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THE FATAL POWER OF APHRODITE?
SOME REMARKS ON THE ICONOLOGY
OF HELEN AND PARIS

Abstract: *This article focuses on the iconology of Helen and Paris on the hydria dated to the early 4th century BC in the collection of the Princes Czartoryski Foundation in Krakow.*

Keywords: *Red figure vases; vase painting; Helen; Paris*

An ambivalent attitude towards events changing the course of human fortunes, arising in part from the scale of values operating in society and in part from the subordination of life to the will of the gods, was visible as early as in Homer's *Iliad*. One such controversial case was the kidnapping of Helen by Paris, which was severely criticised by Hector as an imprudent reason for starting a war (Hom. *Il.* 3.39-57). Paris certainly did not consider himself to be in the wrong (Hom. *Il.* 156-157) and Priam comforts Helen in a similar tone; though he is aware of the consequences of the war, he also recognises human dependence on the gods (Hom. *Il.* 164-165). Helen herself also knows this as she looks down from the walls of Troy onto the Achaeans, burdened with a sense of guilt (Hom. *Il.* 173-174).

In the Classical period the belief in the possibility of starting a war over even the most beautiful woman abated (Hdt. 2.112-120; Thuc. 1.9). The secondary, political aspect of this myth – the fact that for Menelaus marriage to Helen was tantamount to taking power in Sparta and the break-up of that marriage to loss of the throne – was forgotten (Pomeroy 1985, 31). The sole *spiritus movens* of the story was the machinations of the gods, as is reflected in the production of the drama *Helen* staged during the 412 BC Dionysia. Euripides took as his theme one already used

by Stesichoros in *Palinode* (Lesky 2006, 475): in the prologue, Helen, taken by Hermes from Sparta to Egypt, openly tells of her sad fate – the jealous Hera sent down from the heavens the phantom of a woman, who accompanied Paris to Troy and thus became the pretext for the enactment of Zeus's plan to relieve the world of excess people (Eur. *Hel.* 29-34).

In spite of the awareness of this intrigue of the gods, the destruction of Troy is linked to the socially reprehensible act that was a woman abandoning her family. This stereotype is the theme of Gorgias' oration the *Encomium of Helen*, written around 414 BC, which took as its purpose exoneration of Helen's guilt and her bad reputation: is it possible to attribute blame to a human who is at the mercy of the will of the gods, force, love, or the power of speech? Physical weakness or human weakness in the face of divine might meant that one had no option but to accept one's fate.

The significant contribution of Peitho and Eros in the meeting of Paris and Helen is also visible in scenes typical for the vase painting genre. On the hydria from the beginning of the 4th century BC in the collection of the Princes Czartoryski Foundation in Krakow (Beazley 1928, 69; Schefold 1934, 18; Bulas 1935, pl. 13[67]2; Pl. 1), Paris, sitting on a rock draped with a cloak, holds in his left hand a ribbon, which invites association with the wedding ceremony. He is gazing at it somewhat pensively, as if pondering the fate mapped out for him by his decision taken under Aphrodite's influence. Helen approaches him from behind, calmly, carrying a jewellery box and mirror, indicating her attention to her appearance and beauty (cf. Denoyelle 1998, pls 57, 58: 1-2). Eros (Himeros?; cf. Shapiro 1993, 192-194) is standing tall and confident before Paris, his left hand resting boldly on his hip, and his right playing coquettishly with his cloak. His piercing gaze holds the youth in its grip and anticipates further events. Paris is placed in the centre of the composition here, as an allegory of the choices we make in life, and Eros's gaze fixed on him reinforces this effect further. In this reading, Helen, standing in the background, has a passive position, obedient to her fate, in accordance with the cause-and-effect chain of the myth: it was Paris who chose Aphrodite as the most beautiful of the goddesses, accepting from her in exchange Helen's love – yet it was Helen, not he, who was stigmatised for her deeds.

In another scene of the meeting of Paris and Helen, on a hydria by the Painter of Jena, the figures are labelled with their names for unequivocal identification (Langner 2007, 30). The lack of inscriptions on the Krakow hydria allows the scene to be read in the context of the meeting of any pair of future lovers, but the youth's nakedness and the vigilant presence

of Eros suggests the theme of the tragic and controversial mythological love. Abandoning one's husband and marrying another man, while not a unique case in mythology, was not canonical behaviour. The politically difficult period around the end of the 5th and beginning of the 4th centuries BC was conducive to the introduction into vase painting of themes that showed the pleasanter side of life within the sphere of Aphrodite's influence, but at the same time incorporated political and moral content (Smith 2005). The fatal attraction between Helen and Paris was used as an allegory of action detrimental to the polis in the form of violation of social norms, leading to tragedy (Borg 2001, 311).

The Krakow hydria with Helen and Paris was most likely a wedding gift, and the motif selected for its decoration deliberately evoked reflection on the positive – but potentially destructive – power of Aphrodite for the family and the Greek polis.

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Pl. 1. Red figure Hydria. (Inv. no. MNK XI-1228, Princes Czartoryski Foundation deposited with the National Museum in Krakow). Photo by M. Studnicki