

Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood. By LAURIE MAGUIRE. Chichester and Malden, MA: Wiley–Blackwell, 2009. Pp. xviii + 258. Paper, \$35.00. ISBN 978–1–4051–2635–9.

Laurie Maguire's (M.) *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood* was not the book I expected. As someone interested in the appearance of classics in film, I was misled by M.'s title, thinking that the focus of this book would be how Hollywood has transformed antiquity's Helen for the big screen. While M. does take filmic versions of Helen into consideration, they receive little sustained treatment and make up only a small part of her analysis, which M. more accurately describes in the first sentence of her preface as a "literary biography."

That said, M. generally succeeds in her aim of presenting a thorough exploration of Helen's "literary afterlife" (p. ix) in English language sources (with the exceptions of attention to German sources in her treatment of the Faust tradition, and a neglect of American poetry in general). I note for *CJ*'s readership, however, that M., who is professor of English at the University of Oxford, approaches her topic securely from the perspective of her own discipline. Although in the course of her extensive research she has consulted a handful of classicists, the majority of experts whose help she acknowledges (p. xii) are medievalists, Renaissance specialists and Shakespeare scholars housed in departments of English. M. also relies on English translations of Greek and Latin texts, although she seems to have done so in a responsible way. In addition, M.'s statement that her narratological approach "avoids ... the eclecticism common to most studies of Helen to date which tend to mix archaeology, history, literature, and mythology without any sense that they are separate disciplines" (p. x) betrays an important bias, as the mixture she disdains is one way of describing the field of classics itself. I would argue that the multi-disciplinary approach she refers to is an equally valid way of examining a figure like Helen: M.'s dismissal ignores the fact that those of us who study the ancient world may have different objectives that require more comprehensive methodologies. Fortunately, this bias does not detract from the overall value of M.'s study, which for the most part achieves its particular aims effectively. Indeed, one advantage of M.'s approach is that she views Helen as a character who persists through time rather than as a figure from antiquity whom subsequent authors have appropriated, as many classicists—myself included—are prone to do. This enables M. to pinpoint essential truths about the Helen archetype that are easily missed if one views the Greco-Roman character as the "real" Helen and later manifestations as derivative. For example, by using works from the *Iliad* to Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* to show that Helen is "systematically lin-

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guistically suppressed" (p. 14) from Helen narratives, Maguire successfully demonstrates that, rather than being a mere byproduct of a plot that centers on abduction, the presentation of Helen as "both absent and absence itself" (p. 13) is fundamental to a complete understanding of her character.

M.'s survey is impressively broad in scope, including depictions of Helen in epic, drama, poetry, opera, novels and film, and covering sources from Homeric times through 2006. Rather than using the chronological approach her title implies, M. approaches her subject thematically. In the introduction, where Helen's life story is presented sequentially, this disregard of chronology is, in my opinion, ill-advised: the effect of drawing not only on ancient texts—themselves often varied and contradictory—but also from sources across the centuries is a bit dizzying. While M.'s freedom from classical bias may count as an asset elsewhere, here she might have done better to anchor her analysis by presenting Helen's story as it stood in its original cultural milieu, particularly as she seems to make no assumptions about her audience's familiarity with either the events of the Trojan War or Greek mythology in general. As it stands, this overview of Helen's life is at times both sprawling and confusing.

On the other hand, M.'s thematic approach works well in the main chapters, and is indeed essential to the book's greatest strength: M.'s ability to see continuities in the presentation of Helen across time and to tease out broader meanings. As a result, her analyses of ancient and modern sources become mutually enlightening. M. does this most successfully in Chapters 1 ("Narrating Myth") and 2 ("Beauty"), and in the earlier parts of Chapters 3 ("Abducting Helen") and 4 ("Blame"), where she methodically examines elements crucial to Helen-narratives. M. has much to say on such topics as the role of absence in Helen's story and the "textual shudder" her presence provokes; the function of mythic themes in Helen narratives; the problems associated with Helen's beauty, both in terms of representation and in the issues it raises when she interacts with other characters; the nature of beauty and its relationship to nostalgia; the theme of abduction; and competing views on the subject of Helen's responsibility. Scholars from many disciplines will be interested in M.'s insights and observations on these and related subjects.

M. seems less concerned, however, with offering the sort of broad analysis that leads to such insights as the book progresses. In most of the later sections of Chapters 3 and 4 and throughout Chapter 6 ("Parodying Helen"), rather than identifying recurring issues by ex-

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aming continuity and difference in narrative treatments of Helen, M.'s exploration of texts in which Helen figures is largely reduced to a series of summaries, and the analysis she does provide is applicable chiefly to individual texts. While I can see valid uses for such a survey, in sections focusing on individual texts I was generally left wanting the sort of contextualization and analysis of larger trends that M. presented so well in the earlier parts of the book. And while this shortcoming might have been offset by a thorough conclusion that brought these texts together and posited some broader significance, M. instead includes a short and unsatisfying conclusion at the end of Chapter 6. In addition, Chapter 5 ("Helen and the Faust Tradition"), seems anomalous: while M. does consider the role of Helen here, the chapter is far more about the Faust tradition itself than about how the depiction of Helen in these narratives fits into the larger picture of Helen as a phenomenon.

M.'s research has been thorough and meticulous, including everything from the Homeric epics to texts both ancient and modern that have been largely forgotten. Although she is generally conscientious about identifying her sources, M. occasionally gives a less familiar detail without indicating its source, especially in her introduction. At other times, she looks to less prominent texts while downplaying more canonical ones: in the introduction, for example, she exhibits a predilection for Dictys of Crete, while making a seemingly conscious attempt to de-emphasize Homer's accounts. In the analytical portions of her book, I also found the lack of sustained attention to the *Odyssey* disappointing, especially since the interchange of tales between Helen and Menelaus in Book 4 has much to say about the subject of blame in particular. In these chapters (particularly 1, 3 and 4), however, M. does wisely turn first to the *Iliad*, using it (sometimes along with other ancient texts) as a springboard to launch her discussion.

Occasionally, M.'s generally admirable tendency toward thoroughness leads her to present tangential information in an unnecessarily sustained way, so that material seems forced in for the sake of inclusiveness at the expense of focus and coherence. Thus in Chapter 3 M.'s discussion of changing rape law in the late 16th century is far more detailed than is necessary to illustrate her point that the use of the term *raptus* has made it historically difficult to differentiate rape or abduction from adultery (pp. 100–2). So too, an exploration of precisely *who* Jane Stanley was adds little to the analysis of her *A Daughter of the Gods* (pp. 193–4), making M.'s discussion more about this text than about her ostensible subject, Helen of Troy. While in-

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teresting independently, these digressions distract from M.'s larger purpose and from what momentum she has achieved in her analysis, a fault she seems to recognize when she points out these very examples and attempts to rationalize their inclusion in her preface (pp. x-xi).

It seems fair to acknowledge that some of these criticisms stem from where my own interests in Helen lie. And M.'s book is in any case an impressive achievement that should prove valuable to any scholar looking at the character of Helen or Helen-narratives, no matter what their discipline. M. has marshaled an impressive array of sources on Helen and provided valuable summaries and commentaries on most of them, and the connections she draws and the insights she offers are often informative and enlightening. This book is thus an important contribution to the continuing conversation about just what has made Helen such an intriguing and enduring character across the millennia.

Augustana College

KIRSTEN DAY