

The Past is a Female Country
Ancient Women and their Reception in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

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ABSTRACTS

Carla Suthren, “‘If Alcest be deade, good Ladie revive hir not againe’’: Resurrecting Alcestis in Medieval and Early Modern Literature’

The story of Alcestis, interpreted as the idealized wife who dies for her husband and is subsequently brought back to life (in a resurrection particularly amenable to Christian allegory), held an understandable appeal for medieval and early modern writers. She appeared in catalogues of ‘good’ women from the classical period onward, and was invoked frequently for her exemplary qualities as a wife. In medieval literature she developed an allegorical association with the daisy, but this was dropped by early modern writers – George Buchanan, for instance, who translated Euripides’ *Alcestis* into Latin, forbore to bring up such a link in the dedication of his work to Marguerite de France, though perhaps it lies somewhere in the background. This paper will analyse the trends and genealogies that emerge in references to Alcestis across a range of genres and authors, from Vives’ *Instruction of A Christen Woman* (trans. Richard Hyde, 1528) to Isabella Whitney’s poem entitled ‘Lamentation of a Gentlewoman upon the Death of her Late-Deceased Friend, William Gruffith, Gentleman’. Whitney’s interesting gender-reversal of the scenario in this poem, and her use of the classical allusion to assert her right to speak in the public medium of printed verse, indicates that the exemplarity that women were expected to find in Alcestis’ story might not always be quite the same as the inspiration they actually found.

Elisa Stafferini, ‘Venus’ Charms and Minerva’s Might: Interpreting Semiramis’ Ambiguous Persona in Late Medieval and Early Modern Visual Representations’

In her publication, *The Sight of Semiramis: Medieval and Early Modern Narratives of the Babylonian Queen* (2016), Alison Beringer delves into the wealth of diverging texts that surround the figure of Semiramis. These texts construct an enigmatic depiction of a woman who, depending on the context, can be both condemned and praised. This paper seeks to examine how this plurality of interpretations is translated into visual imagery. Through the analysis of late medieval illuminated manuscripts, and early modern engravings and paintings, we will notice how Semiramis’ portrayals show her as both an unchaste figure and the perpetrator of an unspeakable crime (incest), and as a woman capable of founding cities, expanding the boundaries of her empire, and even abandoning traditional feminine pursuits to engage in battle. It is precisely this latter iconography that forms the focal point of this paper’s analysis. Drawing from accounts by Valerius Maximus and subsequent authors,

including Boccaccio and Petrarch, the paper examines the tale where Semiramis, amidst hair braiding, learns of a revolt in Babylon. With her hair partially undone, part braided and part not, she swiftly takes up arms. Visual representations of this narrative exemplify the inherent dichotomy within Semiramis, as she exists at the intersection of different realms: the feminine and the masculine domains, the domestic and public spheres and the realms of Venus and Minerva.

Claudia Daniotti, 'Unforgivable Mother and Ideal Bride: Depictions of Medea in Renaissance Italy'

Among the ancient heroines whose stories enjoyed a significant popularity in Renaissance Italy, the mythical princess of Colchis Medea is a notable example of strength and the power of love and seduction. Before turning into a vengeful wife and murderous mother, Medea was a passionate lover whose affection, boldness, and magical skills crucially earned Jason the Golden Fleece. Throughout the Renaissance, Medea's story was retold in the visual arts and biographical compilations of Famous Women, stressing either her fascinating personality or the morally problematic nature of her deeds. My paper will investigate the multifaceted reception of Medea in Renaissance Italian art, as exemplified by domestic artefacts, including *caissoni*, marriage caskets, and maiolica. By discussing her depiction both as a devoted bride and a powerful sorceress, this paper will examine how such a controversial figure engaged with Renaissance depictions of love and what kind of model she offered to Renaissance women.

Lisa Hopkins, 'Camilla the Volscian and Lady Arbella Stuart'

This paper considers a letter of Lady Arbella Stuart's referring to Virgil's Camilla the Volscian. Reading it against the period's most famous representation of the Volscians, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, it argues that both authors are influenced by the fact that the relationship between the Volscians and the Romans could trope that between the Scots and the English. In the month in which Queen Elizabeth died, Arbella Stuart reached for a Volscian as a way to connect herself to Scotland, a country ruled by the cousin she had never met but who might be about to succeed to the crown. But in her semi-confinement in Hardwick Hall, amongst the huge appliqué panels of classical heroines created by and for her grandmother Bess of Hardwick, Arbella also found in Camilla an example of valour, indomitability and independence.

Aidan Norrie, 'Deborah's Odyssey in Early Modern England'

Judges 4 and 5 of the Old Testament recount the remarkable story of Deborah, who God chose to lead the Israelites and to deliver them from the oppression of the Canaanites. While the historicity of the Book of Judges is questioned, it is nevertheless significant that one of

only fourteen judges was a woman, and Deborah's example showed that God could—and did—choose women to carry out His plan. Deborah had a long afterlife, and her example was invoked in an array of contexts in succeeding centuries. This paper will analyse some of the many depictions of Deborah in early modern England, with an emphasis on their use in royal iconography during the reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I, and will seek to show that Israel's only female judge was a powerful and adaptable figure in the hands of early modern writers and commentators.

Carole Levin, 'Boudicca and Queen Elizabeth I: Parallel British Amazonian Queens'

Boudicca, queen of the Iceni tribe in Britain, fought the Romans in the first century of the common era. Most of what we know about her comes from the Roman writers Tacitus and Dio Cassius. Though writing from the Roman perspective, and showing the violence of Boudicca, they also portrayed her as eloquent. As the depictions of Boudicca continued, we see that for some she was represented the worst of female ferocious behavior. For others, she demonstrated great female bravery. There are some very negative violent depictions of her in medieval and early modern period, but in the reign of queen Elizabeth, Boudicca was also seen as a national hero and a counterpoint to the Tudor queen. This paper focuses more of the positive than negative depictions of Boudicca as I am most concerned with the connections between Boudicca and Elizabeth. But some of the negative ones provide important context. Negative depictions of Boudicca continued in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though in the reign of another queen, Victoria, Boudicca was again valorized by some. From the earliest Roman depictions of Boudicca to the modern period, the way Boudicca is described, how her image is used, either negatively or positively, often has significant political/cultural/ethical ramifications having to do with the time the work was composed.

Edith Hall, 'Repurposing Tomyris from Deschamps to Queen Anne'

Most of the great heroic women of classical literature and history who defied mighty empires ended up defeated, or dead, or both. The exception is Tomyris, Queen of the Massagetae, who defied and executed Cyrus the Great to keep her people free. This talk traces her repurposing in art and literature from her inclusion in the medieval canon of female worthies and her representation in Renaissance and Early Modern visual art to her popularity in Restoration English theatre.