

Mismatches in Language in Euripides' *Helen*

This paper analyzes the language of Menelaus and Helen in Euripides' *Helen* in order to draw out the precise ways in which the playwright used his learning. It shows that Helen's use of philosophical language reflects her own intellectual endeavors, which separate her from previous representations. Menelaus' language, however, is grounded in the poetic traditions that form the basis of much Athenian education. This tradition has shaped his character, but has not equipped him to deal with the complexities of Helen's thought; Helen and Menelaus have been educated by different kinds of books. Through these characters, Euripides dramatizes some aspects of the controversies over education that play such a large part Aristophanes (e.g. *Clouds* 961-1112) and much of Plato.

Scholars have noted that Helen's own account of her situation uses ideas from Anaximenes and Anaximander, but have not taken account of why they are invoked when they are. When Helen says that her image was created from the *aithēr*, we should ask how she knows such a fact. I draw the conclusion that Helen – not only Euripides – has been reading the philosophers. Based on Menelaus' speech (483-99), we can speculate that philosophical ideas gave her a way of making sense of her perplexing situation. Euripides makes his character employ the language of philosophy to explain herself, and by doing so he is developing a character whose education and reading contribute to her identity. Menelaus' path of thought is one that Helen has already followed and that has given her a new level of sophistication. Menelaus, however, has his own kind of literary sophistication; the poet, not the philosopher, has been his teacher, as was traditional (e.g. Xen. *Symp.* 4.6). I analyze specific references in his speeches (765-71, 842-54, 947-95) to show that his heroic outlook is informed by a literary tradition that gives him a high level of self-consciousness. For example, he follows his grand

pronouncement that he will kill himself after he kills Helen (842) with a reference to Ajax, and thus directs us toward Sophocles. Ajax, however, held himself to standards of heroic behavior, while Menelaus holds himself to the models provided by other heroes in literature. Helen thinks with ideas, Menelaus with models.

Much of this seems to be a more sophisticated version of the opposition between the hero of *mētis* and the hero of *biē*. It may be, but Helen represents more than the replacement of physical strength with mental agility. Euripides' use of literacy as a feature of character development mirrors and reacts to new possibilities in education: Sophists and books made specialized learning available to individuals, as opposed to training that is proper for everyone (e.g. Ar. *Clouds* 964-9). The ideas that Aristophanes represents as “weaker and stronger *logoi*” become Euripidean instruments of characterization. He also uses the new educational possibilities as a counterweight to the heroic tradition that seems to burden his characters in plays such as *Electra* and *Orestes* (e.g. Zeitlin 1980). Ultimately, Euripides shows how reading and literacy allow for more complexity of character in literature and life.

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