

Euripides' *Helen* tells an international story, set at the mouth of the river Nile, but in its triangular psychological geography linking the three continents of Africa, Europe, and Asia. It touchingly reunites a famous Greek husband and wife, separated for more than a decade, while she has been in Egypt and he faraway in Asia, fighting before the walls of Troy. The international dimension is appropriate to a play about the peerlessly beautiful Helen, Spartan princess, wife of Menelaus, and alleged cause of the war when she eloped with the Trojan Prince Paris. For Helen was so famous that the ancient Egyptians themselves liked to think that she had spent time in their country, and their temple historians were probably the ultimate source for the myth that Euripides the Athenian playwright dramatised in his dazzling *Helen* of 412 BCE.

Euripides was already at least seventy years old and experimenting with plays involving exotic locations, surprise, suspense, and emotionally sophisticated relationships. No wonder he was attracted to this version of Helen's tale, in which she never went to Troy at all; Zeus' winged son Hermes had instead taken her, wrapped in a cloud, to stay with the Egyptian King Theoclymenus. The intention was to keep her safe in a secret location. The Helen for whose sake the Greeks and Trojans massacred one another was merely a phantom, a divinely created 'double' so lifelike that even her lover had been deceived. But in this play the real Helen, who has remained faithful to Menelaus, sees her virtue rewarded as they are joyfully reunited and escape, with the divine blessing of Helen's winged brothers Castor and Pollux. Times have been hard, and the married couple have lost many years of happiness, but can now at least look forward to old age together.

This upbeat conclusion has confused critics ever since the Renaissance. Of all Greek tragedies *Helen* is the lightest and funniest; it certainly conforms least with commonplace preconceptions of 'the tragic'. Nobody dies (except some Egyptian sailors the audience has not met), and there are many moments of absurdity along the way to Helen's escape from the libidinous pharaoh Theoclymenus. Critics have therefore argued that it is not tragedy but Euripidean 'self-parody', 'melodrama', 'tragicomedy', 'romantic comedy' and even just plain 'comedy'. But the ancient Greeks would have no such problems with its generic

classification. A tragedy was a play set in the mythical past which addressed serious concerns, and for all its levity and buoyant conclusion, *Helen* is deadly serious. It portrays people of different ethnicities struggling to understand each other's conduct and culture, and the characters of Theonoe and her slave prove that not all non-Greeks are by any means barbarians. *Helen* portrays captives suffering the indignities of slavery and of arbitrary rule by a tyrant. But the central question it asks is whether there is ever any reason for going to war. This makes it painfully relevant to any society which receives regular news of the death of its soldiers in farflung locations: to the original Athenian spectators, who almost without exception had been recently bereaved by a military catastrophe, the play's sweetness must have left a bitter aftertaste indeed. In 413 BCE many hundred Athenian men had died, confined in the baking hot quarries of Sicily, after an ill-conceived expedition had been sent out to conquer the island and extend the Athenian empire westwards. The surviving Athenians had received the news of the fatalities with fury, destabilising public order in their city.

Euripides, who avoided involving himself in public life and whose plays frequently address the dangers of the mob rule into which the Athenian democracy sometimes descended, responded to this crisis by producing an innovative new type of play. Indeed, its central romance and escapist plot adumbrate by two thousand years the lighter plays of Shakespeare. The play's brilliance lies in its juxtaposition of a romantic dimension with intellectual bravura. Euripides, who was close to the philosopher Socrates and absorbed into his plays all the new advances in philosophical thinking, uses the apparently folkloric notion of a human simulacrum to explore the epistemological issue of the impossibility of true belief. If even 'Helen of Troy' did not go to Troy and did not commit adultery, then how can we ever know anything for certain? The form and the language of the play are all generated by a tension between on the one hand the 'real' world and actual events, and on the other such fantasies that only 'seem' to be true. The philosophers contemporary with Euripides had questioned whether there is a fully knowable real world, and whether language is adequate to describe it: *Helen* explores the gap between reality and repute, speech and truth.

Fittingly for a play dealing with the impossibility of cognitive certitude, the visual element of *Helen* is unusually important. It is not just that Euripides relished the visual potential of portraying Egyptian funeral architecture, but that he plays with themes of illusion and doubleness. The heroine, who of course has a *Doppelgänger* herself, wishes that her beauty, her superficial 'appearance', could be washed off her face like the paint off a beautiful statue. The entrance of Menelaus mirrors the previous appearance of Teucer; the Egyptian twins have a pair of equally spectacular entrances (Theonoe with incense and religious procession, Theoclymenus with hunting dogs and nets), and the play concludes with an epiphany of divine twins. Costume is significant; besides the comic effect of seeing Menelaus wrapped in salvaged materials from a shipwreck, Helen herself changes her appearance in order to 'appear' as a widow, when paradoxically she has just regained the status of 'wife' in the true sense again. The trope of mistaken identity serves to emphasise further both the theme of recognition, and the irony with which it is laden in this play. For Menelaus' recognition of his wife involves recognising that he fought a protracted and bloody war for the sake of an illusion. Here lies the 'truth' of the relationship between this superficially frothy, whimsical adventure and its immediate historical context. Against the 'real' backdrop of the Sicilian carnage, Euripides' spectators cannot have failed to draw some connection between their own bereavements and the play's implication that all the heartbreaking losses of the Trojan War had been incurred for no reason at all.

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