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Bathsheba Plotted, Shot, and Painted

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

To be given in free exchange, to be willingly kept in ocular circulation, to serve as object for readerly and visual reception, not to hold out on the viewer, is already surely an act of generosity, if not forced.

Mary Ann Caws, 'Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art'

'Plotted' in the title of this chapter refers, of course, to the narrative handling of the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11. 'Shot' has nothing to do with Bathsheba's death, which is not recounted in the Bible, but rather invokes the camera, since I want to consider how Bathsheba is treated in movies based on the biblical story. I also want to look at some famous paintings of Bathsheba, from the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. My primary interest in the comparison between narrative, painting, and film is in the representation of the female body; specifically, I want to investigate how Bathsheba, who is a kind of paragon of sensuality, is portrayed as the object of sexual desire and aggression, and to inquire how her body is focalized, first in the text itself, and then in visual representations of it. I shall be looking, then, at women—for we are dealing with more than one Bathsheba here—as the object of the male gaze. And I shall be arguing that there is more to Bathsheba than meets the eye. Since I shall be self-consciously looking at looking, I invite the reader to join me in looking at our own gaze—at our collusion, or complicity, or resistance when faced with the exposure of female flesh for our literary

or visual consumption. Surely female and male readers and viewers will react differently to the textual and visual images. The female reader or spectator, like it or not, is identified with the body observed. To the extent we view the naked woman as object, we are co-opted into objectifying our own bodies and reading the textual and visual representations against our own interests. I shall return to this point later.

Bathsheba Plotted

The biblical story of David and Bathsheba holds a place in popular imagination both as a tale of unbridled lust and also, curiously, as a famous 'love story'. It is, in fact, as a love story that producer Darryl F. Zanuck and director Henry King presented *David and Bathsheba* in the 1951 film by that name.¹ What is it about David and Bathsheba as a topos and about us as consumers of this topos that makes us so eager to imbue their encounter with feeling—with *mutual* feeling—rather than dismissing it as an isolated incident, a gratified whim of the king with disastrous consequences for him and his kingdom? The biblical version is no love story. Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, is 'sent for' by King David, who has sex with her in a moment of passion. That brief encounter might have been the end of it but for one complication: Bathsheba becomes pregnant. Unlike King's film version, where David and Bathsheba romp about the countryside enjoying bucolic trysts, in the biblical account David and Bathsheba do not have sex again until after she has become his wife. Nor is there any evidence in the biblical version to suggest that David *wanted* Bathsheba either for his wife (as the film is at pains to show) or his paramour. On the contrary, the text makes clear that David would prefer to have Uriah assume paternity of the child and, presumably, continue in his marriage to Bathsheba as before. David has Uriah killed and then marries Bathsheba only because his ploy to get Uriah to 'go down to his house'—that is, to have sex with his wife (11.8-13)—fails.

In the biblical account, David's erotic involvement with Bathsheba occupies only one verse of narrative time.

1. Twentieth Century Fox; produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; directed by Henry King; screenplay by Philip Dunne; and starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward.

David sent messengers and took her. She came to him and he lay with her, while she was purifying herself from her uncleanness. Then she returned to her house (2 Sam. 11.4).

Since Bathsheba will become pregnant, the clause, 'while she was purifying herself from her uncleanness', is necessary to establish David's paternity. Apart from this essential information, only five actions—three on David's part and two on Bathsheba's—are minimally described. He sent, he took, and he lay: the verbs signify control and acquisition. In contrast, only her movement is described: she came and she returned.

This encounter is set in a narrative context of aggression and violence. 'All Israel' (2 Sam. 11.1)—that is, all the men except the king—are away at war, besieging a city, while David is at home, taking a woman.² Is Bathsheba, like Rabbah of the Ammonites, taken by force? We cannot be sure, for although 'sent' and 'took' indicate aggression on David's part, 'came' and 'returned', the two verbs of which Bathsheba is the subject, are not what one would expect if resistance were involved. The king sends for a subject and she obeys. Does she know for what purpose she is summoned? For news about her husband Uriah, who is away on the battlefield (which is the pretext used in the film *David and Bathsheba*)? Or for sex? An actual demand for her sexual services is not necessary to make her feel she must agree to sex. David is, after all, the king, so is she free to refuse?

Both the placement of this scene within the account of the Ammonite war and its consequences suggest force. When, as part of his punishment, David's children reenact his sins, David's adultery with Bathsheba is replayed as rape, not once but twice. First Amnon rapes his sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13) and later, to signal his takeover of his father's kingdom, Absalom rapes ten of David's wives. The ten women are raped in a tent on the roof, a location which serves both

2. See J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*. 1. King David (Assen: van Gorcum, 1981), pp. 41-70, and Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 10-36, for discussion of the combination of war, sexuality, and violence in 2 Sam. 11. For other explorations of the connection between women, war, and metaphors of sexual violence, see the essays in Claudia V. Camp and Carole R. Fontaine (eds.), *Women, War, and Metaphor: Language and Society in the Study of the Hebrew Bible* (Semeia, 61; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).

3. In the film, David tells Abishai to invite Bathsheba to dine with him so that he can reward her for Uriah's valor in battle.

to remind us of the place where David sinned and to fulfill Nathan's prophecy that God will do to David in the sight of the sun and all Israel what David had done in secret (2 Sam. 12.11-12; 16.21-22).

Whether or not David rapes Bathsheba is a moot question, and one I do not feel compelled to argue, since I am not interested in subjecting a literary creation to cross-examination.⁴ What Bathsheba might have done or felt is not the point; the point is we are not allowed access to her point of view. The issue of force versus consent, which is crucial for constructing the woman's point of view, is not raised. Nor does the text describe an attempted seduction, which would give the woman a role, even if one in which she is manipulated.⁵ Bathsheba's rape is semiotic; that is to say, her violation occurs not so much *in the story* as *by means of the story*. By denying her subjectivity,

4. For an approach that attempts to flesh out female characters by giving them narrative life in the reader's consciousness, see Alice Bach, 'Signs of the Flesh: Observations on Characterization in the Bible', *Semeia* 63 (1993), pp. 61-79.

5. On the problem with the rape-seduction opposition, see Ellen Rooney, "'A Little More than Persuading': Tess and the Subject of Sexual Violence", in *Rape and Representation* (ed. L.A. Higgins and B.R. Silver; New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 87-114. The film *David and Bathsheba* gives Bathsheba power by turning the encounter into a seduction scene. Susan Hayward holds Gregory Peck off until she gets what she wants: 'There are women you could send for and send away again. I am not one of them.' At this point, she has ceased to call him 'sire' and addresses him as 'David'. In part this portrayal is due to the fact that Zanut and King have in Susan Hayward an important female star whom they want to showcase. They flesh out her character and show *her desire*; she acts, she is motivated, and the film evinces a 1950s concern with the woman's feelings. In the final analysis, however, the film reinscribes the gender ideology of the text according to which women are a temptation that can cause a man's downfall, women lead men astray, women are dangerous. Ironically, the 1985 film makes Bathsheba more passive, in what I take to be a backlash against feminism. Alice Krige as Bathsheba, not a star with the box-office attraction Hayward held, is rarely on screen. Krige as Bathsheba does not see her first son die, as Susan Hayward as Bathsheba does. Extremely damaging is her testimony that she would be willing to put up with physical abuse from her husband if only she could have a child—traditional female fulfillment at any price. Besides this speech, her only other spoken line in the movie is 'Let the king's wish prevail, Ahithophel', when David insists that Absalom, and not Solomon, will be king after him. Thus the film takes away from Bathsheba the active role and positive contribution the Bible has her make: her role in obtaining the kingship for her son Solomon (1 Kgs 1 and 2). Not only does Bathsheba not get her final moment, but her position is reversed and she speaks against her own interests in supporting Absalom over Solomon.

the narrator violates the character he created. By portraying Bathsheba in an ambiguous light, the narrator leaves her vulnerable, not simply to assault by David but also to misappropriation by those who come after him to spy on the bathing beauty and offer their versions of, or commentary on, the story. In particular, the withholding of Bathsheba's point of view leaves her open to the charge of seduction.

Both the 1951 film *David and Bathsheba* and the 1985 *King David*,⁶ for example, are unable to resist the appeal of seduction in order to make David less guilty at Bathsheba's expense. *David and Bathsheba* is sensitive to the possibility of coercion: is Bathsheba free to say no? 'You are the king', says Bathsheba. 'What other answer can I give, sire? You have sent for me and made known to me your will, what else is there for me to say?' This response represents Bathsheba as a subject who feels she cannot refuse her king, one who yields to his authority, and at this point we may think that the film is out to restore Bathsheba's honor.⁷ But pursuing this characterization of Bathsheba would cast King David in too negative a light. David therefore responds to Bathsheba's submission to his will with a long speech in which he prides himself for refusing ever to take anything by force, not even the kingdom: 'So I said nothing to you until you told me that there is no love in your marriage. Yes, you told me that, and so did Uriah...'⁸ Only when he tells Bathsheba that she may leave, proving his respect for her right to refuse, does Bathsheba confess to having planned the whole thing! She watched him walking on his balcony every evening and knew she could count on his being there to see her. She had heard he had found no woman to please him. *She* wants to be the woman who will make him happy. *She* wants to be his wife.

In the 1985 film *King David*, drastic changes are made to make David look better. He sees Bathsheba bathing, but does not send for

6. Paramount Pictures; produced by Martin Elfand; directed by Bruce Beresford; and starring Richard Gere. Alice Krige has a minor role as Bathsheba. For interesting comments about his role as advisor to the film, see Jonathan Magonet, 'My Part in the Fall of "King David"—the Bible Goes to the Movies', in *A Rabbi's Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1991), pp. 73-85.

7. The fact that the film uses it at all shows, I think, how compelling an interpretation it is of the narrative silence. It also makes Bathsheba appear more manipulative: she does not yield to David until she has him where she wants him.

8. At the beginning of the film, Uriah has already indicated to David that he prefers the soldier's life to the marriage bed.

her. He has sex with her only after their marriage, which takes place after Uriah is dead (a death David arranges to rid Bathsheba of an abusive husband). As a result of these and other distortions of the story line, nothing that happens later in the film makes much sense. In particular, the disasters that befall David's house now appear arbitrary and random rather than as having some connection to his sin and his punishment in kind. Though Bathsheba is not clearly guilty of planning the affair, as in *David and Bathsheba*, she is nonetheless complicit in letting herself be seen bathing. When David first meets her face to face, he says, 'I've seen you once before', to which she responds, 'I know'.⁹

What I have described is not just a contribution of Hollywood. Biblical scholars draw similar conclusions. When commentators on 2 Samuel 11 suggest that Bathsheba shares the blame, are they picking up on a latent message in the text, or are they reading their own gender stereotypes back into it? George Nicol, for example, maintains:

It cannot be doubted that Bathsheba's action in bathing so close to the king's residence was provocative, nor can the possibility that the provocation was deliberate be discounted. Even if it was not deliberate, Bathsheba's bathing in a place so clearly open to the king's palace can hardly indicate less than a contributory negligence on her part.¹⁰

Similarly, Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, in his commentary on the books of Samuel, says, 'We must, however, ask whether Bathsheba did not count on this possibility', and then quotes Alfons Schulz—'one cannot but blame her for bathing in a place where she could be seen'—before concluding, 'not, of course, that this possible element of *feminine flirtation* is any excuse for David's conduct'.¹¹ Though he

9. Why Bathsheba has come to petition David is another aspect of the film that makes little sense, for, although she tells David that Uriah beats her and shows him her wounds, she reminds him that a woman has no redress against her husband. She can tolerate the beatings, she says, but she wants a child. David says she shall have one, to which she replies, 'Not while my husband lives'. The scene thus suggests that she puts the idea of killing Uriah into David's mind, and the very next shot is of Uriah's death letter being sealed.

10. George Nicol, 'Bathsheba, a Clever Woman?', *Expository Times* 99 (1988), p. 360.

11. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel* (trans. J.S. Bowden; The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 309, italics mine. In the German original (*Die Samuelbücher* [Das Alte Testament Deutsch, 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2nd rev. edn, 1960], p. 254) the term is 'Koketterie'.

holds David accountable, Hertzberg manages to blame the woman also. He goes on to propose that, although we know nothing of Bathsheba's point of view, 'her consciousness of the danger into which adultery was leading her (Deut. 22.22) must have been outweighed by her realization of the honour of having attracted the king'.¹² I find it more than a little disquieting that what is arguably a violation and certainly an objectification has so easily, in the view of the conventional commentator, become an *honor*.

Why is it that (male) interpreters are so quick to blame Bathsheba for appearing on the scene in some state of undress? What about the responsibility of the narrator, who made the decision to portray her in the act of washing?¹³ It is, after all, the biblical narrator who, using David as his agent, makes Bathsheba the object of the male gaze. When biblical commentators imply that Bathsheba desired the king's attentions and when popular renditions of the story attribute such motivation to her, they let the narrator off the hook at the woman's expense.

We also are involved in the narrator's pretense. By introducing Bathsheba to us through David's eyes, the biblical narrator puts in the position of voyeurs:

...he saw from the roof a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful (2 Sam. 11.2).

I have discussed the voyeuristic nature of this scene in my book, *Fragmented Women*.¹⁴ The narrator controls our gaze; we cannot look

12. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, p. 310.

13. John Berger (*Ways of Seeing* [London: Penguin Books, 1972], p. 51) makes this point about visual art, but it applies as well to narrative: 'You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure'. To the extent that the narrator implies culpability on Bathsheba's part, he, too, is being hypocritical, morally condemning her for the nakedness he has created imaginatively for his pleasure, David's, and that of his ideal readers. He could, for example, have had David see Bathsheba in somewhat the same way that another biblical 'lover', Samson, sees the woman he wants: 'David went out in Jerusalem and he saw a woman who was the right one in his eyes'.

14. For the following discussion, see J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 163; Sheffield: JSOT Press/Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), pp. 174-75, 194-95.

The woman is focalized through the male gaze:

...and he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful.

How does David, through whose eyes we see the woman's body, react to what he sees? The sight of Bathsheba's body arouses his desire, and he acts on it: he sends for her and has sex with her. Lustful looking is the prelude to possessing. The story thus raises the question of the relationship between looking, desiring, and acting on the basis of desire.¹⁹ Fortunately, not every voyeur acts on his lustful impulses. The text condemns David for doing so, but only because the woman is another man's property. The voyeuristic gaze at the female body that can lead to appropriation is permanently inscribed in the text, and we, its readers, are implicated in it. With all this looking, it is little wonder Bathsheba has become the quintessential object of the gaze in literature and art through the ages.²⁰ Her 'punishment' for being desired is to be forever visualized as the sensual woman who enflames male lust.

This is how the paintings and films I want to consider treat her, dramatically reinscribing the text's voyeuristic gaze at the naked female body. As readers or spectators, we are implicated in this gaze, but as gendered subjects, we are implicated differently. The biblical story, it is fair to say, was written by men for men. To the extent that female readers assume its male perspective, we are forced to read against our own interests: to accept the concept of woman as a source of temptation that can bring about a man's downfall. Even if we

19. My discussion of this issue owes much to Mieke Bal's analysis of the story of Susanna ('The Elders and Susanna', *Biblical Interpretation* 1 [1993], pp. 1-19).

20. The ease with which one can find paintings of the naked Bathsheba attests to the primacy of this scene in the painterly tradition. In spite of the fact that Bathsheba reappears in the biblical account, what most people remember about her is her bath and 'seduction' of David. This is overwhelmingly the answer I receive when I survey introductory students with the question, Who was Bathsheba? She is remembered for setting in motion the downfall of David's house, but not for helping to build Solomon's. The film *David and Bathsheba* ends, for example, before Solomon is born with a 'and-they-lived-happily-ever-after' ending in which David and Bathsheba walk out toward the balcony hand in hand to the strains of the twenty-third Psalm (where outside it is raining as a sign that the drought caused by David's sin is over, and symbolizing purification and a new beginning). In *King David* Bathsheba is present at the end of the film when David proclaims Solomon king, but she has nothing to do with it. She stands by silently, just as she appeared in silent roles the first two times we saw her: watching David dancing before the ark and bathing.

away from the bathing beauty but must consider her appearance: 'very beautiful'. We presume she is naked or only partially clad, and thinking about it requires us to invade her privacy by undressing or dressing her mentally. The intimacy of washing is intensified by the fact that this is a ritual purification after her menstrual period, and this intimacy, along with the suggestion of nakedness, accentuates the body's vulnerability to David's and our shared gaze. A woman is touching herself and a man is watching. The viewing is one-sided, giving him the advantage and the position of power: he sees her but she does not see him.¹⁵ Readers of this text are watching a man watching a woman touch herself.¹⁶ Can male and female readers possibly react in the same way to the scene? For my part, I am uncomfortable being put in the position of voyeur, watching a naked woman being watched.

Nor are we and David the only voyeurs: 'Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?' (v. 3). It is not clear who says these words, whether David¹⁷ or an attendant,¹⁸ but in any event, 'Is this not Bathsheba?' suggests that someone else is looking too.

15. Looking at the female body is a cultural preoccupation for both men and women. Women look at women, as the genre of the fashion magazine—the how-to manual for capturing the gaze—well illustrates. Looking at women is an expression of male sexuality. Men are the owners of the gaze. Men look at women (including to take stock of us, to decide how to treat us. Women look at women (including ourselves), among other reasons, in order to determine how to attract the gaze, or how to avoid attracting attention, in order to become like or unlike the image before us. Berger (*Ways of Seeing*, p. 46) puts it well: 'Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it. That part of a woman's self which is the surveyor treats the part which is the surveyed so as to demonstrate to others how her whole self would like to be treated.'

16. If we accept the testimony of literature, art, film, and pornography, men are aroused by watching a woman touch herself. Even more arousing perhaps is the sight of another woman touching a woman, a scene exploited in the film *King David* (see below).

17. So, convincingly, Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 75; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), p. 85.

18. So most commentators and most translations.

do not identify with Bathsheba, we cannot escape feeling included in the indictment of woman that she represents.²¹ The paintings of Bathsheba are also by men²² and for assumed male spectators and male owners. In commenting upon the Western artistic tradition, John Berger observes,

In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger—with his clothes still on.²³

Finally, the films, like most Hollywood movies, are produced and directed by men, and in spite of the fact that their audience consists of women and men, the naked female body remains focalized through the male gaze. The woman holds the look; she plays to and signifies male desire.²⁴ As Laura Mulvey has argued in her classic study on

21. The position of the female reader is well described by Judith Fetterley, 'Palpable Designs: An American Dream: "Rip Van Winkle"', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (ed. R.R. Warhol and D. Price Herndl, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 507.

22. There were not many women artists and women were not admitted to academies where nude models were used until the end of the eighteenth century according to Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 13-14. It is illuminating to compare Artemisia Gentileschi's 'David and Bathsheba' to the Bathshebas discussed here. Gentileschi gives us a sympathetic Bathsheba who appears to want to shield herself from the gaze.

23. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 54. Kenneth Clark's often discussed distinction between naked and nude is neither relevant for my purposes nor compelling; for critiques of the gender assumptions in Clark's discussion, see Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, pp. 13-16; Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 12-33. Nead deconstructs Clark's binary opposition between the naked and the nude, a binary opposition retained but reversed in Berger's study. As Nead (p. 16) remarks: 'The discourse on the naked and the nude, so effectively formulated by Kenneth Clark and subsequently reworked, depends upon the theoretical possibility, if not the actuality, of a physical body that is outside of representation and is then given representation, for better or for worse, through art; but even at the most basic levels the body is always produced through representation... There can be no naked "other" to the nude, for the body is always already in representation.'

24. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989), p. 19.

'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema': 'In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*'.²⁵

The male viewer of the paintings and the films, like the male reader of the biblical story, is invited to take David's symbolic position as the focalizer of the gaze: he can look through David's eyes; he can fantasize himself in David's place. The woman is naked for his pleasure. The female spectator's involvement is more complicated. Our position is that of both surveyor and surveyed, or, to use Mulvey's terms, we are both the image and the bearer of the look. The male spectator is invited to identify with the male protagonist and to desire the female image. The female spectator is also invited to look at the female image with the phallic power of the gaze, yet we are identified with that image as well. Identification and desire, which for the male spectator remain separate operations, are collapsed for us.²⁶ We might find the male perspective we are asked to assume uncomfortable, and therefore reject it and, with it, the pleasurable cinematic experience. Or we might enjoy the control and freedom of action that identification with the male protagonist gives us.²⁷ Either way, it would seem that it is not possible for our desire to be acknowledged.

25. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 19, italics hers.

26. See Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 157, 168-69. As Kaplan (*Women and Film*, p. 31) notes, '...men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it.' It should be obvious that I am pursuing a heterosexual reading, since the premise of the paintings is heterosexuality and mainstream, classical Hollywood cinema represents heterosexuality as the norm. I hope it is equally obvious that I am not insisting that the approach taken here is the only way to look at this material; many factors will cause individual readers to react differently.

27. See Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 29-38. The nature and the possibilities of a female gaze is a subject of debate among feminist film critics; see Kaplan, *Women and Film*, pp. 23-35, 200-206; Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, pp. 155-83; Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* [London: Routledge, 1991], pp. 17-43; Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 187-234; and the essays in Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (eds.), *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: The Women's Press, 1988).

Bathsheba Painted

The story of David and Bathsheba provides both theme and pretext for artistic representations of a naked woman. Female nudity in the art of the Christian West, argues Margaret Miles, carries associations of shame, sin, and guilt. In the case of Bathsheba, the paintings imply what the cinematic representations will make explicit: Bathsheba's exhibitionism. But they also problematize it, and with it our voyeurism also.

I should explain briefly how I intend to 'read' the paintings discussed below. I am neither an art critic nor an art historian. I find art history somewhat like historical criticism in biblical studies: it asks questions about origins, about the artist's historical situation and influences on the artist's life, and it talks about composition and style, particularly in terms of contemporary trends and distinguishing characteristics. But it does not seem very much interested in the 'story' the picture has to tell, in what Berger calls 'the plane of lived experience'.²⁸ The mystification of art by art historians that Berger deplores is much like the mystification of the Bible by professional biblical scholars—how many people really care if a particular text was written by J, D, or P?

When I look at Rembrandt's famous painting of Bathsheba (fig. 1.1), I am not particularly interested in the artist's age or his financial circumstances when he painted her. It does not matter to me that the subject was probably the artist's common-law wife, Hendrickje Stoffels (though this may account for her sympathetic portrayal). Nor is my interpretation affected by the question whether the letter she holds in her hand represents Hendrickje's summons before the Dutch Reformed Church for 'living in sin with Rembrandt the painter' or whether the painting itself may have incited the church authorities to issue the

28. Berger's satiric critique (*Ways of Seeing*) of the mystification of art by art historians has emboldened my 'reading' of these paintings. Berger acknowledges his debt to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (*Illuminations* [ed. with an introduction by Hannah Arendt; New York: Schocken Books, 1969], pp. 217–51), anticipates much modern art and film theory. The other important influence on my use of the visual is Mieke Bal's *Reading 'Rembrandt': Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).



Figure 1.1. Rembrandt, *Bathsabie au bain*, Louvre © Photo R.M.N.

summons.²⁹ This is not to say that I am not interested in what historical critics of the Bible have to say or that I do not appreciate knowing something about the background of a painting. But what I see when I view these paintings is a naked woman identified either by the painter or someone else as Bathsheba, and I cannot help reading the painting in the light of what I know of the story. What I am advocating here is a reader-response criticism of art. I intend to read the paintings semiotically, as if, like texts, they have a story to tell. In their case, the story is often compressed, with various elements of the story represented in one moment in time. More importantly, I want to raise questions about the interaction between painting and spectator similar to the questions I am asking about the interaction between text and reader.

The striking thing about Rembrandt's Bathsheba is that David is not looking, we are. We replace David as voyeur, as we view what we assume he has viewed already. This assumption is predicated on the letter summoning her to the king, which Bathsheba holds in her hand—an intertextual reference to Uriah's death letter, since in the story Bathsheba receives no letter from David. I cannot help thinking if she has had time to be seen by David and receive the letter and still has not put her clothes on, she must spend a good deal of her time naked.

The imagery is essentially frontal because the sexual protagonist is the spectator/owner who is looking at it.³⁰ Bathsheba's body, however, is slightly twisted, as if she were in the act of turning away, and her crossed legs are a modest gesture in relation to the spectator. The pose is ambivalent, making it difficult to decide: is she or is she not an exhibitionist? Mieke Bal, in a brilliant discussion of this painting in her book, *Reading 'Rembrandt'*, calls attention to a distortion of structure that requires explanation. The letter in Bathsheba's hand points to the locus of the distortion. Her legs are crossed, the right leg over the left leg, but her right foot remains at the right side of her knees. The distortion, Bal argues, draws attention to the artificiality of the display of the woman's body; it exposes itself as an exposure.

29. See the discussion of this issue in Bal, *Reading 'Rembrandt'*, pp. 224-27. The quotation is from Bal, p. 226, citing Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 292.

30. Berger (*Ways of Seeing*, p. 56) makes this point about most post-Renaissance European painting of the nude.

The navel, the center of the body, had to be displayed so that the viewer could collude with David's voyeurism, but the display itself—its artificiality—had to be emphasized.³¹

Whereas Bathsheba's body is turned toward us, offering itself to our view, her head is turned away, indicating her reluctance to be seen. The expression on her face suggests an interiority that we cannot penetrate, a private, inner space that is hers alone. She is pensive, perhaps even melancholy. Should we interpret the look on her face as signifying resignation or hopelessness? We might read it proleptically as expressing mourning for her husband Uriah (2 Sam. 11.26) or grief for her dead child (2 Sam. 12.15-24), or, more generally, as regret over all the misfortune the letter in her hand will cause. The painter gives Bathsheba what the biblical narrator did not: a measure of subjectivity. He has managed to reveal an inwardness and an inaccessibility in the expression of her body and face. This humanizing of the female nude tells the spectator that she is not simply naked for him.³²

In Hans Memling's fifteenth-century painting of Bathsheba, the only remaining panel of a triptych (fig. 1.2), once again we, and not David, are the voyeurs. David is in the background, in the upper left-hand corner of the painting. Given his distance from her window, he cannot see or have seen her very well. Indeed, she seems fairly well shielded from his view since her back is to him and her attendant, holding ready her dressing gown, stands between them. Clearly her nakedness is for the spectator's benefit. We—and, again, I mean specifically the male spectator—are invited to identify with David's perspective by means of the woman's body, which signifies his sexual arousal. What we see is female nakedness as the cause of male desire, with the slipper and the pot by the bed providing conventional symbols for sex.

Bathsheba has the long limbs and rounded belly that were standards of female beauty in the fifteenth century. The rounded belly also foreshadows Bathsheba's pregnancy, which will lead to David's downfall. Her naked body therefore suggests both the allure and the

31. Bal, *Reading 'Rembrandt'*, p. 244.

32. On such 'exceptional nudes' in European oil painting, see Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, pp. 60-61; but cf. the caveat of Nead, *The Female Nude*, p. 15. See also Bal's discussion of this painting (*Reading 'Rembrandt'*, pp. 219-46). Something similar to Rembrandt's humanizing of his subject occurs later in the narrative, when pregnancy gives Bathsheba power and voice (2 Sam. 11.5).



Figure 1.2. Hans Memling, *Bathsheba im Bade*, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

danger of female sexuality. Here, too, it seems to me, there is an awkwardness to the pose that draws attention to itself. The suggested movement appears unnatural: it is hard to see how she can keep her balance, and it seems rather awkward for her to be slipping into her dressing gown while still in the process of climbing out of such a high bath. The painting thus gives greater meaning to the precariousness of Bathsheba's position.

Neither Rembrandt's nor Memling's Bathsheba meets our voyeuristic gaze. Both are staring into space. Rembrandt's Bathsheba stares ahead pensively. Memling's stares vacantly as if she were a sleepwalker getting out of her bed. The fact that these Bathshebas do not acknowledge our gaze heightens the voyeuristic effect and conveys a sense of shame on their part in relation to the spectator.³³ Not looking back is what we tend to do when we are self-conscious about being observed, as if by ignoring the observer we can pretend we are not being watched. In addition, by averting their eyes from the viewers, the naked Bathshebas cannot accuse us of looking.

An alternative way of looking offers itself to us in these paintings. Both paintings show a servant attending Bathsheba. Neither looks upon her naked mistress: the old woman in the Rembrandt Bathsheba, so elaborately dressed as to make Bathsheba's nudity conspicuously artful, is absorbed in her work; Memling's servant modestly looks down from behind Bathsheba as she helps her into her robe. By looking elsewhere, these women make us aware of, and thus enable us to share in, their self-consciousness at the idea of looking. In other words, they problematize our voyeurism by drawing attention to the alternative: looking away. They invite us to look away from the naked woman even as the naked Bathshebas avoid returning our intrusive gaze.

In the painting of Bathsheba by the Dutch artist, Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem (1562–1638), David is absent, as in Rembrandt's Bathsheba. Here, however, there is no clue that he has seen or will soon see her (fig. 1.3). The complete absence of any reference to David in this painting (he cannot see from the roof of the castle far in

33. This is not to say that female subjects of voyeuristic painting do not look back at the spectators; Rembrandt's 'Susanna and the Elders' is good example. Looking back can have various meanings: accusation, appeal for help, acknowledgment of responsibility, etc.

the background) dramatically illustrates that Bathsheba is naked for the spectator's pleasure. So too does the fact that Bathsheba's attendants are also naked and thus join her as objects of the voyeuristic gaze. Their nudity, in turn, dramatizes hers, since she alone is fully exposed (except for the translucent cloth hiding and marking the place of her genitals).

The women appear to be in a magnificent garden, and almost at the center of the painting is a tree in the middle of a landscaped area, like the tree of (sexual?) knowledge in the midst of the garden of Eden. The painting is a study in contrasts. Everything is dark or bright. Bathsheba's body and her servant's back, the blue cloth around the other servant's neck, the yellow robe in the foreground, the area around the tree, and the castle are bathed in light, whereas everything else is dark and difficult to distinguish. Light links the castle, and through metonymy David, with the edenic tree and Bathsheba, the forbidden fruit.

Bathsheba's brightly illuminated body presents a dramatic contrast to the servant at her side, whose darkness strengthens the impression of otherness and the exotic of which the woman is already an example. The black attendant is positioned as the dark place between the two pale figures. As representative of the new, mysterious dark continent that fascinated Europeans of the time, she symbolizes the dark and dangerously seductive mystery of woman. Her left arm is between Bathsheba's knees, and the effect of the shading and the shadows caused by the black arm against the black body is to give this arm the appearance of being thicker than the other (fig. 1.4). We might therefore see the arm as a fetish, a phallus substitute that serves to mitigate woman's threat. Bathsheba's gaze seems to be directed at this enlarged foreign body between her legs. Female sexuality is simultaneously displayed and rendered less threatening by means of the kitschy fountain in the form of a naked woman with water spewing asymmetrically from her breasts. The fountain serves also as a fore-shadowing of Bathsheba's motherhood, which will neutralize her sexual threat.³⁴

34. For further discussion of fetishism and other means of (male) escape from the threat of female sexuality, see below, Chapter 6.



Figure 1.3. Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem, *Het toilet van Bathseba*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

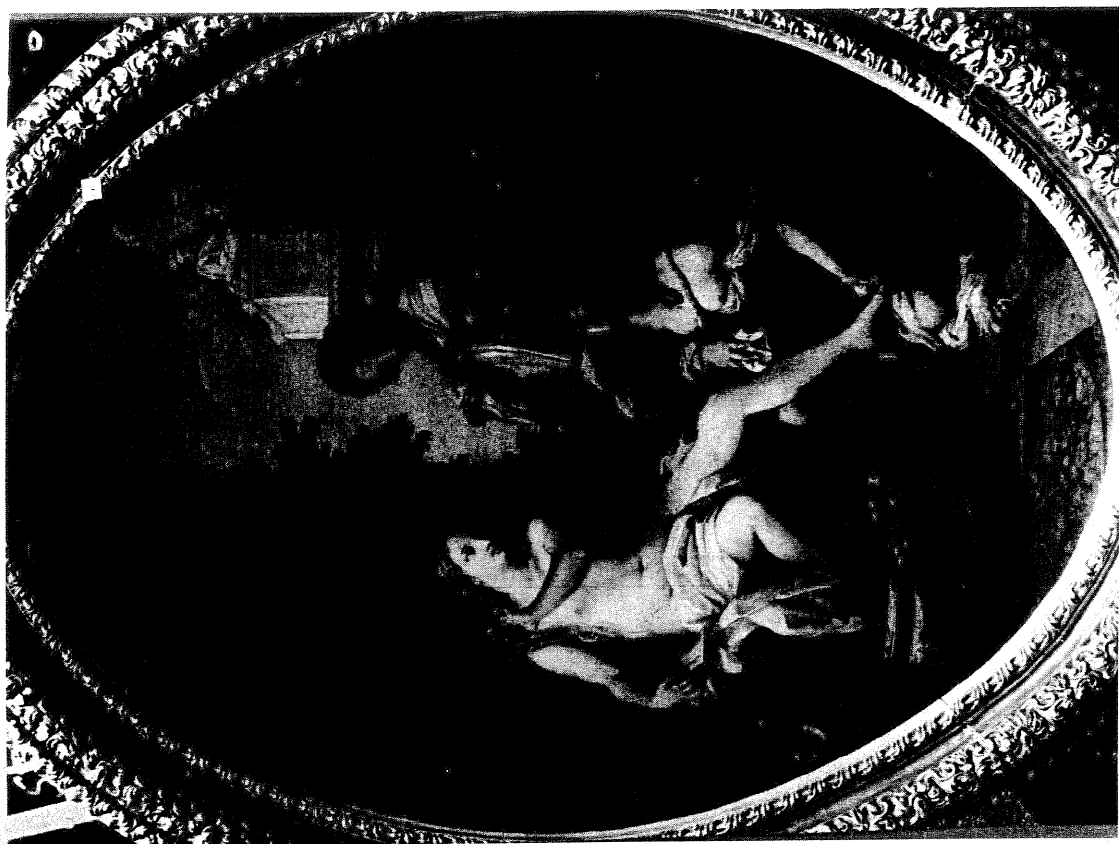


Figure 1.5. Carlo Maratti, *David and Bathsheeba*. Whereabouts unknown.
Photograph: Courtauld Institute of Art



Figure 1.4. Van Haarlem, detail

Particularly noteworthy are paintings of Bathsheeba in which she is shown looking at her reflection in a mirror. Not only does the mirror function to accuse Bathsheeba of vanity,³⁵ it also permits her to join her voyeurs in the act of looking. She thus not only colludes with but also participates in making herself the object of the voyeuristic gaze. This is most striking in the seventeenth-century painting by Carlo Maratti (fig. 1.5). Bathsheeba gazes at herself, while King David looks on from the balcony in the background. Bathsheeba's two servants look at each other, not at her. Yet again it is clear that the woman's nakedness is for the sake of the spectator, who alone is offered the full frontal view. Bathsheeba's legs are parted, suggesting availability, though the traditional piece of cloth covers her genitals, and her left arm covers her left breast.

Bathsheeba's reflection in the mirror is difficult to make out. Given the position of the mirror, we ought to be able to see her shoulders and arm, but all we can see is her face, the reflection of which appears reversed. In the painting by Hans van Aachen from the early seventeenth century (fig. 1.6), Bathsheeba's reflection is also, and more arrestingly, reversed. This distortion, like that in Rembrandt's painting of Bathsheeba, draws attention to itself, and alerts the viewer that something is awry. We might take it as foreshadowing the reversal of

35. Compare, e.g., her literary reincarnation as Bathsheeba Everdene in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. When Farmer Oak catches his first glance of Bathsheeba, she is riding along on a wagon. Unaware that she is being watched, she takes out a mirror and surveys herself for no apparent reason ('woman's prescriptive infirmity had stalked into the sunlight'). To the gatekeeper at the toll bar, Oak remarks on the 'greatest' of her faults with one comment, 'vanity'.

the fortunes of Bathsheba, Uriah, and, of course, King David. Or, alternatively, as a hint that there is another side to the story, and even another side to Bathsheba. The image in the mirror is not an accurate reflection of the lovely face of the woman but a transformation of her almost innocent beauty, prefiguring perhaps the formidable woman she will become (1 Kings 1-2).³⁶ As a perversion of perspective, it calls our attention to the perversion of the voyeuristic gaze that leads in this case to appropriation.³⁷

Who is the figure looking over Bathsheba's shoulder and holding the mirror? A servant? According to the description in the museum catalogue, the figure is a female servant (*Dienerin*),³⁸ but the features, especially the neck, are rather mannish. Could this figure represent David's voyeuristic gaze (David is barely visible in the distance, on the rooftop), so that Bathsheba looks upon herself reflected through his eyes, as it were?³⁹ Or is it a reminder of Uriah, who is away on the battlefield, and his claim to possession of the woman (and the gaze)? Another, earlier painting by van Aachen, dating from 1596, presents a suggestive point of comparison. In *Scherzendes Paar mit einem Spiegel* (*Der Künstler mit seiner Frau*) (fig. 1.7), van Aachen has painted his wife, Regina di Lasso, who served as the model for Bathsheba, looking at her reflection in a mirror. Her breasts are bared to the spectator. The artist, laughing, looks over her shoulder directly at the spectator. With one hand he holds the mirror, displaying his wife for the spectator's pleasure. His other hand rests on his wife's shoulder, and he wags his finger at the spectator in a knowing gesture, as if



Figure 1.6. Hans van Aachen, *David und Bathseba*, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

36. The reflection is not as unflattering in the original painting as it appears on the reproduction, though there seems to be a distorting mark on the face from below the ear just about to the chin. A *memento mori*?

37. I have not been able to locate an explanation within art history for the complete reversal of the woman's face in the mirror. It is well established that the disparity between a beautiful face and its unflattering reflection in a mirror served as a sign of vanity, a symbol of the transitory nature of beauty and worldly pleasure, and a *memento mori*; for a useful discussion, see Jane Dillenberger, *Image and Spirit in Sacred and Secular Art* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), pp. 51-66.

38. *Eros und Mythos: Begleittheft zur Ausstellung des Kunsthistorischen Museums, Wien 1995*, p. 63.

39. As, for example, in the miniature from the Codex Germanicus 206 (c. 1454), which represents David on the roof as well as standing next to the bathing woman. A reproduction can be found in Dorothee Sölle et al., *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 184.

playfully (or mockingly) saying, 'I am offering this to you to enjoy, but shame on you for looking'.



Figure 1.7. Hans van Aachen, *Scherzendes Paar mit einem Spiegel* (*Der Künstler mit seiner Frau*), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

The similarities between this painting and *David und Bathseba* are striking. The same woman appears as the subject of both paintings. A figure stands behind her, looking over her shoulder and holding a mirror in which we see her reflection.⁴⁰ *David und Bathseba* assumes two spectators, David on the roof, who cannot see the woman very well, and the viewer of the painting, whose view is close-up and direct. *Scherzendes Paar* has only one, the viewer. The artist both invites the voyeuristic gaze by exposing the woman (his wife) and at the same time implicitly criticizes it: David ought not to be looking; the viewer of *Scherzendes Paar* is chided for it. If the figure looking over Bathsheba's shoulder is not Uriah, at the least he or she stands in the position of the husband who cooperates, even to the extent of holding the mirror, and whose presence simultaneously accuses the viewer of looking.⁴¹ Not only is the subject (and the moral?) of the paintings similar, it is easily confused: in the museum catalogue for the 1995 exhibit, the photographs of the paintings appear on the same page with the titles reversed.

Bathsheba Shot

Our gaze does not permit the naked Bathsheba to leave her bath or the canvas. The cinematic Bathshebas, in contrast, are in motion, and our gaze at them is both guided and interrupted. We can gaze only at what the camera chooses to show us. Unlike the canvas Bathshebas, frozen in time, ever available to our intrusive gaze, these movie stars

40. The museum catalogue refers to *Scherzendes Paar* as a moralizing allegory (*Eros und Mythos*, p. 62). What looks on the reproduction like a crack in the mirror appears in the painting to be a sliver of light, a reflection of some unseen light source such as a window or door, perhaps to show that this is a mirror and not a portrait.

41. In another painting of Bathsheba with a mirror, Pieter de Grebber's *Toilet of Bathsheba* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, a child is holding the mirror. Like the artist in *Scherzendes Paar*, the child returns the spectator's gaze as if to acknowledge our joint complicity in the viewing. In this painting, the letter summoning her to the king momentarily takes Bathsheba's gaze away from her image in the mirror. De Grebber's Bathsheba is less available to the spectator than those discussed here; a translucent wrap covers much of her body, and her left arm hides her breasts. A servant points to the window, through which we can make out the faint outlines of the balcony from which we assume David will have seen her. The mirror reflects Bathsheba's hand, holding the letter, thereby calling attention to the letter's fateful consequences.

are performing for the gaze. Susan Hayward knows that theater audiences are watching along with Gregory Peck. During her bath, she looks around in all directions, making a pretense of not noticing her attendants, or David, or us, all of whom are looking at her, while coquettishly casting a glance at the camera. Alice Krige in the role of Bathsheba strikes a pose that tells us she is looking back at David, returning his and our shared gaze.

Film is by nature a voyeuristic medium: we sit passively in a darkened theater and spy on other people's lives. We watch anonymously and with impunity. The replacement of David with the viewer as voyeur is achieved in both films by means of zoom shots, overcoming a difficulty of perspective the paintings could not. The close-ups of Bathsheba bathing create the illusion that what we see is what incites David, but, of course, he is back on the roof and not in the room with the camera, the woman, and us. We are privy to more than David can see. In addition, the films contribute something lacking in the paintings, since our voyeurism includes David's response as well as Bathsheba's bath. The paintings show us Bathsheba through David's eyes but do not expose him to us, as the films do by recording on his face his reaction to what he sees (he does, of course, like Berger's spectator of the nude painting, have his clothes on).

When David spies Bathsheba bathing in the 1951 film *David and Bathsheba*, the timing of the scene and the music add to the titillation. We are watching David as the camera moves back and forth between his face, as an indicator of his arousal, and what he sees, the image that activates his lustful gaze (figs. 1.8–1.14). Through the window, we glimpse, through his eyes as it were, the woman bathing. From a distance, we watch her slip out of her robe and step behind a screen, which is where her bath will take place. Then we see David's face, attentive and interested. Next we see the woman again, through the window, which is framed and illuminated as if it were a movie screen, with David in the position of moviegoer in the shadows. Again we see his face, fixed on the screen/scene before him. He munches on grapes he has plucked from an overhanging branch, a rather obvious sign that his sexual appetite has been whetted by the sight of Bathsheba. Our next view of Bathsheba is a zoom shot into the room. Drawing on the iconographic tradition, the film shows Bathsheba attended by two servants, whose blackness, as in the painting by van Haarlem, lends a sense of otherness and the exotic. In



Figure 1.8

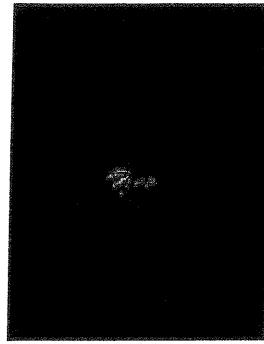


Figure 1.9



Figure 1.10



Figure 1.11



Figure 1.12

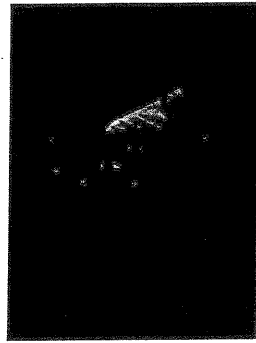


Figure 1.13



Figure 1.14

this close shot, one attendant is washing Bathsheba, but because Bathsheba is bathing behind a screen, we cannot see her hands, and so we do not see her actually touching Bathsheba. Both the hierarchy of status and the hint of intimacy between women appear calculated to intensify male arousal. David's superiority to Bathsheba is mirrored in Bathsheba's superiority to her attendants, who, however, enjoy greater access to Bathsheba's naked body than David has—at the moment—and also, at the moment, their gaze, like ours, is not from a distance, like his. Unlike David and us, they are allowed on Bathsheba's side of the screen.

In the next shot, the camera lingers on David's face for what seems to be a much longer time than it actually is. The slow pace allows the spectator to imagine, perhaps even to participate in, his arousal: when the camera shifts back to Bathsheba again, what will we see? I said earlier, with regard to the biblical text, that we cannot look away from the woman but are forced to think about her appearance. Of course, we *can* read the text without visualizing the naked woman, especially if we are casual readers. The pacing of the cinematic scene forces us to do what the text implicitly calls for: to take account of the woman's body. Since this is a 1950s movie, the answer to the question, 'What will we see?', is: not much. We are watching David's face when Bathsheba steps from behind the screen, and when we see her again, she is already pulling her robe about her and leaving the room, the outline of her body barely but tantalizingly visible through her transparent robe against the light behind her (fig. 1.14).

This scene in the film *King David* is very similar to that in *David and Bathsheba*. It begins with the same illusion, with David in the role of moviegoer and Bathsheba framed as if on a movie screen. Again the camera moves back and forth between David and Bathsheba; in this case, a total of five times as compared to four times in the 1951 film. This film uses lighting more effectively than the earlier one to create a mood of sensuality. Bathsheba is bathing in the open air (in what looks curiously like ancient ruins) and the fire that heats her water and keeps her warm represents the flame of passion. She is filmed in hues of red and orange, colors that, as in the painterly tradition, suggest sensuousness and concupiscence, while David is filmed in the cold blue of the evening. The 1980s production, however, leaves less of the erotic for the imagination. From David on the roof, the camera moves to Bathsheba bathing, seen from a distance that repre-

sents David's perspective. Then we see his face again, and a slightly closer view of her bathing. She is naked, and she is not, like Susan Hayward, bathing behind a screen. David, and we—in ever closer views he cannot share—can see her entire naked body. She has an attendant, who is not black (this is a 1980s film), and both she and her attendant are rubbing her body. Again we see David's face, the camera moving closer in on his face just as it moves in on her body. The camera now shows an even closer shot of her and her attendant running their hands over her body. Back again to his face, followed by an even closer view of her, from the waist up. She and the attendant are washing her breasts—rather thoroughly I would say. Indeed, there are suggestions of homo-eroticism and nymphomania, certainly not innocent washing, in the way Bathsheba enjoys her bath. We then have yet another close shot of David's face, followed by an even closer view of her in which her head, neck, and shoulders fill the screen. The hint of intimacy between women I mentioned in *David and Bathsheba* is even stronger here, as both Bathsheba and her attendant caress her body repeatedly. This is a performance designed to titillate male desire. No woman bathing is going to let herself be touched like this by another woman, unless they have an intimate relationship (and we need to keep in mind that this is a servant and her mistress).

Bathsheba Framed

Biblical style typically suggests a causal connection by means of simple juxtaposition:

...he saw from the roof a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful. David sent and inquired about the woman. He said, 'Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?' David sent messengers and took her.

Because Bathsheba was seen bathing, she was sent for. It is thus the woman's fault that the man's desire is aroused. Bathsheba is guilty of being desired, but the text hints that she asked for it: she *allows* herself to be seen. By having Bathsheba plan or know she is being seen, the films go beyond the biblical text in making Bathsheba's complicity in the viewing explicit. For them, David may be a voyeur, but Bathsheba is an exhibitionist. The effect is to lessen David's guilt at the woman's expense, because she *wants* to be seen. As representations of a single

moment in time, the paintings stand somewhere between the biblical account and the films with regard to accusing the woman. In them, because Bathsheba's body alone (and not David's face, as in the films) communicates and explains David's desire, her nakedness becomes a sign of her guilt.⁴²

It bears mentioning that, as far as the films are concerned, it is not just Bathsheba who must be made to look bad in order that David might appear in a better light; Uriah's honor has to be sacrificed, too. In *David and Bathsheba*, Uriah is not interested in Bathsheba. He is more interested in making war than in making love: during the seven months they have been married—an arranged marriage, as the film has Bathsheba disparagingly remark—they have spent six days together. In addition to preferring the battleground to the bedroom, Uriah is a heartless follower of the letter of the law, and would invoke the law to have his wife stoned if he had reason to suspect her of adultery. In *King David*, Uriah won't have sex with his wife or touch her, except with a whip. All this is in contrast to the biblical story, where Uriah's faithfulness serves to underscore David's falseness. The biblical Uriah is on the battlefield with the army, while the king, who ought to be there too, is at home, where he catches sight of Uriah's wife. Uriah's refusal to have sexual intercourse with his wife while 'my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field' contrasts markedly with the king's willingness to have sex with Uriah's wife in Uriah's absence. Perhaps for the cinematic versions, the duping and murder of a good man was unthinkable. In any case, Uriah, like Bathsheba, must be guilty so that David's betrayal of him is not totally undeserved.⁴³

Who is guilty in this affair? If the films wrongly accuse Uriah, do they otherwise find any support in the biblical story for their portioning out of guilt? Certainly not from God, who through the mouth of his prophet Nathan condemns David alone for sin:

Why have you despised the word of the Lord to do what is evil in his eyes? Uriah the Hittite you have slain with the sword, and his wife you have taken to be your wife, and him you have killed with the sword of

42. Miles (*Carnal Knowing*, p. 123) makes this point with regard to Susanna.

43. In *David and Bathsheba*, David has Uriah killed to save Bathsheba's life, for otherwise she would be stoned as an adulteress. Moreover, the film goes so far as to make it Uriah's idea that David should order Joab to set him at the front of the fiercest fighting!

the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house.

Because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife—thus says the Lord—I am raising up evil against you out of your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the eyes of this sun. For you did it in secret, but I shall do this thing before all Israel and before the sun (2 Sam. 12.9-12).⁴⁴

In the biblical account, David's crime is twofold: he had Uriah killed and he took Uriah's wife. Both are crimes against Uriah and against God. But they are not treated as crimes against Bathsheba, who is defined solely in terms of her relation to Uriah. Having sexual intercourse with Bathsheba is a crime because it violates another man's marital rights.⁴⁵ David's punishment for adultery is that *his wives* will be raped. What he did to another man will be done to him, only more so; in neither case is the women's point of view represented.

Although the story is about *David's* guilt, it does not follow that Bathsheba is blameless. When she is introduced in the story, Bathsheba is bathing. Guilty of being seen, the beautiful woman is responsible for arousing male desire. Gender is an important factor here; a man bathing would not raise the same questions about provocativeness because what is being provoked is *male* desire. Bathing is sexually suggestive in our story because a woman is doing it and because a man is affected.

In 2 Samuel 6, David exposes himself when he dances before the ark of the Lord wearing only a loincloth. The degree of exposure is ambiguous, as in Bathsheba's case, but in both instances we are led to imagine at least partial nakedness. The sight arouses a woman's anger, not her desire. When David's wife Michal criticizes him for his exhibitionism ('How the king of Israel has honored himself today, exposing himself today in the eyes of his subjects' women servants...'),

44. Dividing v. 10 with Fokkelman (*King David*, pp. 83-86), who makes a convincing case against the Masoretic division.

45. Adultery is always a matter of the woman's status: a married woman who has sex with a man other than her husband commits adultery; a married man who has sex with a woman other than his wife commits adultery only if that woman is another man's wife. On adultery in ancient Near Eastern law, see Raymond Westbrook, 'Adultery in Ancient Near Eastern law', *Revue Biblique* 97 (1990), pp. 542-80, and the references cited there.

he boasts of the attention he has received ('among the women servants of whom you have spoken, among them I shall be held in honor'). This situation, where a woman views a man's nakedness, is not quite the reverse of 2 Samuel 11, where a man watches a naked woman, for David is in both cases the focal character, first as exhibitionist and then as voyeur. The women are not there for themselves but for what they reveal to us about him. (In a clever twist, the film *King David* has Bathsheba watching David dancing—thus she sees his nakedness before he sees hers. She desires him before he desires her.) Male display of sexuality is active: David is dancing. It is public: he is in control, and he lets himself be seen by women and men alike. As David's response to Michal shows, he is not ashamed of his nakedness. Female 'display' of sexuality, in contrast, is passive and private: Bathsheba is observed while bathing.

This notion is reproduced in the Western artistic tradition, where, as Margaret Miles has demonstrated, the male appears as glorified nude and the female as shamefully naked. Consider Michelangelo's famous David (fig. 1.15). His pose is not modest; rather it suggests prowess and self-assurance. Not simply physical perfection but also inner strength, or divine favor, seems to be presented in this ideal specimen of masculinity. This is a young, vigorous David in, we suppose, the days God smiled upon him—more a young Richard Gere than a jaded Gregory Peck. His pose suggests activity and purpose, in contrast, for example, to the Bathshebas we looked at, who sit or stand passively, and whose shameful or frightening genitals are hidden, by crossed legs or a part of a robe or gown.

Whatever else nakedness signifies, its connection with sexuality is never far from view. In our two scenes, nakedness and sex are linked. Michal sees David's nakedness and objects to it. As a result (the causal connection is created simply by juxtaposition), she has no children. A reasonable conclusion is that David does not again have sex with her because she objected to his (public) nakedness.⁴⁶ Bathsheba is seen naked and it leads to her becoming pregnant.

The connection between the desire to see (voyeurism) and the desire to know needs to be considered in comparing these textual and visual representations of the female body. 'It is evident that sight has

46. Another possibility is that Michal refuses to have sex with David, which would not be out of character for her. Or responsibility could lie with the deity, whom the Bible describes as opening and closing the womb.

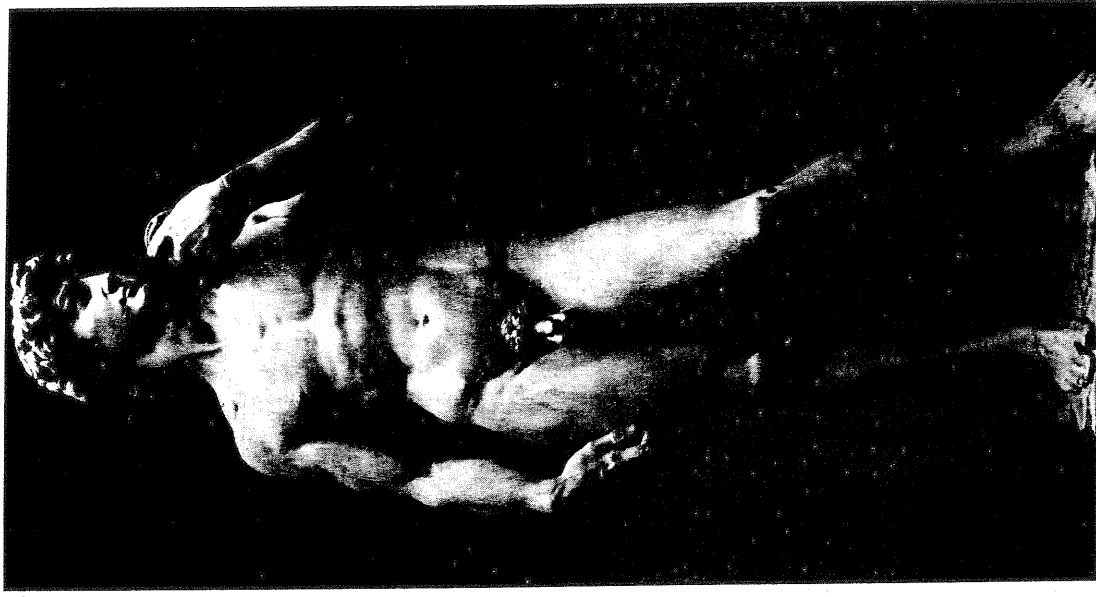


Figure 1.15. Michelangelo, *David*, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence

always been both a central faculty and a central metaphor in the search for truth', writes Peter Brooks.⁴⁷

47. Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 96.

The erotic investment in seeing is from the outset inextricably bound to the erotic investment in knowing, in the individual's development as well as in the Western philosophical and literary traditions. And the value given to the visual in any realist tradition responds to the desire to know the world: it promotes the gaze as the *inspection* of reality.⁴⁸

In the examples I have discussed, men control representation. What is represented is the female body, seen through the male gaze. This representation has a social function. In her analysis of film, Mulvey discusses voyeurism as knowledge that leads to control.⁴⁹ Similarly, Miles sees portraits of the female body in the Western artistic tradition as attempts to capture the complexity of woman on canvas. It is a man's way of managing the threat women pose. 'Figuration works to displace threat in that women seem to be understood in advance of any relationship with a real woman.'⁵⁰ In her study, *The Female Nude*, Lynda Nead, too, argues that artistic representations of the female nude can 'be understood as a means of containing femininity and female sexuality'.⁵¹ I have made similar claims about the portrayals of women in biblical literature: they serve to define women and keep them in their place, where their threat can be perceived as more manageable.⁵²

Just as representation is gender-determined, so too is interpretation. Since meaning is constructed through interaction between text or image and reader or spectator, we will decide for ourselves whether or not we feel called upon to be voyeurs when we read the 'story of David and Bathsheba' or view these paintings or films. Women and men are likely to decide differently, largely but not wholly along gender lines, based on the different demands they perceive the story or image to be making upon them. Some of us will resist the phallogocentric premises of the text and its visual representations more than others. I have argued elsewhere that the biblical story of David and Bathsheba invites a kind of voyeuristic complicity between the narrator and his assumed or ideal male readers.⁵³ The narrator not only

48. Brooks, *Body Work*, p. 99, italics his.

49. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 14-26; similarly, Kaplan, *Women and Film*, pp. 23-35.

50. Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, p. 82.

51. Nead, *The Female Nude*, p. 2; see esp. her discussion, pp. 5-33.

52. Exum, *Fragmented Women*; on Bathsheba's reappearance in the story in 1 Kings 1-2, see pp. 198-200.

53. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 196-97.

controls our gaze at the naked or partially naked female body, he excuses it by letting us look without any blame being attached, which is more than he does for David. The text insinuates that David has no business looking, since it leads him to sin. He should be away at war with 'all Israel' instead of at home taking a long siesta. By setting it up so that what we see through David's eyes becomes part of our judgment against David, the narrator gives us the moral high ground. This makes it possible for readers to gaze upon the naked woman without embarrassment, or at least without feeling guilty about it. Possible, but not inevitable, and harder, I think, for women, for reasons I have tried to suggest.

The narrative strategy of allowing us to look guiltlessly and, if we wish, to blame the woman at the same time is the premise behind the story's representation in painting and film. In this chapter, I have sought to problematize our position as consumers of images, to draw attention to its gendered nature, and to make it difficult to view unreflectively both texts and images that invite our collusion in voyeurism. Resisting such textual and visual claims upon us does not mean advocating the removal of nudes from museums or the deletion of sex scenes from movies (though, personally, I would like to see more censorship of films). Nor does it mean 'cleaning up' the Bible, which, interestingly, both films I have discussed attempt to do in other respects. Resisting, as I see it, involves interrogating these materials with the aid of an interpretive strategy that takes seriously the gender politics of both representation and interpretation. Resisting involves becoming self-conscious about what we do when we see texts and images in certain ways, recognizing what is at stake personally and culturally, and taking responsibility for our interpretations.