Act I

Troy has fallen. Menelaus has recaptured Helen, the bride who had been stolen from him and the cause of a ten-year war, and is sailing towards home with her. Helen will have to be killed as a reparative sacrifice on the altar of her country’s gods or even here on the ship, and Menelaus himself will have to offer that sacrifice, whether here or elsewhere. His conscience requires it: he is in debt to the countless dead who fell before the walls of Troy.

A storm drives the ship onto the shore of a rocky island, ruled over by a nymph, an Egyptian princess called Aithra, the lover of Poseidon, god of the sea. Menelaus enters Aithra’s palace with Helen, whom he has helped to swim to safety. Here, in a splendidly-lit room, she stands before him, as lovely as ever and shamelessly bold. Menelaus has already decided on the sentence and knows he must execute it here and now; if he delays, he will never do it and will thus be a blasphemer before the gods and men. He draws his curved sword, the same one he used to kill Paris, and now raises it against the infamous woman.

The nymph Aithra, hiding behind a curtain, takes compassion on the most beautiful and most famous woman in the world. She summons her elves, ambiguous spirits concealed in their rocky island dens in the moonlight, and orders them to play a trick to save Helen, at least for the moment. The elves conjure a war-like din, so that Menelaus believes he is once again hearing the Trojan trumpets and the sharp clash of arms. He clearly distinguishes the voice of Paris, challenging him to combat, and rushes out to slay the dead Paris once again or, if he is a ghost, to strangle him.

The two women are alone. Aithra has a marvellous potion of lotus juice at her disposal that brings “swift forgetfulness of any ill”. Helen drinks it and is calmed like a child; she nearly forgets what awaits her when her husband returns brandishing his arms. Aithra orders her handmaidens to lay Helen on her own bed so that she can rest and she herself goes to meet Menelaus. He now rushes in, waving his sword, which he is convinced is dripping blood (while we spectators can see it is clean and dry) because outside he has thrust it into the back of two ghosts he believed were Helen and Paris. Now Aithra tells him a story she has fabricated with feminine astuteness, and being upset as he is by excessive anxiety and emotion, he no longer trusts his senses and his intellect and so nothing seems impossible to him. Aithra tells him that for ten years he and all his fellow Greeks have been the victims of a ghost, and that the one he bore away from the burning city and has just rescued from the waves, carrying her on his shoulders, is only an apparition. While she is speaking, she administers him a calming potion that creates a nearly dreamlike state, and then urges him to speak softly because, she pretends, there on her bed lies Helen herself: the true Helen, who ten years earlier had been stolen by the gods and brought here to Egypt to the fortress of Aithra’s father where, constantly protected, she has slept all this time without ageing.

The adjoining room is suddenly filled with radiant light, a curtain is pulled open and on a large bed, Helen opens her eyes, gets up and with a virginal gesture rests her head on Menelaus’ shoulder; he cannot resist the burst of unexpected happiness and believes that what he sees before him is marvellously real. Whispering to Aithra, Helen asks her to magically carry her and her husband away to some place where Helen’s name is unknown and where no one has ever heard of Troy and its great war. Aithra murmurs her assent, the reunited couple crosses the threshold and the curtain falls.
Act II

Helen and Menelaus wake together in a palm grove at the foot of the Atlas Mountains. The ruse has apparently been successful, but Helen has been given back only half of Menelaus, or rather, less than half. Waking after a magical night of love (they have been transported through the air in their sleep on Aithra’s enchanted cloak), he shyly glances at the stupendous woman. The truth is that he fears her. His confused mind is convinced that the night before, there on Aithra’s island, he has killed the real Helen with his terrible curved sword, the Helen who had caused him such pain and for whom he had slain Paris; he believes that the woman before him, so young and with her innocently-smiling face, is only a vision, an ethereal siren that the Egyptian sorceress has placed in his arms to comfort him. Nonetheless, he is still, and will always be, Menelaus, the assassin and inconsolable widower of Helen of Troy. The desert around the palm grove does not remain empty for long; it is crossed by sheikhs, nomad sovereigns on horseback, and one of them, with his son and retinue, happens upon the two solitary foreigners. The sight of such a beautiful woman, even if none of them had ever heard her name, causes the same situation that has happened in the past: both father and son lust for her and intend to steal her from Menelaus, each one ready to kill the other for her sake. Helen, however, is almost indifferent to all of this; her only wish is to win Menelaus back completely, as she understands him and his feelings more deeply than he himself does. She thus makes the boldest and most dangerous decision: to wake him from his trance, from that sort of inner turmoil and half-madness that is consuming him, and to free him from the ruse so that he will recognize her as the guilty party, the one he is destined to punish. A demoniacal strength within her helps her to completely succeed in her intent. Once again, Aithra helps her, as she has in her possession a potion able to cancel the effects of the one that produced forgetfulness. Helen pours it for her husband and they drink it together. When Menelaus, now completely aware of reality, gazes at her and, once again determined to punish her, raises his avenging sword, Helen smiles at the weapon and her assassin. As soon as he recognizes her, is able to recognize her fully, he drops the sword and falls into her arms, still in love and now reconciled: bridegroom to his bride, lover and beloved, despite everything. Together they depart to reign as king and queen, on the throne of their palace in Sparta.

(Traduzione di Mary Groeneweg)