

## Unexpected Intervention: The εἶδωλον as Deus ex Machina in Euripides' *Helen*

In Euripides' *Helen*, a major crisis for the main characters is resolved through an unlikely intervention. It is not, however, the crisis solved by the intervention of the Dioscuri coming down as a Deus ex Machina at the end of the play, but rather the crisis resolved by an intervention midway through the play by Helen's εἶδωλον or phantom. In this paper I will show that the intervention of Helen's εἶδωλον serves the traditional function of a Deus ex Machina more thoroughly than the actual Deus ex Machina at the end of the play.

Midway through the *Helen* the main characters are at an impasse. Menelaus refuses to believe Helen's claim that she never went to Troy and that the woman that he fought for and currently possesses as his wife is nothing but an εἶδωλον. Menelaus is about to leave the real Helen behind when a messenger arrives with a strange tale. The woman whom they believed was Helen has been lifted up into the heavens and has disappeared after revealing that she was a fake all along and that the real Helen never went to Troy. It is only upon hearing this news that Menelaus is able to accept that Helen is not an imposter but actually his wife.

The sudden appearance of the εἶδωλον does not fall in line with the traditional Deus ex Machina in many ways: the intervention does not occur at the end of the play, the εἶδωλον is technically not a god or goddess, the crane is not used, and the εἶδωλον does not appear on the stage but is only reported by the messenger. Yet in many other ways the intervention of the εἶδωλον seems very much like a Deus ex Machina at least in function. Scholars both ancient and modern, for example Aristotle and Dunn, have viewed the device of Deus ex Machina as a way for an author to fix a plot that has gone out of control by resorting to a divine solution. The intervention by the εἶδωλον is vital to the plot of the play and solves a very real crisis for the main characters. The εἶδωλον, while not technically a god or goddess, is most definitely

supernatural in nature. Though the crane is not used to make the εἶδωλον disappear, the messenger reports, “βέβηκεν ἄλοχος σὴ πρὸς αἰθέρος πτυχὰς ἀρθεῖσ’ ἄφαντος· οὐρανῶ δὲ κρύπτεται” (605-606) implying the same type of movement that a Deus ex Machina would have. Finally, although the εἶδωλον never appears on stage, her speech is directly quoted by the messenger, thus giving her a speech like a Deus ex Machina.

Furthermore the content of the speech matches up in many ways with other extant Deus ex Machina. For example, the εἶδωλον first addresses her audience and explains that they were wrong in their assumptions and that Paris never had Helen. She announces that she has completed her task and thus is departing to the heavens. The speech ends with the assertion that Helen was blamed unjustly. These types of statements fit in particularly well with the Deus ex Machina by Artemis in the *Hippolytus* who explains to Theseus that he has been mistaken in his beliefs and Hippolytus is really innocent. The intervention of the εἶδωλον, despite its differences from traditional Deus ex Machina scenes, seems to fulfill the purported function of a Deus ex Machina.

Yet an oddity is revealed when comparing the Dioscuri’s intervention as Deus ex Machina with the intervention of the εἶδωλον. It is the intervention by the εἶδωλον which has a larger impact on the plot’s main characters. The Dioscuri appear only after Menelaus and Helen have already made their escape so do not really affect their fate at all. The Dioscuri merely tell Theoclymenus to let go of his anger and to not kill his sister, a relatively minor character.

By comparing the intervention by the εἶδωλον with other known examples of Deus ex Machina and with the Deus ex Machina at the end of the *Helen*, I hope to more thoroughly explore the features and function of Deus ex Machina.

## Selected Bibliography

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