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Clemence McLaren

Inside the Walls of Troy: A Novel of the Women Who Lived the Trojan War

United States (1996)

TAGS: Achilles Agamemnon Andromache Cassandra Hector Hecuba Helen Helenus Laodice Menelaus Odysseus / Ulysses Penelope Priam Theseus





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General information	
Title of the work	Inside the Walls of Troy: A Novel of the Women Who Lived the Trojan War
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Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
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Creators



Clemence McLaren , b. 1938
(Author)

Clemence McLaren is an American author, teacher and researcher who has lived in an impressive range of places. Born in New Jersey November 3, 1938, the daughter of an engineer, she went on to graduate from Rutgers University in 1960. In 1960, she also married Robert McLaren, a fellow teacher. After this, she was a flight attendant for a year, then began teaching, first in Dover, NJ, then in Saudi Arabia and finally in Hawaii. In 1987 she became summer program dean for Johns Hopkins University, and a sometime Professor and researcher for University of Hawaii from 1987 to 1995. She finally moved to Hawaii with her family and became a teacher of senior secondary school English there from 1993. Here, she also achieved a doctorate in religion.

At one time, McLaren and her husband lived in Greece, where they built a cottage on a Greek island. It was here that McLaren told the first versions of her novels to her children and others. McLaren has two children, Kevin and Heather. Her other published works are a sequel to *Inside the Walls of Troy, Waiting for Odysseus* (2000), which is based on the *Odyssey, Aphrodite's Blessings: Love Stories from the Greek Myths* (2002) and *Dance for the Land* (1999), published in expanded form as *Dance for the Aina* in 2003. The latter tells the story of a twelve year old girl's move from California to Hawaii, and her subsequent adjustment to this new environment and experiencing of prejudice.

Sources:

Goodreads (accessed: January 29, 2020).

Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham,

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Additional information

Summary

This novel tells the story of the Trojan War from the perspective of Helen and Cassandra. The first third is narrated in first person by Helen, and tells of her abduction by Theseus, her realisation of the power of her own beauty, her marriage to Menelaus and the birth of her daughter Hermione. Helen is a sweet and pleasure loving girl who somewhat reluctantly persuades herself to be the dutiful wife to Menelaus. She is close to her less beautiful older cousin Penelope, but becomes angry when she realises Penelope is conspiring with Odysseus in the matter of Helen's suitors so that Penelope and Odysseus might marry. Helen is frustrated that Penelope will enjoy the romance she never can. The Helen section ends as Helen encounters and falls in love with Paris, who confesses he has only come to Sparta to win her, and the two flee together and spend a long, happy time on the ships, in no hurry to arrive in Troy.

The second two thirds are narrated in the first person by Cassandra. Cassandra is a rather strange Trojan princess who does not fit in and has visions, as does her twin brother Helenus, the person to whom she is closest. Cassandra is presented as very different from other women, although she interacts a lot with her more feminine younger sisters Polyxena and Laodice. The most beautiful Trojan princess, Cassandra attracts suitors whose presence she is embarrassed by, but she is eventually persuaded by Helenus to flirt a little with her suitor Othronus and begins to enjoy it. When Paris arrives with Helen, and even before they arrive, Cassandra is overtaken by visions of destruction. She flings herself at Priam's feet screaming out to "Beware the whore of Sparta!" (p. 89). Ignored, she watches from afar as all the Trojans are charmed by Helen's sweetness, even her sisters. Helen makes friendly overtures to Cassandra and Cassandra herself is eventually reluctantly won over, even though she still believes Helen will destroy them all.

When the Trojan War begins, the Trojans turn against Helen, who, not used to being alone and unpopular, relies more on her friendship with Cassandra. Much of the action of the *Iliad* is recited, narrated by the women watching from the walls. Helen forms a scheme with Andromache, who is consistently denigrated by Cassandra for being the most traditionally feminine of the main female cast, to win Achilles over by offering him Polyxena in marriage. Cassandra is furious and she and Helen fight over this, with their ultimately contradictory

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perspectives on life becoming apparent. After the death of Hector, Polyxena takes it upon herself to sleep with Achilles to persuade him to return Hector's body, and is traumatised for the rest of the novel.

Finally, after the Trojan Horse is let into the city and Troy is about to fall, Helenus confesses to Cassandra that he has betrayed the Trojans and extracted a promise the Greeks will not harm Cassandra, but the Greeks have gone back on their word and Cassandra has now been allotted to Agamemnon. Helenus offers to again act the traitor and kill Agamemnon, but Cassandra rejects this. Instead, she goes to Helen, tells her what is happening and helps her prepare and beautify herself for Menelaus so that she won't be killed. She then runs to Andromache's quarters, persuading her to abandon the servants to their fate, and take Astyanax with her to shelter with Cassandra, Laodice and Polyxena at Athena's temple where they can meet their captors. The novel ends with Cassandra telling herself the four Trojan women will be there for each other, "holding one another's hands and wiping one another's tears" (p. 192).

Analysis

In her author's note at the end, McLaren positions her novel as an attempt at woman-centred history for teens. She writes that "In the *Iliad* … there was almost no mention of women. (Even Helen, who supposedly caused the whole thing, rates only a few sentences.) …Unlike Homer, singing his poems to an audience of noblemen, I was writing for readers who, like myself, may have wondered about the girls and women who watched the fighting from Troy's walls and waited for their destinies inside the women's quarters." (pp. 196–199). This makes *Inside the Walls of Troy* a forerunner to Adèle Geras' *Troy* (2000), Theresa Tomlinson's *The Moon Riders* (2002) and Esther Friesner's *Nobody's Princess* (2007). All of these are Trojan War novels for teens that attempt to centre historical female experiences whilst somewhat explicitly presenting their work as empowering for modern readers. More recent woman-centred Trojan War history for adults includes Emily Hauser's *For the Most Beautiful* (2016), Pat Baker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and Madeleine Miller's *Circe* (2018).

Compared with these, *Inside the Walls of Troy* is notable for the extent to which male characters are decentred and the emphasis really is upon women's experience of what we might conjecture to be aristocratic dark age female activities; playing knucklebones, washing

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linens in pools, sharing beauty secrets, styling each other's hair and whispering about suitors from whom they have no rights of their own to choose. Whilst Geras, Tomlinson and Friesner all had their protagonists move frequently among and converse with circles of men and male heroes, McLaren's women are their own circle, held apart from what is going on in the male world. There is a sense, more than in these later novels, of men and women truly occupying different spheres to the point they barely understand each other's lives.

Fans of the twenty-first century style of feminist-leaning YA fiction, however, used to active protagonists and the idea of the 'strong female character', might be disappointed with how little actually happens in this novel and how limited the actions of its female leads are. McLaren talks in her author's note about how she wanted to retell Homer's *Iliad* whilst making space for the female characters he ignores. *Inside the Walls,* however, might be better represented in places as a retelling of the actions of the male characters in Homer narrated by female characters intermittently providing their emotional reactions. Once the war begins, the novel is heavily focused on the male-centred action of the *Iliad*, albeit narrated by Cassandra. This focus dominates the novel far more than corresponding scenes in the work of Geras and Tomlinson, in which the female characters are more active participants and maintain dominant plotlines of their own. To some extent, McLaren's heroines become a framing device. They have little agency, and with the exception of Helen's elopement with Paris, their actions have almost no impact on the overall plot, leaving them to react passively to what the men are doing. To some extent, this makes real points about the status of ancient women, and might perhaps even be a critique of less realistic and more glamourised feminist leaning historical fiction, but it is unlikely ancient women were really always so utterly unable to affect anything as in McLaren. Moreover, it is not clear that this female powerlessness is always a deliberate authorial choice, since in places McLaren presents limited female agency as though it is in fact powerful. The following are the main instances of women taking action to influence the course of events in *Inside the Walls:*

1) Penelope conspiring with Odysseus to resolve the crisis of Helen's suitors and allow him to marry her. This is presented as a powerful and empowering moment for Penelope, and is repeated with her as narrator this time in *Waiting for Odysseus* (2000). This comes about, however, through Penelope severing her close bond with her cousin Helen and sending Helen off to a life that she is not happy with.

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Penelope's sole reward for this is marrying a man she loves; heterosexual companionate love is therefore shown to be a rare example of a goal towards which these women can successfully work, albeit at the expense of their relationships with other women and those other women's wellbeing. Penelope's empowerment is also shown in her discarding her discomfort with her own lack of beauty, and becoming confident in her own body knowing she is loved by a man, to the point Helen thinks she has a special kind of beauty of which she is almost jealous.

2) Helen's elopement with Paris, the plot of the novel. This is the point at which Helen forgives Penelope and understands how she can have made selfish decisions for love.

3) Cassandra's attempts to persuade people Helen is dangerous and should be sent back; all failures.

4) Helen and Andromache's scheme to persuade Achilles to leave the Greek side by marrying him to Polyxena. This is opposed by Cassandra, who considers it a betrayal of Polyxena; however, Helen sees this as irrelevant in the face of the greater good. Polyxena herself is terrified of the brutish Achilles. This scheme of Helen and Andromache goes nowhere.

5) Polyxena's successful attempt to persuade Achilles to surrender the body of Hector by sleeping with him. This does succeed, but it emotionally destroys her, and she is never the same again.

6) Cassandra hurrying through the city before it is destroyed to bring the other royal women to the temple. She persuades Andromache to leave the servants to their fates, and only rescues the sisters she is close to. Cassandra's run through the city is presented dramatically and tensely, to the point the fact they are only going to a temple to await their captors is perhaps something of a let-down. The narrative implies, however, that this is a triumph for Cassandra.

The rest of the novel is dominated by the actions and decisions of men, and the mysterious will of the gods, who are often referred to but whose existence is not determined one way or another. With the exception of Cassandra's rather lacklustre victory at the end, then, women only succeed when their schemes involve love or sex, and sometimes not even then. When a woman's scheme uses sex as a means but involves an end goal that is not romantic love, as in the

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case of Polyxena, this destroys the woman. To some extent, this may all be intentional on the part of the author, suggesting that any idea of female power in this world can only be an illusion. It is also more reflective of YA 1990s trends, when there was less focus on the protagonists being active, agentive and didactically admirable characters.

Cassandra herself is an outsider who never feels that she fits well among the women and dislikes everything coded conventionally feminine. She is naturally beautiful, but not interested in feminine dress and styling, not interested in men and flirtation and not interested in learning games women play like knucklebones, which she describes as a silly woman's game. She says of her own beauty: "Of all the royal daughters I was often judged the most beautiful. I should have been a prize in the marriage market. But I was also considered odd, unfeminine" (p. 73). She allows Helen to style her hair but when Helen wants to add alkanet juice to her cheeks and soot to her eyebrows, she protests "I don't want to look like a concubine!" (p. 110).

Cassandra frequently asserts that it is impossible for any other women to understand her quasi-feminist objections to being treated as a pawn in the marriage market; in Cassandra's view other women universally hold no resentment whatsoever when it comes to having marriage decisions made by men, and embrace being treated as objects. She says "I had no wish to be bargained off in order to strengthen alliances.... But my sisters were never going to understand that" (p. 73) and "Discussions inside the women's quarters always came back to the same subject, the marriage market we were raised to compete in. Troy could be burning down and its women would still be talking about potential suitors." (p. 72). Cassandra's dislike for what is coded feminine causes her to isolate herself from other women: "I had no female friends. Women were wary of me. Of all my sisters and half sisters, only these two youngest somehow managed to accept me, and I worried that as they grew into women they, too, would become strangers. Not that I had ever really tried reaching out to the others. So much of what women did together struck me as falsehood and foolishness." (pp. 92–93.) She laments to Helenus "Oh why wasn't I *born* a man?" (p. 86).

Overall, this Cassandra is suggested to be an appropriate heroine for a woman-centred Trojan War novel because she is not like other women, and the ways in which she is different are suggested to make

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her better than them. Her feelings towards other women arguably express a lot of internalised misogyny. Something about Cassandra as a figure clearly evokes this kind of association to authors, because Tomlinson's 2002 Cassandra in the feminist YA novel *The Moon Riders* is also extreme in her denigration of anything hinting at conventional feminity, disparaging a hypothetical beautified women as 'a painted, delicate woman' (p.305), for example, and again this is not presented as something to be criticised.

Andromache in this novel plays the role of the anti-Cassandra, a woman who has entirely embraced the oppressive elements of her role as a woman. When Cassandra tries to persuade other women to come to the council chamber Andromache tells her "that women weren't *supposed* to be interested in matters of state" (p. 81). Helenus mockingly imitates Andromache to Cassandra, saying "*you're* not *supposed* to want choices" (p. 86). Andromache's embrace of patriarchy therefore is shown to be extreme even in the eyes of some men. Cassandra's attitude towards Andromache is negative; she calls her "a silly woman" (p. 103) and says her "presence always put a damper on my enjoyment" (p. 117), although towards the end she does become somewhat more sympathetic to her. A reconciliation between the two is shown when Cassandra pulls Andromache from her home and brings her to wait in the temple of Athena at the end. Overall, however, Cassandra's resentment towards enforced gender roles is directed at other women, who are painted as her oppressors, and less so towards men.

Both Cassandra and Helenus in this novel appear to be true prophets; their visions come true and we are given no reason to doubt them. The difference is that Cassandra is never believed, whilst Helenus sometimes is so long as he expresses himself diplomatically. Helenus, according to Cassandra, "liked to tease me about having won the love of the god Apollo … Helenus's speculations were based on mysterious glowing lights that lingered beside me whenever I was in the holy shrine. … Helenus said Apollo had given me the gift of sight, but when I had refused his love, he had added a cruel condition: that my countrymen would never believe my predictions." (p. 76). Hecuba, meanwhile, explains the gift of prophecy as serpents coming to Apollo's temple and licking the ears of both baby Helenus and Cassandra. Cassandra does not think either explanation makes sense, and believes Apollo would have expressed his love more directly. She attributes Helenus sometimes being believed to the fact he is "a better judge of human nature' and 'knew when to keep his visions to himself"

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(p. 77).

The novel's characters believe in the gods uncritically, but unlike in, for example, Geras' *Troy,* we never actually see the gods, and it is therefore left to the reader to determine whether they really exist. Nor do other supernatural elements appear in the novel, as in Tomlinson's *Moon Riders.* The only supernatural element to which there is a degree of supporting evidence is therefore prophecy. Cassandra's visions are sudden and violent, and when she invokes them, her manner of speaking changes. For example, when Cassandra throws herself at Priam's feet to implore him to send Helen home, she proclaims: "Beware the whore of Sparta! Send her back to her husband or we will live to see our men slaughtered, our children tossed from the walls, our women carried off as slaves…." (p. 89). This does not sound like Cassandra's normal narrative voice, which is usually highly calm and detached.

McLaren makes Troy in some ways a more gender-oppressive state than Greece; for example in Greece noblewomen go to banquets but 'In Troy such free association between the sexes was frowned upon' (p.84). This is a contrast to the 2016 anthology novel *A Song of Troy* (Quinn et al.), in which Helen elopes with Paris not from love but because after meeting Andromache she longs to be in Troy where women have more rights, use their husband's seals and are less likely to be beaten by these husbands.

We do not know what sources the author may have used, aside from the fact that in her note at the end she refers to her novel as a retelling of Homer. The amount of detail about ancient make-up and hairstyles is quite high, with the addition of other more well-known elements like knucklebones. McLaren emphasises the basic living conditions of even the royals; for example, Helen has not seen her reflection in a proper mirror until Theseus, king of a much more powerful city state in this version, brings her to one to show her her own beauty. Overall, there is significantly more historical detail than in Geras' *Troy,* but less than in *The Moon Riders.*

Troy, according to Cassandra, seems to have accepted the Panhellenic Greek view of Greeks and outsiders and internalised this prejudice towards itself. She says: "We Trojans wanted desperately to be thought of as civilized. And Father believed his reign had placed us among the civilized, that Troy alone among Asian kingdoms had somehow earned this status. For Priam, the only unpardonable insult

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	was “barbarian.”" (pp. 82–83). In reality, it seems highly unlikely the Greek view of Greece as superior determinant of culture to an uncivilised eastern world would have been commonly accepted within the so-called ‘Asian kingdoms’. There is, perhaps, a hint of a ‘west is best’ attitude here.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Achilles Agamemnon Andromache Cassandra Hector Hecuba Helen Helenus Laodice Menelaus Odysseus / Ulysses Penelope Priam Theseus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Appearances Desires Family Gender Gender expectations/construction Gender, female War

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