

My Grecian Tragedy

At some point during our academic tenure, we are introduced to Greek Tragedy—or to some—tragically introduced to the Greeks. The truly tragic nature of these epic works is not the chaos, betrayal and calamity that plagues the characters, but rather that these same misfortunes haunt us still, though on a less grand and eloquent scale. I am a classicist and with that in mind, I ask you to bear with me as I regale you with the tragedies of old set in a personally modern context.

Upon reading *The Iliad*, I naturally see the poetry, mythology and the Bronze Age tactics of war, but then again so does everyone else. The one thing that stands out to me the most is the estranged relationship between the man that launched a thousand ships and the man who would see her returned to his side. All who have read this unfortunate tale, or are familiar with it to some degree know that the war started as the result of Paris claiming his prize for his Judgment, but the question of who Helen really loved remains unknown. Throughout the *Iliad*, Helen shows her discontent with Paris and openly states that she longs to be returned to Menelaus, but in the final book, during the lament over Hector's death, she fully admits to marrying Paris. Now I wonder, did, and if so, by what means did Menelaus learn of this marriage and as to why in the world a man, much less a king, reclaim a disobedient and adulterous bride after the death of her treacherous lover?

Granted he knew full well that Helen was taken and held behind the formidable walls of Troy, but he did not know whether or not this action was one of abduction, consent or divine intervention. There is a distinct possibility that Helen went along willingly to Troy. It is also feasible that Helen was opposed to her "capture" at first, but then grew to love Paris enough to marry him, or her marriage to Menelaus meant so little to her that she tossed it aside for the newfangled affections of Paris; all of which may have and probably were influenced by

Aphrodite, who is the one who promised Helen to Paris for his favor. None the less, it is very doubtful that the marriage between Helen and Paris was one of noncompliant will. It is later confirmed in the Odyssey, that Helen returned to Sparta where she reentered marriage with Menelaus. The question as to why Menelaus would actually accept Helen as his wife given her past history still remains. No answer is given to explain why the two were reconciled, but divine interference is the probable cause. This would be far from the only time that the gods actively interfered with the relationships of mortals. Divine interference aside, given Helen's promiscuous nature and tendency to elope, what is preventing her from doing so again? Can she be trusted? The answer lies in how far the betrayal has gone, and to whom it was done. It is not often found in the nature of men, let alone kings, for betrayal to go unpunished, nor ignored.

Had the gods left things alone, Menelaus probably would have killed Helen along with Paris, as was his first intention, and a justifiable one given the culture and nature of the offence. Perhaps he would have granted mercy upon her, but they would not be reunited; instead she would have been dismissed and forgotten. Even this is a light punishment for her betrayal. The act of showing mercy is not one associated with a man of Menelaus' reputation and character. Menelaus could very well have been left in the dark in respect to the actual marriage between Helen and Paris; ignorance of this magnitude would have been a blessing, for it is one thing to know that your wife is a captive to an enemy, and quite another to know that she has willingly entered his tent.

Life, much like the Tragedies, places two people into tragic situations that have a tendency to focus on relationships, and the consequences of those involved. The fates have placed me in the role of the Spartan king and it is his behalf I will speak in addition to others that I am doomed to play.

In this day in age, similar acts are committed, but usually to a smaller scale where marriage rarely enters into the equation. I am no king of Sparta, nor have I been married, but I am a man who has seen the lady of his affection run off with another, whom she actually agreed to marry. During the final weeks of the courting process, Helen was mine to be in everything except in title, which was prolonged while differences between us were made known and discussed. I abandoned my courtship for a short time to decide whether or not I could come to terms with the complications between us.

Enter Paris: One minute I am the leading suitor, the next I am vying for the affections of one already spoken for. Upon learning this information, Helen became dead to me save for the dreams which she haunts and thus remains far from forgotten. At one point during my personal war with Troy, I came into the knowledge that there was trouble in paradise and my estranged Helen. She, much like her ancient counterpart wished to repent from her eloping with Paris and return to my side.

Now the question is whether I open my arms to the long since cold dreams that are now a possibility and embrace them? Or do I continue to do as I once did, and spurn the affections of Helen who has all but knocked on my door seeking my affection, yet again? Oh, how I wish the decision could be made for me as it was made for my ancient predecessor, but alas, this decision is mine and mine alone. After a great deal of thought and time the answer that I reached was to embrace the possibilities and dreams long since passed now that they had the potential to become reality.

However the fates had other plans for me. Instead of being a modern day Menelaus, I find myself to be Aeneas, victim of a lost war searching for another place to call home. Through the course of this trial I am taken in the comfort of a purely platonic relationship with Dido, who is Helen by another name. Fate interjects and the embers of desired are flamed by the winds of

time. When I do leave her to found my empire that I have no choice but to found, I learn the pain of loss on a new level and yearn to take my beloved's place upon the sword so that she can be spared.

Time passes and eventually allows me to return to my queen who as far as I can tell still holds me in her highest affection. I have now become the other son of Atreus returning from a war to find that the one who I believed to be mine, in the arms of another, both of who conspired my death. The Helen that I had known became my Clytemenstra as did Paris evolve into Aegisthus and thus I died ensnared by the one I cared the most about, and the one who was chosen to replace me. This death brought my life full circle as I return to my original life as Menelaus. Instead of seeing my love returned to me, I have lived to see all ties I have to Helen destroyed and salted like the seemingly impenetrable walls of Troy, and the fields Carthage, where I lost love for the first and last times. All this brings me to the final question of what did I do that was so offensive to the gods that they have decreed that I live as Tantalus with what I desire most to constantly there but always out my reach no matter how hard I strive to obtain it?

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