

Absurdism in Euripides' *Helen*

From Menelaus first laying eyes on Helen (550) and the mysterious evaporation of her image (605) to Menelaus dressing up as a messenger to tell Theoklymenos of his own death (1200), Euripides' *Helen*, though technically a tragedy, is riddled with breaths of comedy and puzzling scenarios. Many of these instances where Euripides blurs the line between tragedy and comedy in *Helen*, seem simply absurd. I argue that there is more to the philosophical underpinnings of Euripides' *Helen* by showing the drama anticipates defining characteristics in the 20th century "theater of the absurd".

Through heavy use of tragicomedy, the theater of the absurd severely divorced the normal use of language from correspondence with the normal happenings of the world. French absurdist thought, dealing with questions of the meaning of life and the purpose of existence, manifested itself through uniquely bizarre and confounding plays. In grappling with the realization that existence is absurd and purposeless, writers such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco placed their characters in situations that highlighted the relativity of language, cultural customs, and patterns of typical human thought. These notions, along with a stark incomprehensibility of the events of the drama, uniquely characterize the theater of the absurd. (Esslin 1960, 5 and 14).

In this talk, I will survey key instances in Euripides' *Helen* that exemplify elements of absurdist theater. From mystical dissolutions to questions about personal identity, Euripides' makes notable use of absurdist notions of relativity in language and incomprehensibility. Friedrich Solmsen (1934) identifies a disjunction between what is said in *Helen* and the actual actions of the play. I then strengthen the connection by identifying instances in absurdist theater

that resemble scenes and circumstances in *Helen*. For instance, Valdimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* make a series of baffling choices and conclude that they must continue waiting for Godot despite knowing he will never come (Beckett 1965, 91-94). Similarly, Menelaus quickly forgets about the woman whom he loved and cherished when perhaps we would not be so quick to forget. Finally, I interpret *Helen* as an absurdist tragicomedy. I show that the non-correspondence of the language with what is actually happening in certain crucial moments drives the narrative of *Helen*. As a result, I argue that there is a distinct philosophical thesis about the use of language in communicating humans' absurd existence which underlies *Helen*.

Works Cited

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