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HELEN
PHOENICIAN WOMEN
ORESTES

Edited and Translated by

DAVID KOVACS

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PREFACE

The Greek text, as in earlier volumes, is my own, and my editorial principles are explained in the introduction in Volume One. I discuss in a forthcoming book called *Euripidea Tertia* some of the readings and translations adopted here. As usual, text enclosed between square brackets is deemed to be spurious, while text enclosed between angle brackets are words thought to have been accidentally omitted from the manuscripts. As in previous volumes, where I have marked a lacuna of a line or more I have usually filled in, purely by way of illustration, what the sense seems to require. Unattributed supplements are my own.

As in Volumes Three and Four I have marked passages written in lyric meters and sung in the original performance by translating them line-for-line to match the Greek. For spoken verse I use the ordinary typography of prose.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge debts of gratitude incurred. A grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities enabled me to devote the academic year 1996–7 to parts of this volume as well as its predecessor. I was also elected, for that year, to a Visiting Fellowship at Balliol College, Oxford. My deepest thanks to both bodies.

Work on parts of this volume and its successor were

aided by a grant from the Earhart Foundation, research *leave from the University of Virginia*, and a *Visiting Fellowship* at Trinity College, Cambridge. I am immensely grateful to the Master and Fellows of Trinity for their generosity and especially to Roger Dawe, who kindly discussed textual problems with me. Residence in Cambridge has also allowed me to benefit from the kindness, learning, and acuity of James Diggle. I have profited immensely over the years from discussions with Charles Willink, and it is to him that this volume is dedicated in thanks for his stimulating friendship.

University of Virginia David Kovacs

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HELEN

INTRODUCTION

Helen the virtuous and faithful wife, the Helen who never went to Troy but stayed in Egypt, falsely blamed for the actions of her divinely created *Doppelgänger* at Troy—these novel twists to the story of the Trojan War were not new with Euripides. Stesichorus, a lyric poet from Himera in Sicily who lived in the first half of the sixth century, wrote a famous palinode (i.e. a poem of recantation) in which he says, addressing Helen, "The tale is not true: you did not go on the well-benched ships and never reached the citadel of Troy" (*PMG* 192–3; see, in the Loeb series, David A. Campbell, ed., *Greek Lyric III*, pp. 92–7). The poem (or poems: there may have been two) is represented by a few paltry fragments, but according to one ancient report Stesichorus mentioned a phantom Helen. Legend has it that Stesichorus lost his sight after writing an earlier poem vituperating Helen, but that after his recantation the deified Helen restored it.

Euripides' older contemporary Herodotus also mentions a version of the story that put Helen in Egypt, not in Troy, while the Trojan War was being fought. He claims (*Histories* 2.112–20) that priests at Memphis told him the following story: Paris and Helen stopped at Egypt on their way to Troy, Paris' slave let it be known that his master was making off with his host's wife and treasure, and King Pro-

teus made Paris leave both Helen and treasure behind; then when the Greeks arrived at Troy, the Trojans could not persuade them that Paris had done so; only after Troy was sacked was it clear that the Trojans had been telling the truth; Menelaus then returned home by way of Egypt. Herodotus' story is a rationalizing one: there is no supernatural phantom and no evidence of divine intervention in affairs. But it furnished Euripides with the locale of his play.

The plot, as usual, shows evidence of careful construction. Helen speaks the prologue in which she outlines her situation. When the three goddesses, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, competed in a beauty contest before the Trojan prince Paris, the prince awarded the prize to Aphrodite, who had bribed him by promising him marriage to Helen of Sparta, the most beautiful woman alive. When it came time for Aphrodite to fulfill her promise, Hera substituted for the real Helen a phantom figure, which Paris took to Troy, and Hermes was despatched to convey the real Helen to safety in Egypt at the court of Proteus, who piously respected the trust made to him of another man's wife. Proteus' son, Theoclymenus, however, is not god-fearing like his father, and he wants to marry Helen himself. She has had to take refuge at the tomb of Proteus to escape his advances. All she knows of her husband is that he has mounted an expedition to Troy to recover her. But she has also heard a prophecy that one day she and he are fated to dwell in Sparta again—if she can escape the embraces of another man.

Next a Greek warrior named Teucer arrives, on his way into exile. From him Helen learns that the war is over and that, while sailing home, Menelaus was driven off from the

others by a storm and is presumed dead. She also learns from Teucer's reaction to a woman he thinks merely resembles Helen how hated she is because of deeds she never committed. In sung verse she laments her fate, and a Chorus of Greek women join in her lament. After expressing sympathy, the Chorus persuade her not to despair before asking Theoclymenus' prophetic sister Theonoe whether her husband is still alive. They all go in, leaving the stage empty. This allows the audience to see and hear Menelaus before his reunion with his wife.

Menelaus arrives dressed in sailcloth, his clothes having been ruined at sea, and he delivers a sort of second prologue, telling of his shipwreck, which left him, a few comrades, and his wife on an unknown shore. He expresses horror at the shame of begging but means to present himself at the door of this rich house. He rouses the gatekeeper, an old woman with a rough tongue, who tells him to go away. Menelaus can make nothing of her warning that Theoclymenus kills all Greeks because Helen, daughter of Zeus, is in the house.

When Helen and the Chorus return, having heard from Theonoe that Menelaus is still alive, she recognizes her husband, but he, having just left the Helen he brought back from Troy in a cave by the shore, refuses to believe that Helen is his wife and the other woman a phantom. Finally one of his men comes and reports that the phantom Helen has flown off, and this convinces Menelaus that the woman before him is indeed his wife. Husband and wife sing a duet of recognition and reunion.

But after their rejoicing Helen informs her husband of the hopelessness of the situation: he had better run for his life and leave her behind rather than be killed for her sake.

Menelaus refuses to do this, and the two pledge that they will die together if one dies. The biggest obstacle to any possible plan of escape is Theoclymenus' sister Theonoe, who, Helen says, already knows of Menelaus' arrival and might tell her brother. Helen promises to leave no form of entreaty untried to persuade her to keep this a secret.

Theonoe emerges from the palace. She is a slightly mysterious and forbidding figure with her ritual attendants purifying the air with sulphur. After reminding Helen of her accurate prophecy that Menelaus was alive, she describes the situation in heaven. Hera wants Helen to return, while Aphrodite does not, and so all depends on Theonoe. Helen and Menelaus take turns beseeching her to do the right thing and restore Helen to her husband, as her father would have wanted her to. Theonoe agrees to say nothing to her brother and departs.

Now it is time for husband and wife to plot their escape. As usual in Euripides, it is the woman who has the brains. Helen suggests that Menelaus pretend to be the messenger of his own death. Helen will profess grief but agree to marry Theoclymenus after the funeral. This, they will claim, must by Greek custom be conducted at sea. They will ask for a ship to take them out of sight of the shore, then Menelaus' men will overpower the crew and sail away. Theoclymenus, when he has learned of Menelaus' death and Helen's willingness to marry him, is all too happy to give her a ship and lots of precious gifts to be thrown overboard in honor of the deceased. After their departure the king learns from a messenger that Menelaus is alive and has rescued Helen. Just when he had decided to kill his sister for her disloyalty in not telling him of Menelaus' arrival, Castor and Polydeuces appear on the

mechane. They forbid him to take vengeance on his sister, promise Helen and Menelaus a safe journey home, and predict that Helen will become a goddess and Menelaus live in the islands of the blest. Theoclymenus graciously accepts the *fait accompli*, and the play ends with five choral anapests that Euripides had used in *Alcestis, Andromache,* and (with a small change) in *Medea*, to the effect that with the gods in the picture mortal expectations are defeated.

Helen was produced in 412 B.C. Like the nearly contemporary *Iphigenia among the Taurians* and *Ion* it ends happily. But all three Athenian tragedians wrote such plays, and there is nothing paradoxical, from the ancient point of view, about a *tragoidia* that turns out happily for the principal characters. The similarities in plot between *Helen* and *Iphigenia* are striking. In both a woman finds herself in a foreign land, in one case with disagreeable duties (Iphigenia must participate in human sacrifice) and in the other with a disagreeable suitor (Theoclymenus, the new king of Egypt). In both cases the gods spirited the woman there, and her family does not know where she is. A close male relative arrives (Iphigenia's brother Orestes, Helen's husband Menelaus), and after the man and the woman have established their identities, they plot to rescue themselves from this hostile environment. The main blocking figure in each case is a local barbarian king. The two protagonists prevail over him by a ruse involving a religious ceremony: Iphigenia pretends that the statue of Artemis that Orestes has been instructed by Apollo to steal is in urgent need of cleansing because of contact with a murderer, while Helen pretends that she wants to give her husband a burial at sea. Thus each pair of Greeks manages to

get away, and a god intervenes to see to it that those who are complicit in the escape are not punished.

Though *Iphigenia* and *Helen* show a striking structural similarity, there are differences as well, and these are important for the way the plays affect their audience. In *Iphigenia* it is crucial that brother and sister were separated when Orestes was a small child and that therefore brother and sister cannot recognize each other by sight. The Oedipus theme, that it is impossible to know who your parents or other relatives really are, and hence that it is possible under unpropitious circumstances to commit horrible crimes against one's kin, finds its counterpart in *Iphigenia*, for it is Iphigenia's duty to sacrifice all foreigners to Artemis, and she comes very close to assisting in her brother's sacrifice. In fact, however, both Orestes' capture and near sacrifice by Iphigenia, and the fact that the sacrifice does not take place, are the result of the kind of happy chance that can only be ascribed to the unseen guidance of events by the gods. The human perspective is extremely limited, but behind the phenomena of human life stand the fixed purposes of heaven.

In *Helen*, by contrast, a different version of the theme of human fallibility and weakness comes to the fore. The radical insecurity of a world in which one does not know who one's close relatives are does not appear here. Instead of this form of insecurity, the play introduces another, epistemological, one in which, because of the intervention of the gods, the real is always shadowed by the unreal. In the second half of the prologue, for example, Teucer is convinced that the woman he sees before him is not Helen, though in fact she is, and he is convinced that the real

Helen is a morally reprobate person whose wantonness has caused immense destruction, when in fact she is not. As he leaves he congratulates his unknown informant on being, despite resemblance to her in looks, a better woman than Helen. When Menelaus comes on in the absence of Helen and is told by the gatekeeper that he'd better run for it since the local king Theoclymenus kills all foreigners because of a woman named Helen, daughter of Zeus, he tries to make sense of this by supposing mere homonymy. But though he tries the supposition that there is a local man called Zeus who fathered a woman called Helen, he knows that this will not cover the facts. When he finally meets his wife, he nearly leaves her behind, convinced that his real wife is the phantom Helen being kept in a cave, not the woman before him.

Contributing to the bewilderment of the situation is the discord among the gods. Theonoe tells Menelaus of a strife between Hera and Aphrodite, a strife that Theonoe will have to decide: it is up to her whether he can return, for if she tells her brother, return is impossible. Only at the end do we learn from Castor that Theonoe's decision to allow his return is also that of the whole assembly of gods.

There is also another mythical pattern that serves as a backdrop to the action, that of Persephone, carried off by Hades to the underworld. Helen sings (244–5) that Hermes carried her off as she was picking flowers, precisely the circumstances of Persephone's abduction. Helen's return from Egypt is thus a kind of return, like the annual return of Persephone that signals the fertile time of the year. The choral ode at 1301–68, often thought of as a pretty irrelevance, serves to underline this mythic pattern.

Mostly, though, the play gives pleasure by its polish and

cleverness, the beauty of its lyrics, its shifts of mood from despair to elation, and the quick wit and presence of mind of the rehabilitated heroine, who fools Theoclymenus while uttering scarcely a single lie.

Within a year (or possibly two) of its first production, an extended parody of *Helen* was prominently featured in Aristophanes' *Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria* (lines 855–923). The premise of this play is that the women of Athens are conspiring at the women's festival of the Thesmophoria to punish Euripides for portraying women in a bad light. Euripides gets wind of the plot and persuades a kinsman to disguise himself as a woman and attend the festival. He is discovered and kept under guard, and his attempts to get Euripides to rescue him take the form of his impersonating Helen and Andromeda, while Euripides plays the role of their rescuers Menelaus and Perseus. It is thanks to this parody that we are able to restore *Helen* 561, omitted from our only manuscript.

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Dramatis Personae

ΕΛΕΝΗ	HELEN, daughter of Zeus and Leda and wife of Menelaus
ΤΕΥΚΡΟΣ	TEUCER, a Greek warrior, brother of Ajax
ΧΟΡΟΣ	CHORUS of captive Greek women living in Egypt
ΜΕΝΕΛΕΩΣ	MENELAUS, husband of Helen
ΓΡΑΥΣ	OLD WOMAN, servant of Theoclymenus
ΘΕΡΑΠΩΝ	SERVANT of Menelaus
ΘΕΟΝΟΗ	THEONOE, sister of Theoclymenus
ΘΕΟΚΛΥΜΕΝΟΣ	THEOCLYMENUS, king of Egypt
ΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ	Servant of Theoclymenus as MESSENGER
ΘΕΡΑΠΩΝ Β	SECOND SERVANT, slave of Theonoe
ΚΑΣΤΩΡ	CASTOR, deified brother of Helen

Nonspeaking role: Polydeuces, twin brother of Castor

A Note On Staging

The *skene* represents the palace of Theoclymenus in Egypt. Before it is the tomb of Theoclymenus' father Proteus. Eisodos A leads to the seashore, Eisodos B to the inland portions of Theoclymenus' kingdom.