

Laurie Maguire, *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood*

(Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) pp. 258

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A reviewer of Bettany Hughes' 2005 book *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore* wrote that "[t]here won't be another book on Helen in a long, long time, because [Hughes] has . . . exhaustively covered [Helen] from [many] angles – romantic, historical, archaeological, mythological, psychological."<sup>1</sup> Yet here we have, less than five years later, another book on Helen of Troy. But Maguire seeks not to analyse Helen from the angles mentioned above. Instead, *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood* is a *literary* biography, "not a historical life of a Bronze Age princess or a study of mythology . . . [The] subject is the literary afterlife of the woman we know as Helen of Troy" (ix).

This is not a biography in the traditional sense; readers do not move through the order of the events in Helen's 'life,' nor do they follow a chronological order of source material, as in the case of Mihoko Suzuki's 1989 *Metamorphoses of Helen*, and as indeed the subtitle "From Homer to Hollywood" might imply. Instead, Maguire structures the book in six chapters around key themes, from beauty to blame, from abducting Helen to parodying her, in an attempt to avoid any repetition in a chronological account since "[t]he same issues recur in each period" (x).

However, this thematic approach leads to its own problems. There is no chronological analysis within each theme, and the discussion can jump back and forth between different eras, which can make judging the development of Helen's character through the ages difficult. This book is not just about Helen of Troy, it also encompasses 'Helen characters' such as Cressida or Yeats' Maud Gonne. The mixing of the different sorts of Helen has the potential to be confusing, but it is mostly fascinating, drawing in new aspects to add a deeper analysis to Helen.

Maguire states that her biography, being "literary, specifically narratological" (x), will avoid pitfalls common to "most studies of Helen to date, which tend to mix archaeology, history, literature, and mythology without any sense that they are separate disciplines" (x). Yet, Maguire seems to have no problem in mixing Classics, Medieval Studies, English, German, and Media Studies, without any real sense that they, too, are different disciplines. As a Classicist, this was particularly apparent to me in the statement, "I generally exclude Helen material in foreign languages" (143, explaining the special inclusion of the German *Faust*) – since many of the texts under consideration in this book were originally written in ancient Greek or Latin.

Maguire has used English translations of foreign texts "since most readers first encounter [them] in English versions" (xi), and she does state that she has been careful

to note instances of ‘poetic license’ taken by any translators (although I wish she had consistently followed the Classical method of citing Classical texts by the line numbers equivalent to the original language text – easily accessible online or in a Loeb edition – rather than by year and page number of translation).

The “Introduction,” which is not the introduction to the book (that is the function of the “Preface”) but an introduction to Helen, presents a particularly confusing account for a non-specialist of Helen’s ‘life story’ as given in ancient accounts. As for any mythological character, there is no one, straightforward version of the story, but Maguire’s “Introduction” implies that it is a summary of all the variations in the myth. Yet, it misses some variants out, emphasises others which provide lesser-known events, and often prioritises fragmentary or rare sources at the expense of more popular texts. There are other instances throughout the book that could trip up a non-Classicist. For example, no consideration is given to the fact that breast-baring as part of supplication is a trope within Classical works (52 ff.), and Helen’s breast-baring is discussed in isolation to imply solely that she is an exhibitionist.

But just because Helen of Troy is a Classical character, should she remain the purview of Classicists, especially when the topic under consideration is essentially her reception in later works of literature? Maguire really gets into her stride with a fascinating cross-cultural, cross-temporal analysis of Helen in the Faust tradition. I also enjoyed the discussion of the rare works of Victorian Jane Stanley, and while the subtitle implied that there would be more Hollywood under discussion than actually appears, there is a detailed analysis of the remaining fragments of the 1927 silent film *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*.

A welcome addition to this book would have been a list of sources used, preferably in chronological order, since Maguire zips backwards and forwards between texts in pursuit of thematic links, and the date of a work is not always clear from the references (Maguire cites the date of the translation in most cases: first-century BC Virgil is cited as being from 1981; sixth-century AD Johannis Malalas is cited as 1831; this potentially explains the rather odd phrasing implying that Virgil was the later writer on page 47).<sup>2</sup> This would also assist with the lesser-known creative works – is Mark Haddon’s *A Thousand Ships*, for instance, a novel or a film? On trawling through the bibliography, I discover it is a radio play.

In the “Preface,” Maguire stated that “[t]he topics of the subdivisions . . . are designed to translate into seminar topics for anyone who wishes to use this book in university teaching” (xi), although I am unsure as to whether the intended students would be Classicists looking forwards at the reception of Helen, or more modern literature scholars looking back at her heritage. Either way, this book would certainly be a useful supplement to a course focusing on the original Helen texts.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dr Steven Pressfield, quoted at <[http://www.bettanyhughes.co.uk/helen\\_book\\_review.htm](http://www.bettanyhughes.co.uk/helen_book_review.htm)>.

<sup>2</sup> “In Johannis Malalas’ *Chronographia* Helen has curly hair . . . as she does **later** in Virgil” (47, my emphasis). It is possible that this was just a slip: there are a surprising number of typographical errors for a paperback edition.