

Call for papers

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**The seduction of the name**

**Helen and her spectre**

*But it was not me, only my name*

Euripides, *Helen*

*There is no lover that does not love forever*

Euripides, *Trojan Women*

Is war a spectre? More precisely: is it a simulacrum of civilisation? This is probably how Euripides must have thought when, in his *Helen*, he readapted a different version of the myth from that adopted by the Homeric poems. Euripides dismantles the more canonical logic of absolute beauty (for Homer, Helen's beauty tends to fatally imply the bride's unfaithfulness) and in this way he wears down, to the foundations, certain cultural strongholds of archaic Greek civilisation. In the tragedy first performed in 412 B.C., Greeks, and Trojan are said to have slaughtered each other for *nothing*, for a ghost (but is a ghost, and moreover a ghost of a beautiful woman, really *nothing*?): the woman that Paris takes away with him far from Sparta is not Helen, but only her image. *Eidolon*: "An image endowed with life [...]. He thought he had me and he had not, vain illusion" (Euripides, *Helen*, vv. 34-36). What does the ghost of Helen say? An image cannot be possessed; even less so a moving image, which lives without possessing a precise identity. Euripides has the power to liberate Helen from her image - an image that seems to evoke that of Eve in *Paradise Lost*: a woman available to the seduction of the word, superficial, ephemeral, ungrateful towards those who grant her a kingdom. In this way, he literally provides her with another image that allows her to disassociate from death her existence, her beauty, her desires.

Materially, therefore, the conflict is fought over an appearance: Euripides' Helen, the one for whom one fights and dies, is nothing more than a name; there is no substance; her body is not where it should be. The "real" Helen in fact, in Euripides' tragedy, is in Egypt, where she spends her time anxiously waiting to recompose the ruins of her family (in the eyes of Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, this

dreamless, sluggish, resolutely anti-apollinarian Helen was probably meant to appear as a formidable confirmation of Euripides' suicidal intentions towards classical tragedy). For Euripides, war is an illusion, the least real there is, and for this very reason it is destructive and almost relentless. It is a question, at this point, of opening one's eyes, eluding a series of misunderstandings, to finally put an end to the illusions that ruin life, to understand that the conflict that leads the city of Troy to its demise is a senseless experience, the result of a terrible misunderstanding. At this point, the torn bodies, disfigured in the battles, constitute nothing more than a cover for an event even, if possible, more traumatic and upsetting than the massacre: any conflict is a deadly hallucination.

Helen indeed appears an indecipherable mystery to those around her; the culmination of the most radical materialisation of female difference; after all, precisely because, unlike other female figures in tragedy, she does not present an exceptional dramatic depth (we are thinking regarding this, as is pointedly noted in a valuable volume (M. Bettini, C. Brillante, *Il mito di Elena. Racconti dalla Grecia a oggi*, Torino 2002), in Helen, before arriving shipwrecked in Egypt, where he will find his "true" wife, Menelaus spends seven years with Helen's *eidolon* (taken from Troy after the end of the war) and yet, incredibly, he does not notice anything, he does not recognize any difference between the "true" Helen, whom he has not in fact met for seventeen years, and her image; not even a doubt. He perceives no dissonance between the two; so much so that in Egypt he can only believe in the "real" Helen when the evanescent double of the Queen of Sparta disappears (but can an image definitively disappear? Is this not its greatest privilege: to survive even when it vanishes?).

However: if the young Nietzsche's hypothesis about the Apollonian structure of Greek culture is true, which would be founded on the idea that to live, one must delude oneself that life is worth living, that one must, as in a dream, give a form to destruction in order not to be destroyed, things are probably complicated. Let us be clear, therein lies the tragedy of war and its boundless brutality: it is necessary to delude oneself that it makes sense. Are we certain, then, that Agamemnon, Menelaus, Hector, Ajax, Ulysses did not know - that is, without lingering as Euripides does in the *Helen* in discourses that might evoke diatribes in the philosophy of language (how else to consider expressions about the value of a proper name literally unhinged?) - that the interminable carnage of war is invariably accomplished by an image? We might venture even further and think that already the Homeric poems, where Menelaus' wife is, before anything else, an unfaithful bride, warned that Helen is the proper name of a common affair; that is, that war is inexorably an affair of spectres, deaths, survivals, and pain; that Helen at this point is only a name for the senseless. A doubt then arises: is it not the case that Euripides in *Helen* stages what is in many ways a well-known fact and thus disposes with excessive agility of the myth of a woman whose beauty would be the basis of a bloody conflict? A myth of beauty and war that indicates, precisely, that war, the longer and bloodier it is, the more reckless it turns out to be. Isn't war, in other words, inextricably linked to simulacra, false beliefs, but above all to the need to attribute meaning to the tragic

and senseless vortex of existence itself? After all, the unrepresentable, ugly Thersites of the second book of the *Iliad*, the Greek soldier different from all the other heroes described by Homer, had not already shouted in Agamemnon's face the truth: This is your war! Of kings and the mighty, it is not about cripples, wretches, nobodies, nameless men, and women. He says it clearly: we are going home. Humiliated, immediately by Ulysses, no less, he is still a soldier, he weeps defeated, struck down, mocked, he sobs. In the *Iliad*, there are two monsters among the Achaeans: Helen, chilling for her extraordinary beauty, almost a foreigner by now, and Thersites, the man who dares to lash out against power and imagines that all those like him should desert the honours of war.

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Helen of Sparta? Or: Helen of Troy? Whore, unfaithful wife, runaway, traitor, lover, spectre, adulteress, shrewd queen? Daughter of Zeus and Leda, sister of another woman of dangerous habits, Clytemnestra, sister of the Dioscuri, is her name lost or does nothing remain but her name? In the name of the absolute, of extraordinary beauty, bordering on justice, can one devastate the world? By dedicating a dossier to the queen of Sparta, for Homer arrived in Troy, while for Euripides she is a refugee in Egypt, while her double lies in the arms of Paris, the journal *K* intends to raise a series of questions that are probably valuable for the genealogical physiognomy of the notion of destitute power.

The feminine as a potential difference in war: although accused of being the cause of a terrible and bloody conflict, Euripides' Helen may instead represent a form of the classical world's feminine otherness in relation to war (think, of course, of *Lysistrata*, among many others).

The figure of Helen is so seductive that it famously merits one of the most provocative gestures of Gorgias who, in the *Encomium of Helen* (almost coeval with Euripides' *Helen*), undertakes to prove the innocence of Menelaus' wife: the materialist philosophy of the Sophists rails against the archaic, exonerating the woman from guilt. However, to defend the woman from the sin of adultery, and attributing all wrongs to the marauder, he must necessarily elide female desire, and make Helen nothing more than a victim: either of fate or of male violence and rhetoric. In short, essentially defenseless, and therefore blameless: "she did what she did either by the blind will of Chance, and meditated decision of Gods, and decree of Necessity; or abducted by force; or induced by words or captured by Eros (by love)".

Does female desire become tolerable only if it is reasonable? If convenient? If consumed responsibly and weighing up the consequences? Can female jouissance be endured or does it become a tragedy, a betrayal, the dismissal of all moral norms. Is Euripides not in danger, after all, of taming the

role of the feminine in the tragic to the point of access, finally letting the illusions of a pleasure ungovernable by Reason of State vanish?

Dispelling the name, not having a name of one's own, separating oneself from the name, as the Pirandellian condition for evading forms of self-capture. In Euripides' *Helen*, the Trojan War is fought over a name, while the woman for whom the war is waged is elsewhere. One might then think that anonymity is Helen's true salvation. Probably, today, to vanish, to be nameless, to be clandestine, is both the greatest danger and the only political battle worth conceiving.

Who is Menelaus? In Hofmannsthal's *Egyptian Helen* (1928), in which the Homeric and Euripidean versions of the myth brilliantly converge, Menelaus is poisoned by resentment, by rage: he tries to kill his wife more than once; he cannot bear the outrage he has received, and his beauty cannot be tamed. In Hofmannsthal, in fact, the real protagonist of the play is the betrayed king, the cuckold par excellence of the entire Western tradition. Yet, in the story, Menelaus changes: he forgives, as Derrida puts it, the unforgivable. What enables Menelaus to stop being a despondent, violent man, to look perhaps for the first time at his wife?

As Walter Benjamin understood perhaps like no other in the fight against Nazi-fascism, to sever any form of cultural complicity with its political presuppositions, the battle has first and foremost an aesthetic character: the radical and preliminary battleground is played out in the field of images. If the fascist intention is always, at bottom, dominated by an anesthetization of war, overturning this vision requires that no compromise be tolerated with the fascination and reasons, whatever they may be, of warlike violence.

In Euripides' *Helen*, a long-standing literary and artistic *topos* is set up: the double (the double of Helen is also a crucial figure in Hofmannsthal's *Egyptian Helen*). An anodyne figure capable, perhaps like few others, of tormenting the logic of identity by the excess of proximity between what embodies it and its revocation; a traumatic type of complicity such as perhaps only victim and executioner can establish.

The myth of Helen, first, concerns a beauty that is not like any other: it is incomparable to any conceivable on earth. With Kant, it would not be incorrect to consider her sublime: the condensation of terror into the highest pleasure. In the *Iliad*, on the other hand, the elders of Troy, while recognizing that it is a misfortune, have no doubt that a beauty like Helen's, a beauty never seen before, a beauty difficult even to imagine, is worth slaughtering: "It is not to blame that the Trojans and the Achaeans with the beautiful shields should suffer such a woman's pain for a long time; she is very like the immortal

goddesses in appearance” (*Iliad*, Book III, vv. 156-159). In the wake of Lyotard, we would like to interrogate the current value of the notion of the sublime as a device capable of delivering to the artistic gesture an unimaginable, hence, revolutionary politics.

**Submit a proposal by April 8, 2024 (2500 characters max.)**

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**If the proposal is accepted, the paper must be delivered by September 20, 2024.**

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