Norman Austin, *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. Pp. xiv + 223. $29.95. ISBN 0-8014-2955-2.

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Standing at the center of the Trojan legend, Helen of Troy embodies a stubborn paradox: as the prize for which countless men are willing to fight and die, she is most highly valued; as an adulteress, she is the source and object of deep shame. Helen is the most conspicuous instance of that perplexing, unstable union of seductiveness and treachery, of indispensability and unreliability, which the Greek imagination saw as intrinsically female. The ancient mythological tradition worried away at the problem of Helen, generating multiple characterizations of her as heartlessly evil, sympathetically chastened, or subject to forces beyond her control. One notable response was the creation of an alternative legend, according to which Helen herself never went to Troy and her place there was filled by a phantom. This story was elaborated by a diverse and distinguished series of authors comprising Stesichorus, Herodotus, and Euripides.

This ingenious variant on Helen's story resolves the question of her moral status by dividing her contradictory qualities between the real, upright woman and the unreal, wayward phantom, but also raises other, equally challenging issues. The introduction of the phantom opens up questions about the purpose of war and about the relationship between a series of seeming opposites that the Greeks expressed as *onoma* and *pragma* or *dokesis* and *ta onta* and which modern thinkers might variously express as appearance and reality, signifier and signified, or absence and presence. It is no surprise, then, that this legend received its fullest treatment in antiquity from Euripides; that it was dramatized by two modernist poets, Hofmannstahl and H.D.; and that it has been explored in articles by classicists interested in literary theory and feminist criticism such as Froma Zeitlin and Karen Bassi. Now the legend of Helen's absence from Troy has become the subject of a book-length treatment by Norman Austin.

Austin's survey starts with the more canonical tradition, in which Helen does go to Troy, as told by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and by Sappho, and then moves on to Stesichorus, Herodotus, and Euripides. His account includes quite full plot summaries, which should make it accessible to readers who do not already know these texts. He also offers detailed discussions of the problems associated with reconstructing Stesichorus' fragmentary *Palinode* from the ancient testimonia: Did Stesichorus include the phantom, or did he just deny that Helen went to Troy? Were there two *Palinodes*, as a commentary by the Peripatetic Chamaeleon would have it? Was Hesiod actually the first to introduce the phantom, as a scholiast claims? Those discussions are, however, scattered through Austin's exposition, and that may make it difficult for neophytes to piece together the overall picture.

As he contemplates this legend, Austin is not particularly interested in what each treatment can tell us about its author and how that author exploited a chance to play with the mythological tradition, but rather in Helen herself and the challenges inherent in telling her story. While he evokes the full range of issues raised by his material and sometimes seems to be groping among them for the central thread to his argument his most consistent focus is on Helen's adultery as a serious embarrassment to Greek honor

that Greek writers were collectively trying to remove. "We can imagine Greek sailors, Dorians at least, facing down the chuckles in countless harbor taverns when Helen's name was mentioned."

Stesichorus, Herodotus, and Euripides are seen as taking on this shared problem of impaired Hellenic honor, each improving on the solution of the other. Stesichorus got as far as establishing that Helen did not go to Troy but left open the possibility that she spent the war years unchaperoned and still out of control. Herodotus took care of that defect when he endorsed a story he heard from some Egyptian priests that she had been confiscated from Paris by a noble pharaoh who kept her in Egypt until she was collected at the end of the war by Menelaus. But a version in which all the credit belongs to an Egyptian could not really restore Greek honor, and so Euripides came up with his plot, in which Helen herself wards off the advances of the good pharaoh's lascivious son and Menelaus is her rescuer.

It is hard to believe that most Greeks took the Helen legend as seriously as Austin would have it, and his approach tends to underrate both Helen's fictional status and the freedom enjoyed by those authors who told her story to pursue artistic agendas of their own. If we choose to believe Plato's account of the genesis of the *Palinode*, then Stesichorus did see Helen as a powerful goddess, seriously demanding reverence and a clear record, but Herodotus and Euripides seem more interested in using Helen to work out their own concerns about truth, appearances, and tradition than in serving the cause of Helen's rehabilitation.

Furthermore, the role Austin assigns these authors does not just obscure their individual interest: it is also doomed to failure. For one of Austin's main points is that no amount of revision could ever neutralize the original, adulterous Helen, in whom he finds a limitless appeal that transcends the conjoined rationalism and moralism that spawned the phantom story. In his evocation of Helen's power, Austin even attributes to her a mystical capacity to disrupt textual traditions: it is because Helen is the subject that the papyrus of Sappho's Anaktoria ode is so fragmentary; that Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* becomes lacunose just where Helen might be mentioned ("... ancient texts have a tendency to wobble, and some even to dissolve clean away, when Helen's name appears or should appear," p. 106); and that the choral ode about the Great Mother in Euripides' *Helen* is so corrupt ("... the text falls to pieces, as texts are wont to do, when Helen is introduced," p. 178).

Austin's tendency to write about Helen as if she really existed can be linked to the markedly psychoanalytic cast of his discussion, seen, for example, in his equation of the *onoma/pragma* opposition with Lacan's distinction between "Meaning/the Signifier" and "Being/the Subject." For him, Helen is to be understood as a Jungian archetype, and this makes her, if not a literally real woman, a genuine force in human experience. She is a manifestation of the Mother, a representation of beauty that transcends moral categories as it attracts the energies of the male libido. The original Helen story, in which that amoral power remains invested in a single, enigmatic and daemonic figure, is the one that Austin finds truly compelling. "To identify the libido as such, and to weave it into a plot that is the ground of the *Iliad*, was a great feat of the human imagination. But when Olympus crumbled, and the gods were toppled from their thrones, the plot came to seem too naive for the more serious intellects" (p. 133). Austin is clearly out of sympathy with the rationalism that was a major force behind the phantom myth and in line with psychoanalysis' tendency to validate desire and chip away at guilt and shame drawn to the original, *Iliadic* Helen. Thus he dwells on Helen as she appears in the Homeric epics and includes a detour into Sappho's Anaktoria ode, in which Helen's choice to leave with Paris is cited as proof of the power of what one

loves.

Characteristically, Austin makes the most of the challenge to conventional morality that Helen represents in Sappho's poem. As he puts it, Sappho "gave herself permission to read the myth in her own way" (p. 52), and used Helen to voice an indifference to men and a love for women that her culture would have found shameful. The shamefulness of Sappho's desire for women is a dubious proposition, and Austin's attempt to support it with an argument that lyric was confessional and therefore had to be about what was socially unsanctioned, is hardly successful. But Sappho's pointed focus on Helen's self-willed departure for Troy certainly highlights what was most enduringly provocative about Helen's story. This unreconstructed Helen is Austin's true inspiration, and his book is ultimately a tribute to her power, an ode to the figure who is unequivocally Helen of Troy.