

Helen's Remorse and the Opacity of Female Desire

Until recently, students of the classical world have eschewed the study of moral emotions out of a belief that they did not exist before the rise of monotheism. Scholars have shown, however, that moral emotions appear in our earliest evidence of the ancient world. In the case of women, however, these emotions are difficult to get at, both because our sources are primarily men and because, as I shall suggest, the women themselves have a vested interest in making themselves incomprehensible. This paper takes a single example, the decision of the mythic Helen of Troy to leave her husband for another man, regretted by her in some but not all of our sources. I explore how gender stereotypes influence the reception of her decision, mirroring different contemporary views about women and the moral emotions. In some versions (e.g. Homer's *Iliad* 3.172-80), Helen is represented feeling remorse without blaming herself. Sometimes she is exonerated as a victim of divine will (Sappho, fr. 16V) or the power of love (Gorgias *Hel.* 39.4), and some of our sources claim that she never went to Troy in the first place (Eur. *Helen* 31-38). While these exculpatory narratives are often viewed as recuperative, they also work to deny Helen's moral agency. Finally, in some versions of her story, Helen feels no remorse; depending on the author, this is either liberatory (e.g. Ovid, *passim*) or marks her extreme moral degeneracy (e.g. Pausanias 3.19.10). Helen is a woman, and so most of our sources view any decision she makes, especially one involving sexual choice, as problematic. Given their complexity, variability, and frequency, judgments about Helen's decision form a particularly fruitful locus for examining the workings of remorse in a gendered context, and, more generally, for probing decision-making in the ancient world.