

Foreword

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Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom, by Norman Austin, is an exquisite point of contact for myth and poetics. And there are two kinds of myth here, two kinds of poetics. On one side, we see Helen of Troy herself, whose story of shameless beauty and betrayal was widely known and accepted by ancient Hellenes as a centerpiece of their primary epic tradition, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer. Myth merges here with poetics. On the other side, however, we see—or we think we see—Helen the *Eidōlon* or “Phantom,” whose story is that there was no such story. What kind of poetics, then, can we expect to merge with this anti-myth?

The story of Helen the Phantom, like that of Helen of Troy, was widely known by Hellenes, but its mythical authority was by no means universally accepted. Made famous by the *Palinode* or “Recantation” of the lyric poet Stesichorus, the myth behind this story was local—not pan-Hellenic like the myth of Helen that became universalized by the epic poet Homer. The “truth” of this local myth, held to be sacred in various Dorian cultural enclaves, was that Helen, a sort of nature goddess, never in fact left home. Rejecting the pan-Hellenic myth, which insists that Helen shamefully left for Troy with her lover Paris, this myth that we see taking shape in the poetics of Stesichorus’ *Palinode* reacts by making Helen of Troy a fleeting image, an *Eidōlon*.

There is another myth that accompanies, like some background

musical instrument, the rejectionist poetics of Stesichorus: once upon a time, this lyric poet had sung a different tune, which accords with what the epic poet Homer sang, that Helen did indeed leave for Troy. As punishment, Stesichorus had been struck blind by the outraged goddess Helen. Once the lyric poet sings his recantation, however, he regains his vision. The implicit contrast here between ancient Greek lyric and epic poetry is striking: unlike the lyric poet Stesichorus, the epic poet Homer never recants—and he stays blind forever.

Helen's problem, both for her and for those who sing about her, is that the mythical concept of a nature goddess, whose explicit role requires her to be perpetually transferred from one mortal lover in one place to another mortal lover in another, becomes vulnerable *as a concept* once it gets exposed to narrative traditions belonging to Hellenic cultures that do not even have a cult of Helen as goddess. What is in one culture a sacred *logos* about the *enlèvement* of a goddess, with cataclysmic consequences for the cosmos, can become in another Hellenic culture the scandalous tale about the seduction of a heroine, with disastrous consequences for the political future. The Homeric tradition is synthetic enough to blend both the sacral and the desacralized dimensions of Helen, but in the end it is the image of the profane Helen that prevails. The Stesichorean tradition is also synthetic enough to accept the presence of Helen at Troy, but it insists that the profane Helen is just that, a mere image.

Norman Austin's book captures the complexities of this dual Helen, starting with the conflicting epic and lyric versions of Homer and Stesichorus and tracing the far-reaching consequences of these versions through the poetics of Sappho and the history of Herodotus all the way to the celebrated "Palinode to Eros" by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus* and the ultimately revisionist tragedy of Euripides' *Helen*. What Austin says about the latter drama can justly be applied to his own book: it is "a sympathetic treatment of the woman who because of her beauty was fated to be both one with, and separate from, her value as a sign."