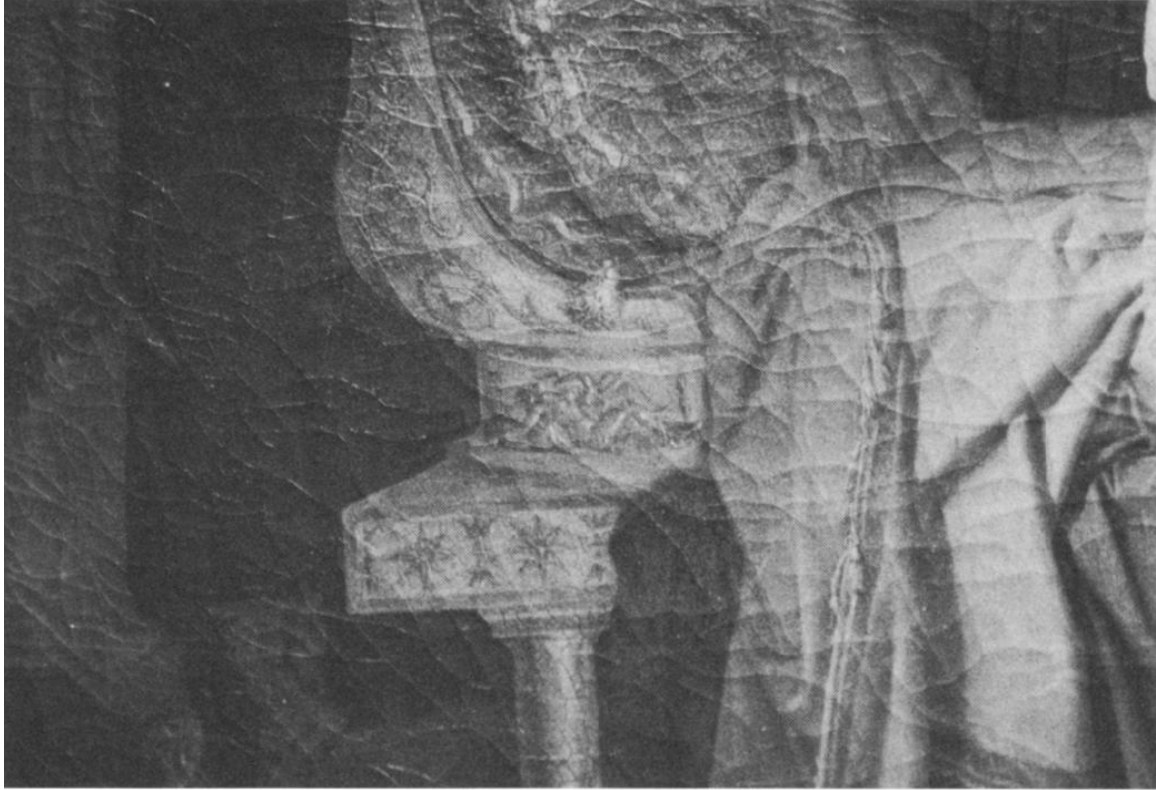
6. Jacques-Louis David, *Sketch of Paris and Helen*. c.1788. Pen with Black Ink, 21.5 x 28.1 cm. Private Collection, Zurich



7. *Venus Pudica*. Detail of Figure 1.



8. *Judgment of Paris*. Detail of Figure 1.



9. *Leda and the Swan*. Detail of Figure 1.



10. Gavin Hamilton, *Venus Presenting Helen to Paris*. 1782 – 84. Oil on Canvas, 325 × 280 cm. Museo di Roma, Rome



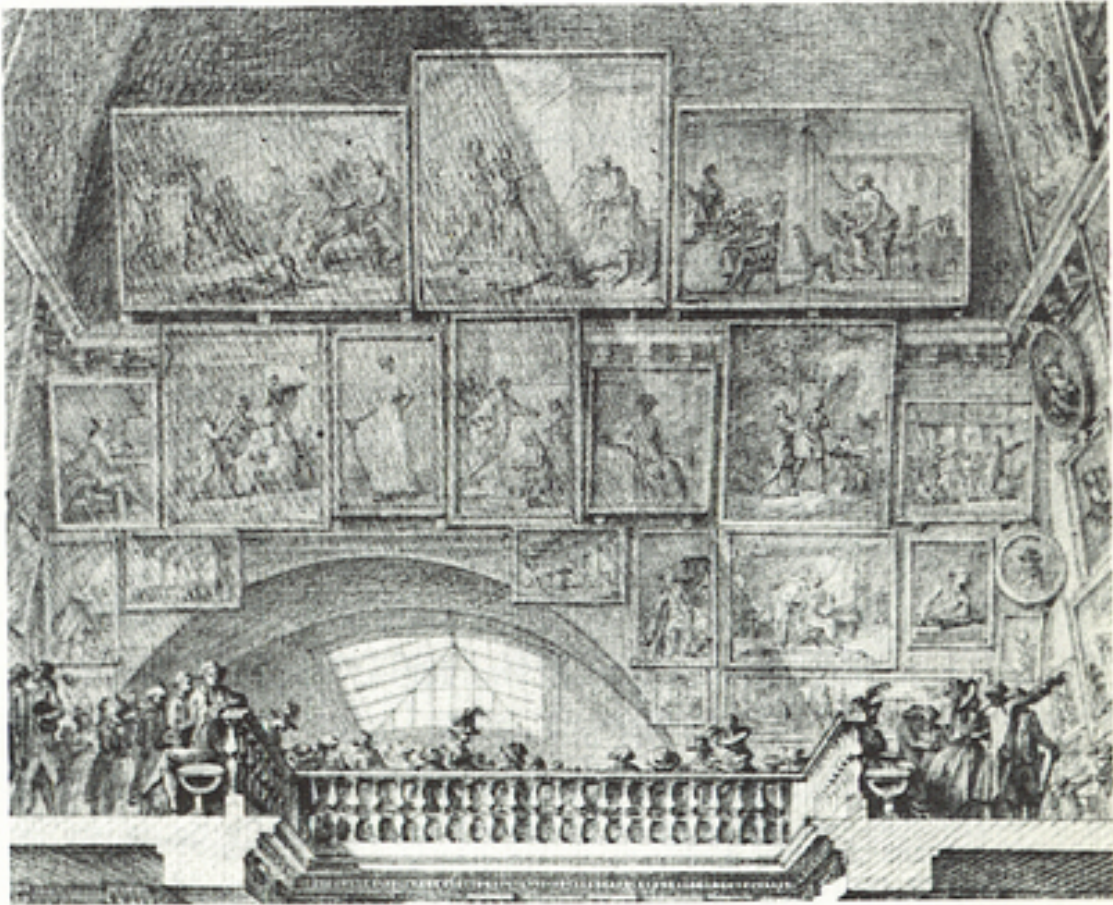
11. *Cupid*. Detail of Figure 5.



12. Louis Jeane François Lagrenée, *Rinaldo and Armida*. 1766. Oil on canvas, 60 x 69.8 cm. Private Collection.



13. Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates*. 1787. Oil on canvas, 129.5 x 196.2 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



14. Charles de Wailly, *The Salon of 1789*, detail. 1789. Drawing, mixed techniques. Paris, Musée Carnavalet



15. Jacques-Louis David, *Lictors Delivering to Brutus the Bodies of His Dead Sons*. 1789.
Oil on canvas, 323 x 422 cm. Louvre, Paris

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