



## EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO DAVID WATCHING BATHSHEBA BATHING IN LATE MEDIEVAL FRENCH MANUSCRIPT ILLUMINATION

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One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, “Isn’t this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her (paraphrasing II Samuel 11: 2–4).<sup>1</sup>

This was the beginning of the end for King David, who incurred the wrath of God after this episode. David had sinned, and what a great sin it was! He had slept with his neighbor’s wife and, in a fit of anger when he found out that his indiscretion had begotten a child, David sent her husband to his death. For this King David had to do penance and he wrote several Psalms asking for God’s forgiveness. This story was well known during the Middle Ages. The image of David as a penitent appeared in many of the prefatory cycles that decorated the penitential Psalms in Books of Hours and other manuscripts such as psalters. Nevertheless, towards the Late Medieval period in France (1450–1550) another episode began to gain popularity in the iconographic repertoire of the manuscript illumination workshops in Paris, Tours, Bourges, Le Mans, and other workshops in northern and southeastern France, and that was David watching Bathsheba bathing. In this story, Bathsheba—not David—occupies the central stage, where she appears to the viewer either completely clothed, covered by drapery and other accessories or completely nude. This iconography seems to have been established around the ninth century, but it was not until the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century that it was transformed by the creativity of artists who offered a greater variety of modes of depiction and types of images which, in turn, offered new iconographical possibilities to the medieval viewer. What these possibilities were and what the emotional responses<sup>2</sup> of the

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical references are taken from *Holy Bible: New International Version* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Many scholars have recently focused their research on the topic of emotions. A sign of the importance of this type of study is the number of congresses that have been devoted to this subject, such as the 2006 Leeds International Medieval Congress entitled “Emotion and Gesture,” or the X Congreso Latinoamericano de Filosofía Medieval entitled “De las Pasiones en Filosofía Medieval.” Some scholars who have worked on



Monica A. Walker Vadillo

medieval spectator were to them will be the subject of this article. In order to answer these questions, however, it is necessary to understand the nature of Bathsheba and her visual representation in manuscript illumination.

Before entering into the iconographic material, it is necessary to discuss briefly how an image as sensual and seductive as David watching Bathsheba bathing appeared in the Late Medieval period despite institutionalized religious repression of the naked body.<sup>3</sup> It was during the Late Middle Ages that France witnessed a shift away from the liturgy of the institutional Church towards private and individual devotion. As Michael Camille pointed out, this private devotion appealed to the heart of the individual, and it was characterized by doing charitable works, secret mortifications of the flesh, and silent prayer.<sup>4</sup> This form of private piety was meant to be a spiritual exercise of meditation which emphasized the direction, pace, and concentration of individual devotion. This spiritual exercise could only be performed by using the book form, which allowed the reader to peruse, recapitulate, check the text against the accompanying image, and refer to the text as many times as he or she needed.<sup>5</sup> During the Late Medieval period the most popular book for private devotion in France was the Book of Hours. Books of Hours offered a charm that was hard to resist: they were personally commissioned or bought.<sup>6</sup> This allowed the artists to include images such as a nude Bathsheba, which were inconceivable in the public space of a church.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Books of Hours were not only personal prayer books to follow during Mass or private devotion, but they were symbols

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this topic are Keith Oatly, *Emotion: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) and Stuart Airlie, "The history of emotions and emotional history," *Early Medieval Europe* 10, No.2 (2001): 235–241.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Claude Bologne, *Histoire de la Pudeur* (Paris: France Loisirs, 1986), 13. According to Bologne this repression was not only concerned with the body, but also with female sexuality.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Camille, "Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy," *Art History* 8, No.1 (March, 1995): 29. (Hereafter: Camille, "Seeing and Reading.")

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> John Harthan, *The Book of Hours* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977), 11–12.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Saenger, "Books of Hours and the Reading Habits of the Later Middle Ages," in *Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Roger Chartier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 156. (Hereafter: Saenger, "Books of Hours."). Saenger mentions that the new reading habits of noblemen and noblewomen, including the new translations into the vernacular, helped shape the contents of books of hours.



## David Watching Bathsheba Bathing

of social status, little gems in the collections of royalty, nobility, and laity alike.<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that Books of Hours were mass-produced in the later Middle Ages,<sup>9</sup> these manuscripts still preserve the personal tastes of their original owners, especially in the choice of miniatures. This includes the preface to the penitential Psalms where the image of David watching Bathsheba bathing usually appears. In addition, as Paul Saenger has argued, it is no coincidence that many erotic illuminations started to appear in Books of Hours in the Late Middle Ages. Artists took advantage of the privacy that a book offered to its owner and portrayed erotic scenes that were unimaginable in public art or liturgical texts.<sup>10</sup> These artists were inspired by the vernacular translation of Valerius Maximus' *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*<sup>11</sup> and they produced Books of Hours with increasingly suggestive erotic scenes. These scenes often portrayed the vices for which penance was required, but at the same time they were designed to consciously excite the voyeur of the book.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, it is no wonder that one could have a seductive Bathsheba in his or her Book of Hours. But was Bathsheba represented only as a seductive creature? Or could she inspire other types of reactions from the medieval viewer?

Christa Grössinger, in *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, made the following affirmation:

Examples of good women from the Bible are Judith, Jael, Suzanna, Ruth, Abigail, and Esther; examples of bad biblical women are Salome, Delilah, Bathsheba, the daughters of Lot, the wife of Potiphar, and the prostitutes who persuaded Solomon to worship idols.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Laurel Amtower, *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 27–28 (hereafter: Amtower, *Engaging Words*). Amtower mentions that after books had become symbols of prestige and culture—usually owned by the nobility—rich townspeople started to acquire them in order to assert their own gentility.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–28. Amtower discusses the origins of this mass production, mentioning that the “third estate,” the laity or bourgeoisie, was responsible for creating a climate that necessitated the mass production of books. With the number of literate people growing, added to a disposable income and a greater appreciation for reading and book ownership, there was an audience that demanded greater affordability in production techniques. Hence the printing press facilitated this newly discovered love for books.

<sup>10</sup> Saenger, “Books of Hours,” 156–157.

<sup>11</sup> Valerius Maximus, *Factorum et Dictorum Memorabilium* (Pisa: In aedibus “Giardini Editori e Stampatori in Pisa,” 1986).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 156–157.

<sup>13</sup> Christa Grössinger, *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 10. (Hereafter: Grössinger, *Picturing Women*.)



Monica A. Walker Vadillo

This type of binary distinction, where good women can only be good and bad women can only be bad, does not account for the complexities that surround Bathsheba's story. It does not take into consideration the ambiguity of Bathsheba's position in the main narrative. On the one hand, it would be preposterous to assume that Bathsheba was consciously trying to arouse King David because, as the Bible implies, Bathsheba was not aware that she was being gazed upon. On the other hand, King David's demand that she sleep with him has the sound of a royal command which seems to be closer to rape than willing acceptance—yet it is for this reason that she is always condemned.<sup>14</sup> Either way, Bathsheba's visual representations appeared to account for this ambiguity despite the conscious efforts of the artists to transform her iconography into a well of sensuality and eroticism. Bathsheba can be represented not only as an agent of sin, but as an innocent object of desire, a victim of the whims of King David, the prefiguration of the Church, or a warning against vanity.

### **Bathsheba as an Innocent Object of Desire**

From an analytical point of view, Bathsheba is no more than a victim of the lustful whim of King David.<sup>15</sup> In the narrative, she is represented as a passive figure. She unknowingly became the object of David's gaze. Her voice is never heard until she sends a missive saying that she is pregnant (II Samuel 11: 5), yet in most accounts found in religious or secular commentaries or in the images she is seen as an evil woman or as a seductress. The textual description does not fit this pattern; on the contrary, it depicts a woman who is seen more as an object than as a person with a will. Is it possible to confirm this interpretation from the visual examples as well?

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Abuse of Command: A Bible Study, Exploiting Power for Sexual Gratification," *Sojourners Magazine* 26, No. 4 (1997), 22.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Greenberg, *Sins of David: A New History of a Biblical Icon* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 1992), 2, states that David was a "corrupt and ambitious mercenary who committed treason against Israel by working with its enemies to seize the throne from King Saul; an ambitious and ruthless politician who initiated, sanctioned, or condoned murder and assassination as a way to eliminate political rivals, royal or otherwise." In his book Greenberg examines the negative side of David and presents a king who was not the victim of Bathsheba, but the perpetrator of two crimes, among others: adultery/rape and murder.

Despite the possible erotic connotations that a “dressed” Bathsheba could have,<sup>16</sup> this seems to be the closest iconography to the general description of Bathsheba as an innocent object of desire. This reading is made possible because of its visual analogy to the representation of the story of Susanna and the Elders.<sup>17</sup> Two examples illustrate this point: David and Bathsheba from the Book of Hours illuminated by Jean Colombe and his workshop for Anne of France in circa 1473 (*Fig. 1*), and Susanna and the Elders from Jean Mansel’s *Fleur des Histoires* from the late fifteenth century (*Fig. 2*). (Full references for the illustrations are given in the figure captions.)



*Fig. 1. Book of Hours. David and Bathsheba.* The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Ms. M.677, fol. 211r (after Seymour de Ricci, *Census of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the United States and Canada*. New York: Kraus, 1935–37; Index 1940, 1481).



*Fig. 2. Jean Mansel's Fleur des histoires. Susanna and the Elders.* Bibliothèque nationale, Richelieu Manuscrits, Français 55, fol. 111v (after <http://gallica.bnf.fr>; accessed 20 January, 2006).

In both instances, Bathsheba and Susanna are seen completely clothed in their undergarments with only their legs showing underneath them. Both of them are oblivious to the gazes of David and the Elders, respectively, which

<sup>16</sup> She is dressed in undergarments, which during the Middle Ages was considered another degree of nudity.

<sup>17</sup> Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art Chrétien*, Vol. 2: *Iconographie de la Bible, Ancien Testament* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), 273, had already made this connection between Susanna and Bathsheba. (Hereafter: Réau, *Iconographie de l'art Chrétien*.)



Monica A. Walker Vadillo

have transformed both women into objects of desire. In none of the examples do the women appear as the perpetrators of the transgression that the men have fallen into. From the visual representations this is as far as the similarities go, and this is the way in which Bathsheba can be seen as being a victim of the events that followed.

The issue of spectatorship needs to be addressed at this point. First, one has to take into consideration the level at which the spectator was familiar with both stories, and this includes his or her level of literacy. For a person well versed in Latin and the events of the Bible or the stories and Psalms that are associated with the iconography,<sup>18</sup> the response could have been the desired one. While meditating on the images, the associated story or Psalm would have been evoked, bringing to the viewer's or reader's mind the complete narrative and the consequences of the actions that were seen in the miniature. Then the difference between Susanna and Bathsheba became evident. The difference was based on what happened after the bath: when Susanna was assaulted by the two old men she did not yield, preferring death to dishonor; while Bathsheba, compelled by a royal command, "accepted" David's sexual advances. Therefore, on the one hand, by a visual analogy the reader or viewer might think of Bathsheba as being in a position similar to Susanna, but on the other hand, with the subsequent remembering of the events that followed both situations, the spectator might have condemned Bathsheba for her weakness and for being the instrument of the fall of a great man. For an illiterate person who was not familiar with the narrative, this type of iconography, where Bathsheba appears as Susanna, could become more ambiguous because he or she only had the image as the main vehicle of communication,<sup>19</sup> and the examples provided above do not lead to a complete understanding of the story of David and Bathsheba at first glance. Therefore it is possible that the reading of Bathsheba as an innocent object of desire could be accepted in this situation.<sup>20</sup>

Another type of reading, specific to the moralizing bibles (*Bibles Moralisées*), falls into this category of Bathsheba as an innocent object of desire. The moralizing bible consisted of short biblical passages and related commen-

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<sup>18</sup> The spectator who had phonetic literacy was also included in this category due to the probability that he or she was familiar with the stories of Susanna and Bathsheba.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Camille, "Seeing and Reading," 33, has pointed out that some illiterate people asked literate people to read them the explanations of the full story. I consider those who did this in the literate group. It is important to remember that the book of hours was a status symbol and everyone, literate or illiterate, would want to own one if they had the resources to afford it.

<sup>20</sup> To my mind, this type of reading does not seem to change if one takes into consideration the gender of the spectator.

taries that had moral or allegorical lessons; they emphasized the typological connections between the Old Testament and the New Testament.<sup>21</sup> The typological interpretation of the story of David and Bathsheba where David is seen as the prefiguration of Christ was a view rooted in Patristic thought, accepted by apologists of King David such as St. Ambrose of Milan,<sup>22</sup> and it was later recorded in the moralizing bibles.<sup>23</sup> According to St. Ambrose, in his *Apologia David*, Old Testament evil deeds could have a positive meaning. In this context, Bathsheba symbolized the Church as the community of the faithful; she was the prisoner of her husband, Uriah, who in turn symbolized the devil. When David killed Uriah and took Bathsheba as his wife it signified Christ who had acquired the desirable Church by defeating the devil.<sup>24</sup>

In visual representations, when Bathsheba appears bathing it was taken as a sign of the Church cleansing itself from worldly stains so that it could become the bride of Christ. This typological representation was clarified with parallel representations of David and Bathsheba and Christ and Ecclesia, as seen in the Moralizing Bible held at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna (Fig. 3). In this context Bathsheba has a definite positive meaning, an object to



Fig. 3. *Bible Moralisée*. *David and Bathsheba/Christ and Ecclesia*. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Codex Vindobonensis 2554, fol. 45r (after Gerald B. Guest, *Bible Moralisée: Codex Vindobonensis 2554, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek*. Tr. Gerald B. Guest. London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1995, 1–20).

<sup>21</sup> Michelle P. Brown, *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum and the British Library, 1994), 20–21.

<sup>22</sup> P. Hadot, ed., *Ambrose de Milan: Apologie de David* (Paris: M. Cordier, 1977), vii, 78–80. (Hereafter: Hadot, ed., *Ambrose de Milan*).

<sup>23</sup> John Lowden, *The Making of the Bible Moralises: I. The Manuscripts* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 2000), 1–2. (Hereafter: Lowden, *The Making of the Bible Moralises*). The moralizing bibles were created during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries.

<sup>24</sup> Hadot, ed., *Ambrose de Milan*, vii, 78–80.



Monica A. Walker Vadillo

be desired because she is the representation of the Church. In terms of spectatorship, it has been argued that the moralizing bibles were commissioned by royalty and their immediate family members and friends,<sup>25</sup> among whom literacy and biblical understanding would have been high. For them, the image would have inspired great piety, understanding, and perhaps even a role model to follow.

In addition, this category of illustration includes the possibility, even if it is speculation, of using the image of the nude Bathsheba, her sensuality and her beauty, as one of those desirable images to gaze upon so that it would arouse desire in a married couple. While contemplating this image of beauty, by analogy, her characteristics would be passed on to the children.<sup>26</sup>

### **Bathsheba as an Agent of Sin**

One small detail needs to be stressed and that is the inventive interpretation of the text by the artists who created the miniatures.<sup>27</sup> In the story of David and Bathsheba cited at the beginning, there is no indication of Bathsheba's general situation. Was she indoors, outdoors, in a pool, in a fountain, in a bathtub, dressed, naked? No information is supplied by the Bible in this respect, so it was the artist's prerogative to create an appropriate setting for her, hence the difference in her visual representations.<sup>28</sup> The most widely known image of Bathsheba presents her as a naked woman outdoors taking a bath in either a pool or a fountain. In this choice of environmental elements, a purposeful intention imbues Bathsheba with the evil seductive character for which she is known, because why, if she did not want to be looked at, was she taking a bath outdoors where the eyes of anyone within visual range could fall on her? This idea is further stressed since these works depicted her in the nude and sometimes, using the position of Bathsheba's body and the turn of her head,

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<sup>25</sup> Lowden, *The Making of the Bible Moralised*, 1–2.

<sup>26</sup> David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 2–3. (Hereafter: Freedberg, *The Power of Images*.)

<sup>27</sup> Réau, *Iconographie de l'art Chrétien*, 274.

<sup>28</sup> King David's setting was the roof of the palace, but even this situation was changed by the artists who depicted him walking onto a balcony, looking through a window or a door, kneeling in front of Bathsheba or walking in the garden where Bathsheba is bathing.

they allowed her to gaze back at David or the spectator, adding to the representation of her seductive nature (Fig. 4).<sup>29</sup>

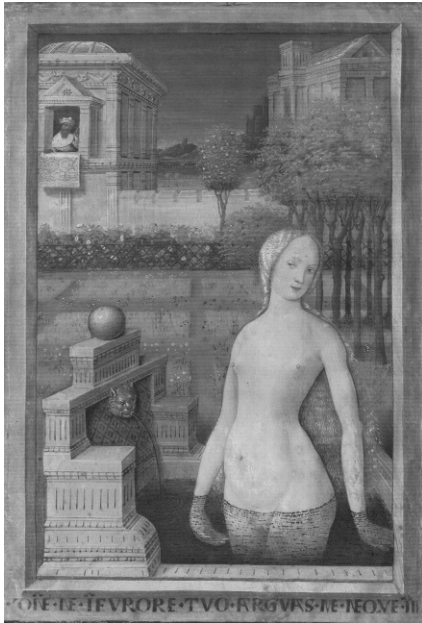


Fig. 4. *The Book of Hours of Louis XII*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (after Thomas Kren and Mark Evans, *A Masterpiece Reconstructed: The Hours of Louis XII*. London: The British Library Publisher, 2005).



Fig. 5. *Book of Hours*. David and Bathsheba. The Huntington Library, San Marino, HM 1181, fol. 76r (after Seymour de Ricci, *Census of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the United States and Canada*. New York: Kraus, 1935–37; Index 1940, 104).

Furthermore, not only her nudity and gaze, but certain decorative elements adorning Bathsheba, such as a necklace or headdress, could lead the viewer to identify her with contemporary depictions of prostitutes. An example of this can be seen in a *Book of Hours* where Bathsheba wears a triple-chain necklace with a cross (Fig. 5), a jewelry design similar to those worn by the prostitutes in Valerius Maximus' *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 6). The horned headdress that

<sup>29</sup> See Cat. 27, 31, 41, 44.

<sup>30</sup> Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*. France, fifteenth century. National Library of Breslaw. From Manuel Núñez Rodríguez, *Casa, Calle, Convento: Iconografía de la*

Monica A. Walker Vadillo

Bathsheba wears in some instances was also seen as a sign of lechery and evil because it allowed the devil to take an abode between the horns.<sup>31</sup> This image presents Bathsheba as a lustful creature capable of tempting anyone to commit base deeds, portraying her as an agent of sin.<sup>32</sup>



Fig. 6. The Vapor Baths from *Valerius Maximus' Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*. France, fifteenth century. National Library of Breslaw (after Manuel Núñez Rodríguez, *Casa, Calle, Convento: Iconografía de la mujer bajomedieval*. Santiago de Compostela: Universidade, Servicio de Publicacións e Intercambio Científico, 1997, 259).

It has been argued that the representation of Bathsheba was part of the new type of erotic scenes that were created after the mid-fifteenth century, when artists who were inspired by the sexually explicit illustrations in secular texts such as Valerius Maximus' *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* decorated Books of Hours with such images, taking advantage of the privacy that the book offered the owner.<sup>33</sup> In this way they consciously tried to excite the voyeur of the Book of Hours, male or female, while at the same time they depicted a vice for which penance was required.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the sin that the image of David and Bathsheba represents and the one that it elicits are not the same for the spectator.

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*mujer bajomedieval* (Santiago de Compostela: Universidade, Servicio de Publicacións e Intercambio Científico, 1997), 259. (Hereafter: Núñez Rodríguez, *Casa, Calle, Convento*.)

<sup>31</sup> Christa Grössinger, *Humor and Folly in Profane and Secular Prints of Northern Europe, 1430–1540* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2002), 110.

<sup>32</sup> John A. Nichols "Female Nudity and Sexuality in Medieval Art," in *New Images of Women: Essays Toward a Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Edelgard E. Dubruck (Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 174–175, mentions that women were evil because they were believed to be lustful and seductive by nature. For this reason, medieval artists and their patrons chose to depict this evil side as a nude woman because of the original sin of the first female nude, Eve.

<sup>33</sup> Saenger, "Books of Hours," 156, also mentions other situations beside depictions of Bathsheba where the artists created highly erotic scenes. These situations included baptism and the Last Judgment.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*



## David Watching Bathsheba Bathing

David and Bathsheba's sin was adultery, but lust was the sin incurred by spectators who gazed at the body of Bathsheba. Despite the hermeneutic closure that the text might bring, the nude still might have provoked a strong erotic response from the viewer. In a situation of meditative contemplation, the eyes would linger over the surfaces of the object, and by looking and gazing at it, could create sexual interest capable of arousing the spectator.<sup>35</sup> In this situation one must not assume that this response came only from male spectators. Women's bodies depicted in the nude, seen as objects of desire, did not preclude their being enjoyed by other women.<sup>36</sup> In other words, even though there is an extraordinary dominance of male perceptions of women, the latter might also have been aroused by the sight of conventional female beauty or "conventionally seductive nakedness."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, as the viewer is caught in this web of sensuality, his or her process of rationalization denies or diffuses the sexual response.<sup>38</sup> The spectator's emotional state is framed within the penitence which he or she must perform after consciously or unconsciously discovering the nature of the feelings evoked by the image. This acknowledgment could create anxiety and fear for the salvation of the medieval viewer's soul. In this case the penitential Psalms must have been read with deeper feeling and emotion.

### Bathsheba as Vanity

An interesting point that is seldom noted is the use of several elements that present Bathsheba as the personification of Vanity. In a number of examples Bathsheba conforms to the definition of Vanity because she holds its attributes: a comb and a mirror or both, among other things. In some instances Bathsheba combs her hair while she looks at her reflection in a mirror. Her hair is long and loose, which was considered to be a source of great temptation. An example of this can be seen in several early sixteenth-century Books of Hours that show Bathsheba either combing her hair or having maidservants present her with the objects themselves (the comb and the mirror) (*Fig. 7*). In addition, Bathsheba's servants hold plates full of red fruit, maybe as a reminder of the original sin perpetrated by Eve. In other instances, Bathsheba is adorned with necklaces and

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<sup>35</sup> Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 329.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love: Objects and Subjects of Desire* (London: Laurence King, 1998), 27.

<sup>37</sup> Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 321.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

Monica A. Walker Vadillo

an elaborate headdress, also indications of Vanity.<sup>39</sup> All these elements can pair Bathsheba with representations of sirens, the Whore of Babylon (*Fig. 8*), and Venus, which are in turn representations of Vanity as well. The similarities between them do not stop at the symbolic elements that were used, but they can also be seen in the depiction of the body. All of them have light brown or reddish blond hair which flows loosely behind their backs; they have a domed belly, small breasts, and an elongated body. The forms are the same, but the context and label are different. In all the examples, however, the sin of Vanity is evident.



*Fig. 7. Book of Hours. David and Bathsheba.* The Huntington Library, San Marino, HM 1171, fol. 97v (after Seymour de Ricci, *Census of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the United States and Canada*. New York: Kraus, 1935–37; Index 1940, 102).



*Fig. 8. Jean Bondel and Nicolas Bataille. The Whore of Babylon.* Tapestry of the Apocalypse, Angers. c. 1375–1379. Musée des Tapisseries, Angers (after James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, and the Graphic Arts: From 1350 to 1575*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985, 49).

<sup>39</sup> Manuel Núñez Rodríguez, *Casa, Calle, Convento*, 245.



## David Watching Bathsheba Bathing

In terms of spectatorship this reading should be seen as a warning not only for women, but also for men because they could also fall into the clutches of Vanity. As Geoffrey de La Tour-Landry noted in the fourteenth century, mirrors were the objects used by the devil to make women fall into sin by looking at their reflection excessively.<sup>40</sup> During this time many other commentators warned women against the dangers of beautification.<sup>41</sup> This practice, in which the mirror and the comb were involved, was considered to be part of a woman's power to foment her sex appeal and attraction by abandoning herself to the gestures that fed the game of seduction.<sup>42</sup> In this way a woman's moral imperfection was made even more evident by her lack of shame in presenting her naked body and her loose hair as the ultimate weapons of seduction. Therefore, the image of Bathsheba became a warning for women, a categorization to avoid. In addition, men were not immune to this imagery because while the beauty of the woman represented might have cheered them, they could have been overcome by the will to possess her, thus falling into the sin of lust.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusions

From these readings on the nature of Bathsheba and the possible emotional responses of the spectator, one can conclude that even though Bathsheba is usually presented as a seductress operating as an agent of sin, this perception differs in several distinct ways from her visual representations in manuscripts, where it allowed for other meanings and possibilities. These possibilities range from the innocent object of desire who is seen as a victim of King David through the prefiguration of the Church cleansing herself for her groom, Christ. In addition, Bathsheba could be seen as a warning against Vanity. Moreover, she could be all of these depending on who the viewer or reader was. In this way the body of Bathsheba became a vehicle for social meaning which moved beyond mere sensuality and eroticism towards a deeper and more complex array of possibilities for the medieval viewer.

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<sup>40</sup> Grössinger, *Picturing Women*, 13–14.

<sup>41</sup> Núñez Rodríguez, *Casa, Calle, Convento*, 245, mentions that practices of beautification measures taken by women were a way to trick their husbands about the “merchandise.”

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, according to Núñez Rodríguez, Ecclesiastes 36: 24 gives this warning.