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The Reinvention of Wartime Womanhood in Euripides' *Helen*

"Tragedy is an ancient military technology," writes Bryan Doerries, presenting tragedy as "a form of storytelling that evokes powerful emotions in order to erode stigmas, elicit empathy, generate dialogue, and stir citizens to action" (xiii). As the dramatic readings of these translations for modern veteran audiences have demonstrated, this ancient technology still possesses the ability to erode stigma and communalize trauma for soldiers. However, Doerries' approach has been critiqued for its refusal to consider historical differences between ancient and modern modes of combat and the sociopolitical structures that produce them (Crowley, Hanink). Moreover, Doerries' singular focus on the combat veteran ignores the ideological work that tragedy performs on a female subject. Taking seriously the notion that tragedy was an ancient military technology, but projecting its effects onto a female subject, this paper historicizes Doerries' claim through a Marxist feminist reading of Euripides' *Helen* (Marxist: Adorno, Althusser, Jameson; Marxist feminist: de Lauretis, Marcus).

The premise of Euripides' *Helen* is that Helen has been doubled: one version, a phantom (*eidolon*) went to Troy, while a second version, the "real" Helen, resides in Egypt. Many critics have analyzed the thematic, structural, metapoetic, and, most recently, musical doubleness of this shape-shifting tragedy (Solmsen, Segal, Zeitlin, Marshall, Wohl, Lush, Weiss). Through an analysis that views these formal doublings as political expression, this paper argues that the two Helens give shape to two competing narratives of wartime womanhood that emerged in the fifth century during a period of rapid militarization for Athens. The first, more traditional narrative imagines female initiative, and particularly female desire, as a threat to male hegemony that must be subdued. The second narrative contradicts the first, presenting women as fellow soldiers, allied to men in a common purpose – fighting the enemy and returning safely home. This second narrative responds to shortages of men in the last quarter of the fifth century, which demanded greater female participation in the war effort (although Athenian women did not fight in actual battles, their labor at home was figured as war work on behalf of the *polis*). The doubleness of Helen in Euripides' play gives formal expression to the conflict between these two political identities for women, while the play itself imagines a formal solution to an unresolvable social contradiction by eliminating the *eidolon*. Euripides' *Helen*, I argue, is indeed an "ancient military technology," in that it both produces and formally resolves the contradictory demands of militarized patriarchy on the female subject.

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