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Metamorphoses of Shamed Bodies: Sexual Violence in Euripides's *Helen*

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[Final draft]

Abstract

In this paper I explore the connections between shame and embodiment in Euripides's play *Helen*. The paper focuses on the play's underlying theme of sexual violence and rape, and on the descriptions of metamorphoses that the mythological female victims often undergo in the face of rape. In my analysis on shame and embodiment I apply two insights from Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the phenomenon of victim shame in *The Remnants of Auschwitz*. These are, first, the definition according to which shame is "to be consigned to what cannot be assumed"—that is, to be consigned to one's self, being and physical body—and second, the claim that in shame one is affected by one's own (bodily) passivity. Building on these definitions, I explore the intimate connection between shame and embodiment at work in *Helen*. As a result we can see how the female metamorphoses before or after sexual violence—in Euripides's play and in Greek mythology in general—can be read in terms of victim shame. Furthermore, I suggest that this shame of the victims of sexual violence originates from the very nature of the crime itself: from being forced to experience the body's abject passivity.

Key words: victim shame, Euripides, Helen, Giorgio Agamben, embodiment, metamorphosis

Introduction

Helen, traditionally, has a problem with her shame. In the *Iliad* Helen presents herself as a shamed and self-shaming woman, and, in his version of the story, Euripides continues with the theme of shame.^[1] While in the *Iliad* Helen's self-shaming adds ambivalence to her already ambivalent situation—that is, whether she is a victim of violent abduction by the Trojans or an adulteress eloping with Paris—in Euripides's *Helen* the ambivalence is dissolved and she is depicted as an innocent victim of slander and violence (Euripides *Hel.* 614–5).

Still, her shame remains: it is inscribed in her body. In reading the embodied shame in Euripides's *Helen* my guiding question will be: why does the victim feel shame? And, furthermore, how does she go on living as a body that functions as a reminder and the origin of her shame?

One interesting analysis, which explicitly connects the affect of shame to embodiment, can be found in Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999, *RA*), whose ontological analysis locates shame to the most intimate difference within subjectivity, to the gap between language and life. Agamben begins his analysis with Emmanuel Levinas's remarks on shame in his early essay, *De l'évasion* (1935). According to Levinas, shame doesn't stem from a recognition of a defect in our self, and thus, has very little to do with the kind of morality that is based on counting our errors. Instead, in his analysis Levinas takes an aspect of shame—the wish to hide oneself—and turns it into the very basis of the experience, arguing that:

What appears in shame is therefore precisely the fact of being chained to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself, to hide oneself from oneself, the intolerable presence of the self to self. [...] What is shameful is our intimacy, that is, our presence to ourselves. (Levinas 2003, 64–5. Quoted in *RA* 105.)[2]

That is, in Levinas's account, shame is rooted in the *inescapability* of the self from the self and this is what Agamben builds on in his own definition, namely, “to be ashamed means to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed” (*RA* 105). For Agamben, as for Levinas, the thing that cannot be assumed or escaped in shame is always something our intimate to ourselves, such as one's physiological body or our organic, animal life.

Agamben takes this inescapability to define not only the experience of shame but also the structure of subjectivity. For him subjectivity is, by definition, split into two poles: on the one hand, the living being (i.e. the body, the physiological organism, our animal life), and on the other, the speaking being (i.e. the discursive self, the subject of enunciation, the consciousness). Between these two poles of subjectivity there is an “irreducible disjunction between . . . living being's becoming a speaking being and the speaking being's sensation of itself as living” (*RA* 111). The speaking being never simply *is* the living being. Despite this fracture, the two poles are nevertheless always consigned to each other in an “absolute intimacy”—an inescapable

proximity that always retains its distance (*RA* 125). For Agamben, then, the origin of shame is inscribed into the very structure of our subjectivity.

Further, Agamben argues that shame occurs when a subject is “affected by its own receptivity” or “overcome by its own passivity” (*RA* 110, 105). This passivity is the passivity of the living being, of the body-organism, which affects the speaking being. Thus, in the experience of shame, the subject both *is* passive and has to *witness* its own passivity. As an example for this, Agamben gives the case of sexual violence suggesting that the shame of a victim of sexual violence is triggered by her own being-affected by her passivity (*RA* 110).[3] To sum up, in Agamben’s ontological account, shame is about our intimate consignment to the inescapable and foreign passivity of our living bodies.[4] While Agamben’s analysis of shame has its defects (for example, he doesn’t consider how the passivity, which is but *one* possibility inscribed in the body, has to be produced with violence) the claim that shame has to do with the experiences of inescapability and passivity forms a fruitful basis for reading the shame in the *Helen*.

Helen’s Two Bodies

Euripides’s *Helen* portrays its eponymous protagonist as a subject whose subjectivity and embodiment are called into question; the play introduces a double Helen, a woman of two bodies and two identities. The play opens with Helen alone on the stage delivering a monologue, in which she offers an alternative account of the Trojan War in which Helen never went to Troy but to Egypt.[5] For, when Paris came to “snatch” Helen, Hera replaced her with an *eidolon*, a breathing copy of Helen that she fashioned from the clouds and the sky. There is, then, the ‘real’ Helen and her identical ‘copy’, a phantom double, which occupies Helen’s place in the world. Furthermore, we learn that the former king of Egypt, the virtuous Proteus, who up to his death had protected Helen’s ‘female honour’, has died and that his son, Theoclymenos, now threatens Helen with a ‘forced marriage’, that is, rape.

In the opening scene Helen clings to the tomb of Proteus as a suppliant, protecting thus herself from the sexual violence and the shame that would result. She declares: “even if my name carries disgrace throughout Hellas, my body will not incur shame here” (*εἰ καθ’ Ἑλλάδ’ ὄνομα δυσκλεές φέρω, / μή μοι τὸ σῶμά γ’ ἐνθάδ’ αἰσχύνην ὅφλῃ.* *Hel.* 66–7). While Helen can try to protect her body and its ‘honour’ in Egypt, she cannot, however, escape shame entirely. For

the *eidolon*-Helen in Troy has become an origin of shame and an object of shaming: we learn that everyone hates Helen (*Hel.* 81, 926), that there runs a rumour that Helen left her home and shares the bed of a barbarian (*Hel.* 223–5), and that she is cursed by everyone for her shameful marriage (*Hel.* 694–7). The shame produced in and through these circulating stories results in death: Helen’s mother commits suicide because of “Helen’s shame” (*Hel.* 134; Ἐλένης αἰσχρὸν . . . κλέος; 200–3). Although Euripides’s *Helen* is often read as a romantic fantasy where the *eidolon* serves merely as a narrative trick, I am inclined to read the *eidolon* rather as a metaphor for any subjectivity that is shattered in shame.

In the play we see Helen trying to maintain the split between her self and the shameful *eidolon* by emphasising the distance between the reality of her own being and the unreality of the mere seeming of her counterpart. She, for example, tells that Paris “thinks he holds me—an empty assumption (κενὴν δόκησιν)—when he does not hold me” (*Hel.* 35–6.) maintaining that her *name* was given forward as a price of war, but not her *self* (ἐγὼ μὲν οὐ, / τὸ δ’ ὄνομα τούμον, *Hel.* 42–3). Helen tries to pin the difference between her image-name and her self on her body, claiming that “a name can be in many places but the body cannot” (τούνομα γένοιτ’ ἀν πολλαχοῦ, τὸ σῶμα δ’ οὐ. *Hel.* 588). This way she attempts to separate the shame attached to her name in Troy so that it would not defile her body in Egypt. It is as if the body of Helen would somehow ground the difference between her true being and her *eidolon*, and thus separate her from the shame attached to her name.

As has been pointed out by many commentators, the distinction between Helen’s self or body is, however, impossible to maintain (Cf. Lush, 2017; Gumpert, 2001, 43–57; Pucci 1997). And it is namely Helen’s body that connects her to the shame of the counterpart. Helen’s first encounter with another person in the play is with an Achaean soldier who, as soon as he sees her, exclaims: “Ah! O gods, what sight do I see? I see the deadly image of the hateful woman who has destroyed me and all Achaeans. May the gods spit you out for having a *mimesis* of Helen (θεοί σ’, ὅσον μίμημ’ ἔχεις / Ἐλένης, ἀποπτύσειαν)” (*Hel.* 72–5). Helen’s body is identical to the body of the other Helen (*Hel.* 160–1; 599; 577). Even though Helen might try to separate her self from the shame of her name by appealing to her body, it is, in the end, precisely her bodily appearance that connects her to the shame of the other Helen. Moreover, the origin of this shame is in the body of the other Helen—or in Helen’s other body—in the living and breathing *eidolon*. The other Helen is shamed namely for sharing her bed with a barbarian king, that is, for forbidden bodily proximity to a foreign male body. We can see how

the shame of the *eidolon* slowly becomes the shame of Helen in Egypt, when she herself comes to call it “the shame of Helen (Ἐλένης αἰσχρὸν . . . κλέος)” and then, “my shame (αἰσχύνας ἐμᾶς)” (*Hel.* 134; 201–2; 688). The shame is as inescapable as the body.

Returning to Agamben and Levinas, we can detect two things. First, the subjectivity of Helen is taut between different constellations of body and name— uncoinciding yet consigned to each other. Second, Helen’s shame is founded on her inability to escape the body that is both intimate and foreign. The uncontrollable *eidolon*, when seen not as a literary special effect but as a body that is *felt* to be foreign and threatening, serves as a metaphor for the possibility that is open for all subjectivity: to be violently torn apart in shame.

The Theme of Sexual Violence

The connections of shame and the body become more pressing when we turn to the underlying theme of sexual violence and rape in the play. In the fifth century Athens, falling victim to rape was commonly considered disgracing and shameful for the victim—Lysias calls it “shaming by force” (αἰσχύνω βίᾳ, Lysias 1.32).[6] Although the practice of victim-shaming is symptomatic of patriarchy, I argue that following Agamben’s definition of shame as being affected by one’s passivity we can see how the experience of shame might be rooted in the nature of the crime itself.[7] What is interesting is that in the *Helen* and in Greek mythology generally, stories of rape often include a metamorphosis of the violated female body.[8] Metamorphosis seems both to be a way to escape the shame that falls to the victim, and to underline the materiality of the violated body.

The most obvious allusion to the theme is the situation of Helen herself. We meet her at the tomb of Proteus seeking protection from the licentious king of Egypt, her body under a threat to be ‘put to shame’ in the bed of a barbarian king. When recounting the story of how she ended up in Egypt, Helen tells that she was snatched (ἀναρπάζω) by Hermes while she was plucking flowers on a field (*Hel.* 244–9). The scene echoes the paradigmatic rape story in Greek myth that is the abduction of Persephone by Hades—she too was snatched (ἀρπάζω) by a god from a flowery field (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 1.32). The word used in both cases, ἀρπάζω, is characteristic when referring either to violent abduction of a woman or to wild beasts snatching their prey.[9]

Besides Persephone, Helen is likened with other rape victims. When the chorus of slave women first appear on stage, they say that they've come to see who is wailing at the tomb, singing:

There I heard a pitiable noise, an elegy without a lyre, that some bride shouted, mournful wailing, such as a Naiad sent forth over the hills, in flight, a mournful strain. Under the rocky hollows with echoing cries, she shouts: Pan rapes me.[10] (*Hel.* 184–90)

To the ears of the chorus, Helen sounds just like a victim of rape. Diane Juffras (1993), who analyses the theme of rape in this play points out that Helen is not, after all, actually raped in the play and only suffers the *threat* of sexual violence. I would, however, like to suggest a reading that takes seriously the possibility that Helen herself has been violated. For she *sounds*, *acts* and *suffers* like the other victims of rape in the play, and the way she experiences her body as threatening, shameful and foreign (as the *eidolon*) seems to indicate a trauma.

Helen's lamentations echo the far-ranging screams of a nymph being raped. In Greek mythology nymphs are particularly vulnerable to rape, because they often live in the sea or in the wilderness, i.e. because unlike other women in the Greek patriarchal society, their movement outside the *oikos* is not restricted by men (Larson 2001, 42). In the opening speech, Helen mentions another nymph, Psamathe, who was the wife of Proteus. The little we know of Psamathe, is that she was once pursued by Zeus. Either to escape rape or after being raped, Psamathe turns herself into a seal (Larson, 2001, 71; cf. Theogony, 1003–5). In addition to Psamathe, Helen sings of two other cases in which a similar metamorphosis takes place:

O happy maiden Callisto once in Arcadia, who left the bed of Zeus with four-footed limbs, how much happier is your lot than mine. In the form of shaggy-limbed beast you expelled the burden of pain. And you, happy maiden, the Titan-daughter of Merops, who Artemis expelled from her dances as a golden-horned deer because of your beauty. (*Hel.* 375–83)

Helen likens herself to two mythological female characters: first, there is Callisto, who is raped by Zeus and who leaves his bed, her body transformed into a shaggy beast-body of a bear.[11] Second, there is Cos, who becomes a deer. As this is the only extant mention of her, we do not

know if she is also a victim of rape, but the fact that she is a maiden in Artemis's dances and that she is expelled because of her beauty seems to indicate that might very well be the case.

I want to bring up one more metamorphosis, which is not mentioned in the play but is nevertheless linked to Helen's story. While here Helen's parents are said to be Leda and Zeus, in some other contexts she is the daughter Nemesis and Zeus. This is the case in Helen's birth-story told in the *Cypria*.[12] There, Zeus chases Nemesis who is unwilling and tormented by "shame and indignation (*αἰδοῖ / καὶ νεμέσει*)". Trying to escape, Nemesis takes many different forms of animals in the sea and on the land. However, in the end, Zeus takes her by "violent compulsion (*κρατερῆς ὑπ' ἀνάγκης*)."*(Cypria Fragment 10 Ath. 334b.)* While in the other stories there is no mention of the shame of the victim, here Nemesis is explicitly said to feel shame.

I suggest that all these metamorphoses—of Psamathe, Callisto, Cos and Nemesis—should be read as stories about female shame in the face of sexual violence. If we consider that the usual reaction to the feeling of shame is the wish to hide oneself,[13] these metamorphoses can be read as expressions of the wish to escape the exposure in shame. Callisto's body, which becomes unbearable in her maiden form, is concealed and secured within the shaggy limbs of a bear. In undergoing a metamorphosis, a subject can escape the body *within* the body.

The Abject Body

What is, then, at issue in sexual violence? As many other forms of violence it affects and is aimed at the body—but unlike in the other forms of violence, in sexual violence the body of the victim is a reason for the crime. In rape the body of the victim is reduced into a sort of object or a tool for the pleasure of the perpetrator: in the act of violence she is *made into* a mere passive, receptive matter.[14] The active and intending body is *revealed* in its potential materiality, thingness and passivity whose ultimate form is death. What the victim is forced to realise and experience is that there's a materiality or thingness to her that is altogether separable from her desires, wishes, intentions, that is, from her subjectivity. To be revealed in this kind of material passivity calls into question the humanity of the victims; thus, they become and appear as animals not only in the eyes of the offender but also to themselves.[15] This is also reflected by the fact that as animals the victims lose their ability to speak the shared

language.[16] To recall Agamben's definition, to feel shame is to be affected by one's own passivity and this seems to be exactly the experience involved in rape.

In the experience of one's own passivity the body becomes not only a material object but because of this, also an abject.[17] One of the reasons Helen gives for trying to avoid forced marriage with Theoclymenos is that when a woman shares her bed with a man who is bitter (*πικρὸς*) for her, her own body becomes bitter as well (*Hel.* 296–7). That is, the body becomes distasteful and, perhaps, also repulsive for the ashamed person. Thus, Helen can lament:

My life and things related to me are a monstrosity (*τέρας*), the first because of Hera, the latter because of my beauty. Would that I had been wiped clean like a statue (*εἴθ' ἐξολειφθεῖσ' ώς ἄγαλμ'*), so that I might get an uglier form (*αἰσχιον εἶδος*) instead of a beautiful one! (*Hel.* 260–3)

While the imagery of animals is missing, this too appears to be a wish for metamorphosis. Helen calls herself a monstrosity, and because of this she wants to make her own body unrecognisable like the bodies of transformed nymphs. Here the body acquires an object-like status as Helen likens herself to an *agalma* (a statue or a painting), a malleable *thing* made out of inanimate material. Earlier we saw that Helen tried to elude the shame of her *eidolon* by appealing to the difference between her body and the image. Here the body is revealed, after all, as a sort of *eidolon* as well and as a source of shame and distress. Shame, then, resides in the very condition of inescapable embodiment. The body turned into passive and receptive flesh, threatening subjectivity itself, is an abject for the experiencing subject. This is, in the end, what it means to be consigned to what cannot be escaped (at least while alive).

In *Helen* this materiality is so unbearable that even a horrifying metamorphosis of the body seems a better fate than living on with the body that has become a scene of crime. In fact, Helen does make herself ugly in the course of the play by cutting her hair and scratching her cheeks with her nails (*Hel.* 1087–9). In the process of disfigurement as well as in the monstrous metamorphoses, the women seem to assume and embody the shame that has been imposed on them. But by making themselves monstrous, the female figures make the shame work in their protection; like a cover that shelters the self from the hurtful world, it helps to “change the burden of pain” (*Hel.* 380). For shame presupposes love. The feeling of shame is possible only if there has been a previous experience that is fundamentally positive: *only if* one has previously

taken pleasure in her active and expressive embodiment, can she feel the deprivation of this pleasure in shame, in being affected by the sudden passivity of her body. Thus, one does not feel shame for a self that is felt to be *completely* unlovable. Rather, it is our very care and love for the self that make us vulnerable to shame in the first place.[18] As one more female figure in the play, Theonoe, the daughter of Psamathe, explains her wish to avoid disgrace (δύσκλεια) because: “I love my self (φιλῶ τ’ ἐμαυτήν)” and, more ambiguously, because: “There is a great temple of justice in my *fysis* (ἔνεστι δ’ ιερὸν τῆς δίκης ἔμοι μέγα / ἐν τῇ φύσει). . . [that] I try to save” (*Hel.* 999–1004). The loved self (ἐμαυτήν) emerges as something that precedes shame but is also hidden in the shamed body. The fantasy of metamorphosis becomes also a dream of protecting and healing the loved self *in* and *with* shame.[19]

Notes

1. In the *Iliad* Helen says that she is being shamed by her relatives (24.767–772), is afraid of inviting blame from women around her (3.410–412), assumes that her brothers are ashamed of her (3.241–2) and actively shames herself by calling herself a female dog (6.344, 6.356), In a sense she is portrayed as *identifying* with her shame. See Blondell 2010.
2. The translation in *On Escape* (2003) is slightly different.
3. When referring to the shame of the victim of sexual violence, Agamben disturbingly equates the victim’s *being moved* by her passivity to her *taking pleasure* (*prendre piacere*) in her suffering violence. Furthermore, Agamben seems to take the passivity of the body as a given, thus implicitly continuing the philosophical tradition in which the body and passivity (and femininity!) have been considered as coextensive. In addition, Agamben doesn’t differentiate between degrees of passivity: while a woman or an *eromenos* (which Agamben refers to) etc. might be passive during sexual intercourse and take pleasure in his or her passivity, it is very different from the passivity that affects a victim of rape. While in the first case the body actively gives in to its passivity, in the second case the body is forced into passivity without much possibility to alter or reverse this state.
4. In his analysis, Agamben is mostly interested in the shame of the survivors of Auschwitz. I do not claim that the concentration camps and sexual violence or rape would be in any way comparable. I only wish to highlight the fact that all forms of violence, to very different degrees, engage in the production of passive embodiment and in the destruction of subjectivity.
5. The original palinode is attributed to the poet Stesichorus.

6. Cf. Euripides, *Ion* 934–45. See also Cole, 1984, 111. Omitowoju (1997) notes that there are some difficulties in thinking of rape in antiquity. Looking at court speeches she notes that for an offense to be understood as a (heterosexual) rape, it has to violate the consent of a male patron (*kyrios*) of a woman, while the consent of the woman seems to be a secondary issue. It is somewhat difficult to discern between voluntary adultery and rape in the ancient legislation (Ogden 1997, 31), and thus we can imagine that the punishments intended for adulteresses in Solon's law, which were intended for shaming an adulteress so that her life becomes unbearable, might in some cases have been applied to women who were not participating willingly in the sexual act (cf. Aeschines, 1.183).

7. Because victim-shaming is nothing foreign to contemporary societies, Ann Cahill can write in her excellent philosophical study on rape that: “The shame and guilt that many rape victims experience are a *direct reflection* of society’s tendency to blame them for their assault” (Cahill 2001, 127, my emphasis). While it is true that shaming the victim can endorse shame-feelings, it is hardly the *sole* reason for the victim’s shame. This kind of straightforward explanation misrepresents the complex experience of the victims.

8. On the theme of bestial rape, see Robson 1997.

9. The parallel between Helen and Persephone is maintained through the play, and the theme is most apparent in the second stasimon in which the chorus sings about Demeter trying to find her daughter. The seeming irrelevance of this stasimon has puzzled commentators (see Allan’s commentary to *Hel.* 1301–68) but if we pay attention to the theme of sexual violence, the second stasimon seems, however, appropriate. On the parallels between Helen and Persephone and the appropriateness of the Demeter ode, see Swift, 2010, 193; 229–38.

10. ”Πανὸς ἀναβοῦ γάμους.” Here *γάμος* is a euphemism for rape.

11. On different stories around Callisto, see Henrichs, 1987.

12. On the myth, see Forbes Irving, 1990, 187–91.

13. Levinas explains this wish to hide in the terms of the impossibility to flee oneself at the very moment of exposure: “If shame is present, it means that we cannot hide what we should like to hide” (Levinas 2003, 64.)

14. See Cahill (2001, 109–42) on rape as a fundamentally embodied experience. Considering that the western history of philosophy has been dominated by the patriarchal bias connecting femininity with passive materiality here we can see a social practice that *actually* produces the female body as passive matter with violence.

15. In other mythical cases of rape, the woman might transform into a river or a tree.

16. Similarly, Thetis is said to be totally silent during her forced marriage to Peleus (Larson 2001, 72). In the myth of Philomela, she is raped by her brother-in-law who then cuts out her tongue. Philomela is, however, able to communicate by weaving marks on a cloth (Apollodorus, 3.14.8). As the case of Philomela indicates, the loss of shared language might yield to alternative ways of communicating.
17. On the notion of abject, see Kristeva 1982, 1–18.
18. On the role of love in shame, see Probyn 2005, ix–xiii.
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