



# Stealing Helen: The Myth of the Abducted Wife in Comparative Perspective

*Lowell Edmunds*

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It's a familiar story: a beautiful woman is abducted and her husband journeys to recover her. This story's best-known incarnation is also a central Greek myth—the abduction of Helen that led to the Trojan War. *Stealing Helen* surveys a vast range of folktales and texts exhibiting the story pattern of the abducted beautiful wife and makes a detailed comparison with the Helen of Troy myth. Lowell Edmunds shows that certain Sanskrit, Welsh, and Old Irish texts suggest there was an Indo-European story of the abducted wife before the Helen myth of the *Iliad* became known.

Investigating Helen's status in ancient Greek sources, Edmunds argues that if Helen was just one trope of the abducted wife, the quest for Helen's origin in Spartan cult can be abandoned, as can the quest for an Indo-European goddess who grew into the Helen myth. He explains that Helen was not a divine essence but a narrative figure that could replicate itself as needed, at various times or places in ancient Greece. Edmunds recovers some of these narrative Helens, such as those of the Pythagoreans and of Simon Magus, which then inspired the Helens of the Faust legend and Goethe.

*Stealing Helen* offers a detailed critique of prevailing views behind the "real" Helen and presents an eye-opening exploration of the many sources for this international mythical and literary icon.

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