

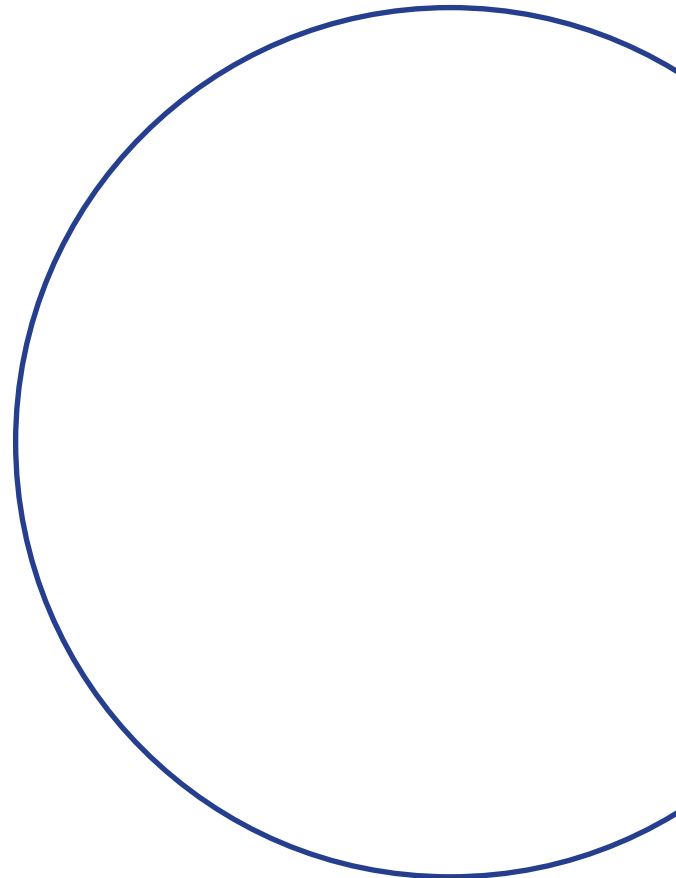
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### **Editors**

Apl. Prof. Dr. Annemarie Ambühl (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)  
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam)  
Dr. Christian Rollinger (Universität Trier)  
Prof. Dr. Christine Walde (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

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### **Contact**

#### **Principal Contact**

Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

#### **Support Contact**

Dr. Christian Rollinger  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

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VIVIAN COLBERT

(Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

## Queen Zenobia's 'Campaign' for British Women's Suffrage<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** This article focuses on the feminist reception of Zenobia of Palmyra in Great Britain during the 'long nineteenth century' and the early twentieth century. A special focus lies on her reception by the British suffragettes who belonged to the *Women's Social and Political Union*. Even though Zenobia's story did not end happily, the warrior queen's example served to inspire these early feminists. Several products of historical culture—such as books, pieces of art, newspaper articles and theatre plays—provide insight into the reception of her as a historical figure, which is dominated by the image of a strong and courageous woman. The article will shed light on how exactly Zenobia's example was instrumentalised throughout the first feminist movement in Britain.

**Keywords** Zenobia, reception studies, British suffrage movement, nineteenth century, feminism

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Anja Wieber for her efforts in helping me with writing this publication and for drawing my attention to the photography introduced in the second part of this article.

In an article entitled "Should Women Have Votes?" the British newspaper<sup>2</sup> *Western Mail* noted in 1869:

When we find a woman with the military capacity of Joan of Arc we shall make her our general. When we meet with one with the executive ability of Zenobia or Queen Bess, we shall elect her governor or president, and not before.<sup>3</sup>

The article featuring this quote appeared in two other newspapers, *Preston Chronicle* and *Liverpool Mercury*, around the same time that year. Under a rather provocative heading the author refers to historical examples of female prowess and leadership that aimed to inspire British society in the second half of the nineteenth century. This striking statement begs the question of how common it was for such appeals to be made and to what extent outspoken feminists also adopted this approach?

The choice of historical figures mentioned in the quote above is also quite interesting, since they represent three different historical eras. However, Zenobia is a particularly interesting figure because she was not European in origin. Using sources including photographs and reports which appeared in the official newspapers of the *Women's Social and Political Union*, this article traces Zenobia's reception among early twentieth-century feminists.

Zenobia's general reception in the nineteenth and twentieth century has been analysed by various authors before,<sup>4</sup> but her reception of that epoch and its links to the feminist movement have hitherto been largely overlooked. In what follows we will be examining how the figure of Zenobia was functionalised for the women's cause and what was particularly characteristic of the early twentieth-century reception of Zenobia. In a first section, we will be drawing by way of comparison on Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788), and the most striking forms of reception following Gibbon in the nineteenth century, which formed the basis on that the suffrage movement of the early twentieth century would draw from. The second part of this ar-

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<sup>2</sup> All newspapers mentioned and cited in this article are also accessible through the British Newspaper Archive (BNA): <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>.

<sup>3</sup> Should Women Have Votes? (1869) 4.

<sup>4</sup> Andrade (2018); Cherry (2000); Stoneman (1993); Wang (2013); Wieber (2000); Wieber (2007); Wieber (2017); Wieber (2020a); Wieber (2020b).

ticle will focus on Zenobia's reception within the suffragette press and also look beyond this to her portrayal in a suffrage play.

## THE HISTORICAL FIGURE OF ZENOBIA, QUEEN OF PALMYRA

In the third century CE, shortly before the year 260, Odaenathus, Zenobia's husband, was named prince<sup>5</sup> of Palmyra. However, his reign only lasted for a couple of years, as in 267 CE Odaenathus was assassinated, along with his son from his first marriage, Herodes. According to Roman law, his second son was supposed to succeed him instead, but the boy was not yet of age and therefore unable to rule in his own right. Zenobia, his mother, instead took over the regency and went as far as declaring herself Augusta. This provoked Emperor Aurelian to organise a military campaign against Palmyra and its queen. By 272 CE the Roman campaign had ended successfully with the capture of Zenobia.<sup>6</sup>

Not much is known about Palmyra's warrior queen. The most relevant sources left to us focus primarily on Aurelian's campaign against her, and, most notably, report the events from a Roman perspective only. Important details about her person, such as her age, are lost. The most important source we can rely on is the *Historia Augusta*, a collection of biographies of the Roman Emperors from late antiquity. For centuries it was believed that the *Historia Augusta* had been written by several authors, which, as we know today, is a hoax. Thorough analysis has revealed that the collection was written by only one person and is largely based on fictive sources.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless it is an important source when analysing Zenobia's reception.

According to the *Historia Augusta*, Zenobia was fully entitled to rule in her son's name until he came of age and to dress herself in the purple colours of a

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5 This title is based on Odaenathus' entry in the Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World Odaenathus—Brill (brillonline.com) (last accessed 07/01/21). Scholars find it difficult to specify the exact title of Odaenathus. Palmyra was a Roman province, but Odaenathus had been awarded special privileges by Rome, including that of a military commander. For further information see Wieber 2000 (285); Wieber (2017) 129 ft. 23; for a detailed analysis of Odaenathus' titles see Potter (1996).

6 Wieber (2000) 281–2.

7 Wieber (2000) 283.

queen regent.<sup>8</sup> The author of the *Historia Augusta* however claims that Zenobia overreached the length of time that a queen regent was permitted to rule. Furthermore, Zenobia's ambition was proving to be a danger to Rome; under her command Palmyra conquered much of Asia Minor and even managed to seize Egypt, all of which caused Aurelian to march against Palmyra. Zenobia and her son were captured.<sup>9</sup> While the *Historia Augusta* reports that Zenobia died in exile after having been paraded in Aurelian's triumphal procession on his return to Rome, Zosimos—an ancient historian—claims she died in captivity while being transported to Rome.<sup>10</sup>

One thing we know for sure though is that Zenobia's afterlife turned her into one of history's many ambiguous female figures who held power over men. The image of Zenobia created by the *Historia Augusta* was that of a woman of dark complexion with a deep and masculine voice, who was regal and chaste but also presumptuous when she dressed herself in the fashions of an Augusta or a warrior. Her successful military campaigns along with her status as "foreigner"<sup>11</sup> clearly made her a danger to Rome. Even though the *Historia Augusta* was following the misogynistic tradition of connecting Zenobia's lesser qualities with her sex rather than her political person, it is remarkable that it emphasises Zenobia's virtue and chastity.<sup>12</sup> Considering that the *Historia Augusta* was written by a man with misogynistic tendencies, it may be safe to assume that she indeed had been highly chaste, because if that had not been the case, it would certainly have been used against her. This image differentiates her from that of other female rulers from the East, who were usually portrayed as voluptuous *femmes fatales*.<sup>13</sup>

The classicist Richard Stoneman has concluded that so-called "warrior-queens" have always been represented with specific polarities, depending on which ex-

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8 HA *Tyr. Trig.* 30, 2 (= *Thirty Tyrants: Zenobia*); cf. Wieber (2000).

9 Wieber (2000) 290.

10 HA *Tyr. Trig.* 30, 23–27 and Zos. 59; cf. Wieber (2000).

11 Even though Palmyra had been part of the Roman Empire, which made Zenobia a Roman citizen, Romans tended to regard it and its population as foreign and alien; cf. Wieber (2000) 288.

12 HA *Tyr. Trig.* 30, 12; cf. Wieber (2000).

13 Wieber (2000) 292; for further reading on the reception of oriental queens also see Carlà-Uhink/Wieber (2020).

ample is being referred to. The Iceni Queen Boudicca, for example, has often been portrayed as being lascivious to emphasise her savageness. In Zenobia's case, she has usually been associated with chastity and purity, two extremely positive character traits that would certainly make her appealing to a society shaped by strict virtues of religion and sexuality. It is in that very same light that Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (approx. 1387–1400) portray Zenobia and which would later inspire the historian Edward Gibbon.<sup>14</sup>

## ZENOBIA IN EDWARD GIBBON

Gibbon's work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788) served as the main inspiration for all subsequent forms of reception featuring Zenobia, including that by progressive women/feminists, even though to modern standards he represents a conservative point of view.

Gibbon was astonished that Zenobia, a woman, could make such a good sovereign: "Instead of little passions which so frequently perplex a female reign, the steady administration of Zenobia was guided by the most judicious maxims of policy."<sup>15</sup> The irritation and astonishment he felt towards Zenobia's character were clearly visible within her portrayal in his work and represents the ambivalence of her reception as mentioned above: admiration for a Queen who transgressed the boundaries of her sex and proved successful enough as ruler to pose a serious threat to the Romans and simultaneously never lost an ounce of traditional female virtues.

The fact that she did display atypical behaviour for a woman, however, was a reason for reproach, which becomes visible in the following examples. Upon Zenobia's capture by Aurelian, Gibbon had the Queen instantly place all the blame on her council and declaring her own innocence, an interpretation of person based completely on what the *Historia Augusta* reported. This weakness of character is a typical way to portray female historical figures, especially those who hold power.

<sup>14</sup> Stoneman (1993) 197.

<sup>15</sup> Gibbon (1862) 115.



But as female fortitude is commonly artificial, so it is seldom steady or consistent. The courage of Zenobia deserted her in the hour of trial; she trembled at the angry clamours of the soldiers, who called aloud for her immediate execution, forgot the generous despair of Cleopatra, which she had proposed as her model, and ignominiously purchased life by the sacrifice of her fame and her friends.<sup>16</sup>

Gibbon's Zenobia proved to his contemporaries—and to many generations to follow—that the strength of the female sex can only last for a limited period of time. In the end their character weakness would always fail them.<sup>17</sup>

Gibbon was certainly not alone in his opinion regarding women and (militant) power. He was merely following an ancient tradition of patriarchy that had very strict definitions of male and female qualities. In accordance with that, the very same ideals can be found in the *Historia Augusta*, which served as Gibbon's primary inspiration for his portrayal of Zenobia. The following paragraph adopts "Aurelian's perspective"<sup>18</sup> when emphasising the problem and controversy Zenobia's war embodied for the Roman people and their concepts of gender, which only underlines further the fact that Gibbon was following an ancient tradition:

'The Roman People,' says Aurelian, in an original letter, 'speak with contempt of the war which I am waging against a woman. They are ignorant both of the character and the power of Zenobia. It is impossible to enumerate her warlike preparations, of stones, of arrows, and of every species of missile weapons. Every part of the walls is provided with two or three ballistae, and artificial fires are thrown from her military engines. The fear of punishment has armed her with a desperate courage [...].'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Gibbon (1862) 116. This quotation by Gibbon is based not only on the HA *Aurel.* 30, 1, but also on the writings of the Byzantine historian Zosimus: Zos. 1, 56, 2–3, cf. Wieber (2000) 303–304.

<sup>17</sup> Andrade (2018) 222.

<sup>18</sup> This is based on a fictive report by Aurelian published in the *Historia Augusta*. During Gibbon's lifetime there was no reason to doubt the validity of the *Historia Augusta*, which, as has been pointed out before in this paper, by now has been revealed as a hoax by one author.

<sup>19</sup> Gibbon (1862) 116; cf. HA *Aurel.* 26.



In this quotation Aurelian describes his own rather ambiguous situation towards Rome and Palmyra. The Roman citizens are indignant that their emperor is fighting a war against a woman, but are ignorant of the fact that Palmyra's Queen is a dangerous opponent, disregarding her sex. However, the emperor remains certain about his triumph, which is apparent in his remark that it is the fear of his punishments that drives Zenobia's resourcefulness.

The image of Zenobia which Gibbon created in his work is definitely that of a woman who transgressed the barriers that restricted her gender, not only during her lifetime but also during that of the author and more generally during the nineteenth century. Having Aurelian, the embodiment of patriarchal power, point out her remarkability emphasises this unusual transgression and would certainly have left a striking impression with the readers. However, in the end it was the image of Zenobia's defeat and downfall that imprinted itself on the historical consciousness of the general population. It was a common habit in ancient Rome to stage imposing processions of triumph to highlight the imperial power of the emperor, often including the display of exotic animals and prisoners from other cultures that had been conquered by the Romans. After Aurelian's successful campaign against Palmyra such a procession was staged, of which the captive Zenobia was a part.<sup>20</sup> Gibbon describes this scenario in his typically colourful way: "The beauteous figure of Zenobia was confined by fetters of gold; a slave supported the gold chain which encircled her neck, and she almost fainted under the intolerable weight of jewels."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Zenobia's end is very controversial. Winsbury (2010) 23 points out the different stories: (1) after having starred in Aurelian's triumphal procession, she retired to Tivoli where she supposedly married again and lived out the remainder of her life among her offspring; (2) another story claims the Queen died on the way to Rome; (3) the third tells she was displayed in her chains in Antioch; and (4) a fourth version surrounding her demise claims she was beheaded in Rome (2010) 23. For a more comprehensive overview read: Hartmann (2001) 413–424. On Zenobia's part in Aurelian's procession: Wang (2013) 77.

<sup>21</sup> Gibbon (1862) 118.

## ZENOBIA IN 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY BRITISH HISTORICAL RECEPTION

There are several examples of Zenobia's reception during the nineteenth century. The general image of her was quite ambivalent: On the one hand she was a "warrior queen" and a woman who overcame the conventional limitations of her sex, on the other hand she was also a symbol of female virtue and decency that complied well with the understanding of femininity during the nineteenth century. It might be due to her ambivalence that she was quite well received among representatives of both sexes and not only by feminists.

The era and its products of art and literature were heavily influenced by neo-classicism but they were also affected by the remarkable changes of that century. The entanglement of both aspects often makes it difficult to comprehend fully the effect Zenobia's reception had on society and why her person was received particularly well.<sup>22</sup> This part of the paper will introduce only a selection of reception products that feature the ancient queen, mostly based on the authors'/ artists' possibly feminist backgrounds.

In particular, Gibbon's work did not remain the only significant literary form of reception of Zenobia. In the early nineteenth century Anna Jameson, a female author of non-fictional women's history, published her *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Sovereigns*.<sup>23</sup> Jameson too was fascinated by the Palmyrene queen's ambivalent nature and appearance. She provides an extensive description of Zenobia, which also reflected that of the author's own time: "courage, prudence, and fortitude, [...] patience of fatigue, and activity of mind and body".<sup>24</sup> But she also stresses that the exemplum perfectly combined these virtues with her role as a monarch and by doing so, she overcame the restriction placed upon her sex: "she also possessed a more enlarged understanding; her views were more enlightened, her habits more intellectual".<sup>25</sup> Jameson extended the latter argument to such an extent, that she claimed all of Odaenathus' political and social success was actually due to Zenobia. But when she faces Aurelian, Jameson's Zenobia

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22 Winsbury (2010) 151.

23 At the time, only men could be publicly recognised historians. Nevertheless, several female authors published their works on history, which often led to controversy among their critics. For further reading: Spongberg (2005).

24 Jameson (1869) 30.

25 Ibid.

again turns into an example of typically female weakness. After having highlighted the competence of the Queen as monarch, the author's description of her downfall appears to be even more dramatic than that of Gibbon:

The unhappy queen, surrounded by the ferocious and insolent soldiery, forgot all her former vaunts and intrepidity: her feminine terrors had perhaps been excusable if they had not rendered her base; but in her first panic she threw herself on the mercy of the emperor [...].<sup>26</sup>

Having to face an armed group of strong men becomes the undoing of the celebrated "warrior queen", but she nevertheless remained a remarkable example of women and what they could achieve. In that context Jameson's work has definitely been a reflection of a rising feminist thought in British society.

In her recent article about Zenobia's reception in advertisements for soap, Anja Wieber also mentions a new shift in the queen's reception in Britain that becomes visible in the text by Jameson, especially when compared with that by Gibbon and the *Historia Augusta* (*Tyranni Triginta* 30,24–26). Jameson describes Zenobia during the procession of triumph thus:

[...] the Syrian queen, who walked in the procession before her own sumptuous chariot, attired in her diadem and royal robes, blazing with jewels, her eyes fixed on the ground, and her delicate form drooping under the weight of her golden fetters, which were so heavy that two slaves were obliged to assist in supporting them on either side [...].<sup>27</sup>

Zenobia's appearance in the procession of triumph would become one of the most striking elements associated with her reception. However, Jameson's portrayal differs to that by the *Historia Augusta* and Gibbon and therefore creates a different image. The *Historia Augusta* describes Zenobia almost collapsing under the weight of her heavy jewellery as she was led through the streets on a collar by one of the slaves.<sup>28</sup> Gibbon stays relatively close to that story and also describes the jewellery clad Zenobia being led through the streets on a chain by

<sup>26</sup> Jameson (1869) 34.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>28</sup> HA *Tyr. Trig.* 30, 24–26; cf. Wieber (2000).

a slave.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to this narrative, Jameson reports that instead of suffering from the physical burden of her extravagant and heavy jewellery, Zenobia struggles with the weight of her shackles.<sup>30</sup> To put a larger emphasis on their weight, Jameson even had two slaves leading her by those shackles, that element which not only reflects her military defeat but also the power of patriarchy to which, in the end, she had to bow.

In his essay on Zenobia's representation in the arts and literature, I-Chun Wang emphasises that the queen is most often portrayed in relation to her capitulation, however there is also always an element of dignity about her. Despite the fact that for large stretches of history, Zenobia has largely been portrayed as an "unwomanly" figure, she nevertheless bore her fate with the grace and strength of a true warrior. The magnitude of this portrayal must have been impressive in nineteenth century Britain. The same can be said about the shackles. They represent her punishment as well as the superiority of Aurelian and the Romans. Considering the impact colonialism had on the British culture at that time, it can easily be understood why such a metaphorical symbol caught the fascination of the audiences.<sup>31</sup> To this day the image of the captive queen remains—in the Western world, at least—the one most commonly associated with Zenobia.

In the feminist context, Harriet Hosmer's statue *Zenobia in Chains* (1862) [Figure 1] is particularly interesting. Along with the knowledge of the artist's liberated lifestyle, the statue and the discourse it created in Britain turned this Zenobia into a feminist icon of her time.<sup>32</sup> Hosmer was born in Massachusetts. Her mother and sister had both died from tuberculosis, which was why her father, a doctor, was keen to introduce Harriet to as many physical activities as possible. This was rather atypical for a girl's upbringing at that time. As an adult Hosmer moved to Rome, where she studied sculpture under Gibson. She never married and her contemporary sources described her as a boyish-looking and queer woman. *Zenobia* appears to have been her life's work. She was very inspired by the historical character while making her sculpture. Hosmer read a lot of research and even worked closely with Anna Jameson. However, Hosmer still

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29 Gibbon (1862) 118.

30 Wieber (2020b) 291 ft. 58.

31 Wang (2013) 83.

32 Winsbury (2010) 11–3.



**Figure 1** Harriet Goodhue Hosmer, American, 1830–1908; *Zenobia in Chains*, c.1859; marble; 44  $\frac{1}{4}$  × 14 × 18 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, American Art Purchase Fund 19:2008

managed to create her own unique image of Zenobia, which can be clearly seen in the statue.<sup>33</sup>

Hosmer's Zenobia was displayed at the *London Exhibition* hosted in 1862.<sup>34</sup> The statue, which stands a striking two meters in height, once again shows the queen in shackles. The public discourse about gender and race was visibly increasing in England during the 1860s, which included the question of the meaning of masculine and feminine power.<sup>35</sup> Zenobia's statue fitted very well into that socio-political discourse with representing the triumph of masculine power over feminine.<sup>36</sup>

The statue did not achieve the success in London which Hosmer would have hoped for, nevertheless it drew attention.<sup>37</sup> The art historian Deborah Cherry discovered that especially the newspapers *The Queen* and *The Art Journal* were convinced that Hosmer did not make the sculpture herself but had hired men to do so. This serious claim was not even dispelled when she and her mentor, Gibson, gave public statements that made it apparent she was the sole artist and creator of the statue. Hosmer even explicitly pointed out that as a female artist she always attracted a certain amount of condemnation by her critics.<sup>38</sup> The attacks seem even more ridiculous when taking into consideration that the statue herself perfectly represented contemporary British conventions regarding womanhood. Every portrayal of female sovereignty was measured by the standard set by Queen Victoria. Following that—whether intentionally or not—*Zenobia's* gaze is averted from the viewer, a convention that was considered virtuous, since at the time eye contact was associated with prostitution. Portraits of Victoria herself only ever showed her with direct eye contact with the viewer when she was pictured as the sovereign, rather than as a woman in a family, domestic

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33 Winsbury (2010) 15–8.

34 Culkin (2010) 67.

35 On 14<sup>th</sup> December 1861 Queen Victoria's beloved husband, Prince Albert, had died. The Queen fell into a deep state of grief after his death which also affected her duties as head of state and ultimately caused a massive wave of criticism. It is therefore hardly surprising that in 1862 Hosmer's *Zenobia* attracted a great deal of attention. See also: Kent Kingsley (2016) 93 ff.

36 Cherry (2000) 101–5.

37 Culkin (2010) 68.

38 Cherry (2000) 105 ff.

setting. Even though Zenobia's statue shows her as a conquered queen, she regains her virtue and dignity by not meeting the eye of the viewer—which at the same time however, depoliticized her.<sup>39</sup>

It is worth bearing in mind that Hosmer's image of Zenobia remains a personal and an idealised interpretation of a historical figure. The artist was obviously inspired by contemporary conventions as well as the existing historical culture surrounding Zenobia and antiquity in general. For example, the white marble statue resembles closely the ancient caryatides that have been a fixed component of the studies of antiquity since the early modern age. Hosmer appeared to have been deeply enamoured with Zenobia and her history, reflected in the strength that seems to be radiating from the statue.<sup>40</sup> This, however, also emphasises her symbolic function for the feminists of the 1860s. Just like them, Zenobia was kept in shackles, but still her light could not be diminished, her strength was not at its end. It is easily understandable how to those feminists who saw the statue at the London Exhibition, Zenobia became an inspiration and beacon of light.

## ZENOBIA AND THE BRITISH SUFFRAGETTES

Today the term "suffragette" is often associated with the general suffrage movement in Great Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, originally suffragettes represented only the militant suffrage campaigners of the *Women's Social and Political Union* (WSPU). In 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, Christabel, Sylvia and Adele founded the WSPU in Manchester.<sup>41</sup> Until then Emmeline had already been a member of the *Women's Franchise League* and *The Independent Labour Party*. Like several other organisations, both had been campaigning for women's suffrage for several years but not with a satisfactory outcome, according to the Pankhurst matriarch.<sup>42</sup> Under the motto "Deeds Not Words!" the WSPU soon changed tack to pursue a more aggressive

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39 Cherry (2000) 124–5.

40 Winsbury (2010) 148.

41 Günther (2006) 1.

42 Cowman (2012) 276.



and militant strategy in their campaign which led the *Daily Mail* to christen them as “suffragettes” in one of their issues of 1906, in order to distinguish them in the public from the “suffragists”, whose organisations were adopting a less aggressive approach to campaigning. The Pankhursts and their followers in the WSPU welcomed their new name and, instead of letting it offend them, took ownership of it.<sup>43</sup>

In 1907 the couple Emmeline and Frederick Pethrick-Lawrence founded the first official organ of the WSPU, *Votes for Women*. Five years later, Christabel Pankhurst founded *The Suffragette*, which would replace *Votes for Women* as the leading suffragette newspaper and would exist under that name until the beginning of the First World War, when it was retitled *Britannia*. Both organs sold very well and aimed at attracting large groups of readers who wished to be informed about the women's campaign for voting rights.<sup>44</sup> The narratives and iconography applied by the newspapers provide modern scholar's great insight into the cultural background of their editors, authors and readers.<sup>45</sup> Along with speeches, processions, pageants and theatre plays, the newspapers can be perceived as a means of self-staging for the suffragettes.<sup>46</sup> Three major functions were central to these early feminist newspapers: they should inspire enthusiasm, have an educational purpose and create a network among readers and organisations.

The large variety of political and cultural reports certainly helped the newspapers in attracting their readership. These topics also exemplify the importance of newspapers in reconstructing history, because they show that when provided with a platform that allowed them to easily access the public sphere, women were perfectly capable of contributing to the political debates and discourses of their time.<sup>47</sup> They are proof that women—in a collective sense—in the past were active agents instead of the passive voices that history had been teaching for centuries.

Following up on this realisation, the contents within the papers naturally also underlined the qualitative contributions women can make in the public sphere within British society, and not only in a contemporary sense. To provide their ar-

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43 Atkinson (1996) xiii.

44 Kämpfer (1997) 100.

45 Kitch (2015) 13.

46 Günther (2006) 112.

47 Green (2009) 196.

guments with a stable foundation, the suffragettes published a great deal of articles that gave evidence of the women who had come before them and who had affected their respective times through their demonstrations of brilliance, bravery and courage.

One of these historical examples was Zenobia. As a militant organisation, the suffragettes tended to adapt female “warriors” for their cause, as the reception of Boudicca<sup>48</sup> and, most importantly, Joan of Arc<sup>49</sup> clearly exemplify. Despite being less significant than the other two mentioned, Zenobia also left her mark in the historical references made by the members of the WSPU. *Votes for Women* printed an article on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1910 titled “Courage in Women” by an unknown author who went by the initials “J. E. M.”. This article criticised the general claim of women’s inferiority to men based on their physically weaker bodies that supposedly led to women being automatically less courageous than men. After one third of prelude, the article focuses on historical examples that clearly prove these claims to be wrong. The example of Zenobia takes things one step further: the author uses Gibbon’s portrayal of the ancient queen as a typical sample of women’s mistreatment across the sweep of history. Even though Zenobia had been a remarkable person, Gibbon nevertheless has to emphasise her failure in context with her “weaker” sex and turns her into an archetypal antagonist in his version of history. At first glance, this latter statement might sound quite superficial. After all, Gibbon wrote about the Roman Empire and from that point of view, Zenobia was an enemy. However, J. E. M. actually bases their argument on the contemporary discourse regarding gender roles and not on the actual course of events.

It is an interesting problem in psychology as to how it comes about that men idealised their own weaknesses and more deplorable qualities, and by the simple process of transferring them to women converted them into what was conventionally admirable.<sup>50</sup>

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48 For more information on Boudicca’s reception within the movement read: Johnson (2014).

49 Joan of Arc was the icon of the British suffrage movement. She featured on several posters and cover pages of newspapers. Her militancy and martyrdom were especially fascinating and inspiring to the suffragettes. As such, she features in all basic works about the movement. For further reading: Tickner (1988) and Christensen Nelson (2010).

50 J. E. M. (1910) 195.

History is obviously being instrumentalised not only to create identity but also to illustrate injustice towards women based on sexist and false stereotypes. The suffragettes demonstrated here a very modern understanding of historiography, as they would have to understand that history is a constructed idea of the past and cannot reflect the "truth". Gibbon's case represents the supremacy of the patriarchy that for centuries has defined what women could be and what they could not be. In their concluding sentence, J.E.M. states: "Women, in fact, must realise the fact that they *have no right to be brave*."<sup>51</sup> This further illustrates the underlining critique of the historical reception of women by men.

Another article featuring Zenobia was published on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1913 in *The Suffragette*. Here too, the author opted for anonymity. The article "The Equality of Women" bore the subtitle, "Verbatim Report of a Speech by Abdul Baha, Leader of the Bahai Movement". Several introductory lines provide information on the figure of Baha and his position within the Bahai-movement. The latter was initiated in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Persia by Mirza Ali Muhammed, who had considered himself a prophet. The article hints at a particular interest on the suffragettes' part in the leader's martyrdom, in which they obviously saw a parallel to their own beliefs. Baha's speech was very progressive: he argues that people should not be judged on their sex as that would prevent balance among the human race. He also accused men, who insisted on treating women as inferior, of being failed humans. Being the most intelligent species created by God, he expected humans—men in particular—to see reason. As a means to underline his theses, Baha chose examples from history that, according to him, proved that women were able to function as political and religious idols, just as men did. He introduced this paragraph with the words: "As regards the political life, one of the great and powerful women who have appeared in history is Zenobia."<sup>52</sup> As a Persian he would probably have been more aware of Zenobia's history than the British and perhaps even come to regard her from a different angle than the average British person would have done. Combined with his audience<sup>53</sup>, which consisted of feminists, his choice therefore was an obvious and well made one.

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51 J. E. M. (1910) 195.

52 *The Equality of Women* (1913) 185.

53 Since the transcription of the speech was published in *The Suffragette* it is safe to assume that the live audience also consisted mostly of feminists and/or those sympathetic to the women's movement. However, there is no proof available that could validate the transcribed speech.

In his speech Baha describes Zenobia as a woman “[...] showing the greatest administrative capacity [...]”<sup>54</sup> and that as regent “she organised a great, efficient, and just government.”<sup>55</sup> From his perspective, Zenobia was obviously the perfect example of female capability and strength. As a leader, she inspired her people when she decided to free them from the Roman yoke:

Although she was not a woman belonging to those foreign lands, yet all these people universally declared her to be their queen, because she manifested this great desire for the regeneration of the people. She practised the greatest justice. She was very wise in her administration. [...] One is astonished with what power and with what great painstaking trouble she has planned these marvellous cities of the ancient time. She became powerful as to try to throw away the yoke of the Roman Emperor, and the Roman Empire rose against her.<sup>56</sup>

Baha's words work as metaphors against the oppression by the British government: On the one hand it aims at British imperialism and the Near East's fight against it,<sup>57</sup> and on the other hand it refers to the suffrage movement and its fight for equality. However, after having first emphasised his position by rejecting the idea of inequality between the sexes, Baha slips in his statements regarding Zenobia. In the quotation above he begins by pointing out that *although* she was a woman, she achieved remarkable things. That indicates a surprise that does not fit his apparent belief in equal genders created by God. Further statements in his speech suggest the same. It is difficult for us to understand whether these slips happened unconsciously or whether his original position on equality was merely made to please his audience. His explanation of Zenobia's defeat does not provide a clear answer but allows the interpretation of the former case:

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54 *The Equality of Women* (1913) 185.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 In her chapter on orientalism and reception of ancient women, Wieber investigates the impact Zenobia has had on the understanding of modern Syrian nationhood (2020a) 136–150. A similar immersion and anti-colonial pattern of argument can be seen in the example of Baha's speech.

The Empire of Rome at that time was very vast and aggressive; but Zenobia was only the Queen of Egypt and Syria, therefore she could not muster as many soldiers as the Roman Emperor could bring into active force.<sup>58</sup>

As previously mentioned, general reception often associates Zenobia's defeat with her lack of aggressive character traits due to her sex. Baha instead argues that it was mainly due to Aurelian's larger forces. His continuous tale of the Palmyrene Queen's story also does not follow the same patterns that have become traditional in her reception during the nineteenth century. He never mentions the supposed incrimination of Palmyra's council Zenobia made directly after her capture. Nor does he touch upon Aurelian's procession of triumph that paraded the Queen in shackles through Rome. Baha rather preferred to emphasise the impressive image of the warrior queen in his concluding sentences.

They day on which the engagement between the two contending armies opened, Zenobia clad herself in a red and glorious garment. She crowned her head with the diadem, and she threw her dishevelled (loose) hair behind her back, rode on a charger, took a sword in her hand, and carried herself with such energy and dauntlessness that the Roman army was completely routed, and had to retreat.<sup>59</sup>

Zenobia, a woman, queen and warrior was such a terrifying appearance that her person alone was enough to drive the Roman forces away, at least at first. This impressive image stands in stark contrast to that of most other forms of reception. Baha's choices in retelling Zenobia's history were obviously very well suited to his audience and would have most probably inspired early feminists in their further campaigning for women's franchise.

Traces of Zenobia can be found not just in the suffragette newspapers but also on the general suffrage stage. In 1911 Edith Craig—daughter of the successful and famous actress Dame Ellen Terry—founded a theatre group called The Pioneer Players, which would exist until 1925. Even though the group was not exclusively a suffrage organisation, it was highly supportive of the suffrage cause and employed many of its campaigners. One of them was the former actress, and by then playwright, Cicely Hamilton.<sup>60</sup> Hamilton is known for writing a number of

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58 *The Equality of Women* (1913) 185.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Cockin (2001) 1–8.

the most successful plays of the suffrage movement, such as *A Pageant of Great Women* (1909).<sup>61</sup> *Pageant* is a play about a woman who is harassed by the allegorical figure *Prejudice*. In her distress the woman turns to *Justice* to free her, who then inquires why she should be worthy of freedom. *Prejudice* tries to intervene by pointing out that only men are worthy of freedom, but then the woman begins to justify her case. As she does so, historical female figures appear on the stage to support her arguments. There are 44 exempla in total in the play, divided into six categories: *The Learned Women*, *The Artists*, *The Saintly Women*, *The Heroic Women*, *The Rulers* and *The Warriors*. Queen Zenobia was listed among *The Rulers*, where she appeared in good company along with the British queens Victoria, Elizabeth I and Philippa of Hainault, and other female rulers such as the Russian monarch Catherine the Great and the Empress dowager of China Tsze-Hsi-An.<sup>62</sup>

All in all, *Pageant* resembles more a procession than a traditional play. As each of the examples enter the stage, they speak just one line that represents their person but also strengthens the arguments made by the woman. Zenobia, who follows Queen Victoria onto the stage, exclaims: "Behind, Zenobia of the hero's heart"<sup>63</sup>. In itself this statement is not very revealing but in the context of the whole procession of female rulers, who each stand for wisdom, strength and courage, Zenobia's heroic memory serves to underline women's skills in politics. There is also a photograph of the actress, Nella Powys, in her Zenobia costume in the printed edition of the play.<sup>64</sup> The picture was taken by the newspaper *Daily Mail*, whose representatives had been invited to watch the performance. Zenobia is not alone on the photograph, which shows several historical figures from *The Rulers*: Tsze-His-An, Deborah, Philippa of Hainault, Queen Elizabeth, Queen Victoria and Zenobia. The centre is dominated by Elizabeth, Zenobia stands to her right (the viewer's left) and once again, she is averting her gaze. Instead of looking into the camera, Zenobia focuses on some point to her right. She is dressed extravagantly, in a quite modern and fashionable chequered cloak with a heavy looking crown on her head. However, there are no shackles visible. The

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61 Atkinson (1996) 246.

62 Hamilton (1910) 17.

63 Ibid, 37.

64 Ibid, 36.

whole play serves as an example of women's deeds in history, which form a basis for the modern understanding of women among the feminists.

## ZENOBIA—THE AUSTRALIAN SUFFRAGIST?

Zenobia's historical figure might not have been as popular as Joan of Arc for the militant suffrage campaigners, but it proved to be an inspirational idol for British feminists throughout the long nineteenth century. But it was not only British women who discovered Zenobia and used her memory in their fight for equality.

Between 1888 and 1891 *The South Australian Register* printed 27 letters to the editor which were all signed by an author using the nom de plume "Zenobia".<sup>65</sup> This Zenobia was a fighter too. Her letters all address the question of women's suffrage as well as other topics involving women's rights, such as education for girls. Just like her British colleagues, she also used historical and monumental examples to prove women's demand for political rights to be legitimate.

In her letter from 10<sup>th</sup> April 1888, for example, she refers back to the Bible, according to which God created both man and woman, after his own image. This leads her to the conclusion: "Whoso reads that Scripture must see that the grant of dominion and authority over the earth was not given to the man alone, but to the man and the woman as joint authorities."<sup>66</sup> In July of the same year she used the example of Queen Victoria, who, like the author's ancient namesake, was living proof that women could wield (political) power and still remain women.

In Queen Victoria we see that the heaviest political responsibility and the most constant political duty do not in any way detract from the most thorough womanliness. Where can we see a more ideal picture of sweet domesticity than that presented by the Queen's "Journal of Our Life in the Highlands." The long conscientious political life of the Queen, united with her domesticity and passionate love of home, and of all that doth become a woman, emphatically refute the idea that political power and duty would destroy the womanliness or domesticity of woman. Surely if the Queen

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<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Mansutti has created a homepage dedicated to the Australian suffragist Mary Lee and the movement in general. She also provided several articles by "Zenobia". Mary Lee (slsa.sa.gov.au) (accessed 02/12/20).

<sup>66</sup> Mary Lee (slsa.sa.gov.au) (accessed 02/12/20).



can discharge all family duty and yet spend hours daily in connection with the grave duties of Imperial Government ordinary women at intervals of two or three years could put a ballot-paper into a box yet retain all feminine grace, and form the centres of love and light within their homes.<sup>67</sup>

Queen Victoria, as the leading figurehead of the British Empire, was also an idol of the British suffrage movement. Today we know that the Queen herself was appalled by the feminists and their demands, but that obviously did not diminish her symbolic meaning for the movement throughout the Empire.<sup>68</sup> The quotation illustrates how Victoria's example was interpreted by suffrage campaigners and used in their argumentation to support their cause. As a female sovereign she transgressed gender barriers everyday but was also highly regarded as a symbol for maternity and femininity. Her example therefore, underlined the arguments of suffrage fighters within her empire, that women can take an active interest in political matters and not lose their femininity in doing so. Especially since casting a vote was considerably less time invested in politics than the duties of the queen.

## CONCLUSIONS

The historical figure of Zenobia is both complex and controversial, permitting the interpretation of her life—and particularly her final moments—in subtly different ways, depending on the attitude and agenda of the historian in question. Although she is now a name that has largely slipped from public memory, she was an historical figure who was extremely present—visually and textually—in the second half of the nineteenth century. For this reason, the (proto-)feminist movement in Britain, but also in the Empire, recognised her potential as a figurehead to voice some of their central concerns. Zenobia's attraction to the suffragettes and early feminists throughout the long 19<sup>th</sup> century was apparent. Just like Zenobia they found themselves in a fight against a superiority which would often feel as hopeless. Zenobia's image in shackles must have symbolised the

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67 Mary Lee (slsa.sa.gov.au) (accessed 02/12/20).

68 For more information on Victoria's relationship with the women's rights movement read Chernock (2019).

defeats, that they themselves continuously had to suffer throughout their campaigns. But, just as she had done before them, the feminists regained their dignity and revived Zenobia's strength and courage in their ongoing fight, which would eventually lead to a successful outcome.

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Vivian Colbert  
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz  
British Studies  
An der Hochschule 2  
D-76726 Germersheim, Germany  
vicolber@uni-mainz.de

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