

Three Songs from Euripides' *Helen*

Translation and Commentary: Diane Aranson Svarlien

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: 1180
 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 1185
 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, 1190
 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 1195
 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 1200
 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, 1205
 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: 1210
 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: 1215

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. 1220

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. 1225

[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 1230
 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 1235
 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 1380
 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 1385
 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, 1390
 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 1395
 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 1400
 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; 1405
 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. 1410
 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 1415
 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 1420

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 1425
 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. 1430

[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. 1435
 There's tremendous power
 in wearing dappled fawn-skin,
 weaving a crown of ivy
 around a sacred fennel stalk,
 and whirling overhead 1440
 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, 1445
 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 1535
 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. 1540
 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.” 1545

[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 1550
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 1555
cattle-sacrifice, a day of feasting.
There Helen will find her child,
her calf 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, 1560
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. 1565
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: 1570
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: 1575
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. 1580
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 1585
 on the towers that Phoebus built.

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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” (*choroís* 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 ἀναβοάσῳ,
 σὲ τὰν ἀοιδοτάταν ὄρνιθα μελωδὸν
 ἀηδόνα δακρυόεσσαν, 1110
 ἔλθ' ὦ διὰ ξουθᾶν
 γενύων ἐλελιζομένα
 θρήνων ἐμοὶ ξυνεργός,
 Ἑλένας μελέας πόνους
 τὸν Ἰλιάδων τ' αἰ-
 δούσα δακρυόεντα πότμον 1115
 Ἀχαιῶν ὑπὸ λόγχαις:
 ὅτ' ἔδραμε ρόθια πολιά βαρβάρῳ πλάτα
 ὅς ἐμολεν ἔμολε μέλεα Πριαμίδαις ἄγων
 Λακεδαίμονος ἄπο λέχεα
 σέθεν, ὦ Ἑλένα, Πάρις αἰνόγαμος 1120
 πομπάσιιν Ἀφροδίτας.

[Antistrophe 1]

πολλοὶ δ' Ἀχαιῶν δορὶ καὶ πετρίναις
 ῥιπαῖσιν ἐκπνεύσαντες Ἄι-
 δαν μέλεον ἔχουσιν,
 ταιναῖν ἀλόχων κείραντες ἔθειραν:
 ἄνυμφα δὲ μέλαθρα κεῖται: 1125
 πολλοὺς δὲ πυρσεύσας
 φλογερὸν σέλας ἀμφιρύτον
 Εὐβοίαν εἴλ' Ἀχαιῶν
 μονόκωπος ἀνὴρ πέτραις
 Καφηρίσιν ἐμβαλὼν
 Αἰγαίαις ἐνάλοις δόλιον 1130
 ἀκταῖς ἀστέρα λάμπας.
 ἀλίμενα δ' ὄρια μέλεα βαρβάρου στολᾶς
 τοτ' ἔστυο πατρίδος ἀποπρὸ χειμάτων πνοᾶ
 γέρας, οὐ γέρας ἀλλ' ἔριν,
 Δαναῶν Μενέλας ἐπὶ ναυσὶν ἄγων, 1135
 εἰδῶλον ἱερὸν Ἦρας.

[Strophe 2]

ὅ τι θεὸς ἢ μὴ θεὸς ἢ τὸ μέσον,
 τίς φησ' ἔρευνησας βροτῶν;
 μακρότατον πέρασ ἤυρεν
 ὃς τὰ θεῶν ἔσορᾷ 1140
 δεῦρο καὶ αὐτίς ἐκεῖσε
 καὶ πάλιν ἀντιλόγοις
 πηδῶντ' ἀνελπίστοις τύχαις.
 σὺ Διὸς ἔφυς, ὦ Ἑλένα, θυγάτηρ:
 πτανὸς γὰρ ἐν κόλποις σε Λή- 1145
 δας ἐτέκνωσε πατήρ.
 κᾶτ' ἰαχήθης καθ' Ἑλλανίαν
 προδοτὶς ἀπιστος ἄδικος ἄθεος: οὐδ' ἔχω
 ὅ τι σαφές, ὅ τι ποτ' ἐν βροτοῖς τῶν θεῶν
 ἔπος ἀλαθὲς εὔρω. 1150

[Antistrophe 2]

ἄφρονες ὅσοι τὰς ἀρετὰς πολέμῳ
 λόγχαισί τ' ἄλκαίου δορὸς
 κτᾶσθ, ἀμαθῶς θανάτῳ πόνους καταλυόμενοι.
 εἰ γὰρ ἄμιλλα κρινεῖ νιν
 αἵματος, οὐποτ' ἔρις 1155
 λείψει κατ' ἀνθρώπων πόλεις;
 ἄ Πριαμίδος γὰρ ἔλαχον θαλάμους,
 ἐξὸν διορθῶσαι λόγοις
 σὰν ἔριν, ὦ Ἑλένα. 1160
 νῦν δ' οἱ μὲν Ἴδια μέλονται κάτω,
 τείχεα δὲ φλογμὸς ὥστε Διὸς ἐπέεστο φλόξ,
 ἐπὶ δὲ πάθεα πάθεσι φέρεις ἀθλία
 συμφοραῖς ἐλεινοῖς.

II. Second Stasimon

[Strophe 1]

Ὅρεία ποτὲ δρομάδι κώ-
 λω μάτηρ θεῶν ἐσύθη ἀν'
 ὑλάεντα νάπη
 ποτάμιόν τε χεῦμ' ὑδάτων
 βαρύβρομόν τε κύμ' ἄλιον 1305

πόθῳ τᾶς ἀποιοχόμενας
 ἀρρήτου κούρας.
 κρόταλα δὲ βρόμια διαπρύσιον
 ἰέντα κέλαδον ἀνεβόα,
 θηρῶν ὅτε ζυγίους 1310
 ζευξάσα θεᾶ σατίνας
 τὰν ἀρπασθεῖσαν κυκλίων
 χορῶν ἔξω παρθενίων
 μετὰ κούραν, ἀελλόποδες,
 ἃ μὲν τόξοις Ἄρτεμις, ἃ δ' 1315
 ἔγχει Γοργώπις πᾶνοπλος,
 συνεῖποντο. Ζεὺς δ' ἐδράνων
 αὐγάζων ἔξ οὐρανίων
 ἄλλαν μοῖραν ἔκραινε.

[Antistrophe 1]

ὄρομαῖον δ' ὅτε πολυπλάνη-
 τον μάτηρ ἔπαυσε πόνον, 1320
 μαστεύουσα † πόνους †
 θυγατρὸς ἀρπαγᾶς δολίους,
 χιονοθρέμμονάς γ' ἐπέρασ'
 Ἰδαῖαν Νυμφᾶν σκοπιᾶς:
 ῥίπτει τ' ἐν πένθει 1325
 πέτρινα κατὰ ὄρια πολυνηφέα:
 βροτοῖσι δ' ἄγλοα πεδία γᾶς
 οὐ καρπίζουσ' ἀρότοις
 λαῶν δὲ φθεῖρει γενεάν:
 ποιμναις δ' οὐχ ἴει θαλερὰς 1330
 βοσκὰς εὐφύλλων ἐλίκων,
 πόλεων δ' ἀπέλειπε βίος:
 οὐδ' ἦσαν θεῶν θυσίαι,
 βωμοῖς δ' ἀφλεκτοὶ πέλαντοι:
 πηγᾶς δ' ἀμπαύει δροσερὰς 1335
 λευκῶν ἐκβάλλειν ὑδάτων
 πένθει παιδὸς ἀλάστω.

[Strophe 2]

ἐπεὶ δ' ἔπαυσ' εἰλαπίνας
 θεοῖς βροτείῳ τε γένει,
 Ζεὺς μειλίσσων στυγίους
 Ματρὸς ὀργᾶς ἐνέπει: 1340

βᾶτε, σεμναὶ Χάριτες,
 ἴτε, τᾶ περι παρθένω
 Δηοῖ θυμωσαμένα
 λύπαν ἐξαλλάξατ' ἀλαλᾶ,
 Μοῦσαι θ' ὕμνοισι χορῶν. 1345
 χαλκοῦ δ' αὐδὰν χθονίαν
 τύπανά τ' ἔλαβε βυρσοτενῆ
 καλλίστα τότε πρῶτα μακά-
 ρων Κύπρις: γέλασέν δε θεὰ
 δέξατό τ' ἔς χέρας 1350
 βαρύβρομον αὐλὸν
 τερφθεῖσ' ἀλαλαγμῶ.

[Antistrophe 2]

† ὦν οὐ θέμις σ' οὔθ' ὀσία
 ἐπύρωςας ἐν θαλάμοις, †
 μῆνιν δ' ἔσχες μεγάλας 1355
 Ματρός, ὦ παῖ, θυσίας
 οὐ σεβίζουσα θεᾶς.
 μέγα τοι δύναται νεβρῶν
 παμποίκιλοι στολίδες
 κισσοῦ τε στεφθεῖσα χλόα 1360
 νάρθηκας εἰς ἱερούς,
 ῥόμβου θ' εἰλισσομένα
 κύκλιος ἔνοσις αἰθερία,
 βακχεύουσα τ' ἔθειρα Βρομί
 ω καὶ παννυχίδες θεᾶς. 1365
 † εὔ δέ νιν ἄμασιν
 ὑπέρβαλε σελάνα †
 μορφᾶ μόνον ἠὔχεις.

III. Third Stasimon

[Strophe 1]

Φοίνισσα Σιδωνιάς ὦ
 ταχεῖα κώπα, ῥοθίοισι μάτηρ
 εἰρεσία φίλα,
 χοραγὲ τῶν καλλιχόρων
 δελφίνων, ὅταν αὔραις 1455
 πέλαγος ἀνήνεμον ἦ,
 γλαυκὰ δὲ Πόντου θυγάτηρ

Γαλάνεια τάδ' εἶπη:
κατὰ μὲν ἰστία πετάσαστ' αὐ-
ρας λιπόντες εἰναλίας, 1460
λάβετε δ' εἰλατίνας πλάτας,
ὦ ναῦται, ναῦται,
πέμποντες εὐλιμένους
Περσείων οἴκων Ἑλέναν ἐπ' ἀκτάς.

[Antistrophe 1]

ἧ̃ που κόρας ἄν ποταμοῦ 1465
παρ' οἶδμα Λευκιππίδας ἦ πρὸ ναοῦ
Παλλάδος ἄν λάβοι
χρόνῳ ξυνελθοῦσα χοροῖς
ἦ κώμοις Ἰακίνθου
νύχιον ἐς εὐφροσύναν, 1470
ὄν ἐξαμιλλησάμενος
τροχῶ̃ τέρμονα δίσκου
ἔκανε Φοῖβος, τᾶ Λακαί-
να γὰ βούθυτον ἀμέραν
ὁ Διὸς εἶπε σέβειν γόνος: 1475
μόσχον θ' ἄν † λίπποιτ' οἴκοις †
ἄς οὔπω πεῦκαι πρὸ γάμων ἔλαμψαν.

[Strophe 2]

δι' αἰθέρος εἶθε ποτανοὶ
γενοίμεθ' ὅπα Λιβύας
οἰωνοὶ στοχάδες 1480
ὄμβρον λιποῦσαι χειμέριον
νίσονται πρεσβυτάτου
σύριγγι πειθόμεναι
ποιμένος, ὃς ἄβροχα πεδία καρποφόρα τε γᾶς 1485
ἐπιπετόμενος ἰαχεῖ.
ὦ̃ πταναὶ δολιχαύχενες,
σύννομοι νεφέων δρόμου,
βᾶτε Πλειάδας ὑπὸ μέσας
Ἰωρίωνά τ' ἐννύχιον: 1490
καρύξαστ' ἀγγελίαν,
Εὐρώταν ἐφεζόμεναι,
Μενέλεως ὅτι Δαρδάνου
πόλιν ἐλὼν δόμον ἦξει.

[Antistrophe 2]

μόλοιτέ ποθ' ἵππιον οἶμον	1495
δι' αἰθέρος ἰέμενοι	
παῖδες Τυνδαρίδαι,	
λαμπρῶν ἄστρον ὑπ' ἀέλλαισιν:	
οἷ ναίετ' οὐράνιοι,	
σωτήρε τᾶς Ἑλένας,	1500
γλαυκὸν ἔπιτ' οἶδμα κυανόχροά τε κυμάτων	
ρόθια πολιὰ θαλάσσας,	
ναύταις εὐαεῖς ἀνέμων	
πέμποντες Διόθεν πνοάς:	1505
δύσκειαν δ' ἀπὸ συγγόνου	
βάλετε βαρβάρων λεχέων,	
ἂν Ἰδαίων ἐρίδων	
ποιναθεῖσ' ἐκτίησατο, γᾶν	
οὐκ ἔλθοῦσά ποτ' Ἰλίου	1510
Φοιβείους ἐπὶ πύργους.	