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THE GHOST TRADITION: HELEN OF TROY IN THE ELIZABETHAN ERA

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Abstract: *Reputedly the most beautiful woman who has ever lived, Helen of Troy (or Sparta) is less well known for her elusive, ghost-like dimension. Homer wrote that the greatest war of Western classical antiquity started because of Helen's adultery followed by her elopement to Troy. Other ancient writers and historians, among theme Aeschylus, Stesichorus, Hesiod, Pausanias, Aristophanes, Euripides and Gorgias of Leontini, challenged the Homeric version, in various ways and attempted to exonerate Helen either by focusing on her phantom/ ghost/ as the generic object of man's desire and scorn or by casting doubt on the mechanisms of the blaming process. This paper argues that the Elizabethans Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare adopted and adapted the anti-Homer version of the depiction of Helen, what I here call "the ancient Helen ghost tradition"; nevertheless, in so doing they further reinforced the character's demonic features and paradoxically achieved a return to the adulterous Homeric Helen.*

Keywords: *demon, double, eidolon, ghost, Marlowe, Shakespeare.*

1. Introduction

Homer's *Iliad* tells us that aeons ago a cosmic war was fought in order to retrieve a possibly abducted wife from the hands of a very handsome Asian prince. Chaos and carnage lasted for ten years but when the wife was finally returned to her husband, Menelaus, what he most wanted to do was kill her. In Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (415 B.C.E), Menelaus revises the Homeric version of history and eloquently dispels any doubts about his true reasons for fighting, which do not concern Helen in the least. In so doing, he questions his first creator's authority and casts doubt upon the very source of the great epic, the Muse's 'song', and the undisputed fount of knowledge shaped by the bard Homer. Interestingly, Euripides' alternative tale is only one case in point that draws its substance from challenging the Homeric 'truths'. We are now all familiar with quite an impressive body of literature that aims at restoring Helen's purity and wifely virtue by keeping her safely in hiding while an identical double suffered the fate that Homer had ascribed her in his epic.

The present paper will focus on what I am calling "Helen's ghost tradition"; I coined this paradigm as an attempt to define the literary and historical tendency over the ages to revise, revisit, deconstruct and split the character of Helen of Troy. However, my argument is that the "ghost tradition", although generally undertaken by the use of texts designed to defend the adulteress' purity and restore her intrinsic worth as a wife, does not limit itself to a "repair job". In the Elizabethan era, for example in the texts of Marlowe and Shakespeare, the female ghost is also the demon, the *femme fatale* who, notwithstanding the generalized *aporia* (in Derrida's sense, as 'puzzle', 'dilemma') that informs her textual appearances, is maleficent in both her substance and her effect on other characters. Thus, my argument is that although Marlowe and Shakespeare share the ghost

tradition regarding Helen, albeit in different ways from their ancient predecessors, their works actually complete a return to Homer and further malign the archetypal adulteress.

This short study will contain two parts. In the first, I will offer an overview of the ancient authors and thinkers who established the alternative 'truth' of a replacement for Helen in Troy, chiefly with the purpose of exonerating her. The second part will focus on the Elizabethan perspective on Helen, as rendered in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Troilus and Cressida*. As previously mentioned, my argument for the second part is that the Elizabethans and their own process of ghosting Helen mainly served either to restore the Homeric perception of fatal beauty or to employ the character only as foil, comic presence or infelicitous term for comparison.

2. Ghosting Helen

2.1. Helen and the Ancients

The phantom (*eidolon* in Greek) double qualities of Helen are established quite early, when we learn that she has two fathers (Zeus and Tyndareus) and two mothers (Leda and Nemesis) (Calasso 1993:122-23); thus, "doubleness is the distinguishing mark of her entire tradition" (139), the thing that marks her out as "[...] a phantom before she was a woman" (130). Thus the alternative stories about Helen's presence in or absence from Troy, accompanied as they are by their inescapable consequences regarding her evaluation in literature, stem from the sign of double parentage, indicative of her divine and mortal origins, so that she is neither subjectable to orthodox moral dogmas nor confined to a single destiny.

In Calasso's words: "Helen is the *power of the phantom*, the simulacrum – and the simulacrum is that place where absence is sovereign" (123, my emphasis). Homer immortalized the world's most beautiful adulteress as the main cause of the downfall of a civilization. However, other ancients opted for focusing on the "power of the phantom" and achieved, I would suggest, a magnifying effect, as there is no better way of inscribing firm contours upon characters or concepts than by modulating absence stories.

There are two main ways in which the ancients rewrote Homer's epics and altered his representations of Helen. The first is to do with geography, while the second is concerned with morality, with guilt, more specifically with the issue of Helen's unfaithfulness to her husband. From Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (458 B.C.E) we learn that Menelaus had a false, shadow Helen reigning with him in Sparta while the true one was presumably in Troy (lines 416-24). Also in the fifth century B.C., Herodotus claimed that although Helen had indeed run off with Paris, "a storm had cast them ashore in Egypt", where she remained in Proteus' care throughout the ten years of the Trojan War until Menelaus sailed to Egypt to take an unharmed wife back home to Sparta (Herodotus 1987:2.112-20). As Doniger (1999:30) points out in relation to Herodotus' version of Helen's absence from Troy "the entire Trojan War was fought for a woman who did not even appear to be there"; nevertheless, Helen's arrival in Egypt occurred after the adultery had indeed taken place. Herodotus' version of Helen's story follows that of Hesiod, albeit with an alteration, since Hesiod has both Helen and Paris shipped off to Egypt, living out their love story undisturbed (Hesiod, cited in Doniger:30). From the lyric poet Stesichorus' *Palinode* we learn that Homer's version of Helen's adultery and desertion "is not the true

story; you didn't go on the well-benched ships, nor did you come to the high towers of Troy" (cited in Murray and Dorsch 2000:xi).

As previously mentioned, apart from the geographical inscription of Helen, another way of rendering the Spartan queen as ghost, eidolon, and object but not subject of her fate is related to the issue of her guilt. More specifically, did Helen commit adultery and, assuming that she did, can she be held totally responsible for her domestic *faux pas*? In *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid transfers the guilt on to Menelaus who was "crazy" enough to facilitate his wife's adultery by "leaving your wife / With a stranger in the house?", thus achieving the same results that trusting "doves to falcons" or "full sheepfolds to mountain wolves" would (Ovid 1982:202).

Among the most thought-provoking answers to the issues related to Helen's guilt or lack of it are to be found in Gorgias of Leontini's *Encomium of Helen*, arguably the most persuasive defence of Helen of Troy. According to Gorgias (followed by Isocrates), there are only four possible explanations or justifications for Helen's behaviour: Helen's guilt cannot be maintained if the gods willed her act, if she was the victim of rape, or if she was enchanted by words or by visions (Biesecker 1992:99-108). Of all the four lines of argumentation in defending Helen, it is the one related to the power of words which most interests me here, as it predates and foreshadows the Marlowian and Shakespearean perspective on Helen which I will develop in the second part of my paper. According to Gorgias, Helen was simply swayed by the overwhelming *logos*, "a great master, with the power to stop fear, remove sorrow, create joy and increase pity" (cited in Murray and Dorsch 2000:xx), whose effects on the mind resemble those of drugs on the body, in that "some speeches give pain, others pleasure; some induce fear, others confidence" (xxi). Moreover, some kinds of speech

"poison and bewitch the mind with an evil persuasion" (xxvi), to the point of rendering the mind unable to defend itself against the lure of the logos. Thus, this very defence of Helen, built as it is around a species of logocentrism *avant la lettre*, actually objectifies, manipulates and transforms her into a puppet and a mere slave to Paris' desire. Hence, although possibly exonerated, Helen is also inscribed as *ghost*, as almost non-presence, due to the erasure of her potential ability to act against the Trojan prince's verbal persuasion.

2.2. Helen and the Elizabethans

When the Elizabethan Helen was born London was a fetid city, "pox and plague stalked the streets", human heads decorated London Bridge and "bears were ripped to shreds by mastiffs within sight of the theatres" (Hughes 2005:299). As calling out or throwing stones to attract customers were outlawed, prostitutes stood waiting, "some branded, some with their nipples painted, all desperate to earn a crust through the sale of their bodies"; customers could take their pick from among "a strumpette (a woman), an apple-squire (a rent-boy) or a young child whose maidenhood was restored every night" (Hughes 2005:299). The city residents delighted in plays of cruelty, revenge and destruction on either a personal or a cosmic level.

Few plays satisfied the Tudor audience's taste for sensationalism better than Cristopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus,* commonly known as *Doctor Faustus*. The play was inspired by the *Historie of the Damnable Life, and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*, a 'true' story of horrible enticement (Hughes 2006: 302):

> Now, in order that the miserable Faust could indulge in the desires of his flesh at midnight when he awoke, in the twenty-third year that had past, Helen of Greece entered into him...Now when Doctor Faust saw her, she so captured his heart that he began to make love to her and kept her as his mistress: he became so fond of her that he could hardly be a moment without her. In the last year he made her pregnant and she bore him a son (Quispel 1975:301)

Possessing Helen causes Faust's horrible demise, a ghastly end involving torn members and dashed-to-pieces head and joints. Marlowe's play, although not specific about the details of Faust's presumed death, also suggests gory possibilities. This is a punishment that befits the crime, though, and it is Helen who, albeit indirectly, bears the responsibility for Faust's ghastly end. According to Greg (1947:106), "in making her his paramour, Faustus commits the sin of demoniality, that is, bodily intercourse with demons". Not only is the conjured-up Helen demonic, but she is also the instrument of Faust's permanent damnation. Moreover, Marlowe's Helen is no mere instrument of obliteration but "the agent of the devil himself", whose "lips suck forth my soul; see where it flies"; through her and for her, Faust becomes "a necromancer", while Helen is "a succubus, a spirit of the dead" (Hughes 2006:303). When Faust requests immortality from "sweet Helen [...] with a kiss", he is actually signing up for eternal torment. Kiss after kiss seals his fate, as Helen is the one for whom he has given up Heaven, the "dross" for which he is ready to sacrifice "all". However, there are alternate ways of reading Faust's obsession with Helen as *spirit* which either absolve him of his crime or justify his transgressions. As Craik (1969:189-196) points out, "spirits" do not always seem to mean devils in this play, nor does the Old Man "explicitly condemn Faustus for demoniality"; hence, if sin is meant to put him "beyond the

reach of divine forgiveness, then he is damned for the act of demoniality without the intention". The play does not rescue Helen's character, though, and the dynamics of gender struggle clearly privilege the male protagonist and not the shadowy female counterpart. Even if she is non-demonic, she is still a ghost, a shadow, a mere image of sublime beauty devoid of agency.

Apart from carefully construing Helen's demonic aura, Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* is also a paradigm of the varied modalities in which language with its inadequate ability to encompass and describe reality is situated at the heart of character depiction. In his incessant striving for infinite power and knowledge, Marlowe's Faust goes beyond the objectives described in the *English Faust Book*, where he only wants to be a spirit, and actually aspires to divine status (Maguire 2009:151). Faust's ambitions are reflected in his frequent use of the adjective "all". Thus, he desires for "*All* things that move between the quiet poles" to "be at my command" (1.1.58-9), to be "resolved [...] of *all* ambiguities" (1.1.82), to "search *all* the corners of the new-found world" (1.1.86), and to "tell the secrets of *all* foreign kings" (1.1.89).

Recent perspectives on the issues of "demoniality", "magic", "sin" and "blame" shift the emphasis onto the role of language, of *logos*, in shaping the play's substance and delineating characters' trajectories or lack of them. As Maguire (2009:152) points out, when language fails to describe, and theology to achieve, necromancy is called to intervene, so that the Adamic powers of the magician may be restored. Paradoxically, then, danger lies in language, not in magic, so that, when Faust conjures up Helen, he warns the scholars to "be silent, for danger is in words"; thus, Helen becomes "a metaphor for language" (Maguire:152). The idea that it was the "duplicity of language" that most concerned Marlowe is supported

by the fact that everything related to Helen is doubled: she makes a double appearance, between two cupids, and is herself a double, a devil impersonating Helen (Forsyth 1987:12). Therefore, in Marlowe's play, the *ghost tradition* is exploited linguistically, in that Helen symbolizes the act of endless substitutions, replacements, variations; one is given not one's heart's desire but rather a mere simulacrum, a ghost who does not utter one single word throughout the whole play. All the same, Helen is a ghost whose historical role as destroyer of civilizations is aesthetically contained in her supreme beauty with its lethal effects. Marlowe's famous lines: "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?" signify Helen's power not merely to double, but to "multiply destruction, even into the thousands" (Doniger 1999:40). Significantly, these immortal lines have inspired recent humorous quantifications of beauty, according to which "the most precise measure in Greek philology is the milli-helen, the quantity of energy it takes to launch one ship"; thus, counting women and quantifying beauty translate into erasure of individualism and its replacement by "ideal types, stereotypes, as is appropriate for the woman who came to symbolize ideal beauty and treachery, the essence of the misogynist view of women" (Doniger 1999: 41-42). Ideal types and stereotypes are obviously, by the very fact of their unattainability, their illusory substance, mere *ghosts*.

Whereas Marlowe is assertive regarding Helen's demonic potential as actualized in the damnation of Faust, Shakespeare is vituperative. In *Rape of Lucrece* Helen inspires murderous rage:

> Show me the strumpet that began this stir, / That with my nails her beauty I may tear! / The heat of lust, fond Paris, did incur / This load of wrath that burning Troy doth bear; / Thy eye kindled the fire that burneth here, / And here in Troy, for

> trespass of thine eye, / The sire, the son, the dame and daughter die (Shakespeare 1980:1471-1474).

The obvious link between Helen and Lucrece is rape. Herself the daughter of rape and subjected to rape (by Theseus) when still a young girl, Helen does share with Lucrece a state of personal victimhood accompanied by the promise of a foundational enterprise. If Helen's abduction and possible rape led to the fall of Troy and the subsequent foundation of the all-powerful Roman Empire, Lucrece's post-rape suicide becomes part of the chain of aggression and violence against women which nevertheless led to the birth of the Roman Republic. However, in the poem's *ekphrasis*, a devastated, ravished Lucrece, searching for illustrious symbols with which to identify herself, unequivocally rejects and vilifies Helen, as a victim of rape. In so doing, the Shakespearean character, through her visceral hatred of her predecessor's name and fate, alters the formal and intentional purposes of Shakespeare's work; *The Rape of Lucrece* is an *epyllion*, a genre whose features combine vivid description with epic subjects (Wells 2002:98). Rape, as originary event, is both manifested and resisted by Lucrece herself, because, although she connects her own fate with the "originary" rape in the Troy tale and seeks to identify Helen in the Trojan picture, she sees her not as the victim but as the whorish artisan of her own undoing. Thus Lucrece the virtuous Roman radically distinguishes herself from villainous Greek Helen, and possibly from the lure of control and authority. However reluctantly achieved, Lucrece's brief detection of Helen as her *double* and *alter ego* enables her to acknowledge the role of the Spartan queen both as *the* passive-aggressive cause of Troy's demise and as the originator of Roman power (Crewe 1990:146). Nevertheless, Helen's character is to be further displaced and rendered as ghost by the Greek arch-

villain and traitor Sinon. In her search for identifications to help her masochistically intellectualize her present degraded state, Lucrece's recognition of Sinon in the picture reveals the epitome of guilt and treachery, the artistic representation of both the victim Lucrece and the rapist Tarquin. As Crewe points out, he is the "weak […] womanishly 'fair' man, virtually the eunuch, whose only power (albeit an enormous power) is that of the smooth-spoken betrayer or rhetorical rapist who penetrates the paternal domain of Troy" (Crewe 1990:157). Nevertheless, he is also:

> […] the perfect hypocrite in whose face truth appears. For all these reasons, he is putatively the figure by whom Lucrece can be cross-represented but by whom Tarquin can also be represented, just as Ajax and Achilles cross-represent each other when Lucrece says of them that "the face of either ciphered either's heart" (1396). (Crewe 1990:157)

In this game of cross-representations, Helen is the origin and the source of destruction, her shadow looming over and menacingly determining coming events, the curse that plagues future histories, both personal and national. In *The Rape of Lucrece*, rape qualifies the victim as culprit, especially, I would argue, in the light of Lucrece's final act. Although declared innocent by husband and father, who go as far as to compete in expressing their loss and sorrow Lucrece ends her own life. In so doing, she rewrites Helen's destiny as possible rape victim who nevertheless decided to go on living. Thus, Lucrece's final act undoes the possibility of reading her character as similar to Helen's. Instead, Helen becomes both demon and ghost, in spite of the fact that she may still appear replaceable by more 'convincing' traitors such as Sinon. Thus, in opting to become the scapegoat herself, Lucrece provides the only satisfactory closure to Helen's

narrative, since Helen has always escaped the fate of the scapegoat and consistently refused to die. In Maguire's words:

> Ethics are not relevant to Helen's ontology […] She is slippage: woman and goddess, the beautiful and the monstrous, absence and presence. She cannot be killed, because she was never alive in any normal way. Helen is an ontological problem the scapegoat tries to resolve through an ethical problem. (Maguire 2009: 135)

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare passes judgment on the many versions of the Troy legend. Through many twists, disorderings and inversions of the well-known tale, he exposes "the lack of authenticity in a legend which exists only to bequeath authoritative origins" (James 1997:89). Among many other changes in the way the original heroes are represented, the route to origins is metonymically expressed through the character of Helen. In Shakespeare's play, Helen is by turns ridiculed, has her beauty ironically assessed, and is blamed for her role in the fall of Troy. As a character, she becomes the alter ego of the unfaithful Cressida and the focus of Troilus' thoughts about the futility of war and marriage; his address to both Greeks and Trojans: "Helen must needs be fair / When with your blood you daily paint her thus" (Shakespeare 1980:1.1.90-1), coupled with his dreamed analogy of taking a wife (2.2.62), bear witness to an ambivalence which has its correspondent in Helen's own duality.

As previously mentioned, in Shakespeare's play Helen is called to negotiate between praise, legendary dignity and parody. As Cole argues, in the scene where Pandarus eulogizes Helen's sublime beauty, he does so in a parodic way and thus erases the main aim of the sonneteer's art by simultaneously affirming and denying Helen's aesthetic function (Cole

1974:135): “Fair be you, my lord, and to all this fair company; fair desires in all fair measure fairly guide them - / especially to you, fair queen: fair thoughts be/your fair pillow! (3.1.42-5). Helen of Troy is further commodified to please, and reduced to a common, trivial “Nell”, perhaps in order to satisfy a certain Elizabethan taste for the low and the vulgar. As Nell, she gleefully participates in her own debasement and further inflames the jesting atmosphere by challenging Pandarus to sing a love song. When he duly obliges, the love song rapidly metamorphoses into a “parody of orgasm”, the kind of love that will “undo” Paris and Helen as legendary figures (James 1997:94).

Yet parody is duly relegated to the margins of the play in the following scene, in which Helen and Paris are left on their own. In asking for her support to “unarm our Hector” (Shakespeare 1980:3.1.146) by using her “white enchanting fingers” (Shakespeare 1980:3.1.147), Paris reaffirms her powers and her decisive role in the legend of Troy. There are, therefore, two Helens in *Troilus and Cressida*, or to put it another way, there is a “Nell” and a “Helen of Troy”, a Helen and her double, both actively engaged in making and unmaking the legend of Troy. Nevertheless, although Shakespeare has Paris restore Helen as an epic figure of the utmost significance, he is merely constructing a simulacrum of Helen’s agency; in none of the many versions of the Trojan War story was Helen able to prevent Hector from donning his armor and march towards his death.

However satisfying this Shakespearean rendering of Helen’s ambivalence may seem at a cursory glance, especially in view of its almost postmodernist playfulness, it nevertheless supports a view of Helen as *the* factor responsible for the fall of a civilization, as the demonic ghost forever doomed to replicate her destructive purposes. As argued by Rabkin:

"Instead of trying to revitalize the tradition, the play stages the conversion of its characters into tropes and dead metaphors" (Rabkin 1969:265). Moreover, whereas warriors and lovers appear to begin the play, at the end they are appropriated by "Elizabethan by-words, including 'merrygreek' and 'base' or 'honest Trojan' for bullies, *whores*, johns and pimps" (James 1997:96, my emphasis). Helen, the archetypal *whore*, could hope for no better reinforcement.

3. Conclusion

I would like to conclude by revising the duality of "Helen's ghost tradition" by drawing on the various OED definitions of the word *ghost*. The first and fourth meanings of the word dwell on its etymology in a German word **(***geist* = *Spirit*, the soul or spirit, any inspiring or dominating principle, as the principle of life, a person). This, as I have argued, would be what all the ancients who aimed at exonerating Helen achieved by depicting her as the very generator of historical meanings. For Marlowe and Shakespeare, Helen as *ghost* (the OED's seventh meaning) is a spectre, an apparition of the dead, a revenant, the dead returned to a kind of spectral existence, the double, the demon, and the succubus.

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