

*Biblical Women in Early Modern Literary Culture, 1550–1700.*

Victoria Brownlee and Laura Gallagher, eds.

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This is a splendid collection of essays and an important contribution to both feminist historiography of the Renaissance and the place of the Bible in the intellectual culture of the era. It has become almost axiomatic to note that women in the Renaissance very frequently wrote on religious subject matter, with at least some degree of apologetic coda attached to or implicit in such observations. This book, though less specifically about women writing so much as women as subject matter, makes the impressive case that the pliability of biblical women, and the kinds of meanings that accrued around them, made them into vibrant and vigorously contested figures. Whether it was female rule and resistance theory (Adrian Streeet) or maternal cannibalism in the besieged biblical city (Beatrice Groves), whether it was the craftiness of biblical wives that both appalled and appealed to early modern readers (Michele Osherow) or the trope of whoredom and Catholicism that was so ubiquitous as a Protestant trope (Victoria Brownlee), the essays here create a picture of the discursive malleability in the way that the scriptural women were deployed. Eve and Mary tend to have a disproportionate role in the *querelle des femmes* tradition. For all that they were central to both its misogyny and at the same time might be battled over and defended, the era was alert to and bracingly capable of bringing counterinstances of women from the Bible to far more effective ends than scholarship has recognized. Nevertheless, Eve is of course central and her role in Lanyer and Milton is attended to here (Elizabeth Hodgson), as is Mary as the problematic embodiment of grief in Protestant England (Laura Gallaher), or the literary afterlife of Mary Magdalene (Lisa Hopkins), in a culture suspicious of, if still enamoured by, the devotional traditions around these biblical women. Venerating Mary may have been proscribed officially and a recusant shibboleth, but she was also widely reconfigured for Protestantism (Thomas Rist). This collection impressively shows how varied the panoply of biblical woman to choose from was and how varied were the tropes of biblical womanhood. It demonstrates

the elasticity of meanings in both uncompromising martial women and those more ideologically docile, or at least deploying docility, whether Esther and her carefully crafted supplication (Alison Thorne), or the prescriptive book of Proverbs, with its injunctions to supinity (Danielle Clark), both of which, the authors show, were amenable to reshaping.

The editors steer the collection effectively, “unravelling the rhetorical potential of the Bible’s women across political, cultural, gendered and theological discourses” (9), and contextualize the essays in a well-pitched set of questions about the generic variety of appropriation they were subject to, the idiosyncrasies of the reading practices that animated the characters, and the effects of the typological refraction that brought them to life in early modern thought. They provide three introductions, one to the volume as a whole and one to each of the testaments. This is a worthwhile strategy in a culture (ours) whose ability to distinguish, as the editors note, Puah, Peninnah, or Priscilla may be shaky. It is useful to have a crisp overview of the multitude of scriptural women for the necessarily more focused essays. They are, like Homer’s Penelope, often wily and intelligent within constricted circumstances. But not always. They are also at times godly female killers, more or less godly female prostitutes, prophetesses, seductresses, child-eating cannibals, dastardly political manipulators, and ruthless ungodly killers. New Testament women are somewhat less vibrant and are more frequently bit-part characters, but their rapidly and contentiously shifting role in early modern culture, divesting itself of Marian trappings, made them significant, and if they were no longer there to be prayed to, numerous other uses were found for them.

The volume has subtle things to say about sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women and their use of the Bible, even while there are not too many of them included. Amelia Lanyer has major billing and there are a fair number of others, not least in the mini-introductions themselves, but this is quite self-consciously not a book that traces what early modern women wrote, so much as how ancient women were refigured. Along the way, it demonstrates impressively how central these women were in early modern thought and how women’s engagement with power might be figured. This is a fine collection of essays that should find a ready readership across a number of interlocking interests — literary, feminist, historical, theological, and political theory.

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