



Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation

Ruby Blondell

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Ancient Greek culture is pervaded by a profound ambivalence regarding female beauty. It is an awe-inspiring, supremely desirable gift from the gods, essential to the perpetuation of a man's name through reproduction; yet it also grants women terrifying power over men, posing a threat inseparable from its allure. The myth of Helen is the central site in which the ancient Greeks expressed and reworked their culture's anxieties about erotic desire. Despite the passage of three millennia, contemporary culture remains almost obsessively preoccupied with all the power and danger of female beauty and sexuality that Helen still represents. Yet Helen, the embodiment of these concerns for our purported cultural ancestors, has been little studied from this perspective. Such issues are also central to contemporary feminist thought.

Helen of Troy engages with the ancient origins of the persistent anxiety about female beauty, focusing on this key figure from ancient Greek culture in a way that both extends our understanding of that culture and provides a useful perspective for reconsidering aspects of our own. Moving from Homer and Hesiod to Sappho, Aeschylus, and Euripides, Ruby Blondell offers a fresh examination of the paradoxes and ambiguities that Helen embodies. In addition to literary sources, Blondell considers the archaeological record, which contains evidence of Helen's role as a cult figure, worshipped by maidens and newlyweds. The result is a compelling new interpretation of this alluring figure.

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