

Helen's Changeable Hermes
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Numerous scholars (notably Segal, Foley) have observed how Euripides' *Helen* uses the imagery of a young girl's rape to describe the eponymous heroine's abduction and transport to Egypt. Their studies have less frequently noted the degree to which Helen herself shapes the narrative of her own abduction as she retells it at four different points during the play: in the Prologue, to the Chorus, to Menelaus, and finally to Theonoë.

Particularly notable is Helen's use of the epithet "son of Maia" for Hermes. While this term appears to be nearly neutral in epic and lyric sources, a survey of its use elsewhere in tragedy [*Libation Bearers* (813), Sophocles' *Electra* (1395); *Ion* (3); *Medea* (759); *Orestes* (997); Euripides' *Electra* (462); *Andromache* (275-6); and *Rhesus* (217)] reveals that the term is usually reserved for occasions when Hermes is associated with guile or *dolos*; when he is acting on behalf of a plan of Zeus; and when the plan he supports will bring trouble and sorrow to the humans associated with it. In this context, Hermes is often regarded as a negative character, and one who contributes to an unjust relationship between the divine world and the human. The deceptive and anti-hierarchical elements of this characterization arose from the story of the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, but appear to have developed further connotations specific to tragedy.

In *Helen*, we find Helen referring to Hermes as "son of Maia" in those tellings of her story where she needs to convince her listener that the gods are unsympathetic to her and that her situation requires her to invent her own *mechane* in order to save herself — namely, when speaking to the Chorus, and also (assuming we accept a common emendation of line 670) when addressing Menelaus. She omits the epithet, on the other hand, when delivering the prologue and when speaking to Theonoë, when she needs to convince her listeners that the gods do intend to rescue her and that there is therefore no reason for anyone to try to oppose her plans. Finally, the Dioscouri use the epithet (1670) during a final speech that confirms Helen's ill-use by the gods.

Thus Helen is using the tools of the playwright: she not only employs mythological imagery and anecdote to achieve specific emotions in her listener, but she uses the particular connotational language of tragedians. Euripides characterizes Helen as rhetorically crafty; all her versions of the story are true, but each is intended for particular ends. Helen must tell her own story over and over until she controls the way she is seen by everyone around her. The ambiguity of divine purpose in *Helen* can best be understood through the use that the heroine makes of that ambiguity: the audience is uncertain about the gods' true intention because Helen is as well, and it is her precarious situation that makes all of her divergent performances equally heartfelt and effective.

Selected Bibliography

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