I. First Stasimon

[Strophe 1]
Amid the trees’ deep tresses you trill your songs;
I call to you now, in your green concert hall,
bird of sorrow,
O nightingale, loveliest singer,
bard of lonely tears:
come take your place here by my side;
as the melody melts in your golden throat,
sing with me—we will both lament
the struggles and woes
of Helen, and the tearful fate of Troy’s women
when their city fell beneath Achaean spears,
thanks to the rover who dipped his barbarian oar
in the rushing gray waves, and came
bringing woe to the sons of Priam—
bringing you, Helen,
his bride from Lacedaemon
Paris, whose marriage was poison,
escorted by Aphrodite.

[Antistrophe 1]
So many Greeks were killed, in a rain of spears
and boulders thrown through the air; their souls sank
down to Hades.
Their wives, all alone in their bedrooms,
cut their hair in grief.
So many Greeks gave up their lives
off the coast of Euboea, deceived by false
beacons set by a lone Greek boat:
a fraudulent star
that dashed them on the rocks of Cape Caphareus,
smashed their ships to fragments on Aegean crags.
This man was driven to woeful barbarian shores,
to harborless landfalls, blown
far away from his home by the storm-winds;
this man, Menelaus,
brought back his prize on shipboard—
she was no prize, she was trouble:  
a phantom contrived by Hera.

[Strophe 2 ]

What is and isn’t god, and what’s in-between—
what mortal can say? Human inquiry
reaches its limit as soon as it finds
the ways of the gods cannot be predicted:
they jump around crazily,
constantly changing their course,
bringing fortunes nobody has foreseen.
O Helen, you’re the daughter of Zeus,
who came to Leda as a bird.
And yet throughout Hellas they call you unjust,
a betrayer, impious, faithless wife.
I have never heard a single syllable
spoken by mortals about the gods
that I would call credible.

[Antistrophe 2 ]

All you who strive for excellence, fighting wars
with valorous spears, have you lost your minds?
Seeking release from your struggles in death!
If all things are settled by bloodshed and battles
then trouble will never
be gone from the cities of men.
Many men lie buried in Priam’s land,
O Helen, when they could have resolved
the trouble over you with words.
Instead they are settled in Hades; the walls
of their town were scarred by a killing flame
like the swift bright flame of lightning hurled by Zeus.
And you’ve had your share of disaster, grief,
and pitiful suffering.

II. Second Stasimon

[Strophe 1]

The gods’ mountain Mother
once upon a time
raced through woodlands and glades,
waded the streams of rivers,
traversed the resonant salt sea waves
in longing for her daughter
whose name may not be spoken.
The cymbals crashed and the air rang
with a shrill vibration
when she had yoked wild beasts to her carriage
and rode out to uncover the theft of her daughter
who was snatched from the circling chorus of maidens.
Rushing right after her came the two goddesses,
their feet swift as whirlwinds:
Artemis with her arrows,
Athena, Fierce-Eyed, with her spear
and battle armor.
But Zeus, as he watched from the sky, brought about
a fate for the girl that was very different.

[Antistrophe 1]

Exhausted, the Mother
who’d wandered for so long
called a halt to her chase,
gave up the race and lay down
on Ida’s palisades swathed in snow
where nymphs keep watch. In sorrow
amid the rocks and snowdrifts
she flung herself in a thicket,
helpless in the face of
the underhanded theft of her daughter.
From the fields of mankind she withdrew the rich harvest;
from the flocks she withheld the leaves and green tendrils.
People were perishing, cities were withering,
the altars were empty:
no batter-cakes, no thigh-bones
were laid on the flames for the gods.
She stopped the waters
that once flowed in crystalline springs from the ground,
so broken was she by her dreadful sorrow.

[Strophe 2]

When Deo had put an end to banquets
for the gods and the race of men
Zeus tried to soothe the hateful rage
of the Mother; he spoke
to the Graces and Muses:
“Go, relieve the grieving
Goddess of her anger
over her stolen maiden
by wailing in your wildest voice,
by singing as you dance.”
The earthy voice of bronze
and drums made of stretched hide
were first taken up by the loveliest deity,
Cypris; at last, then, the Goddess
laughed as she grasped in her hands
the resonant aulos
and took some delight in its wild, wailing voice.

[Antistrophe 2]

It wasn’t correct, it wasn’t holy
what you did in that inner space.
You have incurred the fearsome wrath
of the Mother, my child,
by neglecting her worship.
There’s tremendous power
in wearing dappled fawn-skin,
weaving a crown of ivy
around a sacred fennel stalk,
and whirling overhead
the circling bullroarer;
in hair flying freely
at revels for Bromius, and in the festivals
lasting all night for the Goddess.
When the moon rode overhead,
her chariot climbing
the sky, you exulted in beauty alone.

III. Third Stasimon

[Strophe 1]

Swift Phoenician ship, O craft of Sidon,
the waves of Nereus rush to embrace you
O leader of dances
as the circling dolphins respond to your song
in lovely array when the wind has died down
and Galaneia
the pale-eyed daughter of Pontus, speaks these words:
“Let your sails hang down; there is no more breeze.
Take the oars up in your hands
O sailors, sailors, send
Helen home, to reach the pleasant harbor,
the shores she left long ago,
the city that Perseus founded."

[Antistrophe 1]
There beside the waters of the river
or by the temple of Pallas, at long last
the festival dances
and Leucippus’s daughters will welcome her home,
perhaps at the revels that gladden the night
for Hyacinthus
whom Phoebus once, when the discus left his hand,
killed—the endless wheel made a fatal strike.
Then the son of Zeus decreed
for the Laconians
cattle-sacrifice, a day of feasting.
There Helen will find her child,
herself still at home, still unmarried.

[Strophe 2]
If I had wings I would go flying through the aether
where Libyan birds soar high above in formation,
keeping time with the syrinx-song of their leader,
who guides them beyond
the wintery storms
and calls out as he glides over lands with no rainfall
and fields rich with fruit.
O long-necked flyers,
companions of racing clouds,
set your course by the Pleiades, fly straight
through the night, past Orion.
Touch down by Eurotas, tell them the news:
Menelaus destroyed the Dardanian town,
and he’s on his way back home.

[Antistrophe 2]
Sons of Tyndareos, who dwell beneath the brilliance
of whirling stars in the sky, come leap through the aether
on your steeds, come and be the saviors of Helen:
ride over the pale
salt waves of the sea,
ride above the blue swells and the rushing gray breakers,
and bring gentle winds
from Zeus to sailors.
Come rescue your sister now
from the charge of barbarian marriage that began with the conflict on Ida, though Helen never set foot on the shoreline of Troy, and she never laid eyes on the towers that Phoebus built.


Commentary:

Euripides composed his play Helen in 412 BCE; he was in his late sixties, and had been producing plays in Athens for more than four decades. Late in his career, Euripides’ work became freer and more experimental, with fantastic plots, musical innovations, and greater metrical variety and flexibility. Greek tragedies were composed entirely in verse (spoken or chanted) and song. The Chorus sang and danced to the accompaniment of the aulos, a double-reed pipe whose piercing sound is often compared to an oboe’s. The aulos-player, the only performer who appeared without a mask, also served as a kind of conductor to the Chorus.

The most formally elaborate songs were the choral odes, or stasima. These were written in pairs of stanzas—strophes and antistrophes—that matched each other rhythmically. The metrical repetition from strophe to antistrophe was reinforced by the melody and by the Chorus’ dance movements. Using a traditional technique of Greek choral poetry, Euripides often places sound-echoes or strategic thematic repetitions in the same metrical spot in strophe and antistrophe; for example, in the First Stasimon, Euripides closes each of the first two stanzas with a rhythmically-matching phrase that points to the agency of a goddess: “escorted by Aphrodite” at the end of strophe 1, “a phantom contrived by Hera” at the end of antistrophe 1. In the Second Stasimon, Euripides places the word “Mother” (for the goddess Demeter) in matching spots in both pairs of stanzas (at the beginning of strophe and antistrophe 1, and the fourth line of strophe and antistrophe 2), and the phrase “the Goddess” in the same metrical spot in strophe and antistrophe 2 (the fourth line from the end of each). In the Third Stasimon, the word “dances” (chorois in Greek) appears in the same spot in strophe and antistrophe 1.

Euripides’ Helen departs from the usual account of the Trojan War and takes as its premise the alternative story that the real Helen of Sparta never went to Troy; in order to sabotage Aphrodite’s promise to the Trojan Paris that he could have Helen, the goddess Hera made a phantom Helen and gave the phantom to Paris. The real Helen was whisked away by Hermes to Egypt, where she has been all this time; Greeks and Trojans fought for ten years over the phantom. Menelaus finds Helen in Egypt on his way home from Troy; after some confusion, husband and wife have a joyful reunion. Helen can’t simply go home with Menelaus, though, because the king of Egypt is pursuing Helen and planning to marry her, and he will kill any Greek who sets foot on his shores. So Helen and Menelaus come up with a clever plan to steal a ship and escape, and at the end of the play they are sailing safely home to
Greece together, escorted by Helen’s brothers, the heavenly twins Castor and Polydeuces (“Sons of Tyndareos”).

The songs of Helen refer to music and dance repeatedly. The First Stasimon begins with the Chorus calling on the nightingale to sing a sorrowful song with them as they recall the pointless deaths of the Trojan War. The Second Stasimon tells the story of Demeter (here called Deo) searching for her abducted daughter. Zeus sends her consolation in the form of ecstatic music, of the type associated with rituals of the eastern mother-goddess Cybele and of Dionysus (Bromius). The ode seems to end with a reproach of Helen, but the Greek text is corrupt at both the beginning and the end of the second antistrophe, and the meaning is uncertain. In the Third Stasimon the Chorus sings joyfully of Helen and Menelaus’ escape: dolphins dance around them as they sail home; music and dance will greet them when they return home to Sparta; birds sing high overhead.
Greek Text:

I. First Stasimon

[Strophe 1]

σὲ τὰν ἐναύλοις ὑπὸ δενδροκόμοις
μουσεῖα καὶ θάκους ἐνί-
ζουσαν ἀναβοάσω,
σὲ τὰν ἀοιδοτάταν ὄρνιθα μελῳδὸν
ἀηδόνα δακρυόεσσαν,
ἔλθ᾽ ὦ διὰ ξουθᾶν
γενύων ἔλελιζομένα
θρήνων ἐμοὶ ξυνεργός,
Ἑλένας μελέας
πόνους
τὸν Ἰλιάδων τ᾽ ἀει-
δούσα δακρυόεντα πότμον
Ἀχαιῶν ὑπὸ λόγχαις:
ὁτ᾽ ἔδραμε ῥόθια πολιὰ
βαρβάρῳ πλάτᾳ
ὃς ἔμολεν ἔμολε
μέλεα Πριαμίδαις
ἄγων
Λακεδαίμονος ἀνήρ
ὅτ᾽ ἔσυτο πατρίδος
ἀποπρὸ
γέρας,
οὐ γέρας ἀλλ᾽ ἔριν,
Δαναῶν Μενέλας ἐπὶ ναυσίν ἂγων,
εἰδωλόν ἱερόν Ἡρας.

1110

1115

1120

[Antistrophe 1]

πολλοὶ δ᾽ Ἀχαιῶν δορὶ καὶ πετρίναις
ριταῖσιν ἐκπνεύσαντες Ἀι-
δαν μέλεαν ἔχουσιν,
ταλαινάν ἀλόχων κεῖται:
ἀνυμφα δὲ μέλαθρα
πολλοὺς δὲ πυρσεῦσας
φλογερὸν σέλας
Αἰγαίαις ἐμβαλὼν
Εὔβοιαν εἷλ᾽ Ἀχαιῶν
μονόκωπος ἂγων
πέτραις
Καφηρίσιν ἐμβαλὼν
Αἰγαίαις ἐνάλοις
δόλιον

1125

1130

1135
[Strophe 2]

ὅτι θεός ἢ μὴ θεός ἢ τὸ μέσον,
tίς φησ’ ἔρευνήςας βροτῶν;
μακρότατον πέρας ήπτερν ὁς τὰ θεῶν ἔσορά
δεύρο καὶ αὐθίς εἶκεισε
καὶ πάλιν ἀντιλόγοις
πηδώντ’ ἀνελπίστοις τύχαις.
σὺ Διὸς ἔφυς, ὦ Ἑλένα, θυγάτηρ:
ππανός γὰρ ἐν κόλποις σε Λή-
δας ἐτέκνωσε πατήρ.
κατ’ ἱαχήθης καθ’ Ἐλλανίαν
προδότις ἀπιστος ἀδίκος ἀθεος: οὐδ’ ἔχω ὃ τι σαφές, ὃ τι ποτ’ ἐν βροτοῖς τῶν θεῶν
ἔπος ἀλαθές εὐρώ.

[Antistrophe 2]

ἄφρονες ὦσοι τὰς ἀρετὰς πολέμω
λόγχαισι τ’ ἀλκαίου δορὸς
κτάθ, ἀμαθῶς θανάτῳ πόνους καταλυόμενοι.
εἰ γὰρ ἀμιλλα κρινεὶ νιν
ἀἴματος, οὔπτοτ’ ἔρις
λείψει κατ’ ἀνθρώπων πόλεις:
ἄ Πριαμίδος γάς ἔλαχον θαλάμους,
ἐξὸν τιρεῖσαι λόγοις
σὰν ἔριν, ὦ Ἑλένα.

νῦν δ’ οἱ μὲν Ἀιδα μελόνται κάτω,
teίχεα δε φλαγμός ὡστε Διὸς ἐπέσυτο φλόξ,
ἐπὶ δε πάθεια φέρεις ἀθλία
συμφοραῖς ἐλεινοῖς.

II. Second Stasimon

[Strophe 1]

Ὅρεια ποτὲ δρομάδι κώ-
λω μάτηρ θεών ἐσύθη ἀν’
ὐλάεντα νάπη
ποτάμιον τε χεῦμ’ ὑδάτων
βαρύβρομον τε κῦμ’ ἄλιον
πόθῳ τὰς ἀποιχομένας ἀρρήτου κούρας. 
κρόταλα δὲ βρόμια διαπρύσιον ἵεντα κέλαδον ἀνεβόα, 
θηρῶν ὑπὲρ ζυγίους 
ζευξάσᾳ θεᾶ σατίνας 
τάν ἄρπασθείσαν κυκλίων 
χορῶν ἐξω παρθενίων 
μετὰ κούραν, ἀελλόποδες, 
ά μὲν τόξοις Ἀρτεμίσι, ἀ δ᾽ 
ἐγχεῖ Γοργώπις πάνοπλος, 
συνείποντο. Ζεὺς δ᾽ ἐδράνων 
αὐγάζων ἐξ οὐρανίων 
ἄλλαν μοίραν ἔκραινε.

[Antistrophe 1]

δρομαῖον δ᾽ ὑπὲρ πολυπλάνη-
τον μάτηρ ἔπαισε πόνον, 
μαστεύουσα † πόνους † 
θυγατρός ἄρπαστα δολίους, 
χιονοθρέμμον τοίν παρθενίων 
μετὰ κούραν, ἀαὐγάζων 
ἐπέρασ᾽ Ἰδαιᾶν Νυμφᾶν 
κυκλίων ἄλλαν 
χιονόθρέμμον δ᾽ ἐγχεῖ 
Ἀρτεμίσι, ἀ δ᾽ 
ἔγχει Γοργώπις πάνοπλος, 
συνείποντο. Ζεὺς δ᾽ ἐδράνων 
αὐγάζων ἐξ οὐρανίων 
ἄλλαν μοίραν ἔκραινε.

[Strophe 2]

ἐπεὶ δ᾽ ἔπαισε εἰλαπίνας 
θεοῖς βροτεῖω τε γένει, 
Ζεὺς μειλίσσαν στυγίων 
Ματρὸς ὀργὰς ἐνέπει.
βάτε, σεμναὶ Χάριτες, ἵτε, τὰ περὶ παρθένω
Δηοὶ θυμωσαμένα λύπαν ἐξαλλάξατ᾽ ἀλαλᾶ,
Μοῦσαι θ᾽ ὑμνοισι χορῶν. χαλκοῦ δ᾽ αὐδὰν χθόνιαν
τῦπανά τ᾽ ἠλαβὴ βυρσοτενὴ καλλίστα τότε πρώτα μακάρων Κύπρις: γέλασέν δε θεὰ
dέξατό τ᾽ ἐς χέρας βαρύβρομον αὐλὸν
tερφθείᾳ ἀλαλαγμῷ.

[Antistrophe 2]

† ὃν οὐ θέμις σ᾽ οὔθ᾽ ὡσία ἐπύρωσας ἐν θαλάμοις, †
μὴν ἕξα χαλκοῦσι μεγάλας Ματρός, ὡ παῖ, θυσίας
οὐ σἐβίζουσα θεὰς. μέγα τοι δύναται νεβρῶν
παμποίκιλοι στολίδες κισσοῦ τε στεφθεῖσα χλόα
νάρθηκας εἰς ἱεροῖς, ρόμβου θ᾽ εἰλισσομένα κύκλιος ἔνοσις αἴθερία,
βακχεύουσά τ᾽ ἐθείρα Βρομὶ ω καὶ πανυχίδες θεὰς.
† εὖ δὲ νῖν ἅμασιν υπέρβαλε σελάνα †
μορφῆ μόνον ηὔχεις.

III. Third Stasimon

[Strophe 1]

Φοίνισσα Σιδωνιᾶς ὡ ταχεῖα κώπα, ροθίοισι μάτηρ
eἰρεσία φίλα, χοραγὲ τῶν καλλιχόρων
dελφίνων, ὅταν αὐραίς
πέλαγος ἀνήνεμον ἥ, γλαυκά δὲ Πόντου θυγάτηρ
Γαλάνεια τάδ᾽ εἶπή:
kατὰ μὲν ἰστία πετάσατ᾽ αὖ-
ρας λιπόντες εἰναλίας,
λάβετε δ᾽ εἰλατίνας πλάτας,
ὡ ναῦται, ναῦται,
πέμπτοντες εὐλιμένους
Περσείων οἴκων Ἐλέναν ἐπ᾽ ἀκτάς.

[Antistrophe 1]

ἡ που κόρας ἀν ποταμοῦ
παρ᾽ οἶδμα Λευκιππίδας ἦ πρὸ ναοῦ
Παλλάδος ἀν λάβοι
χρόνω ξυνελθοῦσα χοροῖς
ἡ κύμοις ὶνακίνθου
νύχιον ἐς εὐφροσύναν,
ἄν εξαμιλησάμενος
τροχῶ τέρμονα δίσκου
ἐκανε Φοῖβος, τὰ Λακαί-
να γὰ βούθυτον ἀμέραν
ὁ Διὸς ἐπε σέβειν γόνος:
μόσχον ἦ ἄν ἄ λιποιτ᾽ οἴκοις ἄ
ὡς οὐτώ πεῦκαι πρὸ γάμων ἔλαμμαν.

[Strophe 2]

δι᾽ ἀναίθερος εἰθε ποτανοὶ
γενοἵμεθ᾽ ὅτα Λιβύας
οίμωνοι στοχάδες
ὁμπρὸν λιποῦσαι χειμέριον
νίσσονται πρεσβυτάτου
σύριγγι πειθόμεναι
ποιμένος, ὃς ἄβροχα πεδία καρποφόρα τε γάς
ἐπιπετόμενος ἱαχεῖ.
ὡ πταναι δολιαὔχενες,
σύννομοι νεφέων δρόμου,
βάτε Πλειάδας ὑπὸ μέσας
Ὀρίωνα τ᾽ ἐννύχιον:
καρύζοτ᾽ ἀγγελίαν,
Εὐρώταν ἐφεζόμεναι,
Μενέλεως ὃτι Δαρδάνου
πὸλιν ἐλὼν δόμον ἦξεί.
[Antistrophe 2]

μόλοιτε ποθ’ ἵππιον οἶμον
δι’ αἰθέρος ἰέμενοι
παῖδες Τυνδαρίδαι,
λαμπρῶν ἀστρων ὑπ’ ἀέλλαισιν:
οἳ ναίετ’ οὐράνιοι,
σωτήρε τάς Ἑλένας,
γλαυκόν ἔπιτ’ οἴδαμεν κυανόχροα τε κυμάτων
ῥόθια πολιὰ θαλάσσας,
ναύταις εὐαεῖς ἀνέμων
πέμποντες Διὸθεν πνοάς:
δύσκλειαν δ’ ἀπὸ συγγόνου
βάλετε βαρβάρων λεχέων,
ἀν ᾗ δαίων ἑρίδων
ποιναθεῖσ’ ἐκτήσατο, γάν
οὐκ ἔλθοῦσά ποτ’ Ἰλίου
Φοιβείους ἐπὶ πύργους.

1495

1500

1505

1510