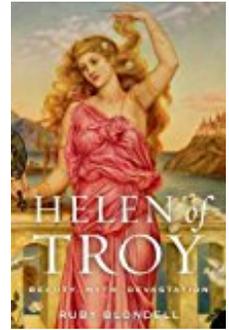


The Helens of Troy

Ruby Blondell argues dazzlingly in *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, and Devastation* that Helen, daughter of Zeus and Leda, possessor of "the face that launched a thousand ships," was the greatest bombshell of all time. "No other character in ancient Greek myth," Blondell writes, "plays such a prominent role in so many disparate kinds of work: epic, lyric poetry, tragedy, historiography, rhetoric, comedy, even philosophy." The figure of Helen represented a crucial conundrum: "Having constructed female beauty as a threat, and imagined an absolute standard of beauty fulfilled by a single woman in whom that threat culminates, Greek men spent considerable energy attempting to analyze, contain, disarm, deny, or appropriate the power accorded to their own creation." Blondell's fascinating analysis of the mythic Helen in her many guises delineates the ancient Greek obsession with the dangers of female beauty and the control of female sexuality, showing the extent to which masculinity was predicated on and defined by the myth of the feminine. And Blondell's study reveals that this preoccupation is, three thousand years on, as strong as ever.



Helen's troubles began with a beauty contest: Zeus appointed Paris, a prince of Troy, to judge whether Hera, Athena, or Aphrodite was the most beautiful goddess. Aphrodite secretly promised Paris that if he chose her, she would bestow upon him as his bride the universally desired Helen (that she was already married to Menelaus, king of Sparta, was only a minor hindrance). Having confirmed Aphrodite's aesthetic supremacy, Paris seduced Helen and sailed away with her to Troy. Incensed at both his guest's bad behavior and his wife's "abduction," Menelaus called upon his brother Agamemnon (married to Helen's sister Clytemnestra) to help him raise an army to retrieve her. So commenced the decade-long Trojan War.

Blondell quickly dispenses with the reality of Helen: "As the woman who was -- and is -- by definition the most beautiful woman of all time, Helen of Troy could never have existed." For the Greeks a woman's beauty, and by extension her erotic allure, was her essential source of power in a world where she otherwise had little. This sexualized force was perceived as a potentially devastating threat to male reason. As a result women were deemed "beautiful evils," embodying, Eve-like, the dual source of male desire and his downfall. Helen, the iconic bride, symbolizes the danger to every man of incorporating this "beautiful evil" into his household. "Every bride," asserts Blondell, "like Helen, is a kind of Trojan Horse."

In Blondell's examination of ancient Greek texts from Homer to Sappho, Hesiod to Aeschylus and Euripides, two central questions emerge: Was Helen to blame, and was Helen really worth it? Erotic folly and the folly of war become fatally and eternally linked as these narratives explore the advisability of the war itself -- should the Greeks have pursued Helen at such a devastating cost? Should the Trojans have insisted on keeping her, ensuring their own destruction?

The first and most influential representation of Helen's character appears in Homer's epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, where she is portrayed as simultaneously guilty and sympathetic. Despite Aphrodite's intervention and Paris's seduction, Homer's Helen repeatedly blames herself for eloping with Paris and causing the ensuing war. This depiction allows for a subtle, complex, and more humanized Helen, but it is also an endorsement, Blondell notes, by Helen herself of "the linchpin of Greek gender ideology, affirming that women's desires are excessive, unstable, and unhealthy, and leave nothing but trouble in their wake." Yet Homer's Helen is also claiming for herself an active, powerful role in the story, one denied by later writers when they depict her exclusively as a dupe of divine coercion, thus a blameless, beautiful object fought over by men.

The versions of Helen in the work of post-Homeric lyric poets -- Semonides, Alcaeus, Sappho, Ibycus and Stesichorus -- are as much in response to Homer's Helen as an attempt to make Helen fit their own agendas. Semonides and Alcaeus blame Helen for the war; Ibycus makes her a helpless victim of the treacherous Paris, her beauty a worthy object of struggle. Sappho emphasizes Helen's beauty and her erotic desires and desirability. She describes her willfully going to Troy, thus retaining the Homeric vision of Helen as actor in her own story. But Sappho avoids blaming Helen for how the men respond. "If men chose to retrieve her at any cost," interprets Blondell, "that is not, perhaps, a consequence for which she should be held accountable." In Stesichorus's *Palinode*, Helen never goes to Troy at all but sits out the war in Egypt, the gods having created a phantom Helen to go to Troy in her stead. Helen's reputation is saved by this twinning, but she also is no longer a player. With each text it becomes clearer that the Trojan War was a battle over a mirage.

In Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the chorus presents Helen as a superhuman force for destruction, "the essence of strife itself." Her evil enchantments are entirely to blame for the Trojan War, Paris her innocent victim. Between Helen and her sister Clytemnestra, the vicissitudes of the dangerous female are covered: Clytemnestra is aggressive, violent, possessing a "manly" heart, whereas Helen is fickle, beautiful, erotically irresistible. Most crucial, both act independently of men whom they treat as replaceable and dispensable, and both are vengeful. Blondell argues that one of the aims of the *Oresteia* was to redirect the perpetration of personal revenge (as symbolized by the vengeful female) toward the more democratic, civilized practice of settling disputes within a justice system. The place where this new justice system was administered by men was on the Areopagus, where the Amazons, the ultimate emblem of female independence, were defeated. "The foundation of the court on this particular

spot," observes Blondell, "marks the fact that classical Athens, with its democratic institutions and its noble victories, is founded on the suppression of such independence -- the threat embodied both in Clytemnestra and in her sister, Helen."

Herodotus in his *Histories* dismisses Helen's beauty as a credible cause for the war, demythologizes her completely, and reduces the Trojan War "to a foolish dispute over a slut." Gorgias, in his *Encomium of Helen*, uses his "joke" version of Helen to scrutinize Greek masculinity and the human condition. In Euripides's play *Trojan Women*, a very verbal Helen insists on her own innocence, which only serves to make her appear guilty. In *Helen*, the playwright picks up on the doubled Helen in which her "good" human manifestation remains faithful to her husband and goes to Egypt, her divine "evil" manifestation heading to Troy to wreak havoc. Which is the "real" Helen? Or are both an illusion?

Blondell's stimulating and provocative book demonstrates how Helen is "an ever-refreshing screen for the projection of ideas and ideals about beauty, women, sex and power." Demonized, idolized, allegorized, or humanized, Helen of Troy remains no woman and every woman.

While reading Blondell's book, I happened upon Bernadette Mayer's poetry pamphlet *The Helens of Troy, NY*. A delightful assemblage of poem-portraits of real-life women named Helen who live in Troy, a small city in northern New York, each poem is accompanied by a photograph of the particular Helen. Mayer uses different poetic forms -- sonnet, villanelle, sestina, free verse -- to describe her Helens. The language evokes words and phrases found, conversations and consciousnesses overheard. As the poems progress, an intense and vibrant tapestry evoking a time and place is woven along with a marvelous and mysterious sense of what it means to be a Helen of Troy. From "Maroon Muckle & Me -- for Helen Sheeran":

one of the helens tap-danced up a wall one time
a helen looked so much like her ancestors
she was mistaken for a ghost when she rang the bell
this now but that was
then when there were movies & plays at proctor's
& if you were lucky you lived in troy & your name was helen

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