

Laurence Goldstein

The Harlot Robed in War

“For Heaven never hates the noble in the end,
It is for the nameless multitude that life is hard.”
Euripides, *Helen*

Well spoken, Castor. You point the moral
and adorn, *ex machina*, the preposterous tale
rumored in Herodotus, that *la belle Hélène*
did not *really* set horns on Menelaus,
no, that was an airy double shaped by Hera
who transported the actual daughter of Zeus
to Africa, there to wait out the matter of Troy.
How Menelaus, in beggar’s rags, is reunited
with his Spartan bride, and Ulysses-like
outwits the Egyptian sovereign who covets her—
that is Euripides’ fairy-tale of the ruling class.
Has anyone ever taken this version seriously?
Even the author, in other plays, sees your sister plain
as Homer’s vain adulteress, the beauty who laid
so many warriors low, the noblest in the end.

In the heaven of art, their fame is everlasting;
these royals resume their privilege, make love
in scented sheets, replicating their kind.
But you finish your speech, starry twin,
by rightful allusion to the underclass,
the ignoble, *hoi polloi*, the grunts
unnoticed by Homer, whose skulls were crushed
under chariot wheels and whose quick burial
was unaccompanied by festive games and gifts.
“You mean,” asks Menelaus’ worn-out servant,
“It was for a cloud, for nothing, we did all that work?”
Truest and most timely line in tragedy,
it deserves truth in response: Yes, *all for*
nothing that epic war, and all its victims
dead for no reason, for the ghost of a reason.

Of the many Troys for Helen to burn

the Greek and Latin bards foresaw every one.
 Readers late as myself longed, once,
 to join the fleet and win sinful favors
 from the muse of battle: her Ledeian visage glowed
 in the text, her figura followed us to bed.
 In later years, whenever her beauty rose
 upon our gaze in movie palaces,
 brazen rationale for war against Reds or Blacks,
 we made choral speech to the unversed:
 don't be fooled, don't pledge your self to her body,
 she is no *real* incentive, no woman at all,
 a goddess of light, fantasy's phantom bride,
 piece of propaganda poured by executives of
 Universal into the lowest-cut of sky-blue gowns.

No moviegoer, no male gawker at Venus
 is a pacifist at heart; no feminist
 either, who suffers the compliment of power:
 "Frail, yet you launch a thousand ships!"
 Art checks us if we seek shelter in art:
 wised up, having read the classics,
 even the most thoroughly seduced of men
 may rise as from unmarked plots, and drift,
 with the pard-like grace of an Atreus,
 to high ground above Troy, purged
 of bloodlust, loving the lowly infantry,
 their spear-bitten limbs, their naked sex,
 their hearts' tragic untutored obedience.
 At the end of enchantment, double-tongued Castor,
 lies something purer than the Muses' spring.

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