

Helen. 412 B.C.E.

Euripides.

Overview.

Euripides is a showman, as well as a profound imagination, who is plumbing the central crises of his time, in dramas employing the persons, myths, and reference points of centuries prior to his own. In *Helen* Euripides plants his action, the discovery of the true Helen, and the sharp reevaluation of the Trojan War, in an Homeric world of heroism, battles, and undisguised interventions of the gods into human action. What Euripides is saying, through this historical-poetic filter, is that the War with Sparta, currently absorbing and overwhelming Athens, overflows into many conundrums onto which the traditional past can shed light: what is being fought and died for (the parallel to the ancient Helen) is a puff of desire and vanity; the gods are indeed vengeful and petty (cf. the ongoing rivalry between Aphrodite and Hera, which is rigging the motions of Helen and Menelaos). More than the other dramatists before him, Euripides explores the ironic possibilities of fitting ancient figures into modern scenes, but the fifth century event horizon is fast moving, and the pace of modernization, from Aeschylus to Euripides, is rapid. Euripides is pushing thought and imagination on into the perspectives of the Sophists and soon of Socrates and his supremely critical culture.

Characters

Helen,	wife of Menelaos
Teucros,	Greek warrior who fought at Troy
Menelaos,	Helen's husband
Old Woman,	Servant to Theoclymenos
Theonoe,	Sister of Theoclymenos
Theoclymenos,	King of Egypt
Castor and Polydeuces,	Helen's twin brothers
Messenger of Theoclymenos	
Second Servant,	to Menelaos
Third Servant,	to Theonoe
Chorus,	of captive Greek Women

Story

Backdrop. Euripides was not the first Greek author to suggest that Helen was not present at the Trojan War—a ghostly image of her was present—but rather spent the war in Egypt. Herodotus the historian, and the archaic lyric poet, Stesichorus, had both claimed that Helen passed the war in Egypt; and that thus the widespread reviling of this woman, as a slut who enflamed both Greece and Troy, was off the mark; the beauty of the real Helen was not only physical but of the soul, and intact it remained while a war was (erroneously) fought in her honor.

Trapped. Having been whisked off to Egypt by Hera, who was jealous of Aphrodite, Helen's staunch supporter in the beauty contest that started it all—Helen finds herself actively wooed by the new King of Egypt, Theoclymenos. True to her husband Menelaos, about whose destiny she knows nothing, Helen turns to Theonoe, the spiritual sister to Theoclymenos. Helen needs advice.

Advice. Theonoe's answer, to the question about Menelaos' location, is quickly forthcoming, as Menelaos himself arrives on the Egyptian coast. After a period of amazed recognition, Helen and Menelaos embrace. Helen is at first puzzled about the nature and whereabouts of the fake Helen, but at just that moment of doubt one of Menelaos' sailors comes in to announce to Menelaos that his phantom

Helen had just vanished into thin air. Helen begins to see what a tricky history she has been consigned to. At this point Theoclymenos enters, and Helen sees that she must hide her husband as quickly as possible.

Escape. Theoclymenos, hating Greeks but wooing the beautiful Helen, is uneasy because he doubts that Menelaos is dead, and fears Menelaos as a threat to himself. Helen sees it as her job, to convince this local tyrant that Menelaos is no longer a threat. Helen tells Theoclymenos that a messenger has just arrived, to say that Menelaos is dead at sea, so that she, Helen, can now marry the tyrant. This is the key deception; leading to a clever trick, devised by Helen and Menelaos, which enables the married pair to escape by boat. Theoclymenos is furious, and all but murders his sister, for not letting him know that Menelaos was alive. She is saved, however, by the intervention of the demi-gods Castor and Pollux, who are Helen's brothers. Helen is free, escaping with her husband on the high seas.

Themes

Fidelity. Euripides wades into a tale usually twisted to stress lust, abduction, and irresponsibility—all alleged weaknesses of the traditional Helen—and turns it (and her) around, to create of her a victim of abusive tales, who is in fact a model of fidelity to husband and family.

Oaths. Helen's marital vow is sacred to her, and she has done all she can to respect her marriage to Menelaos, despite the widespread misapprehension that she is the whore of Troy.

Myth. The narrative Euripides constructs is self-critical. Given the traditional form of the myth, in which Helen comes out scorned—and Menelaos even more so, as a global cuckold who takes his wife back cheerfully—Euripides faces the challenge of building a new style Helen into his imagination. What he creates is a mirror opposite of the expected figure.

Miracle. The disappearance of the fake Helen, who vanishes into the air, is a byproduct of the myth as a self-consuming artifact. The myth central to the present play exists as a vehicle for unwinding the whole narrative and returning it to the beginning, Helen and Menelaos seated in their house in Sparta, their world as normal and mainline as it ever was.

Character Analysis

Helen Helen is the main character, a counter character to the traditional vision of Helen in Greek tales, a vision of a vamp, an extraordinary beauty, quite delighted to be the face that launched a thousand ships, that moved an army from Greece to Troy, and that looked down on her fellow Hellenes, from the Walls of Troy, as though to taunt them. Euripides' Helen, by contrast—and in concord with the view of Herodotus, in his *History*—is a real woman Helen, who was whisked away to Egypt before she could go to Troy, and who—thanks to machinations of the god Hera—was replaced in Troy by a simulacrum of herself, who incorporated all the 'evil woman' traits formerly attributed to the Helen now in Egypt. The Egyptian Helen is true to her husband, careful to stay far from the bed of her captor/host Theoclymenos, and perseverant til the end of the war, when she is able to escape from Egypt with Menelaos.

Visionary. Helen opens the play with an explanation of her presence in Egypt, and a reminder that it has been foretold, by the god Hermes, that she will one day return to live with Menelaos in Sparta.

Shocked. The Helen who addresses us from Egypt, at the outset of the play, is still not aware of what has happened to her husband, or to the Greek forces fighting in the Trojan War. When the shipwrecked Greek sailor, Teucer, arrives on the shore in Egypt, she is shocked by his news, fortunately wrong, that her husband is dead.

Tormented. Helen admits to the chorus of enslaved Greek women, who surround her in Egypt, that she is tormented by her bad reputation. which is undeserved and unjust.

Exultant. Helen announces to the chorus that she has visited with Theonoe, the prophetic sister of Theoclymenos, and has been assured that Menelaos is alive and will come to her.

Triumphant. 'A name can be in many places, but a body cannot.' Helen drops on Menelaos the startling news that she herself has never been to Troy, and that the woman he went to Troy to rescue was only a phantom image of Helen.

Parallels. The reputation of being a shameless flirt, and a sensational beauty at the same time adhered to Helen as the favorite of Aphrodite. Among Shakespeare's rich gallery of provocative women, who might be Helen parallels, Cleopatra may come closest. Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, though as unlike her dark image as Helen was, appeared within her Puritan culture as much a vamp as Helen did to the original audience of Homer. In 1955 Vladimir Nabokov gave creative birth, in *Lolita*, to a fascinatingly alluring teen ager, who rivals Helen as a man-catcher.

Discussion questions.

Euripides is an intellectual playwright, who challenges the archaic, ritual, and 'spiritually deep' dramatic perspectives of his predecessors. Euripides challenges the identity of myth figures, like Helen, he praises—and then takes a skeptical look at—Athens' famous democratic society, he questions gender identities, as in the case of Pentheus, and he makes fun of such figures as Admetus, in *Alcestis*, a middle class man with his own comfort level. In terms of drama history, do you see Euripides working in the direction of the following century, in which the type of the drama is the *Mimes* of Herondas?

Compare two deceptions of power figures—Thoas in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and Theoclymenos in *Helen*. Are the escape strategies of Iphigenia and Helen similar? Has Euripides sympathy for gulled power figures? With what male figures does Euripides particularly sympathize? What does he think of Pentheus in the *Bacchae*?

Does Euripides view human beings as figures acting in a social setting? Is he interested in what we might call economic conditions, psychological states, or the political as human practice? Does the advent of Euripides as dramatist mean a transition away from the older, myth based perspective of Greek drama? What influence do you find, in Euripides' work, of new critical and philosophical trends, like those of the Sophists, for whom every major issue or belief can be questioned?