Helen in Ovid and Euripides: An Analysis of Textual Phantoms

While writing his *Heroides*, a series of letters written by abandoned women to the men who left them, Ovid incorporated intentional allusions to his Greek source material, frequently previous epics or tragedies. The content and linguistic choices of *Heroides* 12, Medea's letter to Jason, has already been analyzed by comparing it to Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* and Euripides' *Medea*. When looking at the influence of *Medea* on the *Heroides*, many have noted that her letter resembles the nurse's opening monologue (Bessone, 1997; Hinds, 1993; Knox, 1986). So far, *Heroides* 17, Helen's letter to Paris, has not been thoroughly compared to Euripides' *Helen* in its theme and word choices. Most of the scholarship on this letter so far has focused on the Homeric source material, but this paper will investigate the references that Ovid makes to Euripides' play in *Heroides* 17.

The intertextuality with Euripides' *Helen*, however, while incorporating aspects of the opening monologue, also involves themes and word choice. For example, both Euripides' and Ovid's Helens are focused on their reputation (*Helen* 66, 135, 253-514; *Heroides* 17.17, 68, 149) particularly how they are perceived by all of Greece (*Helen* 79; *Heroides* 17.209-211). Additionally, this can be seen on the level of word choice. To tell the news of Helen's so-called adultery, Euripides uses βάξις (224), which is roughly equivalent to Ovid's *fama* (17.17) and typically is used of bad news (Allan, 2008, p. 176). Ovid also reinterprets other characters' actions for Helen. At the very end of the play, Theoklymenos says that noble judgement is not within all women "καὶ χαίρεθ᾽ Ἑλένης οὕνεκ᾽ εὐγενεστάτης/ γνώμης, ὃ πολλαῖς ἐν γυναιξὶν οὐκ

ἔνι" (1686-7), which is reflected in *Heroides* 17.41 in the phrase "matronaque rara pudica est". Ovid continues this reinterpretation with other characters. Paris, in *Heroides* 16, when he is writing to Helen, claims her as his wife because she was promised to him (16.35, 85-6, 115). His behavior is a reflection of Theoklymenos' behavior in Euripides' *Helen*, who claims that Helen is his wife "ἡμῶν ἄλοχον" before she can even 'bury' Menelaus (1278).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the *Helen* is the existence of the Helen phantom, which Euripides calls an εἴδωλον or a δόκησις. This is certainly picked up in Ovid. Δόκησις comes from the verb δοκέω, which is equivalent to the Latin *video*, allowing all sight words in *Heroides* 17 to be loaded. Since Helen's later takes place before her phantom could appear, these cannot be used for herself, but Helen discusses her conception with these words. She says that Zeus came to Leda "falsa sub imagine" (17.43) and then, most remarkably, compares this to her own situation: "nec ullus/ error qui facti crimen obumbret erit" (17.47-8). Like Zeus approaches Leda with a false pretense, Paris comes to Helen as a guest when he is really a suitor. Leda's *error* was excused because the agent was Zeus, but Helen cannot claim this same exemption. Running off with Paris would certainly destroy her reputation. Her word choice here, however, is the most striking: *obumbret*, related to *umbra*, shade or phantom. Leda's union with Zeus was false in the same way that Helen's was with Paris in Euripides' *Helen*, and the uncertainty that Helen expresses about these two events is parallel all while recalling the false, phantom Helen. These connections illustrate that Ovid is using Euripides' *Helen* as much as he is using Homer.

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