

BOOK REVIEW

Stealing Helen: The Myth of the Abducted Wife in Comparative Perspective. By Lowell Edmonds. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016. Pp. xvii + 430. Hardcover, \$49.50. ISBN 978-0-691-16512-7

Fascination with the name, the person, and the myth of Helen is epic and universal. Inspirations, derivations, and adaptations abound in literally every medium from Mycenaean and Minoan artifacts through modern art and cinema. How did this “story” begin? Annually facing this query, professors and teachers of classical mythology invariably offer an unavoidable conundrum response. But that was before Edmonds’ extraordinary volume. Covering every possible substantive comment relevant in the slightest way to the subject of this work, the thirty-six page reference bibliography (in 10 point type) constitutes a lifetime of scholarly reading, reflection, and research. The vast variety of topics that comprise the book’s five chapters—each handled with great precision and depth—exceed the scope of this review. The paragraph numbering and titles of the subsets which constitute each chapter signal their thought lines. Throughout this review I have preserved their numbered sequence to convey to the reader the enormous breadth and depth of this book.

The *Introduction* traces the many cycles of analysis which have evolved throughout the study of the Helen myth. Edmonds is careful to distinguish between *langue* and *parole* (terms introduced by Saussure), the former to denote the most initial oral rendering of the myth or folktale, and the latter to denote its written re-performances. Relating this inquiry to the problems that attend the perception of and realization of oral tradition and written text traditions, Chapter 1 is composed of 15 numbered essays bearing titles which unfold a sequential exposition of the “*The Abduction of the Beautiful Wife*” as *International Tale*.”

The meticulously arranged, content revealing titles include: *Typology in Folktale Studies* (1), *The Concept of Type* (2), *The Motif* (3), *The Emic and Etic* (4-5), *The Deconstructive Point of View* (6), *Variant and Version* (7), *The Ontological Point of View* (8), and *The Historical Basis of an Ontology of the Type* (9). Consideration of *How Old are Folktales?* (10), leading into *Proverb and Fable: Oral Wisdom Literature in Antiquity* (10.1), informs *Morphology and Structuralism* (11). *Typological Status of “The Abduction of the Beautiful Wife”* (12) presages *Motifs of*

"The Abduction of the Beautiful Wife" (13) which itself includes 8 subsets: *Birth or Origin* (13.1), *The Swan Maiden* (13.1.1), *Childhood and Marriage* (13.2), *Perilous Beauty of the Wife* (13.3), *Abductor* (13.4), *Abduction* (13.5), *Recovery* (13.6), *Fate of the Abductor* (13.7), *Reunion of Husband and Wife* (13.8), and *Orpheus* (13.8.1). Edmunds concludes with *The Syntagma* (14) and *Methodological Reflections* (15) in which he treats "hybrids not as curiosities of folklore but in order to establish a larger typological or perhaps metatypological context for defining the differentiae of "Abduction"." (60). The extraordinary, tightly woven analyses of Chapter 1 are further augmented by an exhaustive Appendix 1 (247–301). This catalogues all text examples of "The Abduction of the Beautiful Wife" originating from Africa, Eurasia and Asia, Europe and Iceland, and North America.

Chapter 2, *Dioscuri* has ten subsets as it examines the myths involving the brothers of Helen and the different versions involving them in bride theft. Following an *Introduction* (1), Edmunds treats *The Abduction of Helen by Theseus and Perithous* (2) and *Indo Europaean Cognates* (3) as well as those in *The Caucasus* (4) and *The Baltic Egg* (5). He then examines *Cults of Helen and the Dioscuri* (6), and presents an interesting discussion on *The Name Helen and The Nature of Names* (7), *An Indo-Europaeon "Abduction"* (8) is further subdivided into *The Abduction in Indo-Europaeon Epic* (8.1) and *The Three Functions of Georges Dumézil and the Trojan Myth* (8.2). Considerations of *The Indo-Europaeon "Abduction" and the Question of Origins* (9) introduces a summary of the chapter's findings, *Conclusion* (10).

Chapter 3 *Helen Myth*, asserts that in spite of its ubiquitous nature, the myth is really about her "life" story. The multiple variants must receive attention in any effort to handle the literary sources such as Helen in Homer, Helen in Epic Cycle, Helen in Lyric as well as representations in media such as pottery, paintings and sculpture. The 14 subsets begin with *Parentage, Birth, Siblings* (1) and *Childhood* (2). An engaging discussion on *Wooing of Helen and Marriage to Menelaus* (3) is augmented by a brief comment on *Helen's Motherhood* (4) and a transition to the core consideration of Helen's interactions with *Paris* (5). The treatment of Helen's *Abduction* (6) is expanded by a full discussion of her *Abduction in Art* (6.1). Following a brief commentary on *Consequences in Sparta of Helen's Abduction* (7), Edmunds presents variants on Helen's alleged *Stay in Egypt and Eidolon* (8) before treating the topic of *Helen at Troy* (9). *Recovery of Helen by Menelaus* (10) consists of six subsets including *The Trojan Horse* (10.1), *Helen's Role in her Recovery* (10.2), *Menelaus's Happy and Unhappy Reunions with Helen*

(10.3), *Helen Bares her Breasts* (10.4), *Himation* (10.5), *To the Ships, with His hand on Her Wrist* (10.6), and lastly *Reflections on the Reunions* (10.7). Edmunds then turns to the topic of the *Return of Menelaus and Helen to Sparta* (11) and follows up with reflections on *After the Return* (12) and the *Death of Helen* (13). The Chapter ends with a *Comparison of Myth of Helen with "Abduction" Type* (14). This reviewer found Chapter 3 to be most informative, particularly because of frequent illustrations of art objects well integrated with text commentary. Appendix 2, coordinated with the subset titles throughout the chapter, lists objects, dates, places of find, episode and notes for all objects considered in the text.

Chapter 4, *Hypostases of Helen*, explores the literary and material evidence for the existence of Helen as a goddess. Citing various sources, Edmunds discusses *The Cult at Patanistas* (1) and that on the island of Rhodes, *Helen Dendritis* (2). Each sanctuary featured a special tree venerated in her honor, Back in Sparta, there was also the *Cult at Therapne*(3) explicitly referenced by Herodotus, Pausanias and others, and to which belong several artifacts inscribed with Helen's name. A brief treatment, *Herodotus's Designation of Helen: "the goddess"* (3.1), is followed by summary, *Conclusion on Cults* (4), and discussion of *The Cults and the Indo-European Goddess* (5). Rooted in the forgoing analysis, *Helen as Pictorial* (6) essentially addresses the question of how does a real Helen become a fictional Helen and vice versa. In the belief that epic poetry did not create Helen but essentially preserved her memory, Edmunds further notes in *The Discovery of a Real Helen* (7): "For ancient Greeks, however, down to a certain point in time, Helen was a real person who lived in the days of the Trojan War, whereas for the modern scholar Helen is the creation of poetry (or of poetic traditions)..." (189). These points receive extended attention in *Self Ancient and Modern* (7.1) and *The discovery of the Personality of Helen* (7.2) with summary comments appearing in *Conclusion* (8).

Chapter 5 *Helen in the Fifth Century and After* does what it sets out to do. Opening with *Helen in the Fifth Century* (1), Edmunds examines commentary from *Herodotus* (1.1), *Thucydides* (1.2), *Pindar* (1.3), and discusses *Helen in Spartan Charter Myth* (1.4). Such recollections generate *Consequences of Social Memory* (1.5). Helen is then looked upon both as a *Figure of Reference* (1.6), and thereafter as a *Figure of Song* (1.7). The second half of Chapter 5, *Helen from the Fourth Century to Goethe* (2), critiques Eustathius' observations on Helen, *Pythagorean Helen* (2.1). An informative discussion, *Simon Magus* (2.2),

demonstrates how a mixture of magic and sophistication informs Simon's Helen. One of the most engaging and stimulating essays in the book, *Faust* (2.3), meticulously unfolds Helen's reappearance in Georg Faust's writings of 1540, and subsequently its impact on Goethe's Helen. *Roman Reception of the Helen Myth and the First Fictional Helen* (3) has three subsets: *The Origin of Fiction in Antiquity* (3.1), *The Fictive and the Fictional* (3.2), and *A Fictive Helen: Ovid Heroides 16-17* (3.3). After *Fictive Helen (Lucian, True History 2) and a Fictive Hermione (Colluthus)* (4), Edmunds offers a summary *Conclusion*.

This comprehensive, holistic, well organized book is clearly a significant advance in scholarship on myth. Procedurally challenging, but rigorously engaging on multiple levels, all scholars, professors of mythology or comparative literature will find in this volume and indispensable companion to any serious study of the story of Helen. Edmund's informative scholarship packaged with his vigorous writing style has truly made it possible "to trace a narrative constant, persisting with remarkable tenacity, that could generate many new Helens" (xiii).

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