

Where the Truth Lies: Euripides' Democratic Challenge in *Helen*

Scholars' opinions vary on whether or not Athenian dramatic productions must be viewed as inherently "democratic" by nature, but many scholars agree that contemporary political issues or events very likely exercised some influence on the Athenian stage and her playwrights (Conradie 1981, Griffin 1998). In this paper, I examine the impact of Athens' crushing defeat in the Sicilian Expedition (415-413 B.C.E.) on Euripides' *Helen*. While scholars have examined the poignancy and relevance of the event to the audience of the play (Friedman 2007), I examine how Euripides uses this event as a catalyst to invoke Athenian reflection on the responsibilities of democratic society. In *Helen*, Euripides produces a play built on confounding traditional expectations, deception, and misinformation to challenge members of his audience to consider critically the sources of information which drive their democracy.

In the opening lines of the play, Euripides immediately contradicts the traditional narrative that Helen was abducted and taken to Troy (Eur, *Hel* 1-15) as given to us in the *Iliad* and the vast majority of extant works. Helen, continuing her monologue, clearly differentiates between herself and her name (Eur, *Hel* 42-44). She explains that her physical body was whisked away to Egypt while her "name" went to Troy (Eur, *Hel* 31-36). This early contradiction of the *Iliad* sets the stage for further examination of informational sources.

Many characters in the play expend a considerable amount of effort trying to determine fact from fiction. Helen cross examines Teucer for nearly one hundred lines (Eur, *Hel* 68-163) regarding the fates of her family and the Greek forces after Troy. She is met with largely inaccurate or incomplete information based on hearsay. Later, Menelaus launches into a similar inquiry and contemplation of the facts regarding the fate of his wife (Eur, *Hel* 470-514). He then meets Helen but does not believe it is her, preferring to trust his eyes which saw Helen at Troy

and the traditional, *Iliad*-based narrative (Eur, *Hel* 566-596). Menelaus, like Teucer before him (Eur, *Hel* 117-122), trusts his senses as the ultimate source of truth, but they too betray him.

The playwright proceeds to not only defy the literary conceptions of Greece, but also common conventions of tragedy. As Marshall states, tragedy has a rhythm that is “predictable for the spectators familiar with the genre...[but] Euripides deliberately avoids establishing a familiar rhythm for two-thirds of the play’s length.” (Marshall 2018: 24). According to Marshall, the playwright breaks from the normative alternation of choral song and episode until the final third of the play (Marshall 2018). This break from tragic norms deprives the audience of yet another commonly held expectation coming to fruition. The audience may have been ready and willing to accept Euripides’ plot changes as a repackaging of a familiar story for consideration in competition, but Euripides reaches beyond the confines of his play by directly confounding audience expectations.

While the viewers and characters sift through fact and fiction, truth and misconception, expectation and reality, Euripides draws a comparison between the conflicts within the play and the recent Sicilian Expedition. Thucydides relates that the Athenians were frustrated with various prophets who foresaw positive results in the expedition rather than the catastrophic outcome (*Thuc* 8.1). This frustration seems to become manifest when the Messenger, after he has found out the truth about Helen and the origins of the Trojan War, launches into a verbal assault against the dishonesty and inaccuracy of prophets (Eur, *Hel* 744-757). He recommends a complete rejection of divination in favor of γνώμη (“thought”) and εὐβουλία (“good counsel”). This assertion is only strengthened by the fact that the prophetess Theonoe, a woman who allegedly speaks truly the matters of the gods, is quickly convinced that she should present false information to her brother, the king (Eur, *Hel* 895-995).

Euripides systematically presents and undermines different sources of “truth” in Greek society throughout *Helen*—Homer’s *Iliad*, sensory perception, personal reports, the findings of diviners, and genre norms. He, through the words of the Messenger, advocates democratic processes. These processes require an informed society. By demonstrating potential inaccuracy in various sources of information and fostering comparisons with the Sicilian Expedition, Euripides challenges his audience to consider critically the information they receive and its origins.

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