

Review of Caroline Blyth, *Reimagining Delilah's Afterlives as Femme Fatale: The Lost Seduction*.

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Blyth's premise for this book is simple yet effective: to explore why the biblical character of Delilah is so often presented as a femme fatale figure in both cultural re-appropriations and traditional biblical interpretations, arguing that there are many other perspectives from which we should read her story that not only enrich her character, but also liberate her from the confines of a single caricature. Though the aim is simple, the process through which Blyth achieves it is a rich, complex mixture of linguistic, historical, and reception-history based approaches which make this book well-structured and clear to follow.

Blyth begins by presenting an outline of the history of femme fatales with a focus on "those time periods, places and genres where she emerges with particular vibrancy" (5) and with an aim to define the characteristics and motifs most commonly associated with those women. This chapter draws on images of the femme fatale from a variety of sources including nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* art, literature, and music, to film noir and neo-noir depictions in Hollywood films. The rich image-based history of the femme fatale is well demonstrated here as Blyth carefully knits together connections from across these genres to show that the femme fatale has, more or less and in one form or another, always been a part of society.

Interestingly, these connections highlight how the femme fatale figure has frequently been a cultural marker, shaped by the "historical and socio-cultural milieus within which they were created" (50). This is really the crux of Blyth's point in this chapter, and she develops it in the forthcoming chapters and with respect to Delilah's many afterlives which she discusses in the forthcoming chapters. Blyth goes on to argue that societal and cultural influences which have shaped the femme fatale have done so based on gendered fears and fantasies about what women are and what they can become. This realization is not only contextualised in fictional accounts of femme fatales, but also transfers to real women: "the fictional femme fatale becomes Everywoman, while every woman is suspected of having the potential to be a femme fatale" (50).

The remainder of the book applies the definitions of the femme fatale Blyth has established in the first chapter to the biblical figure of Delilah. The second chapter discusses biblical interpretations of Delilah, ranging from linguistic connotations of her name and how her name does or does not offer insight into her character, to her potentially sexual relationship with Samson and the implications of such a relationship. Blyth also discusses gendered interpretations of the story, as well as perspectives of race, ethnicity, and otherness, concluding that the majority of biblical interpreters, regardless of their methods in reading the story, inevitably end up casting Delilah as a femme fatale, leaving little space to consider her in other ways.

The third chapter carries on this theme but looks at the cultural afterlives of Delilah in literature (for example Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, 1671), art (as in

Solomon Joseph Solomon's 1887 painting *Samson and Delilah*), music (Blind Willie Johnson's *Samson and Delilah*, composed in 1927), amongst other media forms like movies, television series, and novels. This chapter is especially adept at showcasing how creators of such pieces have further cemented the idea of Delilah as an archetypal femme fatale figure. Chapters two and three also open up a discourse on ideas of sexuality and gender in the story of Delilah which helpfully can be carried over into other biblical characters as well.

Blyth closes her book by composing some of her own interpretive afterlives of Delilah. She accomplishes this by challenging the one-dimensional trope of the femme fatale as demonstrated in the previous chapters, "exploring instead the contours of her literary landscape, which necessitate her adopting the role of fatal woman" (151). By deconstructing and reinterpreting traditional images of Delilah in this way and reading beyond the "overused rhetoric of Delilah's lethal sexuality" (151), Blyth convincingly argues that Delilah's character can be read as a victim of patriarchal discourses which "construct her sociocultural location" (153)—in other words, the casting of Delilah as femme fatale has been achieved by her place both within the patriarchal text and outside it in a patriarchally-led interpretive and cultural afterlife. There is scope to read beyond the perspective of sex and gender in Delilah's story by considering her outside such a socio-cultural location, and there also is a desperate need to do so.

Blyth has produced a well-structured and persuasive argument which carefully develops through each chapter, building to a conclusion which is both withering in its attack on reading Delilah as a one-dimensional trope of a dangerous yet alluring woman, and inspiring in its call to reinterpret and deconstruct Delilah outside of her patriarchally-enforced sociocultural location. This model is something which could easily be applied to other women in the Bible—the role of Eve as mother, for example, or the trope of Ruth as foreigner. The potential scope for further research in this area is exciting, and, as such, Blyth's book is a vital work both as a framework for how we might approach interpretive and cultural afterlives of women which moves them away from stereotypical labels, and as an exercise in building an argument which caters for scholars of the Bible, culture, and reception. On this last point, though this book is located in the realm of biblical studies, it would be highly beneficial to students and scholars of reception history, cultural studies, and gender studies as well. Working across intersections of academic disciplines like these is innovative and timely, and this book serves as an excellent example of how to navigate those often-disorientating waters without losing sight of the destination.

The book would have been slightly improved by including full-colour images—Blyth, after all, does open with an appeal to the reader to imagine Delilah, adding that for most of us, a "jewel-tones tapestry, whose multihued threads stitch together a woman's presence" (1) is what comes to mind. Her well-constructed argument would have benefited from the many beautiful images which were included illustrating that point to really drive home cultural and interpretive perceptions of Delilah. However, aside from this very small point, *Reimagining Delilah* is a highly-recommended and much-needed discourse on an under-studied and often-demonized women in the Bible.



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