

HELEN OF TROY:
A SYMBOL OF GREEK CULTURE

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Introduction

"She grew up and one day a prince came sailing by and carried her off. They married and lived happily ever after."

We usually call this type of story a *folk-tale* and, whatever definition we may attach to the term, the most striking characteristic of such a tale is, I think, that it does not tell the truth. While the prince carries off his princess, the tale carries off the listeners into a dreamland of fears and wishes.

We tend to attach the term *myth* to another type of tale. Its plot may be similar to that of a folk-tale, but essentially a myth pretends to convey the truth. However fantastic their adventures, the heroes of myth are firmly anchored in time and place.

"Many generations ago, an eastern prince by the name of Paris, crossed the Aegean sea in search of the most beautiful woman in the world. He found her in the kingdom of Sparta and carried her off to his homeland, Troy. Her name was Helen and she was the wife of Menelaos. Her husband Menelaos rallied a host of warriors and a thousand ships from all over Hellas in order to recapture her and to punish the people of Troy. And so, tradition says, Helen caused the Trojan war."

From the time when the Homeric poems were first composed, this story has fascinated listeners and inspired artists, both poets and painters. Those who heard or watched the tale felt they were in touch with historical truth. We are no longer in this privileged position. To us the tale of the woman whose beauty caused a ten-year war means no more than an entertaining fancy. And in studying fancies like this we might be accused of indulging in a less than useful occupation. Of course, studying the tale of Helen cannot be said to be useful in any strict sense. Attempts have been made, however; some years ago the periodical *The New Scientist* discussed the measurement of beauty and proposed applying the "millihelen", a unit sufficient to launch one ship, as a means of measuring the beauty of women (I owe this information to M.L. West).

This admirable proposal for putting an ancient tale to practical use, referring to quantifiable entities, may be persuasive to some. Students of mythology, however, are in a less enviable position since our methods lack the precision of science. What may, then, be *our* reward for studying the myth of Helen of Troy? What significance did the tale have in Antiquity? Was it no more than an enchanting prelude to their history?

Were stories like this just creations of fantasy, disconnected from the serious business of life?



Fig. 1. Menelaos woos Helen, grave stele from Sparta, 580-570 BC. Sparta Museum no. 1 (German Archaeological Institute at Athens).

My rhetorical questions suggest that there was more to the tale of Helen than just entertainment. In addition, my title has already suggested one answer: that *Helen of Troy* was a symbol of Greek culture. However, a bald statement like this will not convince you. In fact, it may not even be intelligible. For what do we mean by "a symbol of Greek culture"? And in what sense can Helen of Troy be said to be a symbol of Greek culture?

What I propose to do in the next couple of minutes is to offer some reflections upon both questions and to sort out some conclusions.

Of course, our research can never be said to be useful in the stern sense of *The New Scientist*. Yet, it may carry us off into the fascinating world of Greek and human culture.

Some Versions of the Helen Myth

The tale of Helen has come down to us in various versions and through different media. Throughout Antiquity artists and thinkers have elaborated upon her adventures and speculated upon causes.

Why did she leave her husband and follow Paris? Why venture on this elopement? Why risk her own reputation and that of all future women?

The sophist and Grand Master of rhetoric, Gorgias, composed a speech in defence of Helen. Gorgias' model speech, however, aimed at proving the impossible. Gorgias' line of defence was to *deny* that Helen consented to the abduction. It was a *tour de force* demonstrating the surpassing power of rhetoric; Helen had been forced by the spell of speech. It was precisely her *willingness* to follow Paris that had offended all people and poets and had turned Helen into the prototype of the unfaithful wife. To be sure, the Homeric poems present a rather appealing picture of Helen. Subsequent generations, however, have seized upon the tale and cast their suspicion and disgust upon this specimen of weak and fickle womanhood. Hesiodos, Alkaios, Stesikhoros, Ibykos, all concur in the condemnation, culminating in tragic drama where Helen advertises the destructive power of the female, the source of all evil.



Fig. 2. Menelaos woos Helen,
lekythos by the Brygos painter,
after 500 BC, ARV 383, 202
(Staatliche Museum Berlin F 2205).

From Homer's time onwards, various episodes of the Helen myth have been presented in the form of decorations on vases, arms, grave monuments, and other objects. We find Helen's birth, adolescence, wedding with Menelaos, and especially Paris abducting Helen to Troy and Menelaos taking her back to Sparta.

These images demonstrate the striking traditionalism of a motif: it can be found unaltered in different areas and over several centuries. If poetry

emphasised Helen's infidelity, painting seems to focus upon her proverbial beauty and irresistible attractiveness: It was told that, when Menelaos found Helen in Troy he rushed off to kill her but seeing her breast he threw away his sword.

The Theory of Myth

What did the figure of Helen mean? I started by presenting the tale of Helen of Troy as a myth. The most widely held definition of myth is that it is a *traditional tale*, handed down by earlier generations and not having any known authorship. The ancient Greeks, in fact, held that the Helen myth had been kept alive by their ancestors and they considered it to be the true beginning of their history. Historians such as Herodotos and even Thoukydides commence their histories with Helen and the Trojan war, while Hesiodos accommodates the Trojan war at the transition to the present Iron age. A traditional tale, then, is the traditional tale of a group of people; it is their common possession.

Furthermore, the historian of ancient religion, Walter Burkert, has pointed to the fact that we cannot understand myths unless we *know* the group who told them. Burkert defines myth as an *applied tale* (eine angewandte Erzählung). A myth is a tale that refers to a reality that is crucial to the community.

This criterion is an important addition to the definition of myth. It transfers our attention from the tale to the teller and his audience, and I think this bridging is essential: the meaning of a myth is not just something hidden in the tale; it is the order and meaning *found* in the tale by the audience who applies the myth. Seen in this perspective, any tale may serve as a myth, provided it is felt to be traditional and true. According to Fritz Graf, a pupil of Burkert, the truth of a tale may be guaranteed by staging the gods and heroes of the community.

A myth, then, according to these theories, is a traditional tale, it is handed down, and somehow anchored in social time as well as in the metaphysical world. Secondly, a myth is an applied tale, a tale which somehow lives within a group and relates things that are of crucial importance concerning their social order and institutions. Thirdly, Burkert and Graf suggest that myth is *not* identical with some particular poem or picture. According to Burkert a myth is *independent of its various versions*. On this view a myth may be expressed in a brief allusion as well as in an extensive poem: the myth is an abstract independent of concrete texts (and pictures), a résumé or synopsis, according to Graf.

Using these three criteria, we should be able to disclose the meaning of the Helen myth. I want to know, however, if this meaning is really to be found in some résumé or abstract lying behind the numerous poems, speeches, or visual representations of the Helen myth. Furthermore, I will ask a serious question: if the meaning of a myth is something of crucial importance, why is it concealed in fanciful tales? Finally, is the definition of myth exhausted by the three above-mentioned criteria?

Expansion of the Definition

In his definition of myth Burkert has in mind some schematic patterns of action (Aktionsprogramme). He recognizes e.g. male and female initiation patterns and a crime and punishment pattern. He has, I think, successfully traced some myths that accompanied initiation or new-year rituals. In fact, when we examine the versions of the Helen myth we find that in Ancient Sparta girls' initiation rites were held under the protecting guidance of the goddess Helen and her husband Menelaos.



Fig. 3. Menelaos threatens Helen. relief pithos, seventh century, Mykonos Museum (German Archaeological Institute at Athens).

Pausanias and Theokritos record some details of the ritual. At their transition from girlhood to womanhood and marriage, the girls at Sparta oriented themselves toward this myth. Helen and Menelaos, as ideal bride and ideal groom, prefigured the crucial events in the life of the worshippers. We might with Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood label this role of the myth an "*ideal representation*".

However, other episodes in the tale of Helen will certainly resist this interpretation. In general, we have to ask: does it suffice to abstract some schematic pattern of action from the various versions of a myth? Can a myth be defined as a résumé independent of its concrete artistic manifestations, as Burkert and Graf suggest? In my opinion it cannot; I think we

have to distinguish between two dimensions in the phenomenon, one its passive, the other its active dimension.

As a traditional tale, a mythical scheme is grasped by the artist and moulded into a concrete artistic shape, into a poem, a ritual text, or an image. Even if the artist may modify the myth, his audience will accept it as *their* myth, owing to a minimal number of constants which are always present and recognized as being traditional. We may call this the *identifying function* of myth. In applying the tale, the members of the group revive their sense of identity, their sense of belonging together and feel that this is *our* history. The tale of Helen found its way into different communities in different guises. Witness the story told about Stesikhoros who wrote a song on her infidelity and - so it was told - was blinded by the goddess Helen. Only after having composed a new song in praise of Helen was he cured of his blindness.

It seems that Stesikhoros presented his two versions for audiences in different parts of the Hellenic world, for different identities; the song of praise, apparently, was sung in Sparta. The historians' use of the Helen myth, on the other hand, was appropriate for creating a sense of Pan-Hellenic identity. Thoukydides observes that it was at Troy that the Greeks collaborated in action for the very first time in their history, and Isokrates praises Helen for having united the Hellenic world.

However, myths are not only passively given shape by the artist and acknowledged by the community. Myths *act upon* those who listen to or watch them. And here it does not suffice to know the group in order to understand a mythical tale; we also have to know the concrete situation when the tale was told or where the image was presented. We have to trace not only how a version of a myth was acknowledged by its audience as being true to their tradition but also to imagine in what *mood* it was received and how its meaning was constituted.

This working upon the imagination and emotions of the audience I will call the *symbolic function* of myth in an anthropological sense. By virtue of this function, myth is related to rituals and visual symbols. These order the concepts of their audience, affect their feelings, and direct their actions. As an "ideal representation" the Helen myth oriented the mind and feelings of Spartan girls and transformed them into adult women.

We have to invoke the concrete occasion at which a myth was presented, a religious celebration, a symposion, a wedding ceremony, or a dramatic performance and, as well, we have to take into account the particular mood of the occasion. The massive condemnation of Helen's infidelity belonged to male congregations as Alkaios' poetry suggests. In Sappho's female circle the myth carried another emphasis.

Indeed "a traditional tale" does not mean "an unalterable tale". The right to modify particular details of a myth or to shift its emotional emphasis characterises living myths. It is precisely the flexibility of traditional plots, within the constraints of some minimal constants, which accounts for their vitality.

Myths operate through their own logic: they may present themselves as history or as geography while in fact they construct the social world-order. On the temple of Zeus at Olympia the depiction of the myth of Pelops and Oinomaos pretended to commemorate an historical event. Pelops was the first victor at Olympia and the prize was Oinomaos' daughter. However, this victory was not just a matter of athletic achievement; by defeating Oinomaos, Pelops put an end to the king's disgusting and barbaric practice of killing his daughter's suitors and attaching their heads to the temple wall. Pelops, in fact, establishes marriage as a crucial element of civilisation.



Fig. 4. Menelaos threatens Helen, grave stele from Sparta, 580-570 BC, Sparta Museum no. 1 (German Archaeological Institute).

In the ancient Greek world marriage regulated social relationships; it distributed and secured private property and social privileges. The institution of marriage guaranteed the continuity of the social order and its hierarchies. Oinomaos represents the stage before social life was ordered, the pre-civilized state of the world.

Ancient Greek geography knew a territory where once the Amazons had lived, at the far north-east of the inhabitable world. These formidable females, by waging war and refusing marriage, represented an affront to the social order, an anti-civilization. By turning the normal Greek social order upside down, the faraway race of the Amazons served to define what was normal and natural to the Greek mind. The horrifying details of the myth underline the absurdity of anti-civilization, and by situating the

Amazons in the far east, the myth implicitly conveys the strongest possible condemnation.

I hope these brief remarks are sufficient to suggest *why* the crucial meaning of myths is clothed in a concrete presentation. Myths do not *state* the truth directly but only implicitly, and in doing so they affect and shape the mind and feelings of their audience more effectively.

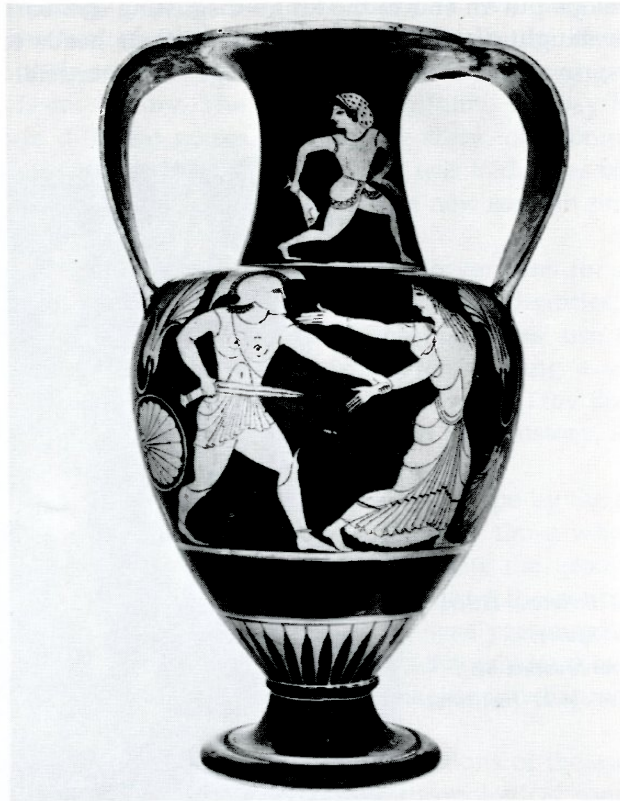


Fig. 5. Menelaos threatens Helen, red figure amphora, Oltos 520 BC, ARV 53,1 (Louvre G3).

I will conclude with a presentation of the Helen myth as it was staged in Euripides' tragic drama *Helen*. In contrast to the rest of Greek tragedy, this version of the myth presents the innocent Helen. We are informed that the real Helen was carried off to Egypt by the gods, while a false Helen joined Paris and was the cause of the Trojan war. While in Egypt, Helen was at first protected by the honest king Proteus. He was, however, succeeded by his aggressive son who tries to force Helen into marrying him. In the course of the drama, Menelaos arrives in Egypt. After some misgivings, husband and wife are reunited and in the second part of the drama they manage to escape from the cruel king of Egypt and arrive safely at Sparta.

This is the drama in bare outline. Does this abstract also disclose the meaning of the myth? To be sure, we recognize the names and some min-

imal constants of the tale, and certainly the Athenian audience recognized this drama as a version of the Helen myth. But does the résumé provide us with its meaning? In short, can we discard the concrete drama and the occasion of its performance?



Fig. 6. Menelaos threatens Helen, red figure plate, Oltos 515-500 BC, ARV 67, 137 (Odessa Museum O. 577).

Greek tragedies were presented for the collective of Attic citizens at their central national and religious celebration. According to Aristoteles, tragic drama creates a particular mood and provokes emotions of tragic shock and horror. I cannot go into detail here, but according to my interpretation of Aristoteles these emotions were reactions against the disruptions of the world- or social order presented in tragic myth.

In rousing emotions of shock at a world turned upside down the drama revived the community's feelings towards the *correct* world order.

Euripides' *Helen* myth cannot be understood by abstracting an elementary pattern of action from the drama. Nor can we follow the acts and experiences of the dramatic characters in order to 'explain their motives'. Here the myth *manifests* itself as 'the acts and experiences of some individuals'. On my reading, however, what the drama really conveyed was the crucial importance of the institution of marriage and the value of female marital fidelity. It does not *state* this truth but conveys it *implicitly*, by eliciting reactions of despair and horror at moments when the marital union of Menelaos and Helen is disrupted or threatened.

Helen's laments at being falsely accused of infidelity, her despair at the rumour of Menelaos' death, her excessive reactions when threatened by the Egyptian king, all amount to an underlining of the value of marriage. Helen's concern for protecting and professing her chastity underscores the value of female marital fidelity. When husband and wife are reunited, the drama evokes their wedding celebration and when they arrive home, all join in the rejoicing. Thus the drama, by presenting the separation and reunion of husband and wife, Menelaos and Helen, implicitly demonstrated the crucial value of marriage and revived the correct feelings towards the institution. In this way the mythical drama of Helen served a symbolic function.



Fig. 7. *Menelaos threatens Helen*,
red figure amphora, Oinokles
470-460 BC, ARV 647, 14
(British Museum 294).

Conclusion

Summing up, we may say that myths present an exciting story, pretend to offer glimpses of early history or remote geography, and may disguise themselves as 'individual experience'. However, they do not belong in the realm of rational, temporal-causal thinking. Symbolic phenomena are neither an outdated response to the world nor an infantile mode of thinking. Mythos was not replaced by logos. Rather, myths follow their own aims and laws and are an indispensable part of human activity. They work upon the imagination creating contrasts, ordering the world, and charging it with value. Their ring of antiquity lends them authority, their anonymity as well as the metaphysical world in which they are situated guarantee their truth. Their tolerance of being modified lends them flexibility and makes them easily adjustable to new audiences and new meanings. Myths may appeal to feelings of awe and admiration in their audience by offering positive "ideal representations". Or they may turn the world upside down and present negative images such as the horrors of

pre-civilization and anti-civilization. They may disrupt the ideal social order thereby chilling the audience in the theatre with tragic shock. In order to grasp their symbolic power, we cannot divorce a myth's pattern from its concrete artistic manifestation.

We can identify *a* myth, a theme with variations, but we cannot speak of *the* meaning of a myth. We have to take into account the audience and the mood of the occasion in searching for the meaning of a particular version.

The myth of Helen of Troy recounts tales of love and romance. To the ancient Greeks they meant more than an entertaining romance. The tales conveyed the crucial value of their social institutions.

For a brief moment I have carried you off into the world of ancient Greek culture and mythology. You *may* doubt whether Helen of Troy ever existed. The myth of Helen, however, because of its identifying power, without doubt united the Pan-Hellenic world. By means of its symbolic power, it strengthened communities and shaped their institutions and culture.

Myths certainly belong to the serious business of life.



Fig. 8. Menelaos seeing Helen's breast throws away his sword, red figure amphora by the Altamura painter, 470-450 BC, ARV 594,54 (British Museum 263).

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