

## Parodic Allusions: the *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Helen*

While other scholars have noticed textual parallels between the *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Helen* (e.g. Eisner, 1980), or noticed elements of comic imitation of the epic model in the play (Steiger, 1908), I argue that Euripides repeatedly compares Menelaus and Helen as a couple to Odysseus and Penelope to create a type of parody in which his characters fall short of the Homeric couple. This is emphasized by the fact that in the *Helen*, Euripides uses a non-traditional view of Helen as a faithful wife and creates a similarity between the typically unfaithful Helen and the ever loyal Penelope.

By focusing on a comparison of characters and their relationships to one another, I will point out many similarities between Euripides' *Helen* and Homer's *Odyssey*, which cannot simply be explained by the themes of νόστος and reunion. Helen's chastity, her problem of dealing with an unwanted suitor, and her belief that her husband is dead all echo the issues that Penelope faces in the *Odyssey*. Menelaus' situation of being shipwrecked on an island, being reduced to a beggar, and having to win back his wife from suitors parallel Odysseus' problems. Then I shall compare Menelaus and Helen as a couple to the standard of a successful couple set forth by Odysseus and Penelope.

The recognition scene between Penelope and Odysseus (*Od.* 23.173-230) is famous due to the riddle of the bed, proving the wife as cunning as the husband. By contrast, Menelaus and Helen are for a long time unable to achieve a recognition even though neither one is disguised, and despite the fact that they can speak freely to one another (*Hel.* 563-567). Menelaus finally does recognize Helen not due to any clever test that Helen set out but by default because Helen's εἶδωλον has disappeared (*Hel.* 622-24). In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and Penelope easily concoct a plan to kill the suitors (*Od.* 536-50, 582-87). Conversely, Menelaus and Helen eventually come

up with a plan to escape, only after rejecting many impractical suggestions set forth by Menelaus and by Helen explaining her plan step by step (*Hel.* 1039-49, 1055-66). Other examples will be added to show that Menelaus and Helen become parodic copies of Odysseus and Penelope. Finally, I suggest that Euripides uses here a parodic technique that he develops in other tragedies as well.

#### Works Cited

- Eisner, Robert. "Echoes of the Odyssey in Euripides' *Helen*." *Maia*, Vol. 32 (1980), pp. 31-37.
- Steiger, Hugo. "Wie entstand die Helena des Euripides?" *Philologus*, 67 (1908), pp. 202-237.