

Brief Reviews of Books

Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation. By RUBY BLONDELL. New York: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 2015. Pp. xvii + 289, illus. \$24.95 (paper).

Blondell's book is a survey of the appearance of Helen of Sparta/Troy in Archaic and Classical Greek literature with accompanying commentary on a series of related themes. As the author notes in the introduction, "This book examines the surviving texts from the archaic and classical periods in which Helen has a significant presence, focusing especially on the twin themes of beauty and female agency" (p. xi).

Chapter 1 is "The Problem of Female Beauty," which considers the *kalon kakon* ("beautiful evil") paradox in Greek ideology. Here, Blondell considers the notion that while in males manly virtue inside is reflected in a fine and noble appearance outside (i.e., good guys are handsome), the opposite is true in females. Focusing on the creation of the first woman Pandora, created by Zeus to be an evil for hard-working men, Blondell explains the Greek paranoia that women's beauty exists to deceive men. Furthermore, because female beauty excites sexual desire, beautiful women themselves are more subject to desire, and thus, like Helen, are more likely to be errant in their sexuality.

Chapter 2 is "Helen, Daughter of Zeus," where Blondell touches on the various origin stories for Helen (e.g., daughter of Leda vs. daughter of Nemesis) and establishes the heroine as the archetypal bride, with all accompanying ambiguities. From this point in the book, the organization is mainly chronological. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with Helen's roles in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, respectively, while chapter 5 is a survey of Helen in archaic lyric poetry, specifically the works of Alkaios, Ibykos, Sappho, and Stesikhoros. Chapters 6, 9, and 10 look at Helen in Athenian tragedy, specifically Aiskhylos' *Oresteia* (where, admittedly, Helen does not actually appear), and Euripides' *Trojan Women* and *Helen* (where she does). Interspersed are Helen in Herodotos (chapter 7) and Gorgias' rhetorically flashy *Encomium of Helen* (chapter 8). The work ends with fourth-century Isokrates' own *Encomium of Helen*, offering a counterpoint to the *rhetor's* teacher Gorgias.

Each appearance of Helen in the literature is accompanied by Blondell's commentary on various aspects and interpretations of the texts. Often these pertain to matters of Helen's agency in her affair/abduction (are active or passive verbs used?), as well as her (potential for) guilt in the horrors of the Trojan War. Thus, in chapter 3—*Iliad*—although Helen did act inappropriately in

actively "going" with Paris, this does not diminish the heroism of fighting for her: Helen's supreme beauty combined with her chagrin over her behavior keeps her from being, in Blondell's words, "damaged goods." By contrast, Alkaios portrays her as damaged goods all around—a destructive whore, a bad mother—while contrasting her with the chaste goddess Thetis, who bore a noble son (Akhilleus) and left her husband not for a sexual partner but for her natal home and father.

In some instances, Helen actually seems irrelevant to the discussion. Mere allusions to her in the *Oresteia* are enough for Blondell to use her image to cast blame on her sister Klytaimnestra, while using Helen's (and Klytaimnestra's) "masculine" behavior as a foil for the female Furies, who, at the end of the trilogy, properly and willingly submit to the rule of (male) law. In her analysis of the poet Ibykos, Blondell focuses more on male homoeroticism than anything to do with Helen *per se*.

A major weakness in the book, from this reviewer's perspective, is that Helen is treated solely as a literary character, *not* as an entity who existed in Greek—and especially Spartan—religion. "I should therefore make it clear from the outset that this book is not about the 'real Helen'. Or rather, it *is* about the real Helen, whom I take to be in her essence unreal" (p. xi). For this reason, Blondell is unable to provide in-depth analysis of texts which do, in fact, portray Helen as a divinity, especially in Stesikhoros (whom she blinds) and Herodotos (where she is presented as a version of Aphrodite in Egypt and performs a miracle at her own shrine in Sparta). Blondell highlights the facts that, in the *Odyssey*, Helen is able to prophesy, and marriage to her grants Menelaus immortality. But the fact that either of these might be related to Helen's original status as a goddess goes wholly unexplored.

In the end, although there are ongoing themes running through the book (beauty, guilt, agency), there is no over-arching argument or culminating point. Scholarly references are left for a brief "Biographical Notes" section at the end, with no in-text citations. On the whole, the book is a good survey of Helen in Greek literature and a decent introduction to Helen for undergraduate Classics students, but is a bit thin for those seeking more advanced, in-depth analysis.

STEPHANIE L. BUDIN
COLLINGSWOOD, NEW JERSEY