

## Euripides' *Helen*: Object and Artificer

A number of studies in recent years have advanced the critical discussion of Euripidean innovation and self-conscious engagement with poetic tradition (e.g. Wright, 2005 and 2010, and Torrance, 2010). More recently, Ruby Blondell's study of the multiple facets and permutations of Helen's literary portrayal from Homer to Isocrates has underscored the surprising fluidity of one of Greek mythology's most central figures (Blondell, 2013). Such scholarship calls for a return to Euripides' *Helen* of 412 BC, a play which adopts a peculiarly self-reflexive posture by combining in a single frame a jarring multiplicity of Helens inherited from his predecessors: the title-character is simultaneously a product of, challenge to, and reflection on her own poetic tradition.

In both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Helen is both creator and subject of song, and so serves as a vehicle for narrative self-consciousness through which the poet comments on the nature and function (and malfunction) of verbal art. In extant tragedy before 415, Helen never appears on stage but is often referred to as the ἀρχὴ κακῶν of a given drama's present crisis. Such references occur especially in choral passages, and since the tragic chorus extends in its discourse beyond the mytho-poetic horizons of the staged action, Helen's predominantly choral presence characterizes her as a peculiarly poetic personage, i.e. as part of a tradition invoked by a community (the chorus) to help them understand the events and conflicts they witness and experience. This foregrounding of Helen's symbolic status receives a new wrinkle in Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, which resists traditional poetry's unanimous condemnation, while also presenting Helen as symbol of the ambiguous power of language not to represent reality, but rather to mold perceptions and inspire powerful emotions. In doing so, he adds a shade of sophistic epistemological skepticism to Helen's evolving character. Euripides' representation of

Helen on stage in the *Troades* of 415 allows her personally to reshape the tradition that condemns her in a rhetorical tour-de-force, a move that would certainly have been noticeable in sophistic circles. In each case Helen both embodies poetic art and exploits an inherent instability in the mythological tradition.

These themes find their fullest expression and culmination in Euripides' *Helen*, especially since the play's dramatic trajectory hinges on Helen's shift from a passive victim of *mythos* to an active agent of mythopoesis. While a number of scholars have commented on this shift (Burnett, 1960; Segal, 1971; Whitman, 1974; Allen, 2008; Powers, 2010), no study to my knowledge has tied this structural element to the play's poetic self-awareness and intellectual concern with epistemology. Once Helen lays claim to poetic authority, she is able to replace old harmful fictions with new advantageous ones, ultimately restoring her marriage and reputation and securing her safe return to Sparta. For example, in the prologue Helen criticizes the more absurd elements of her own poetic persona, namely Zeus' rape of Leda in swan-form (18-21). In the following scene, the hold of traditional myth on Teucer nearly causes him to shoot Helen with an arrow, and even Menelaus at first refuses to recognize his wife due to his belief and personal investment in the more orthodox understanding of the Trojan War. Thus, from the beginning Helen must combat *mythos* itself as a powerful obstacle and antagonist, and her heroic action will consist of creating traditional myth anew. As she seeks to accomplish this, Euripides consistently emphasizes the poetic and even dramaturgic aspects of Helen's agency, as she conceives plots, directs stage action, and employs props and costumes to achieve her ends.

This course of events engages with the theme of epistemology in that the restorative mythoi plotted and staged by Helen are no more 'true' than the destructive mythoi surrounding the *eidolon*. By having Helen fight fiction with fiction, Euripides implies that in verbal and

theatrical spheres, truth value matters less than the ability of mythoi to secure advantages for their authors. In the end, poetic self-awareness and epistemological skepticism merge into a single unifying theme. By insisting on the instability of *mythos*, Euripides deprives his audience of the moral-ethical assurances and orientation offered by the poetic tradition as a major repository of values and ideology.

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