

Questions for January 19 (Eur. *Helen*)

Stesichorus *Palinode*

According to Plato, the poet Stesichorus, struck blind after blaming Helen in a song, sang a *palinode* that denied the truth of his previous poem. Upon recanting, Stesichorus regained his sight.

Stesichorus *Palinode*, preserved in Pl. *Phaedrus* 243a; Bergk frag. 32:

οὐκ ἔστ' ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος,	This is not a true <i>logos</i> ,
οὐδ' ἔβας ἐν νηυσὶν ἐυσσέλμοις,	and you did not embark on the well-benched ships,
οὐδ' ἴκεο πέργαμα Τροίας	and you did not reach the citadel of Troy.

What in the world is a “palinode?” Why do classicists keep using stupid big words?

Do any elements of Eur. *Hel.* conform to Stesichorus in content or style?

How seriously can we take the story of the *Palinode*? Was Stesichorus honest in his recantation? Do Eur. or the Athenian audience honestly believe the ghost story?

Generic Conventions

To what extent does Eur. *Helen* conform the generic expectations that you have formed from reading other tragedy, such as Soph. *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*? To what extent does the play challenge your definition of tragedy?

Do any elements seem more appropriate to comedy than tragedy? What makes this play a tragedy?

Tragedy tends to have a scene in which the chorus informs someone, “You were wrong,” and then explains why that character was wrong. Who was wrong in *Helen*? What did he/she do wrong? What does he/she suffer for it? Is this suffering just?

What roles do fear and pity play for the characters of the *Helen*?

Gender and Power

Does the *Helen* challenge or confirm gender roles? How much power do Helen and Theonoë have, and how do they get and use power? In what are they weaker?

To what extent do Theoklymenos and Menelaus have or lack power, and why?

Eur. *Helen* and the Trojan Tradition

How does the *Helen* affirm or contradict the mainstream (especially Homeric) Trojan stories?

Does Menelaus comport himself like a hero of the Trojan war? Does Helen?

Does the *Helen* reenact any story from the Trojan War?

How does the phantom Helen affect your interpretation of both the Trojan stories and Eur. *Helen*? Was the phantom Helen credible enough a story for the audience to believe?

How might an Athenian audience, familiar with both sophistry and traditional stories of the Trojan war, have interpreted Eur. *Helen*? What is your own gut reaction to the play?