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On your head be it sworn: oath and characterization in Euripides' *Helen*

This paper will argue that Euripides creates a significant tension in his *Helen* between the miserable appearance and dim wit of Menelaus on the one hand, and the suggestion of his importance on the other, a suggestion which is developed by an implied parallel with Zeus through Helen's invocation of the head as sanctifying object in her oath to her husband at *Helen* 835ff.. The parallel is particularly interesting when compared to Hera's oath to Zeus in *Iliad* 15 where she invokes, among other powers, the head of her husband as sanctifying object. This paper will argue against Cathy Callaway *TAPA* 123 (1993)15-25, who claims that Hera's oath is proposed but not sworn, and will use several parallels of oaths by Zeus' head to show how the resulting tension created in Euripides' *Helen* can be seen as working in concert with other apparent contradictions within the play (on which, see most recently Matthew Wright, *Euripides' Escape Tragedies* [2005]). Coupled with this, the frequency of virgin deities as swearers invoking the head of Zeus in parallel oaths, it will be suggested, reinforces Helen's claim to chastity as presented in this play.

The formal swearing of an oath in Greek poetry usually involves the invocation of one or more deities or, more rarely, a sanctifying object. In the cases in which a sanctifying object is sworn by, this object generally embodies some particular power. A well known example is Achilles in *Iliad* 1.233-246 who swears by Agamemnon's sceptre. The sceptre is a symbol of power over the army and control over the situation, something very precious to Achilles at that moment, and something which he does not wish to lose. When Helen swears an oath to her husband invoking his own head, and no other power, as sanctifying force, the implication is similar. It shows that she is desperate not to lose Menelaus, and this is validated by the actual oath statement, which binds her to die and never take another man should the escape from Egypt fail and Menelaus be killed in the process. The oath by Menelaus' head is a unique example of the invocation of a mortal husband's head as sanctifying object. However, it can be read against a background of oaths in epic and lyric poetry, and in the Homeric hymns, in which divinities swear oaths by the head of Zeus (*Iliad* 15.36-46, Sappho fr. 44A, *h. Merc.* 274-6, *h. Ven.* 26-8; cf. S. *Trach.* 1185). Swearing by the head of a divinity is, of course, different from swearing by that of a mortal as the former is tantamount to invoking the god himself. This context, and the context in which Helen's oath takes place in the play, both problematize the way in which we should understand its implications for characterization.