

The Play of Emotion in Euripides' *Helen*

Two major strands in scholarship on Euripides' *Helen* downplay its emotional aspects for different reasons. On the one hand, emphasis on the play's engagement with philosophical issues privileges intellectual over emotional effects (Solmsen 1934, Segal 1971, Downing 1990), and on the other hand, attention to its tragicomic or melodramatic qualities privileges plot over character (Kitto 1961: 311-29, Arnott 1990, Pucci 1997). I argue that, while *Helen* is indeed both exciting and thought-provoking, emotion is central to its design. Helen's misery and her feelings of loss and abandonment motivate and sustain the action from her opening lines through her successful escape from Egypt.

In the prolog, Helen describes how the machinations of Hera and Aphrodite led to her likeness being abducted to Troy while she was brought to Egypt, with the result that she is doubly reviled for adultery and for causing the Trojan War. Adding insult to injury, she is being pursued by the tyrant Theoclymenus and has taken refuge at his father's tomb. The opening scenes only multiply her misery. Her posture is that of an abject suppliant, sleeping outdoors on straw beside the tomb. Teucer arrives to heighten her objective misery by reporting her mother's suicide, her daughter's plight, and the apparent deaths of her brothers and husband. He also heightens her subjective misery by mirroring, in his exile and mistreatment by his father, Helen's own banishment and false condemnation. She is joined by a chorus of Greek women who sing with her a long lyric lament, she then bewails her monstrous life (τέρας γὰρ ὁ βίος 260) and sings a monody longing for death.

As the play proceeds, incidents promise relief from her misery, only to prolong it. Menelaus fortuitously appears, although his abject state mirrors that of Helen, and when she

recognizes him, he refuses to accept her. A servant fortuitously appears to report news of the phantom, so Menelaus now accepts Helen, only to learn of their hopeless predicament. Husband and wife therefore plan a double suicide. Theonoe fortuitously appears and eventually agrees to conceal from her brother the presence of Menelaus, at which Helen contrives a plan for escape. Yet the risks are great and Helen concludes by complaining of her abuse by the gods (ἄλλης δὲ λύμης ἦν μ' ἐλυμήνω πάρος 1099) and praying to escape death, until the long-delayed first stasimon offers a meditation on her miseries.

In two brief episodes, Helen and her husband bamboozle Theoclymenus into enabling their escape with a sham funeral for Menelaus. Yet this Helen has disfigured herself in mourning, with hair cut short, wearing black, and with cheeks torn and bloody. As she explains to Theoclymenus why she is in mourning, she voices again the misery she recently expressed, and the new mask and costume make tangible for the audience the emotions that continue to impel her actions. Finally they depart toward the sea and, after a brief final ode, a sailor appears to report their escape; when Theoclymenus tries to kill his sister in revenge, Castor appears, orders the tyrant to refrain, and foretells happiness for the reunited couple. At this point Helen's miseries seem finally over. But the more-or-less gratuitous finale offers a more-or-less superficial remedy. As Theoclymenus and the chorus march briskly offstage, Helen is indeed vindicated, but the memory surely lingers of her profound and multiple miseries.

What is at stake in reading *Helen* not as a drama of ideas nor a suspenseful intrigue, but as wave after wave of almost traumatic emotion? I conclude by turning to a scholar of modern melodrama who argues that the genre, rather than being “emotionally superficial, patently unrealistic,” is in fact “closer to sensational expressionism, an emotionally harrowing, psychologically incisive drama” (Buckley 2009: 187-8). That he finds such drama “credible most

to those whose experiences of violence and dislocation were most intensive and sustained” surely chimes with the situation in Athens in 412 BCE.

Bibliography

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