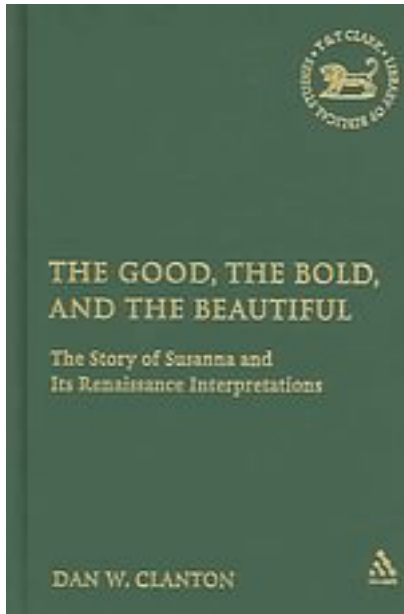


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**Clanton, Dan W.**

***The Good, the Bold, and the Beautiful: The Story of Susanna and Its Renaissance Interpretations***

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This book results from the author's doctoral thesis presented to the Iliff School of Theology in 2002. The author has for many years been a member of the group on religion and popular culture that seeks to show how biblical literature and figures have been re-interpreted in art, music, theater, and film. The book divides clearly into two parts. Part 1 explores what was the historical and social setting in which the story of Susanna was written, while part 2 grapples with how the story was interpreted in the art, theater, and music of the Renaissance from 1450 to 1650 C.E. Clanton, in the introduction, describes his methodology in part 1 as narrative-rhetorical criticism; that in part 2 is descriptive and comparative (5).

After the introduction, Clanton discusses the context and dating of the story of Susanna. He holds that the story was composed in the first century B.C.E. To argue for this position, he provides a quick overview of society and culture in the first century B.C.E. and a survey of the roles women could hold in the Second Temple period. He hones in on the reign of Salome Alexandra. He suggests that a woman as ruler was not acceptable to a male-dominated society and that, to justify her position, her supporters composed the stories of Greek Esther, Judith, and Susanna to show how women could have prominent roles (32), yet not be a threat to male dominance (41). He also looks at the debate between the

Sadducees and the Pharisees in rabbinic material over the treatment of witnesses. There are several problems in this brief overview as it attempts to place Susanna within the first century B.C.E. First, Clanton almost suggests that there were no major disagreements between various factions within Judaism before the first century B.C.E. and that “Hellenization” lay at the root of it all (12–13). The roles he ascribes to women in the first century B.C.E. are not different from those one could posit for the preexilic period or that he finds for the Renaissance period. More important, he does not discuss at all the different genres of the stories of Judith, Susanna, and Greek Esther. If one attends to the traditional narrative structure of Susanna (the innocent woman falsely accused, Stith Thompson K 2112; the clever young judge, Stith Thompson J 1140–1150), the concern about specific judicial procedure may not be so important. As such a story, it would have been enjoyable to audiences in many periods. Also missing is a meaningful discussion of the different emphases between the OG and Theodotonic versions, particularly as revealed in the conclusions. Such an analysis would also have shown the malleability of the narrative even in these early versions.

In chapter 4 Clanton provides a commentary on the Theodotonic version of Susanna. Indebted to the methodology of James Phelan, Clanton distinguishes between the narrative audience, that is, the one implicitly addressed by the narrator and that views the characters and events as if they were real, and the authorial audience, which has the knowledge that it is reading a constructed text (46). A further distinction is between a mimetic character and a thematic character. A mimetic character is a plausible character, a person with recognizable traits. A thematic character is one who represents some larger group or ideal (47, 65–66, 90–93). Clanton provides a nice reading of the story, particularly his discussion of the separation of the elders by Daniel as recalling how it was only the collusion of the elders that had started the attack on Susanna (83). One might quibble with certain turns of phrase by Clanton, such as “ἐγένοντο ἐν ἐπιθυμίᾳ αὐτῇ, literally ‘were in heat for her’” (58) or “The AA [authorial audience] might notice an intertextual allusion here [v. 50] between Daniel and Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2.46)” (82), as though only Christians make up the authorial audience. More important, Clanton notes the problem about Daniel’s cross-examination of the elders consisting only of a question about under which tree the alleged intercourse took place. However, he does not discuss how such wordplays are part of dream and omen interpretation. The wordplay Daniel uses reveals his position as an interpreter. Clanton concludes from his reading of the narrative that it is not primarily a mimetic narrative but a thematic narrative. The readers are not being encouraged to imitate the characters in the narrative, particularly the elders, but to note how Susanna stands for faithfulness to the law.

Part 2 consists of three chapters. The first (ch. 4) discusses briefly salient features of the Renaissance as well as the roles of women and their means of religious expression.

Clanton chooses as his beginning 1450 as around this time the printing press made texts more available and in the vernacular; it was also the time of the fall of Constantinople, when refugees brought with them many ancient Greek texts. For the end he chooses 1650, at the end of the Thirty Years' War, which led to the development of nation-states and sowed the seeds of rationalism. This quick overview leads Clanton in chapter 5 to discuss what he terms standard depictions of Susanna by the painters Tintoretto, Guido Reni, and Guercino. Clanton sees these depictions as "harmful in that they portray the desire to possess Susanna via rape as a natural result of viewing female beauty" (121). "Thus, artistic interpretations that highlight the erotic, mimetic level of the story are using Susanna's story as an excuse to satisfy other agendas, usually commissions from wealthy patrons who were invested in the patriarchal status quo and who therefore might not be as interested in Susanna as a feminine symbol of piety" (139). In chapter 6 Clanton provides counterreadings of Susanna from Albrecht Altdorfer, a painter, Sixt Birck, a playwright, Guillaume Guérault and Didier Lupi Second, a poet and composer, respectively, Artemisia Gentilisci, a painter, and Rembrandt. He sees these interpretations as emphasizing more the thematic qualities of the narrative. For example, he notes how Rembrandt "presents the viewer with a young woman shocked and horrified to find that she is being watched, one who appeals to the viewer both to turn away and to help her" (169). Through his analysis, one gains a better sense of what Clanton understands by mimetic and thematic. He does not want the viewer of these Renaissance works to imitate the lascivious elders wherein the beautiful woman is reduced to a sex object. Rather, he wants the viewers to resist such a reading. This distinction of mimetic and thematic seems much more at home in this context and seems to drive Clanton's attempt to apply the same distinction in the narrative of Susanna. Its application there seems less appropriate, for implausible characters in a story make for a dull read, as do stories out to make a point.

Clanton has pursued a broad-ranging project and is to be commended for it. I would have liked him to explore some methodological issues that his wide-ranging work entailed. First, is there a difference between an aural and a visual audience? Is hearing of the elders' lust for Susanna different from a visual of a beautiful Susanna? Second, Clanton makes no comment on the difference between having the full story portrayed on the canvas by Altdorfer and on the stage by Birck versus the choice of one moment in the narrative. Having the full story immediately brings the downfall of the elders front and center. Finally, the Renaissance viewers, as compared to many twenty-first-century viewers, would have known the whole story of Susanna when they came to see the paintings of Tintoretto and the other "standard depictions" of Susanna. Do these depictions thus not become metonymic for the whole story with the tale of the downfall of the elders? As such, does the naked beauty of Susanna reinforce a male chauvinist ideology or challenge it?