

BOOK REVIEW

Helen of Troy: Beauty Myth, Devastation. By RUBY BLONDELL. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 320. ISBN 978-019-973160-2.

Ruby Blondell's *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation* (hereafter *Helen of Troy*) is, of course, a book about Helen. Specifically, the book is a cross-textual character study, following Helen through a number of Greek texts in order to see how her character varies from text to text, and how her uses reflect ancient understanding of, and concerns about, female beauty and agency. However, as I read it, I began to see it as something else: a bridge. Dr. Blondell's book is one of the best works I have read for introducing someone to Classical scholarship. While many texts feel like they are written either for undergraduate students or scholars at least well into a graduate program, *Helen of Troy* is valuable for people on either side of this divide. The text is helpful and inviting to those just starting to study Greek literature, but even experienced researchers will learn something new from it.

Everything about *Helen of Troy* seems designed to make it easier for budding Classicists to read. Footnotes, quotations, and in-text citations are kept to a minimum, replaced by thorough and helpful bibliographical notes at the end of the book (251–259), which do not merely tell the readers which works Blondell used but also for which purposes. Moreover, most of *Helen of Troy's* bibliography consists of English language texts or Loeb editions of Classical works that are easy for readers inspired by her work to find (251), making this text even more of a gateway into the world of Classical scholarship. Blondell's writing style also serves this end: sentences are consistently easy to follow, and there is very little jargon that might hinder people new to reading scholarly research. However, the straightforwardness of the writing does not result in an oversimplifying of the figure of Helen. *Helen of Troy* consistently highlights the complexities and contradictions of its subject matter.

When discussing the Greek use of Helen, Blondell focuses on the intertwined issues of her beauty, value, character, agency, and culpability with many of her most interesting observations detailing the results of altering the relationship between

these issues. For instance, she explains how tales like the *Iliad* and Herodotus' *History* which emphasize her value often end up reducing her agency to the point where she almost functions as an object rather than a person (59, 152–153). *Helen of Troy* also illustrates how the Ancient Greeks' depictions of Helen and her qualities tie back into ancient concerns about controlling-and being controlled by-female sexuality.

Helen of Troy begins with two chapters that create the framework for the arguments presented in subsequent sections. The first focuses on feminine beauty in Ancient Greece, and the issues that arose from it; the second on the general Helen story and the uses she was put to by ancient authors. Blondell's analysis of the Greek belief in objective rather than subjective beauty, and the way woman's beauty was simultaneously something to be sought and feared, is clearly articulated, and creates a vital parallel between Helen and the qualities she represented in antiquity. The rest of the text focuses on either individual works, or groups of works in which Helen appears, presented chronologically.

Chapters three and four treat Helen as she appears in the Homeric Epics. In chapter three, Blondell focuses on the *Iliad*. The chapter contrasts Helen's description of herself with the way others describe her, emphasizing how Helen's assumption of responsibility for her actions both enables and subverts the way other characters depict her as a prize. This chapter contains arguably the best analysis of the relationship of agency and culpability in value in all of *Helen of Troy*. The chapter also argues persuasively that Helen should be seen as a feminine counterpart to Achilles in both character and importance to the Trojan War tale. In the chapter of the *Odyssey*, Blondell depicts how Helen is connected to supernatural (and supernaturally dangerous) women like Calypso, Circe, and the Sirens (78–80). She then discusses how Helen's seemingly diminished value in the *Odyssey* reflects the epic's reassessment of heroic values generally, with the ideal wife Penelope replacing the ideal beauty as the sort of woman a man should cross oceans for. These chapters provide several intriguing insights into both Helen and the epics she inhabits, although the *Odyssey* chapter, the second longest in the book despite Helen's comparatively small presence in the epic, feels somewhat stretched out.

Helen of Troy's fifth and sixth chapters depart from the rest of the text in discussing groups of texts, rather than single works. Chapter five combines all of Blondell's observations about the fragmentary lyric poems discussing Helen. Blondell illustrates how each Lyric poet's use of Helen reflected his or her desired relationship with both the epic tradition and their own social groups, and how that explains some of the discrepancies between them. However, the (acknowledged)

minimal and fragmentary nature of the lyric material limits the possibilities of making the larger arguments found in the other chapters of the book, which is particularly notable since it is tied with the section on beauty for longest chapter in the book. The section on the *Oresteia*, which describes how the shadow of Helen lays over the tragic cycles' interpretation of Troy, women, and even the divine figures, is far more successful, with the connections to Clytemnestra and the Furies being particularly compelling.

In chapters seven and eight, Blondell returns to individual texts, but moves temporarily out of poetry and into prose, focusing on how Herodotus and Gorgias deal with Helen. These chapters effectively combine close readings of Helen's appearances with explanations of how the authors weaved her into arguments about Greek culture and rhetoric, respectively. *Helen of Troy* then moves to two very different depictions of its subject in Euripides' *Trojan Women* and *Helen*. The analyses of each individual play are persuasive and well-developed, although it may have been interesting to place these two works in communication with each other, and to investigate how and why Euripides made two so different Helens.

Blondell closes with a discussion of Isocrates' encomium of Helen, rightly described by her as the "strangest" (222) of the Greek Helens discussed in her text. Blondell shows that Isocrates was arguably the most successful of all Greek writers in making Helen, and Helen's beauty, a thing worthy of all of the efforts and suffering that happened in her name, but at the cost of removing her individuality, making her a powerful symbol, but still just a symbol. It is a fitting end not only to the character's appearance in Greek texts, but also to how the figure of Helen is depicted in this work.

In a work as comprehensive as this, it is necessary to leave out some alternative readings of specific texts, which Blondell is completely up front about (251). Moreover, this text is just as useful to people who disagree with portions of it as those who accept it completely. The one major change I would make is in the organization of the text. Like most monographs of this type, *Helen of Troy* proceeds chronologically. However, mythical figures like Helen are often more easily connected by genre than by time. This is particularly true for a work like *Helen of Troy*, where many of the texts are roughly cotemporaneous. For example, the distance between the chapters on Gorgias and Isocrates partially obscure the connections they share, without adding many substantive links to the Euripidean dramas they are linked to. . A thematic construction might also allow space for discussing Euripides' *Orestes*, mentioned several times but not analyzed, and Helen's place in

philosophy, art, and modern media. Blondell's introduction and conclusion to the text provides tantalizing hints about her ideas on these topics, but in the current structure they remain only hints. That said, when the biggest "problem" with a book is that there could be more of it, it can safely be deemed a success.

In closing, *Helen of Troy* is an excellent book not only because of its insights into the character of Helen but also because of its accessibility. From beginning to end, Blondell's book is straightforward, readable, and clear in its intentions. In the end, my biggest complaint about it was that it hadn't been written yet when I took a Helen of Troy class as an undergraduate.

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