

**ANJA WIEBER, ZENOBIA OF 1001 NIGHTS.
ALEXANDER BARON'S NOVEL *QUEEN OF THE
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KEYWORDS

Zenobia, Alexander Baron, reception studies, British orientalism, exoticism, women in power, historical novel, male gaze, paratext

ABSTRACT (English)

The central theme of this article is Alexander Baron's historical novel *Queen of the East* (GB 1956). The main goal is to prove to what extent the modern author's description of the heroine, the Palmyrene Queen Zenobia, is shaped by the 19th century discourses of orientalism by which means the ancient ruler is turned into an harem girl. Moreover, the text and its paratexts are interpreted against the background of the 1950s by addressing socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts. As a result, it can be proven that the 1956 portrait of Zenobia serves different purposes: on the one hand her story can be labelled escape fiction for the reader as well as for the author (who had to cope with some identity problems because of his Jewishness), on the other hand the book might be read as a tutorial in contemporary female subordination.

Zenobia of 1001 Nights Alexander Baron's novel *Queen of the East*¹

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During the critical period of the sub-empires in the 3rd century, Queen Zenobia dared to defy the Roman Empire and to enlarge the Palmyrene territory by occupying Egypt until her final defeat in 272 by the Roman emperor Aurelian.² Late ancient historiography moulded her picture like two sides of the same coin: on the one hand she could become the personification of Eastern despotism and decadence; as such the historiographer Ammianus Marcellinus referred to her as a prohibitive *exemplum* whose deeds are not to be imitated.³ On the other hand she embodied rulership and bravery, even *virtus* (albeit a patriarchal concept of gender roles). The unknown author of *Historia Augusta* cast the warrior queen partly as a worthy opponent to the Roman emperor Aurelian.⁴

As a consequence the Palmyrene queen underwent a manifold reception process⁵ through the centuries, and events in her life or sometimes only her name are translated in nearly every genre form.⁶ In modern times,

¹ My thanks go to the following for their help in the preparation of this paper: Filippo Carlà-Uhink, Udo Hartmann, Christian Rollinger and Stefan Sandführ. Special thanks again to Judith Rhodes for grappling with my English language.

² For Palmyra the most extensive study is Hartmann (2001), cf. also Hartmann (2008); Ball (2000) 74-87; Retsö (2003) 462-466; Potter (2004) 251-276; Bowman (2005) 511-516; Sommer (2005), (2006) and (forthcoming). With a focus more on Zenobia's biography: Stoneman (1992); cf. also Breytenbach (2005); Southern (2008); Winsbury (2010) and recently A. Sartre/M. Sartre (2014).

³ Wieber-Scariot (1999) 318-346; for the Zenobia narrative in context with an ancient Roman orientalism cf. Sommer (2015) 118-123.

⁴ Zenobia's portrait in the *Historia Augusta* is far from coherent and depends heavily on the context of the different *vitae* in which she is mentioned; for more details cf. Wallinger (1990) 139-149; Wieber (2000); Burgersdijk (2004-2005); Krause (2007).

⁵ For an introduction into reception studies and their goals cf. Wagner-Hasel (1998), Steiner-Weber (2007) 7-15; Martindale (2007) 297-311; he labels reception as *a two-way process, backward as well as forward, in which the present and the past are in dialogue with each other* (298).

⁶ Asmus (1911); Hartmann (2001) 332-351 (Arabian legends), 470-475; Stoneman (1992) 156f., 197-200; Charles-Gaffiot (2001) 139-179; Southern (2008) 13-16; Grassi (2010);

Zenobia enjoys a large presence in popular culture⁷ that ranges from perfume bottles to comic books⁸ and romantic novels.⁹

During the 19th century, Zenobia's story was mainly encoded in terms of contemporary Orientalism, by which the queen became a symbol of the alluring but troublesome Orient, to be conquered by the progressive Occident. Hence a subdued Zenobia, symbolically or literally chained, figures as an heroine in visual arts¹⁰ and literature as well as in scholarship. To name but one example, she makes her appearance in the historical epistolary novel (William Ware, *Zenobia, or the Fall of Palmyra*)¹¹, of which the fictional letter writer Lucius M. Piso – himself a representative of the Occident whose most recent heirs were then believed to be the U.S. – fears to lose himself to the Orient while staying at Palmyra.¹² By the end of the 19th century, the Scottish historian and member of the Indian civil service William Wilson Hunter summarised Britain's fight for military supremacy over Asia with the words: *It formed the sequel to the immemorial conflict between the East and the West, which dyed red the waves of Salamis and brought Zenobia a captive*

Dallapiazza (2013); Sartre/Sartre (2014) 191-258 (early modern times and modern times).

⁷ For the different discourses about pop culture cf. Hügel (2013) 1-22; for Zenobia's rare appearance in films cf. Wieber-Scariot (1998) 86-87; Wieber (2000) 281-282 with illustration at 307; Grassi (2010) 306-311; Sartre/Sartre (2014) 243-245.

⁸ My case study about Zenobia as protagonist of a comic book is in preparation and will be published in one of the next issues of this journal.

⁹ For an exemplary analysis of a German 20th century novel about Zenobia (Tessa Korber, *Die Karawanenkönigin*, Zürich/München 1998) cf. Wieber (2007); for Zenobia as a romantic and orientalised heroine in novels of different origin (many of them French) cf. Sartre/Sartre (2014) 236-243.

¹⁰ Cf. the famous statue of the Palmyrene queen (*Zenobia in Chains*, The Huntington Library in San Marino/Los Angeles) whom the US-artist Harriet Hosmer portrayed in 1859 holding the chain between the wrist-manacles with dignity and nonchalance; the painting by the English artist Herbert Schmalz in 1888 (*Zenobia's Last Look on Palmyra*, Art Gallery of South Australia) repeats this motif in an oriental setting, whereas his fellow countryman Edward John Poynter depicted her in 1878 (*Zenobia captive*, private collection) in a partly Indian oriental attire from a side-perspective, with her chains almost hidden; for illustrations of Zenobia in the visual arts cf. Wang (2013).

¹¹ The novel was originally written in 1836 for serial publication in *The Knickerbocker, or New-York Monthly Magazine*, which had many editions with changing titles; the title of the first edition does not give Zenobia's name (*Letters of Lucius M. Piso from Palmyra, to His Friend Marcus Curtius at Rome*); cf. [link 1](#), last access: 22/8/17.

¹² Schueller (1998) 85-88.

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to Rome.¹³ In this equation the British Empire is declared the worthy successor to the Greeks and Romans, whereas India is confounded with the Persian Empire and Palmyra – interestingly, Zenobia as a person can be substituted for a geographical term. Besides, this definition of a timeless fight between Occident and Orient, under the auspices of colonial rule, is a perfect example of the narratives about how the West sees the East, in short Orientalism. Since 1978, the book of that title by Edward W. Said has led to many fruitful debates. Critics have pointed out that Orientalism still is a useful category of analysis. Nonetheless, historical contextualisation is needed instead of lumping together material from diverse centuries, and regional varieties have to be dealt with, because of different discourses of Orientalism.¹⁴ Therefore, and as the reception process of ancient times, even in 20th century is strongly influenced by the 19th century, I will confine myself to an exemplar case study: Alexander Baron's English novel *Queen of the East*, first published in 1956. The main focus will thus lie on the question of how Zenobia's description in that novel is shaped by old-fashioned oriental *topoi* from the 19th century and also on the socio-political, economic, or cultural contexts of her characterisation against the background of the 1950s. As two different paperback editions of Baron's novel are accessible to me, I will include the cover illustrations, blurbs and introductory reviews (as well some as external reviews) in my analysis. By these different forms of paratexts¹⁵, we can get an idea of the author's, editor's and reviewers' intentions and how they tried to influence contemporary reader's reception.

¹³ Hunter (1919, 1st ed. 1899), 2.

¹⁴ For a critical revision of that concept and its focus on English and French Orient discourses cf. Wiedemann (2012); Schueller (1998), in her book about American Orient discourses, decides to use the plural 'orientalisms'. She pleads for the idea of orientalism as a fluid concept, also for distinguishing specific locations in oriental discourses, i.e. Algeria, Near East and India, and for including female gazes of women writers as well as homoerotic male gazes.

¹⁵ Genette (1997).

‘A woman is only a woman’.¹⁶
Zenobia as the incarnation of the Orient

Alexander Baron (1917-1999) was an English post-war author of Jewish descent who wrote novels about war, the London working class milieu and about Jewish identity, mainly taking place around the time of Second World War.¹⁷

His novel about Zenobia was published in 1956 and was met with positive contemporary reviews, e.g. in *The Atlantic*,¹⁸ an American literary and cultural commentary magazine, or in *Scholastic Voice*,¹⁹ an American educational magazine. By the book title *Queen of the East*,²⁰ Zenobia is introduced as an anonymous queen from an undefined Orient, which opens a vast array of speculations, but also deprives the queen of ethnic and personal identity.²¹

¹⁶ All the following quotations refer to the *Panther Book* paperback version: Baron (1960); this quotation (120) serves to characterise Aurelian’s bewilderment about his female opponent: ‘*All this to deal with a woman? They (= his Roman interlocutors) waited. No woman is worth this much trouble. What is a woman to a man? A woman is only a woman.*’ These words may refer to a line from Rudyard Kipling, *The Betrothed*: (...) *And a woman is only a woman, but a good Cigar is a Smoke* – an ironic poem about a bachelor who chooses a cigar over his fiancée, because of her request to quit smoking (Jones [1994] 52).

¹⁷ Baker (1969); de Groot (2003); cf. also the internet page dedicated to Baron by Whitehead (2017).

¹⁸ *Queen of the East* by Alexander Baron. (Ives Washburn, \$3.95.) *Zenobia of Palmyra was an Oriental queen who gave the Roman Empire a brief and memorable jolt. This novel about her is suitably romantic, but also plausible and backed with solid research.* (quotation from: *The Atlantic*, Vol. 198, 1956, 88).

¹⁹ *Queen of the East*, by Alexander Baron (Ives Washburn, \$3.95), tells the story of Zenobia, fabulous queen of Palmyra in the third century, A. D. She challenged the powerful Roman Empire and held its armies at bay for months. Rome’s conquest was a hollow victory. (older teens and adults). (quotation from: *Scholastic Voice*, Vol. 21, 1956, 54).

²⁰ In his *author’s note* (285-286), Baron (1960) referred to the use of Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (originally published in 1776), among other more contemporary reference books; he also named ancient sources (*Historia Augusta*, Eusebius, Zosimus). The book title might therefore refer to the allegedly self-given title of Zenobia in one of her fictitious letters to Emperor Aurelian, only with the difference that she starts with her individual name: *Zenobia, regina orientis* = Zenobia, Queen of the Orient, i.e. East (HA Aurel. 27, 2). Gibbon (1906) uses the phrase three times (86, 94, 334), first in connection with her self-given title, the other two after her defeat, otherwise he addresses her by her name.

²¹ In contrast to other reviewers who mentioned the queen’s and the emperor’s name right at the beginning (in order to help the reader?), S.P. Manstein left the two main

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The whole story about the Roman-Palmyrene confrontation is built around four fictitious face-to-face meetings between the Roman emperor Aurelian and the Palmyrene queen Zenobia. At their first meeting, Aurelian is still a general, and Zenobia the dashing young wife of Odaenathus²², then still alive and called *prince* and *consul*²³.

The charioteer's (i.e. Odaenathus) companion, the leopard-killer, had dropped lightly to the ground. Aurelian glimpsed an abundance of black hair, a small oval face and strange flamboyant clothing. He stared, a suspicion trying to voice itself in his puzzled mind. The leopard-killer was running across to the other chariot, and the light fleetness of his stride stirred the awakening suspicion – his stride? – by the gods! **her** (emphasis Baron) stride! The woman – the girl had taken the baby boy from the nurse in the other chariot and was hugging him to her, his cheek against hers. Aurelian, his eyes blazing with astonishment, did not slow his stride. 'Who is she?' One of the scouts, riding behind, called, 'It is the wife of Odenathus, sir. They call her Zenobia.' (...)

Her complexion was dark and flawless, her teeth white, her eyes large and full of light. In contrast with the dark honey colour of her face and her bare arms was her loose white blouse; and there was an odd, carnival swagger in the wide-legged pantaloons which she wore, of flaring vermilion silk, gathered at the ankles by gold clasps above her sandals of soft red leather.

She and Aurelian faced each other, a dozen paces apart. His thoughts burned in his gaze. Was this the hunter? The wife of a prince? Dressed gaily as a clown, half-naked like a whore? This wild, childlike creature? For a second her eyes hold his; the man brooding

characters aside: "*Queen of the East*, by Alexander Baron (*Wasburn*, \$3.95), tells of a hectic but short-lived rebellion against imperial Rome by Palmyra, one of its outpost subject-states, and of a wily woman-ambassador who ferrets out secret information from Rome VIP's (sic!) during boudoir sallies. Sensuous embellishments liven up some musty footnotes" (quotation from: *The Saturday Review*, October 27, 1956, 26).

22 There are different transcriptions of the protagonists' names; when quoting within the chapter I will use the version of the source under discussion; otherwise the English version is preferred.

23 For his documented titles cf. Potter (1996); Hartmann (2001) 102-108; Sommer (2008) 312 fn. 51-52.

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and intent; the girl bold and hostile. This was the first meeting of Zenobia and Aurelian. (13-14)

Some pages earlier, Aurelian had been presented as the incarnation of Western manhood and rational principle:

The earth-shaking legionary tread was in Aurelian's blood. (...) That slow, deep tread throbbed in his mind as the words Law, Discipline, Commerce, Unity. Rome was Power to Aurelian, a male force whose touch could impregnate any place with Romanness. (10; cf. also 72)

There is no doubt that, in this first meeting with the male West, Zenobia is cast as the representative of the female Orient and thereby included in the colonial European discourse about Middle Eastern culture.²⁴ Since Early Modern times, the states of Western Europe had experienced different military and peaceful contacts with the Ottoman Empire which shaped a set of ideas about oriental mentalities and especially women's life in the Harem, in general based on fantasies than facts.²⁵ With the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, these *topoi* did not disappear, but became part of the colonial agenda and were even projected onto ancient eastern cultures: life in the East, in particular that of women, was presumed to have been the same in ancient Mesopotamia, Assyria, Persia, even in parts of Greece (so-called oriental seclusion)²⁶ and in Byzantium as in Ottoman times. The Orient seemed timeless and its position on the map could depend on the viewpoint.

Although part of Zenobia's description derives mostly from the *Historia Augusta* (HA), an ancient source which is far from authentic and also needs

²⁴ Kabbani (1993) and (2008); see above fn. 14.

²⁵ Kleinlogel (1989); she speaks of a *pornographic turn* in the 19th century (415); for the Western harem construction that eroticises Eastern women and strips them – especially in French Art – of their clothes as well as their intellectual capacities cf. Mernissi (2001). By contrast she refers to Early Modern travel reports (around 1600) describing women in the harem as fully clothed, dressed like men (105). British Orientalist painters preferred dressed women as their models, cf. Tromans (2008); as late as 2015, the German journalist and historian (!) Berthold Seewald, in an article about Islamist war goals, coined the phrase *berauschende(s) Lotterleben* (= intoxicating, dissolute lifestyle) to refer to the bygone times of the harem in Istanbul. Cf. [link 2](#), last access: 22/8/17.

²⁶ Wagner-Hasel (1988) 25-39.

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critical reconsideration,²⁷ it is nonetheless interesting to see which details Baron has added. The description of her looks and her bare arms (*bracchio saepe nudo*) resemble the ancient depiction, but trousers are not mentioned. Even though the author of HA calls her an enthusiastic rider and tells of her wearing the military leader's helmet and *paludamentum*, there is no information about her riding costume. However, the expression *wide-legged pantaloons* acts as a topical signifier of the world of the harem. But considering the ancient findings, Zenobia, intruding into the male sphere of hunting and war, could possibly have worn the Parthian trousers in which Palmyrene men are sometimes depicted.²⁸

After Odaenathus has been murdered (we read of *some family intrigue* (35) and of a suggestion that *prince Othenatus and his elder son were murdered by a secret order of Zenobia* (38)²⁹, Zenobia becomes regent for her under-age son and has coins struck in his name (39). The following events tell about her rise to royal power: her counsellors are introduced, we follow her debates with rabbis³⁰ and we even learn that she employs a female spy (who later will become a double agent) in Rome, the prostitute Philomene (60). Finally, the Palmyrene queen has her second meeting with Aurelian (61-75). Thereafter he is declared Augustus and she publishes a *refusal of obedience to Rome* (77).

In all this, we get also an insight into her bedroom. In several scenes we are bombarded with all the clichés about the harem environment. The mentioning of cushions, colours, scents, slaves, naked skin and a bathing

²⁷ HA trig. tyr. 30, 14-15; 17-18; cf. the so-called *Historia-Augusta-Colloquia* (first 1961 in Bonn), for an overview: Johne (2008).

²⁸ Goldmann (2001) 164-168 with fig. 10.1.

²⁹ Eutrop 9,13: *quae occiso Odenatho marito Orientem tenebat – this one holds power over the East, after her husband Odenathus had been murdered*; Zenobia as a bad stepmother and a confidante of her husband's murderer HA trig. tyr. 16,3 and 17,2; in the novel *Rufinus, the Roman Governor of Arabia*, finally made a deathbed confession that he murdered Zenobia's husband (205); for possible but nonetheless hardly probable historical facts behind this denouement that anyhow prove Baron's thorough preparation cf. Stoneman (1992) 108; for identifying this Rufinus with Cocceius Rufinus cf. Alföldi (1967) 196, and for a detailed discussion of all the sources about Odenathus' murder cf. Hartmann (2001) 218-230.

³⁰ For Zenobia's relationship with the Jews and the Talmudic sources cf. Hartmann (2001) 327-332; interestingly enough, Baron (1960) 40-41, lets Zenobia beat the rabbis at their own games when she quotes from Jewish tractates to support her opinion that women should act in public.

scene³¹ serve to arouse Harem fantasies by addressing the reader's olfactory and eidetic memory³²:

In the night's heat Zenobia had thrown off her coverings. Nested deep in the middle of her huge, square couch, she looked like a gleaming figurine set in the dark velvet of its case. Beneath her the sheets, of petal-soft Chinese silk, were of a purple so intense that in the shadow it seemed black. The damask counterpane across her thighs was rose-coloured. She squirmed in her sleep, and the lamplight made of her body a supple, sensual, movement of honey-sheen among the colours of the couch. (...) There were hangings behind the bed, rich fabrics, purple and rose and (her favourite colour) vermilion, to set it off against the room's cool whiteness. Soft Bukhara rugs littered the mosaic floor. There was no furniture except for a round-backed arm-chair and a low bedside table which, like the bed, were made of terebinth inlaid with silver. On the table were a pitcher, a cup and a bowl heaped with fruit, all of silver, and a bronze gong to call her slave. (42-43).

Her foot and her dark, gleaming shoulders sank again into the water. Zenobia liked her evening bath hot. The steam rose around her, powerfully scented with cassia. Two of her bath slaves crouched

31 For bath scenes in oriental paintings and their vaguely sexual connotations cf. Thornton (1989) 347-348; on 352 with the reproduction of *Un bain au Sérail ou Femme sortant du bain* by Théodore Chassériau (1849, Musée du Louvre, Paris). There we are also made witness to the rubbing dry of the protagonist by a slave of another race. Whereas Baron refers to Indian girls, the painting depicts a Nubian slave; quite a good range of Chassériau's bath scenes can be found in an article on the [blog mmediene écritures](#) (2012/2016); last access: 22/8/17; for *Le bain turc* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1862, Musée du Louvre, Paris), in a way the prototype of oriental bath scenes, cf. Lemaire (2000, 202-203).

32 Cf. Kabbani (1993) 107-143: *Der Serail im Salon*; for the formalised and hierarchic behaviour in the Harem, quite unlike the fantasies of licentiousness by West Europeans cf. Gost (1993); the text of the novel seems partly to be a visualisation of well-known paintings; cf. Lemaire (2000) 116, 131, 198-199, 209, 224-225, 243, 258-259, 261; Tromans (2008) 128-159. All sorts of textiles played an important role in constructing what was thought to be an authentic ambience; interestingly by 1900 the bulk of fabrics used for producing clothes in Turkey was imported from West-Europe (DelPlato [2010] 262) which means that the harem is fabricated by the Western mind not only figuratively but also literally. Besides, most of the models the Western painters used came from their region and not from the Orient (Thornton [1989] 351).

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on the steps of the sunken pool. Two more waited by a massage couch. They were Indian girls, naked like herself in the steam, copper-dark, dainty as gazelles, their eyes bright and eager. (...) Zenobia lay for so long in the water that she might have been asleep. When she rose, lovely and gleaming, she came up the steps and stood while the girls laid napkins of soft wool on her and dried her with a gentle skilful patting. (...) Naked, she looked a docile, passive creature, soft, sensual, sleek as satin, the breasts large and proudly firm, the small waist accentuated by full haunches, a golden sheen upon the skin. She might have been an **odalisque sister** (emphasis AW) to the clothed Zenobia whom the world knew. (76-77)

Next, the description of her exquisite make-up, evolving in several paragraphs, is crowned by phrases such as: *It was twice a pleasure to keep a man waiting when he was a Roman* (i.e. the Governor Rufinus) (...) *She was ready. The nubile little animal* (emphasis AW) *which had emerged from the bath was hidden.* (78) By the method of eroticising and dehumanising Zenobia, the author literally speaking strips the queen of her power – and who, in the end, would be afraid of an odalisque³³ and *her refusal of obedience* (77)? In fact, the scenes taken together present the queen as the mere object of the male gaze, even if in written form and therefore only imaginary.³⁴

Some pages earlier, we witness Zenobia's internal struggle – she envies prostitutes because of her loneliness³⁵ –, nonetheless she wonders:

She envied them (i.e. the prostitutes), and all the other women of Palmyra, so different from herself. What was a woman in the East? A creature lolling on cushions, eating sweetmeats, busy with cosmetics, her whole life taken up with the minute study of one art alone, the pleasing of men; a creature useless yet treasured, wielding her influence in the bed. Why was she, Zenobia, so different? Why did a man's energy race through her veins? Why did she hunt and march

³³ Gost (1993) 167-168: an odalisque was a concubine or favourite of the sultan with a room of her own (= oda).

³⁴ For the depiction of women as objects of male pleasure from a masculine and heterosexual point of view cf. Mulvey (1975); cf. Kabbani (2008) 42 about the Western voyeur in the world of the harem.

³⁵ Cf. the phrase *the huge (...) couch* (42).

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and scheme like a man, with a man's ambitions? Why could she not be just another idle, happy, sensual female?

The heat was in her blood again; a woman's sensuality coursing through her; but she knew that to keep her power over men, men who had been born and bred to despise women, she must, she must, she **must** (emphasis Baron) keep apart from them. (59)

By means of the stylistic device of free indirect speech, the author presents Zenobia's possible thoughts, but through the voyeuristic glimpses into her boudoir he makes her exactly the creature she allegedly recoils from. From a modern point of view, harem fantasies and Zenobia's internal struggle with her sensuality might have answered readers' demands in the climate of sexual repression of the so-called long Fifties³⁶, and that is exactly the way the book covers and taglines present the story. The cover of *Panther Book* (1960) reads *Zenobia: who defied decadent Rome, ruled like a man, fought like a soldier and yielded like a woman* and quotes the *Evening News: A lusty*³⁷ (emphasis AW), *vigorous, well constructed novel*. A lazy Zenobia (?) is presented on a récamière or on a cushion with a treasure chest at her feet – her nails painted (!). A passive, idle woman in a lying position, waiting for the things or the man to come: that has been, since the 19th century, one of the main *topoi* of Orientalist harem paintings, photography and literature.³⁸

³⁶ Mann (2012) 89-107.

³⁷ For 'sexing up' books as a house rule of the publisher *Panther* cf. Whitehead (2017).

³⁸ Thornton (1989) 348; for a range of examples in painting and advertisement cf. Edwards (2000) 15, 42, 132, 172, 189; Tromans (2008) 138, 141, 143, 147, 153, 158; for photographic evidence see Micklewright (2010) 245-248, 256; cf. also DelPlato (2010) 274, quoting from Théophile Gautier, *Constantinople* 1853, about a Western male interloper, entering the harem: (...) *into an apartment heaped with all the luxuries of the Orient, where, reclining upon a superb divan, a sultana gleaming with jewels (...) impatiently awaited your coming*. The rather vague cover illustration of *Panther Book* might likewise allude to a Roman penetrating the 'harem', possibly to be located in a tent.

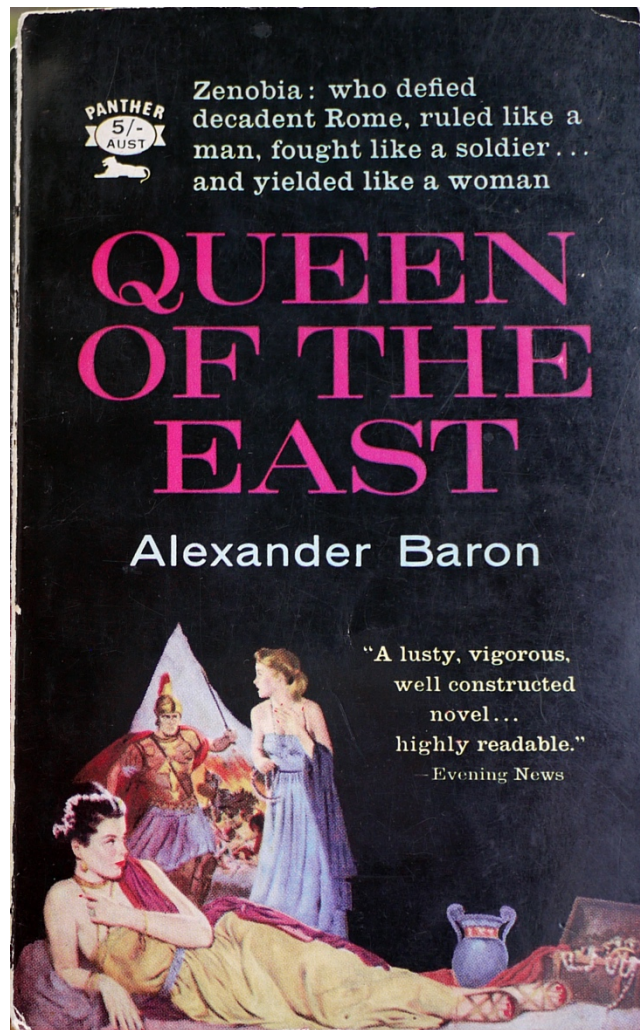


Fig. 1. Cover of the Panther Book edition, GB 1960
(author's own collection)

The *Popular Library* (1958) edition also refers to the conflicting forces of a man's and a woman's world with the tagline *She had a man's power and a woman's desires*. The cover by the American artist Mitchel Hooks, who is

famous for his artwork for paperback books and film posters (e.g. James Bond Movies),³⁹ introduces Zenobia quite obviously as a sort of harem-girl, clad in a bikini and a transparent nothing with waist-high slashes to put her legs on display.

She makes an entrance like a dancer, through a curtain and via stairs, to present herself to the waiting observer, depicted as a Roman officer (Aurelian?) who holds his spear in overdone phallic gesture. This Zenobia is the object of the male gaze, both of her spectator within the illustration and of the reader.⁴⁰ As she is stepping down, her position on top is only temporary. The potential reader could therefore imagine that soon the man will not have to look up to that woman anymore; instead he will gain unbound pleasure from her entertaining him in harem style. The back cover gives the reader a clue who this *Queen of the East* actually is and invokes even more fantasies by addressing the city of Palmyra as *exotic*.⁴¹ The ancient chaste Zenobia, who according to the *Historia Augusta* only had sex with her husband in order to conceive, and after having clarified that she was not pregnant⁴² – would probably not have provided such an interesting topic.

39 For samples of Hooks' illustrations cf. the online image archive [Pulp Covers. The Best Of The Worst](#); last access: 22/8/17 and the entries dedicated to Mitchell Hooks on the blog [Today's Inspiration. Celebrating illustration, design, cartoon and comic art of the mid-20th century](#) run by the cartoonist, illustrator and researcher Leif Peng, last access: 22/8/17; about sexing up the covers in those days Hooks said in an interview: *This was back in the early fifties, when absolutely every book had to have a sexy cover. It didn't matter what the book was, it could have been a cook book* ([link 3](#), last access: 22/8/17).

40 Cf. fn. 34 above; Kabbani (2008) 42 about the voyeurism in Orientalist painting: *awarding the onlooker a 'droit de seigneur' to study at length the object of his gaze*.

41 *Zenobia, Queen of exotic Palmyra* (...). For the overlapping of the category exoticism as the discourse of the other with *orientalism* cf. Rincón (2010) 339, 344, 346, 354, 356-360.

42 HA trig. tyr. 30, 12; the mentioning of Zenobia's continence, that need not necessarily be taken at face value, could be connected to late ancient pagan discourses of chastity, cf. Wieber (2000) 292.

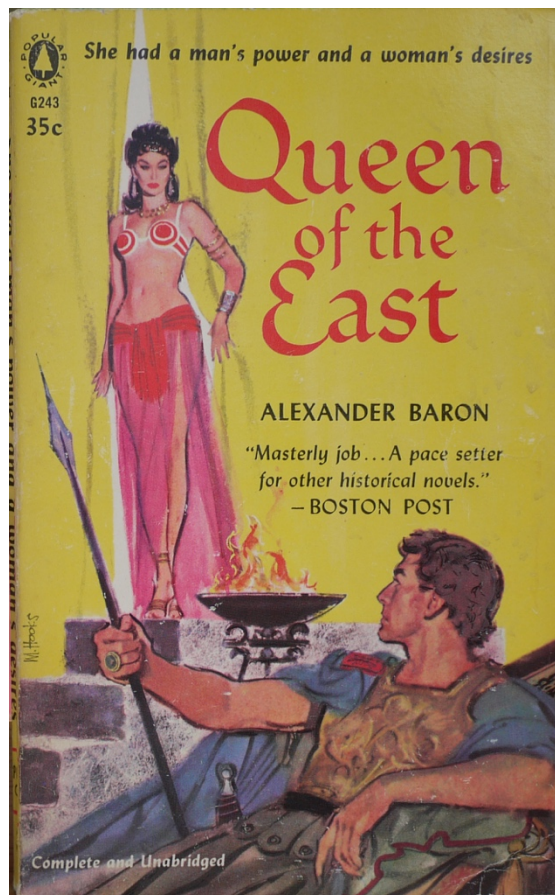


Fig. 2. Cover of the Popular Library edition, USA 1958
(author's own collection)

Back to the book: it is the Governor of Arabia, Rufinus, who informs Aurelian that Zenobia murdered her husband (119) and he sums her politics up in:

'She is dangerous because she is clever, as brave and clever as any man. She is dangerous because she is a woman, with a woman's vanity. She postures in front of the world as she might posture in front of a mirror. That is what makes a woman dangerous.'(118)

On their third meeting, after Zenobia's invasion in Egypt (153) she makes Aurelian an offer of marital alliance⁴³ which he turns down with the answer:

‘A woman who has murdered one husband may well have no fear of a second. But the man whom she favours might as well bed with a cobra as with her.’ (182).⁴⁴

Rufinus has already associated Zenobia with the Roman arch-enemy Cleopatra in his discussion with Aurelian (118), and this connection is now emphasised by the location Egypt and by the Cleopatran snake symbol. As a consequence, the blurb on the back cover of the *Popular Library* (1958) describes Zenobia with the following periphrasis: *This desert Cleopatra*.

After the battles of Antiochia and Emesa, Aurelian can finally – thanks to an act of treachery (228) – end the siege of Palmyra and he captures the fugitive queen. On their fourth meeting everything has changed: *Aurelian could not believe in it. (...) the indomitable Zenobia broken* (252). When the time comes to pass a sentence on her rebellion against Rome, we share Aurelian's viewpoint, by means of free indirect speech: *Again she bowed her head. He was puzzled. He had expected arrogance. Instead she stood like some submissive wife of ancient times, a Lucretia **shamed** (emphasis AW) before her husband* (257-258).

Lucretia⁴⁵ is the paradigmatic *exemplum* of a virtuous Roman *matrona*⁴⁶ who opted for suicide after having been raped.

43 There are no ancient (Western) sources for such a marriage proposal, which corresponds to the idea of oriental women who offer themselves to men; in classic Arab literature however, al-Tabarī (839–923) tells a version of the Syrian al-Zabbā' (i.e. Zenobia) luring the Arab leader Jadhīma, who had killed her father, into a lethal trap by offering him a marriage alliance, cf. Woltering (2014) 28-29; Sartre/Stare (2014) 247-249; the archaeologist and writer Judith Weingarten in her [blog](#) about the Palmyrene queen (last access: 22/8/17).

44 The cobra refers to Cleopatra whose symbol the Uraeus is (Ashton [2001]); whereas Baron (1960) 74, 118, 228 follows the lineage given by HA (trig. tyr. 27, 1; 30, 2; Claud. 1, 1; Aurelian. 27, 3; Prob. 9, 5), modern scholars do not believe in this ancestry (Wieber-Scariot [1999] 323; Hartmann [2001] 23-24).

45 For the political connotations of the *exemplum* Lucretia cf. Prescendi (2000); there is nonetheless a hint in the novel that Baron's Aurelian and Zenobia played their parts in the drama of conquest and submission in mutual consent: *Her face was contrite but in her eyes, for him alone to see, were teasing spots of light, challenging him to understand.* (258)

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Comparing the situation of a raped woman to the female intrusion into the male sphere of war and politics, at the first sight the only *tertium comparationis* seems to be the breach of a taboo, no matter who is responsible for the misdeed. Baron obviously matches the Roman Lucretia, feeling ashamed because of having lost her chastity, with the bold queen's embarrassment about her defeat. Interestingly, he compares the emperor to the husband of old days, which would make Zenobia his 'wife' and mean that she is finally (!) subject to male authority again. Leaving that aside, one may read the Lucretia *exemplum* as a myth of political rebirth after violation of the body politic⁴⁷ and hence interpret the taming of Zenobia in the same way. Roman order is restored, in other words: gynaecocracy has ended and the Occident has triumphed over the Orient.⁴⁸ Again the *Popular Library* (1958) edition is less subtle than the author himself, as the blurb on the back cover reads: *This desert Cleopatra's daring knew no limits: poison plots,⁴⁹ political conspiracies and armed combat – until Aurelian had no choice but to take her by force.* This scenario, justifiably repellent to modern eyes, certainly means rape as a means of punishing the female enemy and her violation of boundaries.

Back to the novel's plot: Aurelian spares her; she pleads female ignorance and betrays her counsellor Longinos. In the end she happily lives in Rome, in a villa prepared by Aurelian for her (273): *She had forgotten her lost*

46 This scene might be the embellishment of the ancient source HA trig. tyr. 30, 27: *ferturque visisse cum liberis matronae iam more Romanae* (= she is then said to have lived together with her children in the style of a Roman lady) and Gibbon's (1906) 95 sentence *the Syrian Queen insensibly sank into a Roman matron* (emphasis AW), only with the difference that with HA and Gibbon this development is the result of Zenobia's acquittal, whereas with Baron the change in behaviour comes all of a sudden and is prerequisite for the emperor's lenity.

47 For interpreting Lucretia's death in terms of restoring order and shaping a new political system cf. Fögen (2002) 21-36.

48 The author of the *Historia Augusta* sums up Aurelian's achievement in this case: *ille, pro pudor[e], orientem femineo pressum iugo in nostra iura restituit* – he was the one who restored our supremacy over the Orient that had suffered, what a shame, the female yoke (HA Aurel. 41, 9); for the ancient discourse of ending women's rulership to restore order cf. Wieber-Scariot (1999) 191-195.

49 Baron's novel does not give an example for that, so this piece of information might derive from the comparison with Cleopatra who was said to having conducted experiments with different sorts of poison; the most famous source is Plut. Antonius 71, for more evidence connecting Cleopatra with poison see the thorough source edition from ancient and modern times by Jones (2006) 108, 114, 169, 181, 186, 194, 195, 197, 210, 211, 214, 273, 294.

throne, as a woman forgets last year's fashion. She had forgotten Palmyra (270) and, what a surprise, the Emperor can go to her villa to get some rest from his work (*sacred mission* 275).

After all this, the double agent Philomene ends the novel with the following conclusion about the couple, Aurelian, now dead, and Zenobia, still alive: '*A lot of good it (i.e. his mission) has done to you, Aurelian! You have an epitaph. She has all the best people to dinner. When will you men learn sense?*' (284)

This version of Zenobia's story is a very conventional occidental-oriental *Taming of the Shrew* that corresponds with the restorative climate of the Fifties and brings any gender trouble to a happy ending. Thus, the historical novel bears a modern subtext: after times of war that made a huge impact on gender relations, women have now returned to their traditional places in society.⁵⁰ But what is best from the Western gentleman's point of view is the fact that in the end the tamed Eastern queen is now his personal 'harem girl', brought home as a trophy and always available, more like a concubine than a wife⁵¹ – a woman whose world is now narrowed down to fashion and society life instead of politics.⁵²

⁵⁰ For a comparable subtext in ancient epic films of the 1950s cf. Wieber (1998), (2006) and (2015). For Zenobia spending her retirement in a villa in Conca near Tibur (not far from the palace of Emperor Hadrian) cf. HA, trig. tyr. 30, 27 and for a discussion of the different sources about Zenobia's life after her defeat cf. Hartmann (2001) 413-424; the Byzantine chronicler Zonaras (12th century) presents two versions (12, 27): either she is married to a Roman senator or one of her daughters marries Aurelian. I cannot account for an ancient source that she was involved with Aurelian; Stoneman (1992) 4, says *sources that add a possible love interest to Zenobia's correspondence with Aurelian go beyond the evidence*. Operas and theatre plays from Early Modern Times or from 19th century might be the origin for that 'love interest', but sometimes only from Aurelian's side, cf. Asmus (1911) 16, 296, 314; Hartmann (2001) 472-473; Dallapiazza (2013) 1060; Sommer (2015) 116-117.

⁵¹ Aurelian's companion and successor Probus said about Zenobia's and Aurelian's obviously secrete relationship in Rome: '*I never knew a pair as discreet as those two.*' (280); before Baron has presented Aurelian as married to Severina (128); for the little we know about the empress cf. Watson (1999) 113, and Strobel (1998).

⁵² This perception of women might be compared to German promotional films from the same time: a line in one of the films from *Dr. Oetker* (the German company famous for baking powder among other products) says: *We all know, of course, that a woman has only two questions in her life: 1) What shall I wear today? and 2) What shall I cook for dinner?* Cf. [link 4](#), last access: 22/8/17.

War memories, Jewish identity and Oriental escapism

Why did a highly praised critical and political author⁵³ as Alexander Baron write such ‘pulp fiction’?⁵⁴ The answer might lie in his biography: the first books he wrote were about World War II. He was especially praised for his description of the common soldiers’ experiences, and he came to terms with his own traumatic war experiences as an infantryman (Normandy and Sicily; *From the City, From the Plough* 1948 // *There’s no Home* 1950). After a novel about post-war London he returned to the topic of war and this time described the fate of Mark Strong, who as a Jew had to bear anti-Semitism in the army to achieve the position of a fighter pilot, just to meet the same hostile climate after the war: His wife suffered a miscarriage during a Fascist rally.⁵⁵ The topic of Jewish identity did not make *With Hope, Farewell* (1952) a success, and in 1954 Baron started to write historical fiction: *The Golden Princess*, a novel about Marina, the Native American who became interpreter, advisor, lover, and intermediary for the conquistador Hernán Cortés. So far no information is available about how many other historical novels, apart from *Queen of the East*, followed.⁵⁶ In the Sixties, when the Eichmann trial was omnipresent, Baron turned again to a Jewish topic, this time about the Holocaust: *The Lowlife* (1963).⁵⁷ Hence *Queen of the East* might be interpreted as escape fiction, for the readers of the time as well as for the author himself, who took a ‘vacation’ for some time from war memories and the question of Jewish identity. Considering that Jews all over the world had been stigmatised Oriental, the alignment with the Roman emperor, so to speak the Western conqueror, against Zenobia, the incarnation of Orient, could also stand as a proof for Baron’s westernisation,⁵⁸ especially when one

53 De Groot (2003) 123: *linked with and compared to* (among others) *Hemingway*; Worpole (2011) captions his article: *Alexander Baron was an East Ender, a bohemian communist, and one of the great chroniclers of postwar*.

54 Allen (2011) 80, mistakes him for an American and calls him *The American pulpmeister* and labelled the book *Orientalist soft-core*; cf. also Stoneman (1992) 200: *lurid and raunchy*.

55 De Groot (2003) 124; Whitehead (2017).

56 De Groot (2003): **selected writings**; Woolf (2009): *He did a couple of novels about Spain and a couple of historical novels about ancient Egypt and several novels set in London after the second world war*; Baker (1969) 20.

57 Cf. Thomas (2011); the Holocaust did not enjoy any wider public recognition in Britain of the 1960s (Cheyette [2004] 702-703), whereas Baron had called it in an interview *the master obsession of my life*.

58 Khazzoom (2003); for the overlapping of different discourses, i.e. orientalism and antisemitism, cf. Wiedemann (2012): N° 4 and 5.

takes into consideration that Baron's family roots lay in Eastern Europe, as his father was a Russian-Jewish immigrant and he himself had changed his second name from *Bernstein*.⁵⁹ Besides, he might have needed a bestseller for economic reasons.

Obviously, Alexander Baron in this novel is more at home with describing the military life and tactics (i.e. the siege of Palmyra) and the disillusion of the Roman emperor Aurelian trying to keep up the appearances of an empire (a man with a *sacred mission* 275) than with the historical Zenobia. To quote a contemporary review: *The flesh on these bones quivers and trembles quite a bit -- but the soldiers, politics, incidental scenes are often vigorous. Not for studious historian* (sic!).⁶⁰ Besides, the Fall of Palmyra and the foreshadowing Fall of the Roman Empire might have also been of some interest to Baron – 1956 is after all the year of the Suez Crisis which is generally considered to mark a turning point in the steady decline of the British Empire that had already suffered a heavy loss through the Indian independence of 1947.⁶¹

Baron has not violated ancient source material⁶² by writing his novel; having said that, one has to admit that by means of many *topoi* he has put Zenobia under the strong spell of orientalisation (in the style of the 19th century) and has in the process stripped the queen of her political power. Therefore this version makes her join the ranks of Oriental *femmes fatales* who

⁵⁹ De Groot (2003) 123; Baker (1969) 17. When interviewed in 1958 for an article in the *Jewish Chronicle*, he is confident in Jewish assimilation and identifies himself more with British working-class culture than Jewish culture (Cheyette [2004] 702); besides he always claimed that religion had no bearing on him (De Groot [2003] 124).

⁶⁰ Quotation from *Kirkus Review* September 1956 ([link 5](#)) (last access: 22/8/17); one reviewer even seems to regret that Zenobia is too often the focus of interest: *Alexander Baron's Queen of the East (1956) concentrates on the continuation of Decius' efforts by Aurelian (270-275), although much of the novel is taken up by the famous Zenobia of Palmyra.* (quotation from *The Classical Outlook* 34 [1957], 71).

⁶¹ For similar motives cf. Weingarten in her [blog](#) about Zenobia: to Robert Wood, who in 1750 set out on an expedition to study the remains of the ancient city of Palmyra, one of the reasons for taking interest in that region was that the city served as a *portent of the future of Britain* (1/7/2008); for imperial discourses cf. Münkler (2010).

⁶² For his sources see above fn. 20; considering the novel's set of characters Baron (1960) 286, wrote: *The only major characters in my story who are not historical are Maxin* (i.e. a Gothic prisoner of war, then Aurelian's body slave and confidante) *and Philomene* (i.e. a prostitute, Zenobia's spy and later double agent). *Such small embellishments as I have added to historical fact do not affect the main course of my story.*

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need to be tamed by the civilised and disciplined Western male.⁶³ As a consequence, in the 1950s her story of bygone times was to be understood as a tutorial in contemporary female subordination, abroad as well as ‘at home’.⁶⁴

Nevertheless Baron’s old-fashioned Zenobia still is alive, as a reference in a recent crime novel (set in the Sixties) proves: together with Chaucer (!) he is named as source about the Palmyrene queen.⁶⁵ And in 2010, Elizabeth Anne Jones uses the novel as reference literature for more or less historical women who applied oil therapy, one of them being Zenobia.⁶⁶ As a counterpart to this still vivid Western imagery of the Palmyrene queen, an Eastern perspective would be convenient. But that’s another story.⁶⁷

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⁶³ For the 19th century definition of the whole Orient as female and its inclusion into an evolutionary model with the male West on a higher cultural stage cf. Kohl (1989) 361-363.

⁶⁴ For the connection of discourses of exoticism with domestic gender trouble and male fears of losing power cf. Rincón (2010) 354; for the post-war era in GB as a period with lot of restrictions for women cf. Mann (2012); Dawson (2001), esp. 285 and 289-290, highlights – using the example of Catherine the Great –, how eroticising the empress in 18th century literature serves to diminish female power and moreover how stories about famous women in power were used to teach female readers submissiveness.

⁶⁵ Falconer (2010) 25: *Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, 3rd cent. AD, who features in Chaucer’s ‘Monk’s tale’ and Alexander Baron’s ‘The Queen of the East’.* (within the story listed on a paper to encourage touristic interest for Syria).

⁶⁶ Jones (2010) 48.

⁶⁷ I am planning to address the modern Syrian version of Zenobia in an essay that will be part of a collection about *Orientalism and the Reception of Powerful Women from the Ancient World*, to be co-edited by Filippo Carlà-Uhink and me.

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