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ON YOUR HEAD BE IT SWORN: OATH AND VIRTUE IN EURIPIDES' *HELEN*

It has long been recognized that Euripides' *Helen* is a play which explores the tension between illusion and reality in a very sophisticated and complex way.[1] The 'real' Helen in this play is a paradigm of chastity and virtue. Not quite a Penelope, but almost.[2] It is clear that the mythic variant Euripides is dramatizing goes against tradition, and Euripides takes great care in emphasizing Helen's chastity, a quality which is antithetical to the standard character of the tragic Helen.[3] Many scholars have discussed the issue of Helen's chastity in this play, especially in terms of implied parallels with the virgin Persephone, abducted by Hades.[4] Apart from being chaste, Helen is also a clever schemer, but Menelaus, by contrast, has been treated as dim-witted, pompous and contemptible by the vast majority of scholars.[5]

This paper argues that the use of oaths in the play sheds further light on the virtue of both Helen and Menelaus. In the case of Helen, it suggests that her oath-taking confirms her chastity and looks forward to her predicted apotheosis. In the case of Menelaus, it suggests that the oath bond with Helen casts him in a more positive light as a character and gives him more credit than has generally been acknowledged by scholars.

In a drama of doubles, it comes as no surprise that there are two oaths.[6] The first comes quite early on. Helen has been devastated to hear from Teucer that Menelaus is believed dead (132), but the Chorus persuade her to find out for sure from Theonoe, blessed with the divine gift of knowledge, whether or not the rumours are really true

[1] See e.g. C. Segal, 'The two worlds of Euripides' *Helen*', *TAPhA* 102 (1971), 553–614; M. Wright, *Euripides' Escape Tragedies: A Study of* Helen, Andromeda, *and* Iphigenia among the Taurians (Oxford, 2005), esp. 278–337.

[2] The parallels between *Helen* and the *Odyssey* have been well noted. See e.g. R. Eisner, 'Echoes of the *Odyssey* in Euripides' *Helen*', *Maia* 32 (1980), 31–7; W.G. Arnott, 'Euripides' new-fangled *Helen*', *Antichthon* 24 (1990) 1–18, at 13; I.E. Holmberg, 'Euripides' Helen: most noble and most chaste', *AJP* 116 (1995), 19–42.

[3] Eur. *El.* 1280–3 is the only other instance in tragedy where Helen is presented as a blameless victim of the gods, there explained by her brothers the Dioscuri.

[4] E.g. Segal (n. 1), 595–600; C. Wolff, 'On Euripides' *Helen*', *CP* 77 (1973), 61–84, esp. 63–4. D.M. Juffras, 'Helen and other victims in Euripides' "Helen"', *Hermes* 121 (1993), 45–57 discusses both parallels and distinctions between Helen and Persephone.

[5] Cf. recently W. Allan (ed.), *Euripides: Helen* (Cambridge, 2008), ad 393–6 and 453; Wright (n. 1), 198, 283, and previously A. Pippin [Burnett], 'Euripides' *Helen*: a comedy of ideas', *CP* 55 (1960), 151–63, at 158; A.M. Dale (ed.), *Euripides: Helen* (Oxford, 1967), xii; C.H. Whitman, *Euripides and the Full Circle of Myth* (Cambridge, MA, 1974), 45–50, 56–7, 61; Segal (n. 1), 575, 610; D.G. Papi, 'Victors and sufferers in Euripides' *Helen*', *AJP* 108 (1987), 27–40, at 39; N. Austin, *Helen of Troy and her Shameless Phantom* (Ithaca and London, 1994), 141, 157–62; P. Pucci, 'The *Helen* and Euripides' "Comic" Art', *Colby Quarterly* 33 (1997), 42–75, esp. 59–66; P. Mureddu, 'Gli stracci di Menelao: polemica ed autoironia nell' *Elena* di Euripide', *Philologus* 147 (2003), 191–204, at 191–2. Arnott (n. 2), 15 calls Menelaus 'a man of limited brain'. A.J. Podlecki, 'The basic seriousness of Euripides' *Helen*', *TAPhA* 101 (1970), 401–18, was refreshingly radical in suggesting that Menelaus is a serious 'Homeric' hero, and not a comic buffoon, at 402–3 and *passim*, but this view has not been popular.

[6] On doubles see Segal (n. 1); G.S. Meltzer, 'Where *is* the glory of Troy?: *Kleos* in Euripides' *Helen*', *CA* 13 (1994) 234–55; Wright (n. 1), 328.

(306–30). Helen agrees, but swears an oath, invoking the Spartan river Eurotas as sanctifying deity, to commit suicide if the rumours of her husband's death are true (348–59). This is a particularly solemn oath statement, and Helen seriously contemplates various options of hanging and suicide by sword-stroke. The passage is a strong marker of how we are to interpret Helen as a character. It should be absolutely clear to the audience that Helen really does love her husband, even after all this time, and will not consider taking another man. Whatever illusions manifest themselves in this play, Helen's devotion to her husband is not one of them. The invocation of Eurotas is also significant. Helen chooses a deity connected to her marital home in Sparta as overseer of her oath.[7]

The sanctifying deity Helen chooses for her second oath in the play, an oath of essentially the same content, is even more striking. In fact, she does not call any deity to witness her oath, but invokes the head of Menelaus as sanctifying power (835: *ἀλλ' ἁγνὸν ὅρκον σὸν κάρα κατώμοσα*). It occurs to Helen, as she and Menelaus are planning an escape ruse, that if Theonoe is not won over, Menelaus will be killed and she will be forcibly married off to Theoclymenus (833). Menelaus feels that Helen is mentioning 'forced' marriage as an excuse (834), proving that old associations die hard. But Helen immediately responds by volunteering this powerful oath, which, like the first one she had taken before Menelaus arrived, clears her of any suspicions with regard to her chaste intentions. She swears by the head of Menelaus to die and never take a new husband should he be killed (835–7). The oath is formalized with a handclasp (838–9), and Menelaus reciprocates in kind stating that he will kill himself if he loses Helen (840). They agree that in the event of disaster, they will take refuge at the tomb of Proteus, father of Theoclymenus and Theonoe, and defend themselves for as long as possible before committing suicide (841–4).[8]

The formal swearing of an oath in Greek poetry usually involves the invocation of a power 'greater than oneself'.[9] This power is normally one or more deities or, more rarely, a sanctifying object. In cases in which a sanctifying object is sworn by, this object generally embodies some particular power.[10] A well-known example is Achilles in *Iliad* 1.233–46 who swears by Agamemnon's sceptre. The sceptre is a symbol of power over the army and control over the situation, something which is very precious to Achilles at that moment, and something which he does not wish to lose. When Helen swears an oath to her husband invoking his own head, and no other power as sanctifying force, the implication is similar. It shows that she is desperate not to lose Menelaus, and this is validated by her sworn statement that she is prepared to die

[7] Podlecki (n. 5) suggests, at 410, that the Eurotas seems 'to symbolize Sparta and the happier days there to which the principals fear they may never return'.

[8] Allan (n. 5) ad 835 follows M. Lloyd, 'The tragic aorist', *CQ* 49 (1999), 24–45, at 31–2, in arguing that Helen does not intend to swear to this death pact but that Menelaus completes her oath for her using his own interpretation of what she should swear (at 836). However this analysis treats too lightly Helen's previous oath at 353–6, which is a sworn statement to kill herself should Menelaus be found dead, not merely a threat to do so, as Allan suggests. In fact it is not unusual for a respondent in a stichomythic exchange to pick up and clarify the meaning of the interlocutor in his or her response since the stichomythic pattern only allows for one line to be expressed by each person in turn; some examples taken at random are Eur. *Andr.* 911–18, *El.* 555–7, 635–6, *IT* 1186–7, *Or.* 432–3. Surely we are to understand that Menelaus has correctly interpreted his wife's intentions at 836.

[9] R. Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary Vol. 4, Books 13–16* (Cambridge, 1992), ad 14.271–9. Cf. A.H. Sommerstein, 'Introduction', in A.H. Sommerstein and J. Fletcher (edd.), *Horkos: The Oath in Greek Society* (Exeter, 2007), 1–8, at 2.

[10] See also Sommerstein (n. 9), 2 and 218, n. 8 on sanctifying objects

should Menelaus be killed. Using the term 'head' to signify 'person' is not uncommon in Greek poetry, and is particularly common in Greek tragedy, [11] but *Helen* 835–42 is unique among archaic and classical Greek oaths in containing the invocation of a living mortal (or living mortal's head) as sanctifying power.[12] However, invocation of the husband's head as sanctifying feature does have a divine parallel which commentators seem so far to have overlooked. This is Hera's oath to Zeus at *Iliad* 15.36–46. There Hera swears an oath on Zeus' sacred head (among other sanctifying deities) to the effect that it was not by her will that Poseidon is harming the Trojans and helping the Achaeans; rather, she suggests, it is his own passion which drives him on.[13]

The parallel between the oaths of Hera and Helen is that they both use their husband's head as sanctifying object in an oath whose purpose is to allay that husband's fears. The difference is that Hera is being duplicitous, while Helen is being honest. It has been argued that 'Helen seems to have uttered the oath only to please Menelaus, as mere lip-service', and that Helen would not have fulfilled her oath had, for example, Theoclymenus appeared and killed off Menelaus.[14] But this suggestion ignores the solemnity with which an oath was treated in Greek literature and society. There are remarkably few examples of broken oaths in Greek poetry and these breaches are punished severely.[15] In general swearers of oaths go out of their way to avoid perjury.[16]

Euripides, of course, became infamous for the line given to Hippolytus in the play of that name at 612: ἡ γλῶσσ' ὀμώμοχ', ἡ δὲ φρὴν ἀνώμοτος, 'it was my tongue that swore, but my heart is unsworn'. This line was taken out of context by Aristophanes especially (*Thesm.* 275–6, *Frogs* 101–2, 1471), and used to present Euripides as a supporter of perjury. But in fact Hippolytus never breaks his oath.

[11] As noted by editors; see R. Kannicht (ed.), *Euripides: Helena* (Heidelberg, 1969), P. Burian (ed.), *Euripides: Helen* (Oxford, 2007), Allan (n. 5) ad *Helen* 835.

[12] The dead can be invoked (as at Eur. *Hipp.* 307, *IA* 473–6), and it seems that the list of sanctifying powers invoked by Demosthenes, *On the Crown* 208, including those who fought at Marathon, Plataea, Salamis and Artemisium, and all who fell in all of Athens' other wars, is meant to include those who fought and survived, but these mortals are invoked in a very specific context and not in isolation. This information has been ascertained by consulting the database of A.H. Sommerstein, A.J. Bayliss and I.C. Torrance, *The Oath in Archaic and Classical Greece* (Nottingham, 2007), accessible at www.nottingham.ac.uk/classics/oaths/database.php.

[13] It has been argued that Hera's oath here remains proposed but unsworn (C. Callaway, 'Perjury and the unsworn oath', *TAPhA* 123 [1993], 15–25, esp. 17–18), but more convincing is the analysis of Sommerstein, Bayliss and Torrance (n. 12) and their remarks on oath id number 409.

[14] Pucci (n. 5), 64.

[15] Examples include *Odyssey* 12.298–307, where Odysseus' men break their oath not to slaughter any sheep or oxen they come upon on the island of the Sun god, and they subsequently all die in a god-sent storm, and Hellanicus, *The First Trojan War* fr.26b (Jacoby), where the Trojan Laomedon breaks his oath to Apollo and Poseidon and fails to pay them the agreed wage for building the walls of Troy. In response Poseidon sends a sea monster which destroys those at hand and the crops. Informal oaths can occasionally be broken without consequence, but these belong to a different category of oaths, see A.H. Sommerstein, 'Cloudy swearing: when (if ever) is an oath not an oath?', in Sommerstein and Fletcher (n. 9), 267–88.

[16] Several passages of Herodotus make this clear. At 3.74–5 Prexaspes anticipates punishment for perjury and commits suicide. At 4.154–5 Themison fulfils his oath by throwing Etearchus' daughter into the sea, but immediately hauls her out again. At 4.201 the Persians purposely swear oaths over a hidden trench which will only be valid if the ground on which they stand remains firm. At 6.62 Agetus is forced to give up his wife after being tricked by an oath. All these examples were discussed by A.J. Bayliss, 'The artful dodging of oaths in Herodotus', at the 2007 APA meeting. The abstract is available at http://www.apaclassics.org/AnnualMeeting/07mtg/abstracts/bayliss.pdf.

Indeed shortly after uttering this line, which is itself spoken in a rage, Hippolytus quickly admits that his reverence of the gods will make him refrain from breaking the oath he took in their name (657). When Theseus returns, Hippolytus again wonders whether he should 'unseal his lips' in frustration at Theseus' refusal to believe him, but decides that it would have no purpose since he would at once violate his oath and fail to convince Theseus (1060–3). Hippolytus' piety in relation to oaths is even confirmed by Artemis in the exodus where she praises Hippolytus not only for rejecting the Nurse's proposal, but also for keeping his oath of silence even in the face of Theseus' slanderous accusations (1306–9). We hear from Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1416a31–2) that Hygianon's attempt to have Euripides charged with impiety because of *Hipp.* 612 was a failure.[17]

There is no reason to doubt that Euripides took oaths as seriously as other fifth-century Greeks. Instances in Euripides where oaths are perceived as having been broken lead to disaster for the perjurer. Jason in Euripides' *Medea* essentially suffers the traditional punishment for perjury through the extinction of his family line (cf. Hdt. 6.86), and Medea can be read as the personification of the avenging fury inflicting this punishment (cf. *Med.* 1260).[18] At *Phoenissae* 481–2, Eteocles is presented as a perjurer and ultimately dies, and Capaneus who swears in defiance of the gods (*Supplices* 498) is killed by Zeus' thunderbolt. If it were merely a question of Helen giving lip service to Menelaus in *Helen*, she could easily have given a promise rather than an oath.

Helen's oath by her husband's head may recall Hera's oath to Zeus in *Iliad* 15, but there are several other deities who invoke the head of Zeus in oaths, and *only* deities do so. Two such invocations are abortive. Hermes, in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, volunteers to swear an oath to Apollo on his father's head, but never does (274–6). Indeed Hermes' engagement with oaths throughout this hymn is consonant with his tricksy character.[19] Slightly different is the course of events at the end of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. In the throes of death, as he supposes, Heracles asks his son Hyllus to swear an oath on the head of Zeus his father (1185). Heracles is not yet fully divine, but he is the son of Zeus, and there are strong arguments to suggest that we are to anticipate that Heracles will undergo apotheosis after the end of the play.[20] What is most telling is that Hyllus, who is certainly *not* divine, when he agrees to swear the oath, does *not* invoke the head of Zeus, he simply invokes Zeus (1188). This confirms that swearing by Zeus' head is restricted to divinities.

Two further examples of divinities invoking the head of Zeus are significant in the context of *Helen*. Sappho fr. 44A and the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (26–8) both contain virgin goddesses swearing on the head of Zeus to maintain their chastity for

[17] J.D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 86, notes the irony of *Hipp.* 612 being used to suggest promotion of perjury, when Hippolytus is 'most loyal to oaths in the most trying and tragic circumstances'. M. Dillon, 'By gods, tongues, and dogs: the use of oaths in Aristophanic comedy', *G&R* 42 (1995), 135–51, at 143–4, argues convincingly that the Aristophanic parodies of *Hipp.* 612 are essentially humorous rather than loaded with accusations of impiety.

[18] *Pace* A. Allan, 'Masters of manipulation: Euripides' (and Medea's) use of oaths in *Medea*', in Sommerstein and Fletcher (n. 9), 113–24, who argues that Jason never swore an oath to Medea, but fails to explain why Jason never denies having sworn or broken the oath as Medea claims.

[19] See further J. Fletcher, 'A trickster's oaths in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*', *AJP* 129 (2008), 19–46.

[20] See R. Fowler, 'Three places of the *Trachiniae*', in J. Griffin (ed.), *Sophocles Revisited: Essays Presented to Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones* (Oxford, 1999), 161–75, at 167–74.

all time, Artemis in the first case, Hestia in the second. Along with Athena, these goddesses are said to be the only three beyond Aphrodite's power (*h. Aphr.* 7–35), and it is perhaps noteworthy that Athena, the virgin goddess, was born from the head of Zeus.[21] Clearly the content of these oaths is a strong parallel to Helen's oath in Euripides' play where the female swears on the head of a significant male, as the only sanctifying power, to remain chaste. If the audience is aware that virgin deities swear on the head of Zeus to their chastity, Helen's oath becomes even more solemn. Similarly, if swearing on the head is a feature of divine oaths, then we have a forward glimpse in this oath towards Helen's predicted apotheosis, which is mentioned at the end of the play (1666–9).[22] Furthermore, we are reminded that, like Heracles, she also has a claim to be the child of Zeus, something mentioned several times in the play (e.g. 77, 81, 470, 489, 1144, 1527).

But what are the implications of this for Menelaus? There is clearly a tension between Menelaus' wretched appearance and the implication of a parallel with a divine formula for oath-taking. There are two possible interpretations. Either we are to find that Menelaus is made (even more) ridiculous by the parallel, or we should find that it shows him in a worthy and virtuous light. The first interpretation would tie in well with the opinions of critics who see the play as a light-hearted drama of the 'romantic comedy' type. Menelaus receives this incredibly solemn oath while being cast as a bumbling beggar, and the effect is intended to be ridiculous. But is Menelaus really so contemptible in the play? Critics have seen the male characters in this play as intellectually inferior to the females. But it is often unwise to treat Euripidean dramaturgy in terms of simple binary oppositions. An obvious example, which fails completely in *Helen*, is a Greek–barbarian antithesis, where Greek is good and barbarian is bad. Theoclymenus is a bad barbarian of sorts, but his sister is nothing but virtue and divine knowledge. Similarly we should not allow Theoclymenus' character to colour our perception of other male characters in the play. I suggest that Menelaus is not nearly as dim as scholars have argued, and that the solemnity of the oath with which Helen binds herself to her husband is a cue for the audience to expect Menelaus to act in a noble and effective way in attempting to secure their escape.

It is true that Menelaus has taken a while to come to terms with certain revelations – that the Helen he took from Troy is just a phantom and that this woman he has come across in Egypt is actually the real Helen.[23] But we can hardly find fault with him there. Indeed, he would be far more gullible and contemptible if he had believed everything straightaway. It is also true that Helen encourages Menelaus to abandon his shame and flee Egypt (805), but he is not well pleased at being treated as a coward in this way (806–8). Helen rejects any idea of Menelaus killing the king. She taunts Menelaus with the fact that killing him is impossible (809), without really ever explaining that this is only because the omniscient Theonoe would never allow it, not because Menelaus is a poor swordsman. In spite of her chastity, there are traces of the

[21] Wolff (n. 4), 62, notes that Aphrodite is rejected in *Helen* by Theonoe (1006–7) and is reproached by Helen (1102–4).

[22] On Helen's connection with the divine in this play, see e.g. G. Zuntz, 'On Euripides' *Helena*: theology and irony', in J.C. Kamerbeek et al., *Entretiens sur l'Antiquité VI: Euripide* (Geneva, 1960), 201–41, esp. 218, and B. Zweig, 'Euripides' *Helen* and female rites of passage', in M.W. Padilla (ed.), *Rites of Passage in Ancient Greece: Literature, Religion, Society* (London and Toronto, 1999), 158–80.

[23] Cf. C.W. Willink, 'The reunion duo in Euripides' *Helen*', *CQ* 39 (1989), 45–69, at 50–1, who comments on the 'shock' caused to Menelaus by the circumstances of his reunion with Helen.

'familiar' Helen in this character.[24] She is very much concerned about Menelaus' poor appearance (554) and she is embarrassed at the idea of Menelaus begging for food (791). But overall, Helen is presented as a virtuous alternative to the traditional adulterous whore of tragedy. I suggest that in this alternative world of phantoms and barbarians, Menelaus too is meant to be understood as a more worthy and virtuous alternative to the negative portrayal he receives elsewhere in tragedy.[25]

In fact, his appeal to Theonoe proves more successful than Helen's and he displays considerable intelligence in improvising explanations which ease the suspicions of Theoclymenus. Theonoe agrees to keep quiet about their escape plan because she does not want to (999–1000) *κλέος τοὐμοῦ πατρὸς ᾗ οὐκ ἂν μιάναιμ'*, 'pollute the good reputation of [her] father', and she is concerned about pollution from her first entry where she is involved in a purification ritual (865–70). Theonoe's decision can be read as a more direct response to Menelaus' threat to pollute her father's grave through suicide (984–5), than to Helen's appeals to justice and reputation. It is Menelaus who persuades Theonoe with what touches her heart most (960), and it is he who tells Theonoe what Helen had left out of her plea (976), that is, their sworn pact to commit suicide over Proteus' grave should their escape attempt fail. Theonoe's response proves that Menelaus' arguments have been more persuasive than Helen's.[26] Similarly, Menelaus shows skill in dealing with Theoclymenus. For example, when the latter asks why the ship must be taken so far away from the shore to perform the bogus burial rites, he promptly replies (1271) *ὡς μὴ πάλιν γῆ λύματ' ἐκβάλῃ κλύδων*, 'so that the waves may not wash the impurities back to land', a wholly believable explanation.

The significance of Menelaus' part in the escape can easily be measured by comparing the role of Orestes in the parallel plot line of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*. The two plays have often been thought of as a pair because of their similarity in structure. But there, Orestes has *no* input at all in the escape plan. Iphigenia is in complete control until they reach the offstage space of the ship, where Orestes must fend off the Taurians who are attempting to prevent them from sailing off. Menelaus, by contrast, is not only actively involved in securing the silence of Theonoe, he also takes over control from Helen *before* they leave the stage. By line 1390, he has been washed and is dressed as a warrior. Even scholars who find Menelaus ridiculous find him less so at the end of the play.[27] Yet he is not just 'less ridiculous' – in fact he plays a fundamental part in successfully effecting the escape. It is he who takes over from Helen in allaying Theoclymenus' suspicions (as noted above), it is he who manages to lead the contrary bull willingly on to the ship (1567–8), and it is he who organizes the ambush of the Egyptians with his men (1606–10), and ultimately makes good the escape. Again, if we compare Orestes in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, we do not find such a success story. Yes, Orestes fights valiantly, but it is only the intervention of Athena that secures the safety of the Greeks who have not yet managed to leave the shore in

[24] Cf. Wolff (n. 4), 77, who remarks that 'the new Helen assimilates the old Helen'.

[25] Menelaus in both *Andromache* (e.g. 362–3) and *Trojan Women* (e.g. 1033–5) is presented as effeminate and contemptible, and his character in the later play *Orestes* is also highly unsympathetic.

[26] Cf. Wolff (n. 4), 66 and 83, who finds Menelaus' rhetoric in this scene 'shrewd'. The appeal to Theonoe must be based on the assumption that she has not yet made up her mind on the subject. Lines 892–3 should clearly be deleted, see further Burian (n. 11) ad loc.

[27] E.g. Pippin [Burnett] (n. 5), 152 and 156, feels that Menelaus regains his courage.

their ship (cf. *IT* 1394–5, 1414–19). In *Helen*, the Greeks have already escaped a significant distance before their deception is reported to the king.

In sum, Menelaus does rather well in the final part of the play, at least, and his fortunes improve after Helen binds herself to him by oath. The formula of this oath, reminiscent of a divine formula, confirms the virtue and potential of an alternative Menelaus, just as it confirms the virtue and divine potential of this new Helen.

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