

REINVENTING HELEN:  
MORRIS'S *SCENES FROM THE FALL OF TROY*

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William Morris's fragment *Scenes from the Fall of Troy* was probably begun in 1857 and worked on during the first two years of his marriage from 1859 to 1861 (Mackail, 1:166). In a manuscript book Morris had proposed twelve subjects. Of these, May Morris, for *The Collected Works*, printed eight scenes in varying degrees of completion. Despite the considerable critical praise accorded to the fragment, written in the dramatic style of *The Defence of Guenevere* volume, little sustained attention has been given to the poems.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, what is most innovative and atypical in the *Scenes*, the representation of the figure of Helen of Troy, has not been sufficiently acknowledged or explored.

To recognize the originality of Morris's representations of Helen in *Scenes from the Fall of Troy* we must briefly cite the major precursor texts that Morris, a recent Oxford undergraduate in his mid-twenties, would have known. Secondly, we shall briefly survey the more "orthodox" representation of Helen in the visual and poetic work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Morris's friend and, in the late 1850s, collaborator. We shall adopt here the methods of Gian Biagio Conte and Mihoko Suzuki, for whom "literary allusions are never simply passive repetitions but sites where differences between text and tradition become manifest" (Suzuki 10; Conte 22-31). These differences demonstrate that though the master-narrative of the Trojan war still held authority for Morris, in his *Scenes from the Fall of Troy* the misogynistic thematics of this master-narrative are interrogated and decentred.<sup>2</sup>

In her study, *Metamorphoses of Helen*, Suzuki identifies the important sites in Helen's representational tradition from Homer to Shakespeare. Suzuki argues that the *Iliad* grants to Helen a subjectivity analogous to that of Achilles, and that this is particularly manifest in her lament for Hector in *Iliad* 24, whereas in the *Odyssey* there is a "shift in the representation of Helen," and the subjectivity of Helen is transferred to her cousin Penelope. Helen is reduced to "a static emblem" of duplicity, "beautiful and dangerous" (Suzuki, 73). In *Odyssey* 4 Menelaus tells Telemachus that Helen sought to betray the Greeks within the wooden horse by simulating the voices of their wives. She is a voice Odysseus must resist, like the voices of the Sirens (Suzuki, 69).