

Gary MATTHEWS

Euripidean Allegory and the Need for Meaning—The Case of Helen

Recent scholarship has focused on *Helen's* function as cultural critique in the Athens of the year 412. I will argue that an important aspect of Euripides' critique is to be found in a particular use of allegory. My paper is inspired by Walter Benjamin's work on allegory in the German baroque (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*). Benjamin locates the value of baroque allegory in the fact that it rendered any person or object capable of meaning anything. Since allegory could signify anything, it could also be seen as signifying nothing. In this way, allegory rendered its main object in baroque representation, evil, illusory. Conversely, the images of death and decline that permeated baroque drama could immediately call forth a vision of redemption. Thus, allegory helped sustain hope in a world perceived as fallen hopelessly into evil.

The value of Euripidean allegory lay similarly in its openness to meaning anything or nothing. But its function was rather to open spaces within traditional representations, which could then be filled with new content. I will focus on the well-known example of how the "new" Helen we see at the beginning of *Helen* later reverts to her traditional form. This reversion appears in such actions as her "weaving" of the plot against Theoclymenus and her bloodthirsty cheering on of the Greek sailors as they slaughter the Egyptian crew of the getaway boat. But what motivates this change? It is not motivated by anything in the literal representation of the Helen of the first part of the play, such that it could be seen as a logical development of her character. It is motivated, rather, by what she *needs* to be to support certain thematic developments in the play. That is, Helen is an allegory.

The first part of the play presents a view of the Trojan War as having been fought in vain. The substitution of the phantom for Helen especially highlights this theme. What motivates the Helen of this part is the idea that the war did not need to be fought. A character who would not, but solely for the gods' machinations, have caused the war, accords with this idea. In the second half of the play, the action tends to rehabilitate the war effort. But this calls forth the traditional Helen, a character whose behavior belonged among the causes that made the war necessary. Thus the allegorical container, Helen, is filled with different contents according to the dominant ideas of the two halves of the play.

This allegorical status reveals Helen as a figural phantasm throughout the play. She is a figure for creating the meanings needed to face an intractable and often inscrutable reality, but at the same time she is a figure of the potential groundlessness of those meanings. It is the generic form of allegory, rather than any precise meaning attached to Helen or any other character or action in the play, that makes Euripides' critique so resonant of the ways Athenians were negotiating the meanings of events around the year 412, as attested by other sources, such as the sophists and Thucydides.