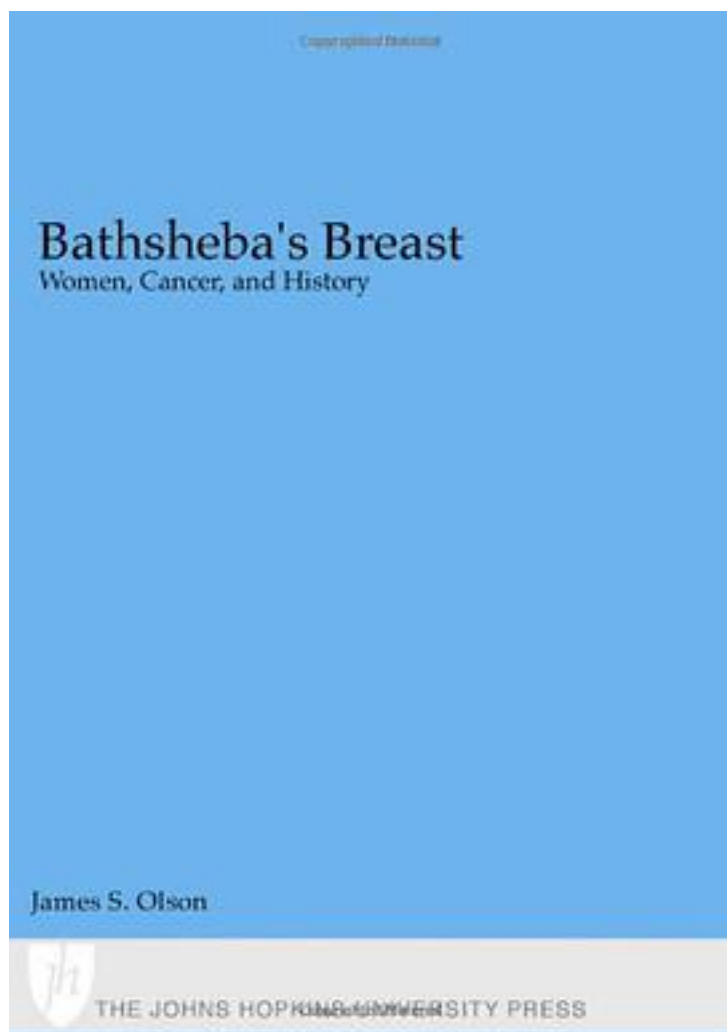


Bathsheba's Breast



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"Breast cancer may very well be history's oldest malaise, known as well to the ancients

as it is to us. The women who have endured it share a unique sisterhood. Queen Atossa and Dr. Jerri Nielsen-separated by era and geography, by culture, religion, politics, economics, and world view-could hardly have been more different. Born 2,500 years apart, they stand as opposite bookends on the shelf of human history. One was the most powerful woman in the ancient world, the daughter of an emperor, the mother of a god; the other is a twenty-first-century physician with a streak of adventure coursing through her veins. From the imperial throne in ancient Babylon, Atossa could not have imagined the modern world, and only in the driest pages of classical literature could Antarctica-based Jerri Nielsen even have begun to fathom the Near East five centuries before the birth of Christ. For all their differences, however, they shared a common fear that transcends time and space." -from *Bathsheba's Breast*

In 1967, an Italian surgeon touring Amsterdam's Rijks museum stopped in front of Rembrandt's *Bathsheba at Her Bath*, on loan from the Louvre, and noticed an asymmetry to Bathsheba's left breast; it seemed distended, swollen near the armpit, discolored, and marked with a distinctive pitting. With a little research, the physician learned that Rembrandt's model, his mistress Hendrickje Stoffels, later died after a long illness, and he conjectured in a celebrated article for an Italian medical journal that the cause of her death was almost certainly breast cancer. A horror known to every culture in every age, breast cancer has been responsible for the deaths of 25 million women throughout history. An Egyptian physician writing 3,500 years ago concluded that there was no treatment for the disease. Later surgeons recommended excising the tumor or, in extreme cases, the entire breast. This was the treatment advocated by the court physician to sixth-century Byzantine empress Theodora, the wife of Justinian, though she chose to die in pain rather than lose her breast. Only in the past few decades has treatment advanced beyond disfiguring surgery. In *Bathsheba's Breast*, historian James S. Olson—who lost his left hand and forearm to cancer while writing this book—provides an absorbing and often frightening narrative history of breast cancer told through the heroic stories of women who have confronted the disease, from Theodora to Anne of Austria, Louis XIV's mother, who confronted "nun's disease" by perfecting the art of dying well, to Dr. Jerri Nielson, who was dramatically evacuated from the South Pole in 1999 after performing a biopsy on her own breast and self-administering chemotherapy. Olson explores every facet of the disease: medicine's evolving understanding of its pathology and treatment options; its cultural significance; the political and economic logic that has dictated the terms of a war on a "woman's disease"; and the rise of patient activism. Olson concludes that, although it has not yet been conquered, breast cancer is no longer the story of individual women struggling alone against a mysterious and deadly foe.

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