

This paper analyses the male characters in Jean Renoir's film *Eléna et les hommes* (France, 1956) – also known as *Paris does Strange Things* (UK) and *Elena and her men* (USA) – in the context of the myth of Helen of Troy, and particularly of Euripides' *Helen*. I intend to identify how the representations of the two central male characters in this film are inspired in the mythical heroes Menelaus and Paris.

The plot takes place in 1900 in Paris and deals with a real episode of French history (a planned coup d'état in 1889, when France was still recovering from the humiliation of defeat in 1870 and after the peace treaty ceding Alsace-Lorraine to Germany had been signed). Elena Sokorowska (Ingrid Bergman) plays a Polish princess and widow who lives in Paris and believes she has a mission to take care of every man who needs help. Although she has promised to marry a wealthy suitor, she has always been surrounded by different men, amongst them the Count Henry de Chevincourt (Mel Ferrer), who hates battles, and General François Rollan (Jean Marais), a national hero who has just been appointed Minister of War.

While *Paris does Strange Things* was praised as “the most intelligent film in the world” (Godard, 1957) it was not greatly appreciated by the public. I want to argue that this film deserves our attention at least because it deals with Greek culture and the contemporary world in a very perceptive manner, mainly in its criticism of classical models of courage, manhood and heroism. Truffaut and Rommer have already noted its pacifist theme. The former, in the context of Algerian war, affirmed that General Rollan had two advantages: he makes us laugh, and he likes women more than power. The latter observed that the film draws the veil from truths hidden behind great lies, showing the animal which exists behind the morning dress and military uniform. Similarly, *Helen* was read as Euripides' lament over the delusions that send men to war.

When asked about his reasons for making this comedy, Renoir answered “I dreamt with Venus,...and around her I tried to make a farce with political stories, stories of generals. I tried to show the futility of different enterprises, including the enterprise called patriotism” (*Cahiers du cinema*, 1957, XIII, p. 78, my translation). This statement is one of the elements that connects this film to Euripides' *Helen*. There are other ones, but I intend to examine in more detail the representation of heroism and manhood comparing: a) Menelaus and Paris to Rollan and Henry; b) Helen's hypocritical future husband Martin-Michaud (Pierre Bertain) to the despotic and dishonorable Theoclymenus, and c) Hector (Rollan's lieutenant, played by Jean Richard) to Andromaque's husband. Finally, I want to discuss the conspicuous theatricality of the scenes in which Rollan and Menelaus disguised themselves in order to flee from their enemies. It seems to me that Renoir (and Euripides too) suggested that we consider “Helen's famous husbands” from an ethical and political perspective in which the traditional male hero has to be redefined.

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