

A comment on Euripides' "Helen" and schizophrenia

Katia Charalabaki, Psychiatrist – systemic therapist



A few months ago, the subject of the "Ancient Greek Tragedy Study Group" was Euripides' "Helen", and as always, we had a very interesting discussion. We exchanged very useful opinions. Before addressing the subject, I would like to make a general observation.

There are various ways to approach and analyse ancient Greek tragedy that differ from each other. The most common are the following three: The first one is to read or watch the play as if you were a spectator from the time when it was written; to be informed of the historical context of the time and the basic intellectual movements as well as the messages that it conveys. The second one is to see it as if it were taking place in our time, with certain modifications of course. The third way is to delve into free association that will unconsciously lead you to the text, through ingenuity, paradoxicality, theatricality as well as through certain sequences that are not necessarily connected to the plot.

The plot in short: Paris' ship, with Helen on board, sails from Sparta to Troy but the winds guide it to Egypt. Helen, the queen of Sparta, seeks and obtains sanctuary. Paris leaves empty handed. The Achaeans attack Ilion, siege it after ten years, get a Helen that is but an image of the real one, and sail back home. Menelaus' ship, with the image of Helen on board, also drifts to Egypt. There, the image rises to the heavens and the real royal couple manages to escape the Egyptian Pharaoh that wants Helen to marry his son.



The case of the double Helen is not Euripides' invention. Hesiod, who lived during the 8th century B.C. – three centuries before Euripides - is considered to have been the first to mention this version. The poet Stesichorus, born in 630 B.C. (a century and a half before Euripides, who was born around 480 B.C.) follows with his book "Palinodes", and then Herodotus, who is Euripides' contemporary. The narration that takes up several pages in Herodotus' second book of Histories, is by Egyptian priests that the author met on his trip to their country. Herodotus does not make mention of the double person, real and imaginary, but notes that Helen never went to Troy, but instead went to Egypt. What is impressive is that Herodotus believes this version to be true: "The Egyptians' priests said this, and I myself believe their story about Helen, for I reason thus: had Helen been in Iliion, then with or without the will of Alexandrus (Paris) she would have been given back to the Greeks. For surely Priam was not so mad, or those nearest to him, as to consent to risk their own persons and their children and their city so that Alexandrus might cohabit with Helen" (Herodotus, II, 120).

Following the third pathway, free association, I thought that the play is an early mythological take on schizophrenia, where a person has been torn in two parts with conflicting views and actions.

Let us reflect on the moment in Sparta when Paris calls Helen on his ship to leave for his country as lovers. In today's standards, Helen would be facing a tormenting dilemma, a severe internal struggle. On the one hand, to leave her elderly husband, joining the – blessed by Aphrodite – prince of Troy. On the other hand, to remain loyal to her husband, to her hometown, and to her royal duties. Euripides expresses these two radically conflicting versions: Helen and her image. The second person is not autonomous, it is a component of the first one. Maybe that is why Euripides does not let the other Helen speak at all, with the exception of when she rises to the heavens. And also that he uses surprisingly many terms to describe her (empty thought, image, cloud image, imitation, phantom, falsely wed, cloud statue, name not body), as if he cannot mention by name a person that is not self-existent, but only exists as a product of Helen.

The splitting of a person into two manifestations is not true only for Helen. It is the same for the Lacedaemonian fighters in Troy. When Menelaus reaches Egypt, he narrates his adventures to the Old maid of the Egyptian heir Theoclymenus. He talks about the surviving Lacedaemonians that travel back home with him "bringing home again names thought to be of the dead" (line 399), bringing their families only the names of those killed.

The phantom version, not as a second presence but as the final outcome of the first, is also mentioned by Sophocles in "Ajax". Odysseus tells Athena about the furious Ajax: "For I see that all we who live are nothing more than phantoms or fleeting shadow" (lines 125-126).

Euripides' work reminds us of Gregory Bateson, who writes in his paper "Toward a Theory for Schizophrenia": "We do not assume that the double bind is inflicted by the mother alone, but that it may be done either by mother alone or by some combination of mother, father, and/or siblings... For example, one parent may negate at a more abstract level the injunctions of the other". The double presence can exist as a defense on the other side of the dipole: "It is not only safer for the victim of a double t bind to



shift to a metaphorical order of message, but in an impossible situation it, is better to shift and become somebody else”.

In the same paper, Bateson refers to literature saying: “Poetry exemplifies the communicative power of metaphor -even very unusual metaphor – when labeled as such by various signs, as contrasted to the obscurity of unlabeled schizophrenic metaphor... We are not so much concerned with the content interpretation of fiction as with the formal problems involved in simultaneous existence of multiple levels of message in the fictional presentation of «reality»”.

In the bond dipole, Menelaus is in the position of the child receiving the schizophrenic message. He has two Helens in front of him. The unfaithful and promiscuous one from Troy that is now returning repentant, and the incomprehensible and faithful one in Egypt, who is resisting the suitors like Penelope. The king of Sparta is going mad: “I have come here, bringing my wife who was taken from Troy, and she is kept safe in the cave, but some other woman who has the same name as my wife lives in this house... Is there any land of the same name as Lacedaemonia or Troy?” (lines 484-495).

Menelaus refuses the existence of two Helens. “As one man, I am certainly not the husband of two women” (line 571) he says. Helen herself says in a moment of clarity: “You have no other wife but me” (line 574), as the Helen from Egypt considers the Trojan Helen to be a manifestation of herself. “I did not go to Troy; that was a phantom” (line 582). The Greek word *eidolon* that is used here has the meaning of shape, image, spectacle, vision, phantom, idea, portrait, not something that constitutes a personality.

In his gothic novel “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”, Robert Louis Stevenson presents common elements to those of Euripides’ “Helen”. A single person with a double personality, appearance and behavior. In the work of Stevenson the good and the evil and in that of Euripides, the faithful and the unfaithful.

As today schizophrenia has a wider and deeper meaning than what its Greek name implies, one can say that the case of the two Helens refers to what DSM-5 defines as “dissociative identity disorder” (formerly “Multiple Personality Disorder”). More specifically: “the presence of two or more distinct personality states” with the distinguishable features of: loss of sense of identity and time as well as dissociative amnesia.

Ultimately, for the ordinary Athenian watching Euripides’ play, the Helen making love to Paris was the real one and there was another Helen whimpering in Egypt, who was an “image”, a figment of the imagination.

And, as Seferis wrote, the entire Trojan war was “all for an empty tunic, for a Helen”.