Review Essay: Hellenistic Women

Arsinoë of Egypt and Macedon: A Royal Life. By ELIZABETH DONNELLY CARNEY. Women in Antiquity. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 215, 13 illus. Hardcover, $99.00. ISBN 978-0-19-536552-8. Paperback, $27.95, ISBN 978-0-19-536551-1.

Berenice II and the Golden Age of Ptolemaic Egypt. By DEE L. CLAYMAN. Women in Antiquity. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 270, 2 illus. Hardcover, $99.00. ISBN 978-0-19-537088-1. Paperback, $27.95. ISBN 978-0-19-537089-8.

Feminism has stimulated classical research in some unexpected ways: it has, for instance, added credibility to Herodotus's notions of historiography by confirming that women, individually as well as socially, could, and did, influence power politics, while at the same time making Thucydides' restrictive emphasis on males in political or military authority look both arbitrary and, worse, patriarchal. But it has also, by (predictably) encouraging more detailed study of notable women in antiquity, shed a depressing light on just how difficult a process this is. We have long been reminded of the pitfalls involved in putting too much trust in ancient biography, especially of literary figures: the mixture of *parti pris* log-rolling, gossipy hearsay, and deductive invention from the subject's own works forms a formidable obstacle to the enquirer. Even with historical characters (as Plutarch too often exemplifies) this kind of semi-fictionalized evidence remains all too frequent, compounded by the average historian's prime objective, throughout antiquity, of offering the reader high-minded moral exempla or, alternatively, awful warnings.

When it comes to investigating women, the problem is even worse: the evidence is provided by males, who (like Thucydides) largely ignore the feminine fifty percent, and when they do take notice of it, for the most part stick to stereotypes and traditional masculine for *idées reçues*, whether for praise or blame. Thus even with the most famous (or notorious) subjects, there are more gaps than testimonia, and the latter are shot through with presumptive unreliability. The prospect for successful research could hardly be more discouraging. However, as

the two works under review demonstrate, this hasn't stopped determined scholars from trying. In the process critical scrutiny of dubious evidence has been refined, and ways have been found to bridge the yawning gaps that such evidence inevitably leaves.

The Hellenistic Age in general, and the Lagid dynasty of the Ptolemies in particular, offer well-nigh irresistible temptations to anyone seeking to improve our knowledge of the ancient world's notable women. No accident that the first volume of Oxford's *Women in Antiquity* series (in which both Carney's and Clayman's monographs now appear) was devoted to Cleopatra VII. That was the end of the dynastic line; as both Arsinoë II and Berenice II demonstrate, family-orientated power politics was a game these Macedonian royal women played from the get-go, sometimes as pawns, sometimes as dominant queens, but always with ruthless, and not seldom murderous, finesse. There is one unlooked-for advantage here today: we live in an age when the lurid details of Hellenistic court intrigue no longer look quite as dismissable as they once did to our resolutely meliorist predecessors, and this extra evidence has been well exploited by both historians to flesh out (often in a very literal sense) their subjects' careers: Carney in particular uses it brilliantly in her introductory account of Macedonian dynastic politics.

Arsinoë (*c.* 316–*c.* 270 BCE) was married as a teenager (in furtherance of her father Ptolemy I's political alliances) to the sexagenarian Lysimachus; bore him three sons; allegedly tried to seduce her step-son Agathocles (son of Lysimachus's first wife Nicaea), perhaps conniving in his execution when she failed; escaped by the skin of her teeth after Lysimachus's death in battle at Corupedium (281), allegedly by exchanging clothes with a slave-girl (who was mistaken for her and killed); fled to Macedon, married—against her eldest son's advice—her half-brother, Ptolemy Keraunos (son of her father's earlier wife Eurydice), who murdered her remaining sons, and would in all likelihood have killed her too had she not fled, once again, this time to Egypt to the protective arms of her full brother, Ptolemy II, who became her third husband; was, finally, made not only a Gloriana-like patron of the arts but a divinized figure, probably in her own lifetime; and died, of unknown causes (though plain exhaustion should not be ruled out) while still in her forties.

Berenice (? c. 273–221 BCE), another royal Lagid, had a less *mouvementé* career, except at its beginning and close. She was the daughter of Magas, Ptolemy I's stepson, appointed governor of Cyrene soon after Ptolemy ousted that city's government when strengthening Egypt's western defenses. On Ptolemy's death

Magas declared himself king of an independent Cyrene, and even attempted an invasion of Egypt, which turned out a fiasco. Reconciled as a result with the new king in Alexandria, Ptolemy II Philadelphos, Magas betrothed Berenice (his only child) to Philadelphos' son, the future Ptolemy III. But when Magas died prematurely, his wife Apame (Seleucus I's granddaughter), a matriarch unwilling to lose Cyrene's independent status, married Berenice off to Demetrius known as the Fair (though in his case καλός may rather hint at a gigolo's attractions), half-brother of Demetrius the Besieger's son Antigonus Gonatas, the current king of Macedon. Scandal ensued. Demetrius allegedly preferred mother to daughter: Berenice is said [Just. *Epit.* 26.4-8] to have caught them *in flagrante delicto* and to have had her errant husband murdered, while considerately saving her mother.

Was the charge true? It certainly clung to her. Carney and Clayman hedge, but admit that she had both means and motive. She then in due course went to Alexandria and married Ptolemy III, arguably what she had wanted to do all along. The quarter-century reign that they enjoyed was marked by a high level of court art and poetry (Berenice—another Gloriana, but also a racehorse fancier: Cyrene was famous for its horses—had almost certainly known Callimachus earlier in Cyrene: the lost and subsequently catasterized 'Lock of Berenice' was hers). But while Ptolemy III died in his bed, Berenice, a Macedonian at the last, fell victim to intrigues over the succession, and was murdered by a cabal that included her own son, the future Ptolemy IV.

The most remarkable thing about both biographies under review is the way they not only expose the crippling dearth of good biographical evidence, but continually remind us of the ambiguities and dubious qualities permeating what literary testimonia we possess. As a result, both Carney and Clayman structure the narrative of their subjects' lives in terms of their general social and historical backgrounds—for Arsinoë, primarily the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphos (282–246), for Berenice that of Ptolemy III Euergetes I (246–221)—in the context of which they set their careful examination of what the tradition tells us about each. Because of that tradition's unreliability, both scholars have trawled, with remarkable thoroughness, for what Clayman rightly describes (176) as 'the kind of evidence that is hard to discredit: contemporary inscriptions, documentary papyri, art, and archaeology.' The careful scaffolding of notes both referential and analytical, together with exhaustive bibliographies, lets the reader in each case both digest important previous scholarship and check the basis of the arguments presented. Though interpretations will continue to differ, it is unlikely—short of

new papyri or inscriptions—that further facts about either Arsinoë or Berenice will be gleaned that are not duly, and for the most part judiciously, considered in these two monographs, which both have the additional advantage (a comparative rarity in modern scholarship) of being elegantly and wittily written.

Carney's impeccable appendix summarizing not only the evidence, but, more revealingly, the scholarly assessments made of Arsinoë, shows with embarrassing clarity how often inadequate evidence can lead to diametrically opposite conclusions. Was Arsinoë more victim or victimizer? Justin suggests both (and may have been right: as Carney reminds us (9), people aren't necessarily consistent throughout their lives, so that 'what was compelling to a young mother of potential heirs to a throne might not have been to a middle-aged woman with only one problematic son and a much more secure personal base.') But there is no reliable narrative source: just how influential was she? The scholarship on Arsinoë's character, as Carney says, has been "curiously personal" (144), ricocheting between an all-powerful and maleficently manipulative tigress and a mere appendage: "if Arsinoë is not running the kingdom then she must be a sort of royal housewife." By using her great knowledge of non-Ptolemaic Macedonian history to apply telling comparisons, Carney steers a plausible mid-course between these two extremes. Yet our knowledge remains startlingly deficient even so. We know hardly any date in Arsinoë's life for certain, including that of her death.

Perhaps the most notorious event in her regal career was her marriage to her full brother, the couple being publicized as the Θεοὶ Ἀδελφοί, the 'Sibling Gods'. Theocritus, not surprisingly, compared the royal couple to Zeus and Hera. No children were born to them. But does this necessarily mean that the union was simply a dynastic political gimmick, with no sex involved? We can't tell. When the poet Sotades incurred royal wrath with the accusatory line εἰς οὐχ ὁσίην τρυμαλίην τὸ κέντρον ὠθεῖς ("You're pushing your prick into an unholy hole") was Ptolemy's resentment aroused because he was, or wasn't? Arsinoë was nearly forty at the time: Carney sensibly implies sibling policy rather than enjoyable incest as the prime motive of both. Like most of the guesses in her well-balanced narrative, this one carries conviction. But what was the point of it? Sheila Ager [*JHS* 125 (2005) 1-34] suggested a symbolic link with royal τρυφή absolute (and exclusive) privileged self-indulgence. More probable, surely, is the paramount wish to safeguard against destructive intrafamilial feuding over the succession. It worked for Philadelphos and Arsinoë; the widowed, non-incestuous, and too-fertile Berenice wasn't so fortunate.

Clayman rightly describes (178) the reign of Ptolemy III and Berenice as the Lagid dynasty's golden age, a 'Camelot-on-the-Nile', when "for a brief shining moment, while Callimachus and Apollonius were composing their best verse and Eratosthenes was measuring the earth, it seemed, or was made to seem, like the forces of politics, economics, religion, and culture, Greek and Egyptian, were all in balance." Berenice might (for the best of wifely reasons) have come to Alexandria as the murderer of her first husband; but with the aid of Callimachus (and, of course, the gods) she rapidly changed her profile, first, to that of a weepy virgin *ingénue* (so Catullus 66, a loose translation of Callimachus' 'Lock of Berenice'), and in due course to that of a polyphiloprogenitive earth-mother (she bore Ptolemy six children in seven years) with an eye for bloodstock and a knack for winning harness races.

Like Arsinoë, in furtherance of her family's political aims she enjoyed a posthumous career as a goddess. In life she had organized national mourning for her daughter (also a Berenice) who died young and was divinized as Kore, a move that let her calculating mother assume the *mater dolorosa* role of Demeter, something denied to Arsinoë, who understandably preferred assimilation to Aphodite. Despite his right to succession as Berenice's eldest son, Ptolemy IV Philopator almost certainly connived at his mother's murder, but he lost no time afterwards before he exploited her potential as a goddess, catasterized Lock and all.

Like Carney, Clayman bulks out her narrative with background material: on Cyrene and the Battiads, on the city and court life of Alexandria, on the Third Syrian War and the Ptolemaic empire. In each case she skillfully uses an apparent digression to lend depth to her subject's activities. The political changes in Cyrene, veering between republicanism and (*soi-disant* royal) autocracy, tell us a lot about Magas (not to mention his daughter's early impressions); Clayman's portrait of Alexandria lets her slide into the court poetry of Callimachus and Theocritus, which she milks throughout for every relevant drop she can squeeze out of it; her lead-in to Ptolemy III's imperial politics includes a close assessment of the surviving portraits (unlike Arsinoë II, Berenice offers attributable likenesses, in a cameo, a mosaic, and a gold octadrachm) and of the various honorific or political decrees involving the Sibling Gods scattered around the Hellenistic world, including those celebrating Berenice's victories in four-horse chariot-racing at Olympia and elsewhere. But throughout Clayman's emphasis is always on the surviving literature (whether directly or indirectly encomiastic), viewed against a rigorously assembled framework of epigraphical and archaeological material.

This is the best and the most rewarding part of her research. It pays particular dividends in the analysis of work by Berenice's fellow-Cyrenaean and clearly devoted court poet Callimachus. His *Hymns* (5 and 6) to Athena and Demeter get careful examination for psychological pointers in support of his royal patroness, Nowhere in these is Berenice named; but, as Clayman reminds us (79), "both are stories of sexual intrusion, in the first instance, on a virgin goddess, and in the second, on a nymph who stands in for a goddess' young daughter. In both cases the goddesses exact vengeance on the perpetrators, vengeance that is as appropriate as it is violent." In other words, in both *Hymns* we can read a discreet but unmistakable sub-text justifying the actions on Berenice's part that led to her departure from Cyrene.

The *Hymn* to Athena also contains an odd digression on Athena's love of horses: read in the context of Berenice's equestrian record, this makes instant sense. The *Hymn* to Demeter is equally apposite. Berenice and Ptolemy, at their own expense, imported supplies of wheat during the famines of 245 and 240 when the Nile flood failed, and were publicly thanked in the Canopus Decree; and we have seen earlier how Berenice took on the role of Demeter after the death of her young daughter. Finally, this *Hymn* contains an account of the goddess's dealings with Erysichthon, a stock figure of arrogant speech and boundless gluttonous and sexual appetites. Who would not think, in context, of the propaganda version (which may even have been true) of Berenice's first husband?

Clayman pursues this line of investigation enthusiastically into the surviving fragments of Books 3 and 4 of Callimachus' *Aitia*: The opening of Book 3 celebrates the victory of Berenice's four-horse chariot team at Nemea, while the 'Lock of Berenice' concludes Book 4. The last thought Clayman leaves us with, (186) is that 'the "Lock" is the only one of the 88 recognized constellations named for an historical figure.' One wishes she'd left it at that. Unfortunately she couldn't resist trawling through Apollonius Rhodius too. Even she feels uncomfortable about the idea of lining Berenice up as a kind of Medea: as she admits (119), it's hard to imagine "a court poet who would suggest, however indirectly, that his monarch might resemble a character who killed her brother and murdered her children"—not least when the lady *had*, in fact, almost certainly organized the death of her first husband. Nor was Apollonius—Librarian and royal tutor prior to Eratosthenes—the kind of Ptolemaic functionary to risk the loss of his excellent position, let alone the kind of death sentence carried out on the scandalous Sotades. But this apart, *Berenice II and the Golden Age of Ptolemaic Egypt* is a cornucopia of a book, brimming over with the fruits of deep research

and perceptive reading, and, like *Arsinoë of Egypt and Macedon*, a page-turner that never needs to compromise its scholarship in order to cater to its readers' pleasure. Between them these two studies have moved our knowledge and appreciation of women in antiquity substantially forward.

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