

American Philological Association 21  
120<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting (Jan. 1989)  
Abstracts

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SESSION IV - A

1/7 1:30 P.M.

KAREN BASSI Tradition, Invention and Recognition in Euripides' Helen

Euripides' Helen follows Stesichorus' version of her story according to which not only did she not go to Troy, but her eidolon did go while the "real" Helen remained with Proteus in Egypt. The premise of two Helens in two places at the same time is, for Euripides, a vehicle for a wide ranging commentary on verbal and visual persuasion as factors in mimetic (especially dramatic) representation. This paper will discuss the literary, epistemological and aesthetic foci of the "two views" of Helen and how they converge in the play to form a self-referential study of tragic mimesis.

When Euripides' audience (and his characters) come face to face (or mask) with a "new Helen" (Thesmophoriazousae 850), they must face as well the difference between the "real" Euripidean Helen and her "false" Homeric image, between the true and the false narrative, between fact and illusion, between what is expected (given what is familiar from epic and/or previous dramatic productions) and what is delivered. These differences are made explicit in the complex and ambiguous recognition scenes in which it is made clear that what the eyes see and what the ears hear (e.g., the names "Helen" and "Menelaus") are not faultless indicators of the characters we think we know. This epistemological dilemma raises the more general aesthetic question of locating truth in art: where and how can truth be located in what is only imitation and doesn't Euripides' play itself fall under suspicion?

General points of comparison between the Helen and the epic material will be briefly discussed, as well as the more immediate points of comparison between the Helen and the Trojan Women (produced in 415), the recognition scene between Helen and Teucer, the non-traditional use of recognition tokens (Helen's symbola, 290-292) and finally the recognition scene between Helen and Menelaus, especially the ramifications of Helen's question to Menelaus (577-578) "Who shall teach you (who I am) better than your eyes?" This question is posed not only to Menelaus but to an audience involved in a process of recognition and persuasion based upon what it sees enacted on the stage. In what sense are we to believe or disbelieve our eyes? Especially in this play, with its true and false Helen, such a question reflects upon the nature of art or mimesis generally, on the difference between original and copy and on the correspondences (or lack thereof) between language, visual perception and fact.