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Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

General Editor Silvia Bigliazzi

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A Feast of Strange Opinions: Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes on the English Renaissance Stage

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and Emanuel Stelzer

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CEMP - Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

The series of CEMP volumes offers studies and fully annotated scholarly editions related to the CEMP open-access digital archive. This archive includes texts pertaining to the genres of the paradox, of the paradoxical fiction, and of the problem, which were published in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and which are currently unavailable online and/or not open access (https://test-01.dlls.univr.it/teipublisher-cemp/apps/cemp-app/index.html). Our digital archive features diplomatic, semidiplomatic, and modernised editions of selected works, furnished with critical apparatuses and editorial notes, alongside related documentary materials, which, in turn, are relevant to poetic and dramatic texts of the English Renaissance. These texts provide fundamental testimony of the early modern episteme, functioning as a hinge joining widespread forms of the paradoxical discourse in different genres and texts and within the development of sceptical thinking.

The project is part of the Skenè Centre as well as of the Project of Excellence Digital humanities applied to foreign languages and literatures (2018-2022) Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the University of Verona (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/en/).

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From Speechlessness to Powerful Speech. Coping with Paradoxes of Reality in Euripides' *Helen*

Marco Duranti

Abstract

This chapter investigates the paradoxes of Euripides' *Helen* and their relevance for the issue of the limits of human knowledge. After pointing out how the entire plot of *Helen* can be regarded as a doxastic paradox, it focuses on Menelaus' bewildering experience of meeting two Helens (the real one and the phantom). It appears that the character experiences a logical paradox, whereas the audience both know more than him and identify with him. Then the chapter illuminates how, in the second part of the play, Helen and Menelaus manage to flee from Egypt by using the illusionistic power of words to create a new paradox. Menelaus himself, by announcing his own death to Theoclymenos, is paradoxically both alive and dead. The two spouses manipulate reality and stage a play within the main play, with disturbing metatheatrical implications on the distinction between reality and illusion.

Keywords: Euripides; *Helen*; paradox; reality; metatheatre

In her chapter on the pragmatics of paradoxes in this volume, Silvia Bigliazzi distinguishes statements flaunting common opinion (*doxa*) from statements contradicting the meaning of words, and finally from statements producing logical *aporiai*. Whereas the doxastic paradoxes consist of questioning established beliefs about reality, the logical ones violate the principle of non-contradiction, according to which a proposition cannot be simultaneously true and false, or by denying factual evidence. As Bigliazzi points out, oxymora and other figures of contradiction – the second case above – may turn out to be perceived by the speakers as if they were paradoxes, thus leading them to raise questions on traditional epistemological assumptions precisely as if they were. Exemplary cases consist

of apparently inexplicable situations which puzzle the characters in ways that produce a sense of clashing realities on stage, with a side-effect on the audience's perception of the drama world as itself an illusory space.[1] Such issues were largely explored in the Renaissance, and to some extent also in ancient drama, but on very different grounds. The closest parallel for the state of confusion and bewilderment of early modern, and especially Shakespearean, characters can possibly be found in Orestes' hallucinations after killing his mother Clytemnestra. Unlike in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, in Euripides' *Iphigenia Taurica* and *Orestes* the Erinyes do not appear on the stage. Although being mentioned also by other characters, they are visible only to Orestes, who finds in them the cause of his own fits of madness. In *IT*, Orestes' delirium is narrated by the Taurian Messenger (285-91), whereas in *Orestes* it is shown on stage (251-79). As Enrico Medda has argued, Euripides wavers between depicting Orestes' madness as a purely psychological phenomenon and sticking to the traditional explanation of the goddesses' fury (2013, 167-84). Aeschylus had anticipated Euripides in staging Orestes' psychological distress at the end of *Choephori* (1048-62), but in the following *Eumenides* had brought the Erinyes on stage. A similar divinely-sent madness affects Ajax: at the beginning of Sophocles' homonymous tragedy, the audience is told that the hero has killed the herdsmen and the flocks of the Greek army, believing them to be the commanders of the expedition to Troy (1-70). But like the other ancient examples of altered mental states just recalled, in this case not only are divine powers responsible for them, but, more importantly, they are not experienced as paradoxical and expressed accordingly. The only tragedy to some extent comparable to what may be found on the English Renaissance stage, where the paradox denotes an idiosyncratic experience raising both epistemological and ontological questions, is Euripides' *Helen*. As Carla Suthren illustrates in this volume, the early modern reader's fascination with Helen's *eidolon* is not coincidental.

As a premise to that discussion, the present chapter focuses on this play, whose distinctively paradoxical quality has often been recognised. For instance, Dale describes *Helen* as a tragedy "rich

[1] On which see Bigliazzi's chapter in this book.

in paradox and excitement" (1967, xiv). According to Erich Segal, "[a] . . . Euripidean paradox is visible in the figure of Helen" (1983, 248). Matthew Wright argues that the effect of the plot of *Helen* and *Iphigenia Taurica* on the spectators "is paradoxical and unsettling" (2005, 200; cf. Wright 2017, 61-3). In no tragedy more than in *Helen* Euripides intends to inspire a reflection on the epistemological problems of the limits of human knowledge, and paradox is an apt way to show how unexpected and how far from men's presumptions reality can be. We may say that the entire plot of *Helen* constitutes a doxastic paradox, in that it shows that nothing is as it seems and that appearance is not reality. The woman who is regarded as the adulteress *par excellence* is instead a model of fidelity: she did not follow Paris to Troy but was instead brought by Hermes to Egypt, were she has preserved her marital fidelity to Menelaus. The universal opinion about Helen is therefore false. This doxastic paradox is expressed throughout the play by way of antithesis and oxymora. An example of the former can be found in Helen's prologic monologue: προυτέθην ἐγὼ μὲν οὔ, / τὸ δ' ὄνομα τοὐμόν ("it was not me who was set up as a prize, but my name"; 42-3). The oxymora of Euripides' tragedies have been listed by Wilhelm Breitenbach (1934, 236-8, with respect to the lyric parts) and Detlev Fehling (1968, 152-4).

This chapter analyses Menelaus' perception of a contradictory reality which he expresses through what for him are logical paradoxes or *aporiai*. The sense of bewilderment he experiences is extraordinary. We will see how his initial amazement at the apparently absurd coexistence of two 'Helens' – the one he has brought from Troy and the one who lives in the Egyptian palace – eventually gives way to a rational explanation. I shall first follow the process of what I call Menelaus' 'intellectual crisis' when he experiences what appears to be a logical and factual contradiction. Interestingly, at this stage, the audience both know more than Menelaus and identify with him, thus having a sort of split experience of the occurrences on stage. I shall investigate what implications Menelaus' episode has on ideas of human knowledge. I shall then discuss the turn in the plot whereby Helen and Menelaus decide to ingeniously exploit appearances in order to leave Egypt, as well as the falsifying potential of words in ways that expose the

tricks inherent in language and its relation to reality.

1. The Two Helens and Menelaus' Crisis

The origin of Menelaus' crisis lies in the coexistence of two Helens. The 'Helen' whom Menelaus is bringing back from Troy is in fact a phantom, which has been moulded by Hera in retaliation for not being chosen by Paris as the most beautiful goddess in the contest on Mount Ida. This phantom, which shares not only Helen's physical aspect, but also her voice and her personality,[2] symbolises the elusiveness of reality, which can deceive humans with false appearances. It is far from certain whether Euripides was the first to devise this version of Helen's story: it appears that the phantom (εἴδωλον) was invented by Stesichorus in the Palinode, but the sources on that work (discussed in Wright 2005, 86-110) do not offer conclusive evidence that in Stesichorus the real Helen was brought to Egypt. In Herodotus (2.112-20), Helen and Paris end up in Egypt due to adverse winds. The Egyptian king Proteus keeps Helen in Egypt, after taking her away from Paris, for the entire duration of the Trojan war. Since the Trojans fail to persuade the Achaeans that Helen is not in Troy, the war is fought anyway. After the fall of Troy, Menelaus sails to Egypt, where he is given back his wife by Proteus. Thus, in Herodotus' version there is no phantom.

It may be that the plot of *Helen* represents "an original *combination* of pre-existing but disparate elements" (Wright 2005, 82; emphasis by the author). It is possible that the ingeniousness of the plot triggered a sense of wonder in the spectators: however, given the inherent plurality of Greek myths, it is hardly likely that "[t]he overall effect would have been to shock the audience out of complacency and radically to undermine their sense of secure, certain knowledge of myths", as Wright argues (2005, 155; cf. Wright 2017, 57). Regardless of the details, it is certain that different versions of the Helen myth with respect to the version contained

[2] In the play it is not said that the phantom has the personality of Helen; however, we must assume that, in order to fully deceive Menelaus and the other Greek warriors, it shares the inner thoughts and the memories of the real Helen.

in the Homeric poems were at least in Stesichorus' and Herodotus' works, not to mention that other versions may as well have been present in other literary works that are now lost. As is well known, Greek religion had no canonical books and Wright's notion of a "secure . . . knowledge of myth" is misplaced.

Euripides himself plays with different images of Helen. In 415 he staged *Trojan Women*, in which Helen is again the unfaithful woman who actually went to Troy. At the end of *Electra*, on the contrary, Castor reveals that Helen has never gone to Troy, but was brought to Egypt, whereas a phantom (as in *Helen*, an εἴδωλον) was sent to Troy in her place (1280-2). Critics used to date *Electra* to 413, thus interpreting its ending as an anticipation of what will be presented in *Helen*. However, the criterion of the resolution rate of the iambic trimeters indicates a date included in the interval 417-21 (Cropp and Fick 1985, 23). Therefore, we must conclude that even in Euripides' oeuvre there is no consistency in the choice of the versions of myth.

Thus, the aim of Euripides' manipulation of myth lies elsewhere. By exposing the plurality of myths regarding Helen, as well as by fully exploiting the presence of the phantom – whether he invented it or not – Euripides undermines our faith in reality, not in myth. In this play, we are constantly reminded that neither hearing nor sight, the two main senses through which we acquire knowledge, are reliable. Humans are told a number of stories and they lack a safe criterion to understand whether they are true or false. Right at the beginning of the play, Helen says that there is λόγος τις, "a tale",[3] regarding her birth: that Zeus flew to her mother Leda disguised as a swan; however, she herself does not know if this tale is σαφής ("clear", 17-21). After Teucer has revealed that Menelaus is believed to have died on sea, the chorus exhort Helen not to uncritically trust what she has been told:[4]

[3] I use the term 'tale' to translate λόγος instead of the common translation 'story' (*OED* I.4 defines 'tale' as "[a] story or narrative, true or fictitious, drawn up so as to interest or amuse, or to preserve the history of a fact or incident"). Being a cognate of 'tell', as λόγος is cognate to λέγω, 'tale' makes clear how the act of repeatedly talking about a thing creates an established version, which is then believed as true, whether it is so or no.

[4] The text of *Helen* is quoted according to Alt's Teubner edition (1964); all

Χο. Ἑλένη, τὸν ἐλθόνθ', ὅστις ἐστὶν ὁ ξένος,
μὴ πάντ' ἀληθῆ δοξάσῃς εἰρηκέναι.
Ελ. καὶ μὴν σαφῶς γ' ἔλεξ' ὀλωλέναι πόσιν.
Χο. πόλλ' ἂν γένοιτο καὶ διὰ ψευδῶν σαφῆ.
Ελ. καὶ τἄμπαλίν γε τῶνδ' ἀληθείᾳ ἔπι. (306-10)[5]

[Co. Helen, do not believe that the stranger, whoever he is,
Has said all true things.
Hel. But he has said clearly that my husband has died.
Co. Things that are said clearly are often false.
Hel. And on the contrary, many things that are clearly said are
true.][6]

It turns out that there is no way to distinguish between a true and a false statement, as both can be σαφής ("clear"). As Wright notices (2017, 62-3), the confusion is increased by the fact that, whilst σαφής and ἀληθής were normally used as synonyms with the meaning of "true", Euripides separates the concept of σαφήνεια ("clarity") from that of ἀλήθεια ("truth").

Being unable to understand whether a tale is reliable, in principle humans can at least rely on their own autoptic perception of reality. However, the presence of Helen's phantom undermines the possibility of believing in one's own eyes. Although Teucer tells the woman he has just met in front of the Egyptian palace – in fact, the real Helen – that he has seen 'Helen' with the same eyes with which he now sees the woman herself (ὥσπερ σέ γ', οὐδὲν ἧσσον, ὀφθαλμοῖς ὁρῶ, "as I see you with my eyes, not less"; 118), when he believed to see Helen his eyes were mistaken: Teucer was actually seeing the phantom, not Helen. Since the phantom looks like Helen, he had simply no criterion to understand that what he was seeing was not, in fact, Helen.

The fact that, in the course of the play, Helen's phantom

translations are mine. My changes to Alt's text are written in italics and explained in footnotes.

[5] Unlike Alt, I adopt the emendation ἔπι *in lieu* of σαφής of manuscript L in l. 310, made by Jackson and printed, among others, by Kannicht and Diggle (Alt has instead ἔπη, conjectured by Hermann).

[6] All translations are mine.

disappears does not bode well for the fate of human knowledge. As the phantom itself says, it has remained in the world for the time decreed by fate, and now it is returning to the sky from which it came (612-14). The war at Troy is over, Menelaus has been forced by a storm onto the Egyptian coast, and Helen is finally allowed to reunite with her husband. This means that the disappearance of false images and the possibility of acquiring true knowledge of the world is subordinated to supernatural plans – or caprices. As long as the gods intend to deceive the humans through false appearances, there is no possibility for them to distinguish between true and false visions. Thus, Menelaus has no means to establish who the real Helen is. The miracle of the disappearance of the phantom does not make Menelaus' bewilderment less significant or painful. And we can conclude that an analogous experience may occur any time and to any human being.

But let us consider the scene more closely. Upon his entrance on stage, Menelaus is first told by the old Egyptian doorkeeper that Helen lives in Egypt (470-6): the woman specifies that Helen is the daughter of Zeus, but also of Tyndareus, that she comes from Sparta and that she arrived in Egypt shortly before the Greeks sailed for Troy. This information leaves Menelaus almost speechless (τί φῶ; τί λέξω; "What should I utter? What should I say?"; 483; ἐγὼ μὲν οὐκ ἔχω τί χρὴ λέγειν, "I do not know what I should say"; 494), and his speechlessness is the natural response to the impossibility of understanding reality. Despite this initial puzzlement, Menelaus tries to find a rational explanation of what he has heard and concludes that it must be a case of homonymy (483-99). There might be another Zeus, probably a mortal, as there must be only one in the sky (490-1); there might be another Sparta (or Lacedaemon), another Tyndareus, another Troy. As artificial as this explanation sounds, it is true that "[t]here is nothing intrinsically ludicrous about M.'s reasoning" (Allan 2008, 203). It is understandable that Menelaus resorts to this explanation, as it would be impossible for him (for anyone, in fact) to imagine the existence of a phantom. His reasoning is perhaps the only rational, if convoluted, way to reconcile the information he has heard from the old woman with a normal experience of reality.

Menelaus is still able to find a rational explanation as long as

he hears the name of Helen in Egypt, without seeing the woman herself; or, to use the language of this play, her *body*. The contrast between ὄνομα ("name") and σῶμα ("body") is recurrent in the play (66-7, 588, 1100): it is always Helen who juxtaposes the two terms in an antithesis, in order to stress that her *body* has remained pure, whereas her *name* has been stained with adultery. The name 'Helen' has been attached to a different entity, the phantom, and since the phantom has followed Paris to Troy, the social identity of Helen dependent on her name is that of an adulteress. Menelaus does not suspect it, and instead surmises that two women, two men, two countries, though being different, have the same names.

Strikingly, when Menelaus sees the real Helen, he experiences a clash between sensory impressions and reasoning, which he himself underlines: οὔ που φρονῶ μὲν εὖ, τὸ δ' ὄμμα μου νοσεῖ; ("How is it possible that I reason well, but my eye is sick?"; 575). While his reason was capable of conceiving of the existence of two different bodies with the same name ("Helen", but also "Zeus", "Tyndareus" and, by extension, "Sparta"), he now sees a woman who has the same *body* as Helen and also the same *name*, that is, the same identity: a woman who claims to be his wife. This is beyond human reason. Menelaus points out the paradox by commenting οὐ μὲν γυναικῶν γ' εἷς δυοῖν ἔφυν πόσις ("I am not the husband of two wives, being one man"; 571). While, again, there is nothing inherently ludicrous in Menelaus' utterances, it is ironical that Helen asks him τίς οὖν διδάξει σ' ἄλλος ἢ τὰ ὄμματα; ("who will instruct you more than your eyes?"; 580). The eyes, that is sensory perception, is exactly what Menelaus cannot trust anymore, as he explains to Helen: ἐκεῖ νοσοῦμεν, ὅτι δάμαρτ' ἄλλην ἔχω ("this is the point on which I'm sick, because I have two wives"; 581). He repeats the verb νοσεῖν, "being sick", which he has already used six lines before. Menelaus' puzzlement results in ἔκπληξιν ("amazement"; 549), and ἀφασίαν ("inability to speak"; ibid.). Whereas after hearing of the presence of Helen in Egypt he was able to overcome this impasse by finding a reasonable explanation, now this possibility is excluded. Helen tries to explain that a phantom was sent to Troy in her place (582) and Menelaus finds it almost unbelievable (ἄελπτα, "unbelievable things"; 585). Helen insists that τοὔνομα γένοιτ' ἂν πολλαχοῦ, τὸ σῶμα δ' οὔ ("the name can be in many places, the body cannot";

588). Even though she is right in saying that the same body cannot be in two different places and that the same name can be attached to different bodies, the point is that Menelaus has no way to verify which body – the one of the woman he has in front of him or the one of the 'woman' he has brought from Troy – corresponds to the real Helen. The fact that entities are ontologically distinct is of little help if, from a gnoseological point of view, humans are unable to ascertain this distinction. Thus, Menelaus is in the unenviable position of having to make a blind choice. His criterion for choosing is psychological: he does what allows him to make sense of all travails which he has experienced at Troy. As he replies to Helen, τοὐκεῖ με μέγεθος τῶν πόνων πείθει, σὺ δ' οὔ ("the amount of sufferings that I have endured there [*scil.* in Troy] persuades me, not you"; 593). The implications of acknowledging that the real Helen is the one who has hitherto lived in Egypt would be psychologically unbearable: the War at Troy would have been fought in vain and countless warriors would have died for nothing. Therefore, Menelaus refuses this unacceptable option and the real Helen has no means to persuade him that he is wrong.

The failed reunion between Helen and Menelaus makes the recognition scene the most anomalous one of all Greek tragedy. Commenting on the latter's reaction after seeing Helen, Allan writes that "amazed speechlessness is a typical motif of recognition scenes" (2008, 209). However, Menelaus' astonishment is rather different from that felt by other tragic heroes. In this case, it is the presence of two identical women which is bewildering. Unlike in normal recognition scenes between two persons who have long been separated – as in the case of Electra and Orestes in plays such as Aeschylus' *Choephori*, and Sophocles' and Euripides' plays both entitled *Electra* – here Menelaus believes that he has already reunited with Helen after the sack of Troy and is unprepared for what he sees. The recognition of Helen is a failed recognition because the traditional methods which were valid in previous plays are here inapplicable. In Aeschylus' *Choephori*, Electra recognises Orestes by the lock of hair and by the footprints, both of which are strikingly similar to her own (*Ch.* 168-211); in *Electra*, Euripides makes Electra mock this recognition method, arguing that these tokens are not reliable (*Hel.* 513-46). The scar on his eyebrow, which is noticed by

the old Pedagogue (*Hel.* 573-4), is the only reliable evidence, as it is peculiar to Orestes and marks his own body. However, in *Helen* Menelaus does not have this piece of evidence, as the two Helens are physically the same.

Another possible recognition method would be a shared memory, as for instance in *Iphigenia Taurica* 808-26, where Orestes shares with Iphigenia memories of their past and their paternal house in order to prove to her that he is her brother. Indeed, Helen says that she and her husband would be able to easily recognise each other through ξύμβολα ("tokens") who are known only to them (290-1; with an obvious hint to Homer's *Odyssey*). However, in the recognition scene "Helen does not even attempt to provide proof of her identity, whether through a physical artifact or a shared memory" (Boedeker 2017, 248). Boedeker is right in regarding this as one of the incongruities which "produce an aura of imbalance or inconsistency that characterises the tragedy as a whole, complementing its focus on illusion versus reality" (2017, 248). Nevertheless, we must add that even if Helen had mentioned a shared memory, it would hardly have counted as conclusive proof of her identity. Menelaus has already spent time with Helen's phantom since the conquest of Troy and we can infer that the second Helen not only looks like the real one, but she also shares her thoughts and memories. A physical artifact – like Agamemnon's seal in Soph. *El.* 1222-3 – could be more persuasive, but this is pure speculation. In fact, Euripides is interested in focusing on *physical* recognition, as this allows him to bring to the fore the theme of the impossibility of distinguishing between truth and falsehood through perception.

Only the providential disappearance of the phantom can help Menelaus understand where truth lies. His Servant comes on stage and narrates how it flew up to the sky (597-624) after uttering a speech which frees Helen from all responsibilities. Thus, Menelaus realises that the speech of the phantom and that of Helen coincide (ξυμβεβᾶσιν οἱ λόγοι, "the two speeches coincide"; 622) and he embraces his wife. It is interesting that also at this point Euripides shows us how the paradoxical coexistence of the two Helens induces humans to make wrong assumptions: seeing Helen in front of Menelaus, the Servant believes that she has fled from the cave in some way, instead of flying to the sky. He ironically comments

ἐγὼ δέ σ' ἄστρων ὡς βεβηκυῖαν μυχοὺς / ἤγγελλον εἰδὼς οὐδὲν ὡς ὑπόπτερον / δέμας φοροίης ("I announced that you had gone to the depths of the sky, without knowing at all that you had a winged body"; 617-19). Although he has heard the phantom say that it was itself the cause of the war at Troy and that Helen is innocent, the Servant is still unable to grasp the trick of the phantom. Therefore, Menelaus reveals the truth to him (700-10) after the recognition duet with Helen (625-99).

Despite the joy of the spouses' reunion, it is impossible to avoid the disturbing thought that the greatest war of all time has been fought over the least meaningful cause: as Menelaus and the servant now say, over a νεφέλη ("cloud"; 705, 707). The futility of the war at Troy is summarised in the adverb μάτην, "in vain", which is repeated three times in the play (603, 751, 1220). Not only do the opacity of truth and the presence of false appearances affect the epistemology of perception; they also have practical consequences, in that humans act on the basis of false assumptions.

Clearly, the sense of a paradoxical reality is here entirely subjective. The audience have been informed in the prologue (33-4) that a phantom identical to Helen has been created by Hera. The two Helens go against the common opinion about the adulteress single Helen, and what is paradoxical at the level of *doxa* is experienced as paradoxical logically by Menelaus: two identical Helens may have existence only in a divinely-ordered reality. The audience know more and can explain what for him is inexplicable. Nevertheless, the audience's superior knowledge is far from being reassuring. What they now witness is a sense of unbelief and puzzlement that in other circumstances they too may experience. This is the human condition: astounding events or situations, for which no possible reasonable explanation may be provided, produce astonishment, and paradoxical thinking is its linguistic expression. Generalising statements on human knowledge encourage this conclusion. For instance, the Egyptian Messenger who reports to Theoclymenos of the Greeks' escape comments: σώφρονος δ' ἀπιστίας / οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν χρησιμώτερον βροτοῖς ("nothing is more useful for humans than a wise scepticism"; 1617-18). As reality may always be deceiving, unbelief is the only defence which humans have. Moreover, the Greek Messenger exhorts humans not to trust seers, as neither the

Greek seer Calchas nor the Trojan seer Helenus understood that Helen was not in Troy (749-51). Instead, humans should sacrifice to the gods so that they may receive from them what they need (753-4); also, humans should be active and resourceful, as no one has ever become rich by just making divinatory sacrifices (755-6); in the end, the best mantics are γνώμη ἀρίστη ("utmost intelligence"), and εὐβουλία, ("soundness of judgement"; 757). Significantly, the chorus agree with the messenger on avoiding seers (758-60). This gnomic passage makes it clear that humans cannot foresee what will happen and must accept the unpredictable will of the gods. At best, they can try to guide them through prayers, or partly predict what they will do by using their cleverness. What comes to the fore is the importance of human judgement and enterprise. As Allan notices, the messenger's speech "prefigures the action to come, where, despite the tacit support of the prophet Theonoe, H[elen] and M[enelaus] must rely for success upon their own intelligence and planning" (2008, 233). Therefore, it is a link between the first and the second part of the play, where human inventiveness will play a major role.

2. Paradox as Strategy

Until the recognition scene, Helen and Menelaus were the passive instruments of events over which they had no control. However, this condition changes in the last part of the play, where the two take their destiny into their own hands and plot their escape. This turning point is marked in line 1050: βούλῃ λέγεσθαι, μὴ θανών, λόγῳ θανεῖν; ("are you willing to be said to be dead in words, without being dead?"). Helen asks Menelaus whether he is prepared to pretend to be dead and disguise himself as one of the mariners of his crew who fortunately escaped shipwreck. This strategy is based on the counterfactual power of *logos*, the same which has made everybody believe that Helen had betrayed her husband and had sailed to Troy. After suffering the tricks of the gods and the blames of a false narrative, at this point Helen eventually acquires agency. The falsifying power of language and faked appearances is what she uses. The time has come for her to harness the power of words to her own advantage. Although the possible connection between

Euripides and sophistic thought is not under scrutiny here, it is tempting to read the play through Conacher's view that the two parts reflect the two different views on words in Gorgias' fragments: "first, the view that words are incapable of expressing reality (D-K 82 B3, 84), and second, the successful use of words in deceptive persuasion (D-K 82 B11, in *The Encomium of Helen*)" (1998, 81).

Menelaus' answer to Helen's suggestion of faking his own death reveals his readiness to the plot: κακὸς μὲν ὄρνις· εἰ δὲ κερδανῶ, λέγειν / ἕτοιμός εἰμι μὴ θανὼν λόγῳ θανεῖν, ("It's a bad omen; but if I can profit from it, I am ready to say that I am dead in words, without being dead"; 1051-2). According to superstitions, faking one's own death in words can bring about one's death (cf. Kannicht 1969, II 267-8); nonetheless, Menelaus does away with superstition in order to achieve a sure advantage. We can see a similar pattern in *Iphigenia Taurica*, where Iphigenia proposes to exploit the ritual pollution of Orestes for killing his mother to reach the seashore (*IT* 1031). She will tell the Taurians that Orestes, Pylades, and Artemis' statue need to be washed in the sea in order to remove the impurity. And Orestes replies: χρῆσαι κακοῖσι τοῖς ἐμοῖς, εἰ κερδανεῖς ("make use of my misfortunes, if this brings you a profit"; 1034). κέρδος ("profit") is the goal to which both in *Helen* and in *IT* the characters aim. This entails the ability to transcend the limits of traditional belief, whether with respect to bad omens or to ritual pollution; moreover, this means performing a mock religious ceremony.[7] In both tragedies, the escape plan consists of turning something that has hitherto been negative for the character into something positive. Orestes' pollution has made him a pariah in Athens, preventing him from being welcomed in the Athenian houses (*IT* 947-57), but now it can be turned into a weapon to his advantage. Likewise, *logos* has hitherto been used to spread the fame of Menelaus' death, as we have learned in the dialogue between Helen and Teucer (123-33); but now this false information may prove profitable. The distance between appearance and reality has damaged Helen and Menelaus; but now, thanks to Helen's inventiveness, the very cause of their suffering becomes the very instrument of their success. While, in the case of Helen, her *soma* was not present in Troy but everybody

[7] On this cf. Medda and Taddei 2021.

believed it was, in the case of Menelaus his body is in fact present in Egypt, but the two spouses make Theoclymenos believe that it is not. The split between *onoma* and *soma* is exploited in a new way: whereas in the case of Helen it was her *onoma* which was attached to a different *soma* (although it was in fact a phantom, identical to the real *soma*), in the case of Menelaus it is his *soma* which is attached to a different *onoma* (the generic identity of a Greek soldier and mariner). The difference between the two situations, as we have seen, lies in the characters' awareness: whilst nobody knew that the phantom was not the real Helen, now the two spouses know the truth and lie on purpose. This lie is based on what we may call the 'phantom of Menelaus' (as the reverse of Helen's own phantom): because nobody has seen his body for a long time, he is reduced to a mere name. Now the presumed absence of the body is skilfully exploited by Helen, who stages a paradoxical ritual of burial, as she pretends to bury only Menelaus' name and not his body, which has disappeared.

The counterfeiting of Menelaus' identity produces a sort of logical paradox, in that he is dead and alive at the same time. It is true that it may be easily explained through the appearance *vs* reality binary. Nevertheless, it is equally true that this tragedy constantly brings to the fore the power of illusion and belief as a force which re-creates reality. The false belief of Helen's elopement has triggered a number of events: the war of Troy, her mother's and possibly – as they say – her brothers' suicide. We may say that the false Helen has been more real than the real one: whereas the latter has lived in the suspended dimension of the Egyptian exile, outside history, the false Helen has made history. Analogously, the belief that Menelaus is dead will persuade Theoclymenos to provide Helen with a ship, thus producing the real effect of the Greeks' escape. In Theoclymenos' perception of reality, Menelaus *is* dead and remains dead until the epiphany brought about by the Messenger's report. Theoclymenos lives for a short period in the same dimension of false reality in which Greeks and Trojans alike have been for years due to Helen's phantom.

The manipulation of reality by Helen and Menelaus also involves physical appearance and clothing. In a word, they create a full theatrical staging. As Craig Jendza puts it, they make "a play-within-

a-play whereby Euripides facilitates metatheatrical reflection by engaging with the methods by which dramatists create, cast, and produce dramas for audiences" (2020, 96). The spectators know that it is an illusionary staging. And yet, its illusion is embedded within a "reality" which is itself illusionary (the world of the play), and which reflects on the illusions of real reality through the two Helens and Menelaus' response to them. It is a play which in different ways calls into question the criteria themselves for establishing what is real.

Helen's and Menelaus' play-within-the-play even alludes to previous plays. When Helen suggests to Menelaus to tell the news of his own death to Theoclymenos, Menelaus comments: παλαιότης γὰρ τῷ λόγῳ ἔνεστί τις ("this tale is somehow old-fashioned"; 1056). Memory goes to Aeschylus' *Choephori* (682) or Sophocles' *Electra* (48-50), where the false news of Orestes' death is exploited by Orestes himself as part of the revenge plot. As in *Helen*, in Sophocles' *Electra* too Orestes dismisses the bad omen of his announced death by referring to κέρδος ("profit"; 61) and comments that "wise" men in the past have already used the trick of declaring themselves dead (62-3). This hint at previous tragedies is probably meant to underline the novelties of the trick in *Helen*, especially the mock ceremony which Helen herself devises in order to obtain a ship and flee from Egypt.

The two spouses' ability to use a disguise for their play-in-the-play plot allows them to transform some aspects of reality which have been negative for them into a positive and effective means for their escape. As stated by Helen in two subsequent antitheses (1081-2), the loss of Menelaus' clothes, which appeared to him as a catastrophe, is instead a blessing. Significantly, Menelaus' rags – which he is wearing after the shipwreck – will make him a credible witness in the eyes of Theoclymenos (1079-80). Those miserable rags which symbolised Menelaus' degradation from his former heroic status will be the very means through which Menelaus will re-gain that status. After their deception of Theoclymenos has been successful, Helen washes the alleged sailor and dresses him in new clothes in order to prepare him for the fake burial ceremony (1382-4). This act of changing clothes symbolises the restoration of royal dignity and is a positive prediction of the drama's ending. What

was taken from Menelaus by an accident of fate is now restored to him by human intelligence.

Like Menelaus, Helen too will rely on the impact of her physical appearance with the aim of persuading Theoclymenos. In order to play the part of the bereaved wife, she will cut her curls, change her white clothes for black ones, scratch her cheeks with her nails (1087-9). Helen demonstrates her ability to manipulate her own physical appearance for which she has always been desired and chased. As Theoclymenos, like all men, is seduced by Helen's looks, and her false consent to marry him is obviously subservient to her plot. Ironically, Helen is now doing what fame has long – and falsely – blamed her for: she is using her beauty to conquer men. She is not betraying her husband, but is playing false in order to be reunited with him.

As a result of their successful trick, Helen and Menelaus appear to be both the actors and the directors – especially Helen – of their own lives. And yet, one should not forget that their agency is limited by supernatural powers: as the Dioscuri remind us at the end of the play (1660-1), it is fate and the gods who have decreed the course of the events.

3. Conclusion

The entire plot of *Helen* revolves around a fundamental split between appearance and reality. In the play's world, nothing which is perceived by the senses can be confidently regarded as true, and human society is trapped in appearances, disorder, and falsehood.

This general rule of human life has an exception in a privileged human being who is in contact with the divine realm and hence derives a special, well-founded knowledge: Theonoe. Her divine inspiration underlines, by contrast, the ignorance to which the other humans are doomed. If it is true, as the chorus say, that there is nothing clear (σαφές) among the mortals and only the gods' voice is true (ἀλαθές) – and the play does not let us reach other conclusions – Theonoe draws her knowledge from the only genuine source of knowledge. In a play where the value of words is questioned, the name of Theonoe ("divine mind") corresponds to her real qualities, in striking contrast with the name of her

brother Theoclymenos ("god-renowned" or "inspired by the gods"; cf. Allan 2008, 146), which is at odds with his impious behaviour. This discrepancy underlines, by contrast, how words often do not correspond to reality.

One of the main points which *Helen* highlights concerns the limits of human action. In this respect, this tragedy is manifestly bipartite. The first part, prior to the escape plan (which is devised at 1032-106), sheds light on the potential futility of all human enterprises, even the greatest of all, that is, the War at Troy. In this part, Helen leaves her refuge beside Proteus' tomb only once, when she goes to consult Theonoe into the palace (*exit* after 385; she goes back to the tomb at line 528). Her departure from the altar after line 1106 marks the beginning of a new, dynamic phase, in which with Menelaus she undertakes an action that will be crowned with success. Helen is aware of the risks they run and reflects that there are only two possibilities: either she will be discovered and killed, or she will manage to go back to Greece with her husband (1090-2). Therefore, she prays to both Hera and Aphrodite (1093-106). Nevertheless, she and Menelaus carry out their plan with determination, as they know that their reunion as husband and wife is within their rights. Helen also received from Hermes the prediction that she would return to Sparta with Menelaus, as she reveals in the prologue (56-9), but she does not mention this prophecy again in the course of the play. But what matters here is that an awareness of the futility of many human actions, above all the war at Troy, does not induce the characters to passive resignation. On the contrary, as we have seen, they understand how they can exploit appearances to their own advantage. Thus, Menelaus and Helen seem to demonstrate that an active and flexible approach to life is likely to be successful. However, this can only happen as long as human actions do not conflict with supernatural plans.

A crucial part of human inventiveness is the ability of using words. The change from being objects of words, as Helen and Menelaus have long been, to becoming subjects of words and employing them to achieve one's own goals, is the turning point of the tragedy. But there is a further use of words which can help humans minimise the negative effects of living in a world where everything can be different from what it seems. As the chorus

argue in the first stasimon (1151-64), humans should avoid waging wars which cause irreparable losses and suffering; instead, disputes may be solved by talking. This use of words is not based on the truth value of what is said – which can never be verified – but on agreement and mutual utility. In the dispute over Helen, this would have been the only way to avoid the 'paradox' whereby the greatest number of men have died for the least meaningful cause.

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