

The Sight of Semiramis: Medieval and Early Modern Narratives of the Babylonian Queen, by Alison L. Beringer. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2016. Pp. xiv+248. ISBN 9780866985420.

Semiramis has appeared in literary, material, and visual culture (not to mention music, opera, and drama) since antiquity. As such, her legend is comprised of a multitude of overlapping yet frequently disparate narratives, which signal an enduring fascination with the queen of Babylon. In *The Sight of Semiramis*, Alison Beringer provides a study of medieval and early modern treatments of the queen that foregrounds the complexity and multiplicity of this figure and illuminates the broad narrative potential of her legend. Beringer draws on a diverse range of premodern material, including a Byzantine romance and medieval and early modern German songs (the *Meisterlieder*), which she approaches thematically according to a “typology of visuality” (16). More specifically, Beringer reads visual communication and “acts of seeing and of being seen” (15) as the nexus between the various interpretations of Semiramis over time.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to this methodology. The impossibility of pinning Semiramis down—one of the overarching arguments of the book—is established here with an overview of the literature and existing criticism. While this is not a chronologically ordered study that aims to chart the development of Semiramis’s representation across history, Irene Samuel’s identification of a general shift in attitude towards the queen in the time of Jerome and the Church fathers is noted. At this point, admiration for Semiramis’s masonic and engineering skills was swapped for disdain for her pagan overstepping of gendered boundaries, excessive female sexuality, and abuse of authority. She is even associated with the invention of castration, “the ultimate threat to masculine power” (9).

Chapter 2 is also foundational for the subsequent arguments and analysis in the book. Here, Beringer sets down some of the main components of Semiramis’s legend, using the account of her life in Diodorus Siculus’s first-century *Library of History*. Beringer is careful not to position Diodorus as a source for later authors, identifying in his account instead “narrative openings” (a term borrowed from Ann Marie Rasmussen), that is, key sites of exploration that other authors might “open” or choose to emphasize. Indeed, chapter 2 is focused on the narrative opening of the manipulation of what people see, which turns on the relationship between public image and private identity, located in Diodorus’s description of Semiramis dressing herself in androgynous clothing.

Later antique and medieval authors would dwell on her cross-dressing when she succeeded her second husband, Ninus, to the Assyrian throne, to reconcile the position of a woman in a typically “male” leadership role. Beringer also explores narratives, which span the centuries, that conversely draw attention to Semiramis’s femininity, particularly through the depiction of her hair as half-braided and half-loose when she runs to defend her city during a rebellion; an act immortalized by the construction of a statue in certain accounts.

In the rather lengthy fourth chapter (it is a pedestrian point, but I would have found subheadings useful throughout the book), Beringer presents material that “bears witness to the diversity and breadth of the narratives created around the figure of Semiramis” (99). The focus of this chapter is on accounts of individual men viewing the body of Semiramis, dead and alive. Derived from various literary traditions, these accounts can all be read in terms of “the tension between the verbal and the visual modes of communication” (99), a fitting theme for a figure associated with the Tower of Babel. It is here that the fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century Greek Byzantine romance, mentioned above, is analyzed: what looks to be a fascinating text in which Alexander the Great is Semiramis’s suitor, solving numerous linguistic riddles and finally posing a riddle that she cannot solve (the answer is Alexander, himself) to become her husband. Beringer makes some interesting comparisons with a late twelfth-century Persian poem, *Haft Paikar* (Seven Beauties) by Nizami, offering an insight into romance and riddling in Persian tradition and demonstrating the range of material she has brought to her readings of narratives on Semiramis. Indeed, Beringer also identifies parallels between the Byzantine romance and the Greek legend of Medusa (without suggesting the latter as an influence; see 125n102). Semiramis’s perilous beauty in the romance is compared with the Gorgon’s fatal gaze, and Alexander’s linguistic and interpretive skill is argued to be equivalent to Perseus’s mirror/ shield, in saving the respective male protagonist and overcoming the dangerous potential of the respective female protagonist. I was not wholly convinced by this analysis as I found the idea of figurative mirrors and reflection a little overstretched. In both narratives, however, female power is undoubtedly defused by men.

The final chapter considers the themes of idolatry, which Ninus is sometimes said to have founded, and incest, which Semiramis commits with her son in many of the versions of her legend. Beringer argues that both acts amount to visual substitution—an image of a dead father in the case of the former, and the exchange of a dead husband for his son in the case of the latter—and demonstrate that seeing leads to destruction (Semiramis is killed by her son, Ninias). The text referred to here is a thirteenth-century South German Christian world

history in rhyming couplets, the *Weltchronik of Rudolf von Elms*. Beringer offers detailed readings of the images that accompany the Semiramis material in three of the extant manuscript witnesses; incidentally, she is pursuing a separate project on iconography and the queen of Babylon. Her inclusion of the *Weltchronik*, of which there is only one scholarly edition and no complete English translation, highlights one of the significant strengths of this study: little-studied, -translated, and -edited texts are favored over well-known narratives such as Orosius's *History against the Pagans*. The *Meisterlieder* that are drawn upon extensively, especially in chapters 3 and 4, are currently only available in their manuscript contexts. There are drawbacks with this approach also: the accessibility of the material discussed is one, although Beringer has helpfully provided diplomatic transcriptions of several of the songs in an appendix. The book is slightly more orientated towards German scholars: medievalists who do not work with German would benefit from some more background on the *Meisterlieder* tradition, which Beringer proves to be a rich area of study, worthy of further investigation. Overall, the wealth of material from different languages, traditions, genres, and centuries in this book is testament to the gravitational pull of a figure like Semiramis, who can be both hailed and condemned. Studying women such as her can bring together scholars across disciplines and periods who find her just as fascinating and conflicting as premodern authors did.

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