

LES SIRENES DU PORT D'ALEXANDRIE: LE THRENE D'HELENE DANS LA PARODOS DE  
L'HELENE D'EURIPIDE

In the parodos of Euripides' *Helen* (lines 164-251), Helen begins her threnos by wondering what kind of cry she should utter (ποῖον γόον) or what muse she should invoke (τίνα μουσαν). She answers the question in the next lines, starting by an "aiai" cry that leads to a song inviting the Sirens to be musical partners of her lament. By presenting this generic question, Helen stages the problem of the nature of a tragic threnos: between an organic exclamation of lament and its articulation in a staged lyric form.

There would be little to add to Nicole Loraux' pages on "le chant sans lyre" (ἄλυρον ἔλεγον, *Helen* v.185) if one were to examine the meta-theatrical characteristics of this lament scene. However, in this paper I would like to argue that in the parodos, Helen's question about how to do a lament and the musical confusion she introduces in her song (by lamenting over *herself* and mentioning a variety of instruments and musical characters not characteristically associated with threnos) is more than a meta-musical topos: her anxiety over threnos genre and musical forms reflect an anxiety over her own identity.

My paper examines how Helen's obsession with the language of *mousikê* in this passage (musical vocabulary, words for types of songs and allusions to musical myths) allows her to engage with three themes that are central to a reflection on her own position in the play. First, the musical figures of syrinx, Pan and the Sirens bring in the question of Helen's identity as a woman (both an object of desire and a seducer). Secondly, the mention of the geographical origin of musical instruments (the Egyptian 'reeds' and the Lybian 'lotos') allows a reflection on her status as an ethnic wanderer (a Greek split between the East and Egypt). Finally, the figures of duplication and multiplicity introduced in the song (both in the exclamations αἰαῖ αἰαῖ, ἰὼ ἰὼ and φεῦ φεῦ that start each antiphonal strophe, and in the compound adjectives πολυκτόνον, πολύπονον, πολυστόνου describing her and her lament) allow approaching the question of Helen's multiple nature.