

So Many Helens: Depictions of Helen in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction

Classicists are familiar with many different depictions of Helen. Her motives, circumstances, and even character shift from epic to lyric to tragedy, and beyond. Blondell points out that Helen is unique within Greek mythology for playing “such a prominent role in so many disparate kinds of work” (2013, xi) and we see shifts of her character within genres, as well. Helen of the *Iliad* is not exactly Helen of the *Odyssey*. Helen of Euripides’ *Troades* is certainly not the character of her eponymous Euripidean tragedy. So too, contemporary authors portray Helen in vastly different ways. Those authors who engage in reception of ancient stories have in Helen a character both archetypal and malleable, providing them with freedom to explore the concerns of the modern day, enriched by a long tradition of past treatments. In historical (or mythohistorical) fiction, writers frequently reveal “concerns about and attitudes toward the cultural tensions of their own times” (Brown and St. Clair 2005, 14). In other words, whether rewriting the ancient Helen or bringing a Helen-like character forward into the modern world, all authors of reception create a contemporary Helen. For authors of young adult fiction, Helen is a particularly productive character who is perennially in transition, and, as such, parallels modern YA characters who typically find themselves caught in a place of transition.

This paper examines the work of six authors of contemporary young adult fiction who portray Helen variously as protagonist or antagonist, as ancient character or modern character, as sympathetic or villainous. McLaren (1996) and Friesner (2007) create a sympathetic protagonist Helen whom the reader first meets as a child and who finds herself caught up in events that she tries to control, but cannot. In sharp distinction, Cooney (2002) and Meyer (2013) set their young adult protagonists against adult Helens who are variously an indifferent mother and an evil foster

mother. Barrett, in her pessimistic retelling of the *Odyssey* through Telemachus' eyes, portrays a Helen who has returned to Sparta, but seems completely – and alarmingly – unaware of reality (2010). Placing a reincarnated Helen character in contemporary Nantucket, Angelini (2011) creates a protagonist who reexperiences her past choices and who struggles to behave ethically as she relives elements of the Trojan War story.

The very act of reception brings depth to characters: the modern perspective and “choices made by authors to rethink...markers of identity help to make the original texts *more* relatable, not less” (Lawrence and Montz 2020, 12). How authors decide to portray Helen for young readers creates the opportunity for an examination of values, as well as an exploration of identity, decision-making, and problem-solving. Furthermore, the retellings that children and adolescents read form “a new classical canon” (Murnaghan and Roberts 2018, 288), just as the D'Aulaires and Hawthorne did in years past. At the same time, revisionist tellings illuminate elements that likely remained obscure in ancient versions. Brown and St. Clair explain that protagonists of young adult fiction tend to represent a progressive element battling forces of tradition (2005, 12). I argue that these books conform to such a model, but they also create more complex oppositions as they present situations that allow contemporary young readers to rework the ancient stories so as to inform their own modern lives.

Works Cited

Angelini, Josephine. *Starcrossed*. New York: Harper Collins, 2011.

Barrett, Tracy. *King of Ithaka*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2010.

Blondell, Ruby. *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

- Brown, Joanne, and Nancy St. Clair. *The Distant Mirror: Reflections on Young Adult Historical Fiction*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005.
- Cooney, Caroline B. *Goddess of Yesterday: A Tale of Troy*. New York: Delacorte Books for Young Readers, 2002.
- Friesner, Esther. *Nobody's Princess*. New York: Random House Books for Young Readers, 2007.
- Lawrence, Dana E., and Amy L. Montz. “‘Both Flesh and Monument’: The Immortal Life of Literature through Adaptation.” In *Adaptation in Young Adult Novels: Critically Engaging Past and Present*, edited by Dana E. Lawrence and Amy L. Montz, 1-14. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2020.
- McLaren, Clemence. *Inside the Walls of Troy*. New York: Atheneum, 1996.
- Meyer, Carolyn. *Beauty's Daughter: The Story of Hermione and Helen of Troy*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.
- Murnaghan, Sheila, and Deborah H. Roberts. *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850-1965*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.