

The Helen Syndrome: The Curse Of Beauty

Good looks, great brain: an irresistible mixture. Pretty, bright, young things have got lucky. Doors open wide, the job offers come flooding in, relationships are a synch.. Even Aristotle declared: 'Beauty is a greater recommendation than any letter of introduction.'

But think of the most sensational trouble-makers of history: all intelligent lookers. Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Boudicca, Anne Boleyn - these are women we've loved to hate. They are too hot to handle, their beauty self-destructs. In poems, plays, paintings and comment pages we celebrate their sticky ends. There's more prejudice than preference. Deep down, we want the beauteous to be bad: we want them to come a cropper.

It's not that beautiful women aren't taken seriously, but that they are taken too seriously – their looks arouse suspicion. After fifteen years researching a book about Helen of Troy, famously The Most Beautiful Woman In the World, and exploring centuries-worth of material I realised that Helen would be better labelled The Most Dreadful Woman in The World. For 2,700 years men have been petrified of this clever Bronze Age princess, dubbed across time a stunning man-eater.

But surely the curse of beauty is a phenomenon of the past? We're sufficiently grown up to realise that external appearance is not an indicator of some kind of malicious trickery or moral turpitude. Aren't we?

I won a scholarship to Oxford based on a series of essays and fiendishly difficult medieval Latin translations. Years later one of my dons admitted that when I appeared for an interview there was a frisson in the room. Could someone so brainy also be presentable? Was there skulduggery afoot?

Terri Duhon is the founder of B&B Structured Finance, a highly specialised (highly successful) derivatives consultancy in the city. She also happens to be 'blessed with good genes'. Laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation she tells the story of being recommended as an expert witness in a complicated financial case. It was not to be. The knee-jerk reaction was that having her front of house was a big risk. If you're female, gravitas comes with grey hair, not with experience.

Gillian Tett, remembers that when she was Bureau Chief for the Financial Times in Tokyo, a Japanese diplomat advised her to keep her gender quiet – to sign herself Dr. Tett. Being an attractive woman in her cut-throat business would have done her no favours. As it was, when this super-bright, blonde journalist turned up to do interviews she was frequently asked if she was the translator. Tett, now Capital Markets Editor says it is malaise discernible throughout the city. 'Talk to city women and they will tell you it is a liability to be too attractive. I once did a photo-shoot with a striking, uber-financier. Far from revelling in the experience she was very anti the pictures, worried in case they compromised her standing.'

Esther McVey, founder of Winning Women has had similar experiences. Because she stands as a Tory candidate for West Wirral and has great business nous she is often

invited in to prestigious events as a guest speaker. Recently, presuming she was someone's PA – she was asked by the MD of the event to deal with a brolly and briefcase. Again, McVey thinks this is hilarious, but it has reinforced her conviction to advise female business clients continually to emphasise that their 'content is as important as their packaging'.

Vanessa Collingridge, BAFTA award winning TV presenter remembers being brushed off by a senior commissioning editor at the BBC 'She's too young and attractive to have enough credibility as a presenter' Collingridge, approaching 40, has a first-class degree from Oxbridge and yet, by her own admission, 'If it is down to two people for a job it'll be the under-qualified 50 year old guy in the leather jacket who gets the gig.' Collingridge's latest book is a new biography of Queen Boudica. The one thing we remember about Boudica is the fine figure she cuts on the battle-field. Flame-hair streaming, breasts heaving. The red hair appears in just one source – a certain Cassius Dio who was writing 150 years after the event. This single reference created a perfect stereotype. Romans, and storytellers ever since, have wanted to remember her as frightful, ergo beautiful.

This is Helen Syndrome at work. For 3,500 years men have loved to hate women they perceive as beautiful and influential. The history books are scattered with morality tales about Femme Fatales. The suspicion starts early. In the 7th century BC the first ever woman was given no name by the Greek author Hesiod but was called simply the 'kalon-kakon', the beautiful-evil thing. In men outward beauty was thought to be a sign of an inward perfection of spirit – the Greeks had a word for it, kalokagatha – joint nobility in appearance and mind. But a woman's beauty was something different, the deceptive gauze covering a festering wound. A hundred years later Semonides penned a charming little rant that starts:

'Yes women are the greatest evil Zeus has ever made.'

Semonides' point was that women tricked men into falling in love with them. In a way he was right. Scientists now realise that in the first flush of a romance the circulation of chemicals dupes us into believing we are in love. The problem of course is that throughout history this biological issue has been laid firmly at the woman's door. And so, the orthodoxy down the centuries has been that attractive women are schemers, up to no good.

Paris, the Trojan prince stole Helen away from Sparta to Troy but it is Helen who is 'the bitch-whore' the 'nasty scheming little bitch' the 'dog-bitch of three husbands' – 'Helen of the luscious tresses who brought about the death of the Age of Heroes'. Even Jeffrey Toobin, speaking of more recent events associates scandal with the female philanderer not the male.' As is demonstrated by the history of scandal from Helen of Troy, to Monica of Beverly Hills, sex has a way of befogging the higher intellectual faculties.'

And so beauty is still considered an inveigling-device. There is a fabulous caricature by the 17th century artist Gaspard Isaac that shows Helen, Lucretia and Cleopatra as they have become in old age. Helen's nose drips, Lucretia has dangling dugs and orange-peel teeth, and Cleopatra has become jowelly with two tiny breasts like amaretti poking out of her staid, matronly garb. The caption underneath reads;

Rome would not have suffered the scourge of Tarquin

Nor Egypt buried Anthony and his empire

Nor Priam watched the flames reduce Troy to ashes

If, in your youth, you had such ugly mugs.

One might apportion some blame to Mark Anthony and Julius Caesar when they shacked up with Cleopatra but for Roman Authors it is the Egyptian Queen who is the 'Fury'. A brilliant re-assessment of Cleopatra's character via unpublished Arabic texts shows she was, in her day, renowned for her philosophy and scientific treatises, not her good looks. But Cleopatra almost brought Rome down – historians needed her to be, not an operator, but a sensational, sex-crazed harridan.

The mediaeval super-potentate Eleanor of Aquitaine was a 'femina incomparabilis' a woman without compare - yet in the judgement of the chronicler Matthew Parris 'by reason of her excessive beauty she destroyed or injured nations.' At her most potent she was heaped with opprobrium: 'a common whore, a woman possessed of the devil'. Anne Boleyn doubtless had less to say in national affairs than her husband Henry and yet in the Judgement of 'The Great Whore' by the Abbot of Whitby: 'The King's Grace is ruled by one common, stewed whore, Anne Boleyn, who makes all spirituality to be beggared, and the temporality also.'

Rudyard Kipling memorably established that 'the female of the species is more deadly than the male'. The message reads loud and clear. Good looking women have been put on earth to beguile men, to trick them, to bring them low.

But the plot thickens. Helen of Troy was not in fact famed through the ancient world for her beauty – more for the fact she had the gift of 'charis' grace – in Helen's case 'a grace which ignites sexual desire'. The ancients didn't particularly care what she looked like – they were much more interested in how she made people feel, what she made them do. And so she was berated not for her golden locks but for being that dangerous thing, a woman who left her mark on the world. Her beauty was described by Homer as 'a terrible beauty, beauty like that of a goddess.' No compliment; look on a goddess' face and dreadful things happen to you; you are turned to stone, torn to pieces by hunting hounds, or worse. Helen represents something very, very scary.

Now I'm not naïve. We are all interested in what people look like. Consciously and sub-consciously we continually check each other out. Cleopatra bedazzled her hair, Eleanor dressed as a scarlet woman, the Bronze Age Helen wore a dress cut away to her waist and was smothered in perfumed oils. Influential women are, by definition, on show – and in our visually saturated culture they are on show a great deal. TV is a visual medium so it would be perverse if today's commentators (like those ancient chroniclers) didn't write about on-screen appearance. The warped logic comes when a description of someone's exterior segues seamlessly into suspicion of their intellect.

I've had my own share of faceism. On the one hand my latest book has been described by academics and critics as 'exceptional', 'brilliant', 'dazzling'. Yet one reviewer unleashed an intemperate rant describing the subsequent TV programme as stupid television for stupid people, 'gimmicky' 'disastrous' – the starting point for this bile was that Helen was presented by 'a lady in tight jeans'. I fondly imagine that by translating Bronze Age Hittite Cuneiform tablets, prime-time on Saturday night, I'm striking a blow for brainy TV. The odd, bitter voice rages that with my legs apparent and long dark hair I am single-handedly responsible for the death of thinking television.

The reaction reminds me of those mediaeval monks who used to write over-heated, diatribes about Helen, denouncing her wiley female ways: and loving every minute of it. Some accounts were positively pornographic. One character, Joseph of Exeter, around 1184 devotes an entire epic poem to the description of Helen's physical attributes – and how evil they were. The poem is explicit to say the least:

'Lying on him [Paris] with her whole body, she [Helen] opens her legs, presses him with her mouth and robs him of his semen. And as his ardour abates the purple bedlinen that was privy to their sins bears witness to his unseen dew. What evil!'

One can imagine his monkish colleagues sucking in their breath with horror 'ohhh isn't that terrible...do tell me more'.

In Euripides' drama, Helen, the eponymous heroine wails 'I wish I had been wiped clean like a painting and made plain instead of beautiful'. But no one can clamber out of their own skin – nor should they need to. Come the 21st century I thought we might have passed the point where pebble-specs equalled intellectual rigour. Please tell me we don't feel the need to perpetuate the millennia long misogyny of faceist attitudes.

So my plea is - move on guys, move on. The fact that a woman has charisma, means she is charismatic, not dangerous. In the past, female beauty was fearful because it was thought to have demonic origins. Speaking to gorgeous and successful women who operate today there is a marked whiff of defiance. Comfortable with – and frankly uninterested in - their god-given gifts they cry 'blue-stockings if you dare!' A combative Helen, from a 1937 poem, can have the last word. Helen Syndrome or no, you'll find it hard to keep a feisty (good-looking) girl down.

'And were you pleased?' they asked of Helen in Hell,
'Pleased?' answered she, 'when all Troy's towers fell;
And dead were Priam's sons, and lost his throne?
And such a war was fought as none had known;
And even the gods took part; and all because
Of me alone! Pleased?
I should say I was!'