

Striking Women:  
Performance and Gender in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Literature

By

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## Dedication

For Ben

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

From Jael's tent peg to Judith's sword, biblical interpreters have long recognized the power of the "lethal women" stories of the Hebrew Bible and related literature.<sup>1</sup> The tales of Jael and Judith, female characters who assassinate enemy commanders, have fascinated artists, writers, and scholars for centuries, no doubt partly because of the gender of the characters doing the killing.<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation, I use the vocabulary and constructs of queer theory to reach

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<sup>1</sup> This term has been used before. In an essay about Delilah, J. Cheryl Exum defines it as "the woman who is irresistible and deadly." J. Cheryl Exum, "Lethal Woman 2: Reflections on Delilah and Her Incarnation as Liz Hurley," in *Borders, Boundaries and the Bible* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 254. There are other terms that have been used to describe this type of character, such as "*femme fatale*" and "woman warrior." For the use of *femme fatale*, see *Ibid.*, 267. For the use of woman warrior, see Gale A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4," *Semeia* 61 (1993): 99–132; Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 1–127; Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 67. For my purposes, "*femme fatale*" is useful but not perfect, because it carries connotations of the sexuality that the characters I discuss use, but does not leave room for the mothering some of them also employ. "Woman warrior" is also a good term for Judith and both versions of Jael, because it speaks primarily to the violence used by these characters. However, to some readers it may inaccurately imply that they are soldiers, instead of civilians who take up arms in a limited role. "Lethal woman," then, is the best descriptor for these characters.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms "woman," "female," "feminine," "man," "male," "masculine," "sex," and "gender." These terms have been problematized by scholars engaging in feminist, postmodern, and queer analysis. As Daniel Boyarin has observed, at one point the consensus among academics committed to the project of liberalism was that "sex" is a biological constant determined by one's anatomy and "gender" is a set of social roles mapped onto people based on anatomy. Daniel Boyarin, "Gender," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 117. Since the 1990s, however, there has been increasing recognition both of the insufficiency of the two-sex paradigm based on anatomy—because of its failure to take into account people who are intersex, those who have non-matching anatomy and chromosomal sex, or cultures where there are considered to be more than two sexes—and of the model by which there is simple one-to-one mapping of gender to sex. Boyarin writes that sex and gender as categories are both produced by the need of those in power for reproductive control over "women." *Ibid.*, 118. Uncertainties about the use of the words sex and gender also stem from the peculiarity that "gender" is a concept not even found in many languages. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Introduction," ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), xiv. When we call into question stable, forthright meanings of "sex" and "gender," we necessarily also make the use of "woman," "female," "feminine," "man," "male," and "masculine" problematic. It is not just a question of whether, when we speak of a "woman," we mean her anatomy or her social role; neither of these signifiers is a straightforward term whose meaning is clear at all times. For more on the implications of the terms "sex" and "gender," see Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review*

important new understandings of the multidimensional roles gender plays in these stories. This is crucial work because of the role of the Bible and other early religious texts in shaping expectations for behavior based on gender. I aim to deconstruct these gender paradigms through an examination of three lethal woman characters: Jael in Judges 4-5, Judith in the book of the Apocrypha that bears her name, and the reconfiguration of Jael in the pseudepigraphical *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (L.A.B.), or *Biblical Antiquities*. To date, no scholar has undertaken a systematic study, deeply attentive to textual and philological issues as well as closely engaged with queer-theoretical frameworks, of these characters as a group. My goal is to unsettle what we think the Bible and early Jewish texts say about gender and sexuality.

This project will examine the ways in which the female characters in these three stories play with notions of femininity and female sexuality, and how this play shapes the world of the text and advances the plot.<sup>3</sup> I will provide background on the world that produced these texts,

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91 (1986): 1053–75. For one model of how to deal with problematic terms in a scholarly work dealing with ideas of gender in ancient literary texts, see David M. Halperin, “Why Is Diotima a Woman?,” in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 113–51. Despite the major problems with treating the terms above as static categories that will be understood the same way by all readers, I use these terms in this project. What is more, I do not always set them off with quotation marks, as I find this practice distracting when it is used extensively. I set the contested terms off with quotation marks when I judge it to be especially necessary to call the reader’s attention to the problematic nature of a particular usage, but otherwise, I let the terms stand unadorned. I hope that this footnote, as well as the engagement of the project as a whole with postmodern complications of sex and gender, will cue the reader to take the use of these words with a shaker full of salt grains.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars who apply queer-theoretical methodologies are often deeply invested in postmodern projects as a whole and thus are committed to exploring the intersection of different kinds of oppression, such as those based upon gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, or physical disability. Because of this commitment, scholars who problematize the categories of sex and gender in the Bible often also end up calling attention to biblical views of, for example, the Canaanites. For example, Ellen T. Armour writes in her introduction to a book of queer-theoretical essays on the Bible, “Jael and Rahab are non-Israelite women whose heroism on behalf of Israel arguably queers normative gender and sexual roles. But their disruptive effects appear in a more sobering light when positioned in relationship to the persistent anti-Canaanite polemic that runs throughout the Deuteronomistic history. This polemic figures the Canaanites as sexually deviant and thus subject to divinely sanctioned violence at Israelite hands.” Ellen T. Armour, “Queer Bibles, Queer Scriptures? An Introductory Response,” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Ken Stone and Theresa J. Hornsby (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 4. I applaud attempts to highlight multiple forms of oppression at work in the biblical texts, and I see clearly that dehumanization of the non-Israelite Other runs through all three of the texts on which I focus. However, I have chosen to address primarily aspects of gender and sexuality in the texts. On occasion, when it is especially relevant to discussions of gender, I do discuss the texts’ goals of portraying the “enemy people” as inferior and deserving of punishment, but this is not the main goal of my project.

including the examination of potential connections for Jael and Judith’s gender play in other tales from the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> In stories from Ugarit, Hatti, and Greece, I will tease out other examples of women engaging with, fighting, parodying, and upending ideas of acceptable gender and sexual behavior.<sup>5</sup> In doing this, I keep in mind Ken Stone’s insight on how queer criticism can transform understandings of the Bible. Stone writes, “But by focusing on this text rather than that one, by reading in this way rather than another, queer readings do not simply undo heteronormative Bibles. They also make it possible for other Bibles to come into existence, Bibles quite different from the ones used to normalize modern forms of monogamous heterosexuality, Bibles that startle and surprise—queer Bibles, perhaps.”<sup>6</sup> Among my other goals for this project, I hope that these new readings of Judith and both versions of Jael indeed “startle and surprise.”

I examine the three narratives which are the focus of this project *as texts*. That is, I view them as pieces of literature and aim to discover how the characters engage with ideas of gender and sexuality in furtherance of the plot. I do not endeavor to weigh in on the historicity, or lack thereof, of any of these stories. Questions of historical context are relevant to some degree, as far

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<sup>4</sup> I do not intend to flatten out my portrayal of the ancient Mediterranean into a single “world” or to imply that no differences existed in the cultural milieu of different regions. I also do not wish to suggest that Palestine in one century and under one empire would be the same culturally as Palestine five centuries later under a different empire. However, I do from time to time refer to the ancient Mediterranean “world” or “context” as shorthand. I do this especially because none of the three texts that are my primary focus has a settled date or provenance. The situation is especially confusing for Judges 5, where the earliest and latest proposed dates are hundreds of years apart. Some propose that Judges 5 is one of the earliest compositions in the Hebrew Bible, dating to the premonarchic period of the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. For a full list those who date Judges 5 early, see the bibliography in Serge Frolov, “How Old Is the Song of Deborah?,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (2011): 163–164. Those who date it later, to the preexilic, exilic, or even postexilic period, include Frolov and numerous other scholars, though the early-dating crowd appears to have a significant majority. *Ibid.*, 165. The only thing we know with reasonable certainty about all of these texts is that they originated from the ancient Mediterranean region, sometime before the Hellenistic period.

<sup>5</sup> As detailed below, queer biblical hermeneutics are notable for their attention to the social construction and artifice of all sexes and genders, not just those traditionally considered female. At times in this dissertation, I address elements of gender performance by the male characters in the primary and comparative texts I examine. However, my main focus here is on the female characters in these stories. I suggest that a queer reading of the men in these tales would be productive, but that is a project for another day.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Stone, “Bibles That Matter: Biblical Theology and Queer Performativity,” *BTB* 38 (2008): 21.

as addressing a text's date and provenance may point the reader in the direction of what sex and gender roles looked like in that context. However, mine is fundamentally a literary analysis, not a historical-critical one. Especially when questions of a text's date, authorship, provenance, and unity are so unsettled, as is the case particularly with Judges 4-5, analyzing the received form(s) of the text as a literary document may prove to be the most fruitful method of analysis.<sup>7</sup>

## Scope

I have chosen these three stories because all are about women who bring down an enemy general by, I argue, "putting on" female roles. Further, I would argue that each of the stories builds on the previous one(s), with the Book of Judith using language and themes from Judges 4-5 and the *Biblical Antiquities* 31 incorporating ideas from Judith into its reimagining of Judges 4-5. I choose to treat Pseudo-Philo's retelling of the Jael story in the *Biblical Antiquities* as an independent text rather than simply an extension of Judges 4-5 because it makes substantial changes from the Judges story, in the process creating a new and distinct Jael. The ways in which *L.A.B.* reflects its own time period, which is substantially later than even the latest date posited for Judges 4-5, and engages with the story of Judith also necessitate treating it as a separate tale.

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<sup>7</sup> For reflections on methods and advantages of literary criticism, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 1–24; Mark K. George, "Postmodern Literary Criticism: The Impossibility of Method," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 459–77; Richard G. Bowman, "Narrative Criticism: Human Purpose in Conflict with Divine Presence," in *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2007), 19–45.

I would also like to offer a brief explanation of why I speak of three stories and not four; that is, why I treat Judges 4 and 5 as a single story instead of as two separate tales.<sup>8</sup> Numerous scholars have taken the opposite tack, arguing that the poetic account in Judges 5 is one of the earliest texts in the Hebrew Bible and that Judges 4 was written much later, by a different hand, and consequently analyzing them as two separate stories.<sup>9</sup> An example of this tactic can be found in the work of Mieke Bal, who in discussing Judges 4 and 5 refers not to “Yael” but to “Yael-4” and “Yael-5;” that is, she argues that the two chapters present two distinct depictions of their characters.<sup>10</sup> I elect to treat the two chapters as one story for two main reasons. First, as I discuss below, the respective dates of Judges 4 and 5 are nowhere near as settled as some would argue. Since we do not possess anything approaching solid dating for these texts, ascribing them to separate authors writing different stories at different times becomes a shakier proposition. Perhaps a better strategy would be that of Pamela Tamarkin Reis, who writes, “From my perspective, the prose of chapter 4 and the poetry of chapter 5 are not the record of two different traditions about Jael and Sisera, nor are they two different versions of one tradition. They are the product of one ‘overarching mind’ who tells the same story in two different genres.”<sup>11</sup> Secondly, when one reads these texts *as texts*, dating, authorship, and provenance become of secondary importance. What is key is that, for as long as we have textual evidence, Judges 5 has immediately followed Judges 4. This results in the reader encountering the stories together. For all intents and purposes for a literary analysis, these two chapters, then, are a unity.

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<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion of the relationship between the prose and poetic accounts, see Jack M. Sasson, *Judges 1-12* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014), 312–316. Sasson concisely reviews seven different lines of argument on how the two chapters are related.

<sup>9</sup> For an encapsulation of scholarly consensus on early dating of Judges 5, see Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19 (2005): 37–38.

<sup>10</sup> Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 211.

<sup>11</sup> Reis, “Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading,” 39.

There are biblical and post-biblical tales of lethal women that I have chosen to leave out of my analysis. For example, I do not discuss at any length Delilah (Judg 16), though she arguably engages in gender play comparable to Jael and Judith's. While Judith and both versions of Jael are portrayed as heroines because they bring down enemies of Israel, Delilah is written as a villain and a traitor. This makes the role she plays in her story quite different from the characters on which I choose to focus my analysis. I omit the woman of Thebez who mortally wounds Abimelech by dropping a millstone on his head; Abimelech has his attendant finish the job with a sword so people will not be able to say that a woman killed him (Judg 9:53-54). While intriguing, this story is told in the sparest of prose, and we learn nothing about the woman's character or even her name. There is simply not enough here.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, while I include the retelling of Jael's tale in *L.A.B.*, I do not address Josephus's version of the Jael story in *Antiquities of the Jews* 5.207-209 because it is far too brief.<sup>13</sup>

I also choose not to discuss Deborah in great detail. Others, such as Gale A. Yee and Susan Ackerman, classify her alongside Jael and Judith as a woman warrior.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, one could argue, as I do elsewhere, that she, like Judith and both iterations of Jael, exercises a military role.<sup>15</sup> However, this project is narrowly focused on female characters who personally kill enemy commanders, and Deborah does not fit the bill. While she may be a general, nowhere in Judges 4-5 is she pictured slaying the enemy, as, for example, her predecessor Ehud is in Judg 3:16-26.

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Ackerman does write about the woman of Thebez, working that character into her argument about women warriors in the Ancient Near East and the Bible. See Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 47-49, 69-70. Given the brief nature of the woman's appearance in the biblical text, Ackerman's commentary on her role as a woman warrior should suffice.

<sup>13</sup> For more on Jael's brief cameo in Josephus's *Antiquities*, see Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (Brill, 1998), 159-160.

<sup>14</sup> Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman." Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 27-88.

<sup>15</sup> Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, "The 'Mothers' Who Weren't: Motherhood Imagery and Childless Women Warriors in Early Jewish Literature," in *Motherhood in the Jewish Cultural Imagination (forthcoming)*, *Jewish Cultural Studies* 5 (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016).

There is something about the stories of women who actually use weapons against opposing generals that involves them in a complicated form of gender play.

## Methodology

The vocabulary and theoretical frameworks I use in this project to explore gender and sexuality come from the interdisciplinary field of queer theory.<sup>16</sup> Queer theory has its roots in the gay and lesbian rights movements of the 1970s onward and the gay and lesbian studies movement of the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>17</sup> These forces, combined with the rise of postmodernism—with its focus on uncertainty, plurality of meaning, and the destabilization of supposedly settled categories—produced queer theory.<sup>18</sup> The concept has been described and

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<sup>16</sup> While I will explore the foundations of queer theory in brief here in the service of explaining the methodology of this dissertation, I will not trace its entire lineage, nor will I reargue its fundamental tenets. Interested readers are advised to consult some of the precursors to and foundational works of the field, including Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York and London: Monthly Review, 1975), 157–210; Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. C. Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 143–79; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998). An excellent overview of the early years of queer theory, as well as the social forces and movements that led to its development, can be found in Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 1997). A useful and insightful synopsis written by a biblical scholar may be found in Deryn Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 42–76.

<sup>17</sup> The work of Michel Foucault, particularly his *History of Sexuality* trilogy, is often credited with laying the groundwork for queer theory by reframing “sexuality” as a social construct. Stephen D. Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001), 14. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 10–11. The apparent first use of the term “queer theory,” though, is credited to Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities: An Introduction,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3 (1991): iii – xviii. The AIDS crisis also played a role in the development of queer theory, with activists arguing that policymakers should not essentialize it as a “gay disease” but rather should focus on its transmission through unsafe practices. This led to scholars problematizing the idea that one’s sexual acts must dictate one’s identity, and also to a new radical sensibility among communities most affected by the disease and the public response to it. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 20, 94.

<sup>18</sup> Ken Stone, *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 20.

understood as having various scopes. At the limited end of the spectrum, definitions focus narrowly on the experiences and perspectives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or otherwise “queer” individuals and communities. Ken Stone, who has been instrumental in bringing to bear queer methodologies on biblical texts, explains this limited application:

[O]ne possible understanding of a ‘queer reading of the Bible’ is a reading produced by a reader who is ‘queer’, where ‘queer’ is understood to communicate lesbian, gay, or bisexual identities, experiences, or social locations; and where those identities, experiences, or social locations are thought to impact both the questions that one puts to biblical texts and the answers one can imagine giving to those questions.<sup>19</sup>

Queer theory can also be seen more broadly, as a deconstructive look at the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, aiming to expose them as socially constructed and mutable in all cases, not just for individuals who identify or are identified as queer.<sup>20</sup> Others broaden the project still more, understanding “queerness” as anything that blurs or transcends categories, not just in matters of sex and gender. For example, Stephen D. Moore, who, with Stone, has been influential in translating queer methodologies to biblical studies, writes:

... “[Q]ueer” is a supple cipher both for what *stands over against* the normal and the natural to oppose, and thereby define, them, and what *inheres within* the normal and the natural to subvert, and indeed pervert, them—this opposition privileging, but by no means being confined to, the mercurial sphere of the sexual.<sup>21</sup>

Though I find intriguing the possibilities of queerness not limited to sexuality, in this project I use queer theory almost exclusively in the “middle way” described above. That is, I aim to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 19. Later in the same essay, Stone gives another understanding of the queer-theoretical endeavor, expanding it to include anyone who challenges sexual norms. Ibid., 28.

<sup>20</sup> Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor*, 18. See also Carla Freccero, *Queer/early/modern* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006). Freccero argues for a “queering” of the whole enterprise of writing sequential history and a more fluid conception of the boundary between history and literature. She writes, “At times, *queer* continues to exploit its productive indeterminacy as a word used to designate that which is odd, strange, aslant; in this respect, I will argue that all textuality, when subjected to close reading, can be said to be queer.” Ibid., 5.



deconstruct categories of gender and sexuality in Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and *L.A.B.* 31 by using the vocabulary of queerness.<sup>22</sup>

Queer biblical criticism emerged in the 1990s in the wake of the development of queer theory, and it has gained steam over the past 20 years.<sup>23</sup> Newer anthologies on methods of biblical exegesis tend to include queer hermeneutics.<sup>24</sup> There are two sections of the Society of

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<sup>22</sup> Choosing this broader option for queer analysis rather than the narrower one that focuses on LGBT biblical interpreters and issues of homosexuality is partly a function of the former's suppleness and utility for these texts. However, it would be misleading to deny the role played by my own status as a woman happily married to a man. I would hold that individuals who do not personally identify as "queer" may use the tools of queer theory in biblical criticism, provided these tools are used sensitively. For a discussion of how queer theory may be used by heterosexuals and/or to discuss heterosexuality, and how to address the appearance or reality of straight appropriation of a queer methodology, see Calvin Thomas, "Introduction: Identification, Appropriation, Proliferation," in *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, ed. Calvin Thomas (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 1–7. Thomas writes that the writers of this collection of essays "want not to appropriate queer theory but to proliferate its findings and insights." *Ibid.*, 3. Thomas asks several questions salient for this dissertation. For example, he asks, "What does reading queer theory tell the straight reader about being queer, about being straight, about being, about becoming, what one putatively is, what one (supposedly thereby) is not, the permeability of the boundaries between the two, the price of their maintenance?" Calvin Thomas, "Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality," in *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, ed. Calvin Thomas (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 12. Thomas also muses on the self-centeredness revealed by his own pleasure in reading a statement of Judith Butler's recognizing that the word "queer" has proven to be a rallying point even for some heterosexuals; Thomas is somewhat dismayed at his jubilation that he, a straight man, is now officially "included" in a theory developed by people more marginalized than he. *Ibid.*, 18–22. See also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 8: "That's one of the things that 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically." Writing specifically from the standpoint of a biblical scholar, Deryn Guest affirms that the heterosexual scholar can and should use a queer lens, while realizing that they are "affiliates" of the queer scholars already doing the work. Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*, 150–164. While offering several caveats for the straight scholar doing queer work, Guest writes, "...I believe the genderqueer hermeneut is identified not by who one *is*, but what one *does* with biblical texts." *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>23</sup> Some of those who do queer-theoretical readings of biblical texts use the term "gender criticism" for their work, though not always consistently. See Deborah F. Sawyer, "Gender Criticism: A New Discipline in Biblical Studies or Feminism in Disguise?," in *A Question of Sex? Gender and Difference in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Deborah W. Rooke (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 2–17; Ken Stone, "Gender Criticism: The Un-Manning of Abimelech," in *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2007), 183–201.; Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*. Guest even occasionally uses "queer" and "gender" interchangeably; see *Ibid.*, 40. Her ultimate proposal is to call her method "genderqueer" criticism. *Ibid.*, 43. While some scholars might distinguish gender criticism from queer criticism, I do not see much if any daylight between the two; as such, I will use the terms interchangeably in this dissertation. (For what it is worth, the Society of Biblical Literature has two sections that seem both to engage with queer theory, one called "Gender, Sexuality, and the Bible," and the other called "LGBT/Queer Hermeneutics." The two sections both host papers that focus on reading biblical texts using queer theory, though the "LGBT/Queer Hermeneutics" section seems to engage more overtly with queer culture, such as inviting papers for the 2013 annual meeting in Baltimore on the Bible and film director John Waters, a Baltimore gay icon.)

<sup>24</sup> See Stone, "Gender Criticism." Beatrice Lawrence, "Gender Analysis: Gender and Method in Biblical Studies," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, ed. Joel M.

Biblical Literature that regularly engage with queer methodologies. And if the publication of a book-by-book biblical commentary that uses a single methodology is an indicator of that methodology's maturity, then queer-theoretical readings of biblical texts can be said to have come of age with the publication of *The Queer Bible Commentary*.<sup>25</sup>

Queer criticism of the Bible uses postmodern ideas about the fluidity of sex, gender, and sexuality to examine biblical texts. The goal of queer biblical criticism is not necessarily the recovery of historical circumstance or authorial intent.<sup>26</sup> Rather, like other methods of biblical scholarship informed by the postmodern project, queer criticism meets the text where it is, examining what its final form(s) can say to readers.<sup>27</sup> In her programmatic essay on gender criticism, Beatrice Lawrence characterizes such analysis as “not a method, but a lens,” meaning that scholars practicing gender criticism of the Bible ask certain questions but may use historical-critical, literary, reader-response, or any other methodologies to arrive at answers.<sup>28</sup> Lawrence's statement is technically true, but because of the postmodern roots and allegiances of the majority of scholars using a queer-theoretical lens, in practice, most queer criticism of the Bible—including this dissertation—is not historical-critical. Rather, queer analysis tends to focus on the texts *as texts*; it also tends to reject the prospect of determining a single meaning for a text. In queer-theoretical analysis of the Bible, as in other postmodern analyses, texts are multivalent and

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LeMon and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 333–48; A. K. M. (Andrew Keith Malcolm) Adam, *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice, 2001).

<sup>25</sup> Deryn Guest, ed., *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Stone writes, “readings which privilege the reconstruction of so-called ‘original meanings’ are a legitimate form of textual interpretation but must stand alongside other possible ways of ‘making sense’ of a text that appeal to other sorts of criteria and norms, either instead of or, as I prefer, *in addition to* the criteria of historical reconstruction.” Ken Stone, “Homosexuality and the Bible or Queer Reading? A Response to Martti Nissinen,” *Theology & Sexuality* 8 (2001): 116–117.

<sup>27</sup> I acknowledge that there is not one “final form” of the biblical text. Manuscripts even of the Masoretic text vary, and there are significant differences among the Masoretic texts and, for example, the Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts of biblical books and the Septuagint.

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence, “Gender Analysis,” 333.

interpreters always bring an agenda to the table, whether intentionally or unintentionally. For scholars, including myself, doing queer criticism is but one way to look at the Bible. In the case of the three texts examined in this dissertation, I find it to be a particularly productive way, but I would not argue that it is the only “correct” way.

Queer biblical criticism both builds on feminist criticism and works in parallel to it. Feminist biblical hermeneutics may take as their mission the retrieval of female voices, characters, and experiences in the biblical texts and the world(s) that produced them, and the exploration of how the texts interact with the subordination of women.<sup>29</sup> While some feminist critics, particularly in the 1970s and 80s, used feminist exegesis to “rehabilitate” the text and rescue it from sexist interpretation, more recent scholarship tends to acknowledge the patriarchal tendencies of the text.<sup>30</sup> Queer hermeneutics start from the premise that gender as a system, including the categories of “female” and “male,” ought to be questioned. Another difference between feminist and queer criticism is the subject of analysis, with queer biblical criticism paying more attention to male characters.<sup>31</sup> Queer theory allows biblical scholars to examine how sex and gender are constructed in the texts, and also how sex and gender are undermined. Stone sets out a succinct and valuable description of the questions that gender criticism should ask regarding biblical texts:

What norms or conventions of gender seem to be presupposed by this text? How might attention to the interdisciplinary study of gender allow readers of the Bible to tease out such presuppositions? How are assumptions about gender used in the structure of a particular plot, or manipulated for purposes of characterization? How is gender symbolism related to other types of symbolism used in the text? How does the

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<sup>29</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, “Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?,” in *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2007), 65–68.

<sup>30</sup> See for example Deborah W. Rooke, “Feminist Criticism of the Old Testament: Why Bother?,” *Feminist Theology* 15 (2007): 170–172.

<sup>31</sup> Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*, 25–26. Guest also observes that feminist biblical scholars have typically been more overt about the ideological goals of their work than have queer- or gender-focused biblical scholars. However, she notes that outside of biblical studies, queer theory is highly engaged with the project of political change, and she calls for such engagement within the guild as well. *Ibid.*, 27–30.

manipulation of gender assumptions in a text relate to other textual dynamics, including not only literary but also theological and ideological dynamics? Which characters embody cultural gender norms successfully, and which characters fall short of such norms or embody them in unexpected ways? Might a character's success or failure at embodying gender norms result from a strategy to cast that character in a particular light, whether positive or negative? Is the text itself always successful at manipulating gender assumptions? Do biblical texts, like persons, sometimes fail to "cite" gender conventions in expected ways or according to dominant norms? How does our attention to these and other questions contribute to our understanding or both gender and the Bible?<sup>32</sup>

Deryn Guest, in her own methodological treatise, adds to Stone's list of considerations for a scholar doing gender criticism of the Bible:

Gender criticism is interested in the differentiation *within* those categories [of sex and gender] (the many and various ways of doing 'man', for instance) and the indeterminate spaces between them (places where male/female, masculinity/femininity/hetero-erotic/homoerotic are fluid and therefore call into question those very binaries.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Stone, "Gender Criticism," 192.

<sup>33</sup> Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*, 18. Over the past few years, scholars practicing feminist and/or gender criticism of the Bible have debated the nomenclature and methodologies of their subfields. For instance, Sawyer asks whether gender criticism of the Bible is just feminist criticism by another name and concludes that it is not, since gender criticism "broadens the lens" of feminism. She writes, "...[T]he Bible comprises multiple, contesting discourses which contradict and parody one another in a constant state of tension. Moreover, within biblical discourses subversions of normative power paradigms clearly exist. They are the jokers in the pack. They provide the clues for deconstruction, or, more positively, the tools for a myriad reconstruction." Sawyer, "Gender Criticism: A New Discipline in Biblical Studies or Feminism in Disguise?" 15. In response to Sawyer's essay, Athalya Brenner writes, "Now, perhaps naively, I thought that feminist criticism has progressed beyond its preliminary interest in biblical women's stories—mainly or exclusively—into gender interest and read femininities and masculinities as a binary pair on a continuum a while ago. Is such a new self-definition beneficial? If so, to whom and why? Is it justified? Does it offer new avenues for research and understanding as such, as 'gender criticism' to distinguish from—old fashioned?—'feminist criticism'? What more does it do to help, to organize, to structure—in general and particularly in the case of this collection? Does it really matter, this fine semantic distinction of feminist criticism, women's studies, gender studies, and the assigning of the study of femininities and masculinities exclusively or especially to the latter? Or is the change of name a technique for achieving respectability and a wider audience/participation, beyond the stigma of being considered a feminist? Or does it simply represent a certain coming of age?" Athalya Brenner, "Review of D.W. Rooke, Ed., *A Question of Sex? Gender and Difference in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*," RBL (2008). Guest comments, "So, it is not a case, as is sometimes thought, of simply 'add men and mix', of modifying the agenda of feminism and broadening the discussion to include both male and female characters.... Gender criticism, rather, explores the processes whereby sexed categories are constructed and made discrete, including interstitial places where gender blending, reversals and transformations take place. It actively explores intersex and transgender bodies and the myriad ways of doing sex and gender that do not map onto any existing categories; those that flit between categories as well as the abject category that falls through the cracks i.e. the non-category; those for which we have no adequate language." Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*, 19–20.

A queer-theoretical analysis of biblical texts hardly need be confined to texts that address homosexuality—especially since queer theory itself works to undermine a homosexual-heterosexual dichotomy.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, I do not argue that the key texts analyzed in this project deal with themes of homosexuality or characters whom modern authors might designate as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Insofar as literary characters can have any “sexual orientation,” the texts give us no indication that these characters are conceived of as other than what we would call “heterosexual.” That is, to paraphrase Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, when they have sex, it is with men.<sup>35</sup>

Performance theory is a subcategory of queer theory that deeply informs this project. Performance theory is most closely associated with the scholar Judith Butler.<sup>36</sup> In her breakout work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler writes that gender has no inherent substance—and certainly no one-to-one mapping of a complete gender onto one of two straightforward biological realities—but rather is constructed through the “stylized repetition of acts.”<sup>37</sup> Butler uses drag performance as her paradigmatic example:

The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme identities.... The notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the

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<sup>34</sup> Ken Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective* (London; New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), 14–15.

<sup>35</sup> In the preface to the second edition of *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick writes, “Not to make a big mystery of it—and because I’ve written as much in other connections in the ensuing years—I’m willing to say nowadays that when I’ve had sex with another person, it has been a man.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xvi.

<sup>36</sup> Butler herself builds on the work of Foucault and of Monique Wittig. Wittig argued that heterosexuality and the two-sex paradigm are not natural or inevitable, and that lesbians are not “women” in the sense that the category of “woman” is derived from opposition to and relations with “man.” For Wittig, one may refuse heterosexuality, render categorization impossible, and transcend the material component of sex through lesbianism. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 141–163.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

very notion of an original... [G]ender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin.<sup>38</sup>

For Butler, drag and its correlates make explicit what we all do, telling people our gender by the thousand little things we do with our hair or voice or walk. Even if the gender being conveyed “matches” the underlying biological sex, it’s still a performance. In her follow-up to *Gender Trouble*, Butler clarifies that she does not suggest individuals can freely choose any gender identity at any time, donning and doffing genders like the outfit of the day. Rather, gender is heavily charged, highly consequential, and complicated to challenge.<sup>39</sup> Throughout this project, I engage with Butler’s conception of gender as freighted performance, and the larger system of gender production and reification as “performativity,” to explain how Judith and the two versions of Jael “do gender.”

Though Butler’s work provides a major theoretical framework for this project, I nuance the methodology used in this project with the work of other queer theorists. For example, Butler’s work is helpful in establishing that the female characters in these ancient stories are performing, but the work of Sue-Ellen Case is necessary to establish the possibility that one can perform without assuming or reinforcing the reality of what one is performing. Case, writing about the lesbian butch/femme dynamic, argues that the butch and femme perform gender roles while acknowledging that they are indeed roles and “not biological birthrights.”<sup>40</sup> I use Case’s discussion of the deliberate artifice of butch/femme performance to ask whether and how Jael and Judith might engage with gender while not “buying into” what they are performing.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 174–175.

<sup>39</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

<sup>40</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 300.

I also nuance the methodology for this project by asking about how reproduction and motherhood play into the characters' gender performance. The vocabulary for these questions comes not from Butler but rather from Lee Edelman. Edelman's writings about "reproductive futurism" have been influential in the world of queer theory, though far less so among biblical scholars. For Edelman, reproductive futurism is the relentless societal and individual focus on the child, who "remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention."<sup>41</sup> Edelman asks what it would mean not to take the side of the child and comes up with queerness as his answer.<sup>42</sup> Queerness is not only a resistance to the focus on the child but also a refusal to view history as a "linear narrative."<sup>43</sup> Edelman's work must be seen in the context of response and resistance to those who identify homosexuality as a "death drive" because of its alleged lack of engagement with reproduction and who rail against homosexuality for the supposed problems it creates for "the child." He argues that the cult of the child, with its narcissistic focus on the replication of the self, is the real death drive, and that queerness represents a creative freedom from that drive. Using vocabulary derived from Edelman's work, this project will explore the implications of the text's portrayal of Judith and both versions of Jael as entirely unengaged with children. The world of the biblical texts, like our own, is focused on reproduction and the linear development of the Israelite nation, but there are moments in the Bible that disrupt this focus. Edelman's theories provide a framework for exploring what it means for a biblical woman not to be a mother. At the same time, circling back

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<sup>41</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>42</sup> Edelman writes, "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*, fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital *ls* and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic Relations and the future that serves as its prop." *Ibid.*, 29. Though the rhetoric is fiery, it is evident that Edelman does not rail against actual children but rather against what "the child" has been made to stand for in modern society, particularly as it relates to the oppression of LGBT people.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

to Butler's work on gender performance will allow me to ask why the texts I explore in this project use maternal language and imagery in connection with childless characters.

Queer and gender-theoretical readings of the Bible often hew closely to Butler's work on gender performativity, focusing on the ways in which biblical characters perform gender. My project engages Butler, but it also reaches deeper into the well of queer theory. I aim to show, through close examination of ancient texts, how concepts like performativity, drag, and the refusal of reproductive futurism all work together. Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and *Biblical Antiquities* 31 are stories about women performing femininity, acknowledging the system of sexual exchange of which they are a part, playing with it, and ultimately subverting it, and playing with the signs of maternity while not becoming mothers themselves. The characters engage in *jouissance*, yet their play is high-stakes and deadly serious.<sup>44</sup>

Why do I use a queer hermeneutic to read these texts? While feminist analyses of Jael and Judith have provided much-needed perspectives on their stories, they can be essentialist regarding sex, gender, and sexuality. As I detail below, the existing scholarship on these characters by and large does not engage with the ways in which they actively construct their own womanhood. Consequently, other writers miss how the stories are in fact driven by this self-invention and performance.

I do not suggest that the writers of these texts intended to portray their female characters subverting gender paradigms by parodying them, that they had any notion of "drag," or that they consciously created characters that would be read as childless so as to challenge the relentless

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<sup>44</sup> *Jouissance* is a French word for "enjoyment" or "pleasure" and can suggest orgasm. As used by Roland Barthes, it suggests "a kind of response to literary works that is different from ordinary *plaisir* (pleasure). Whereas *plaisir* is comfortable and reassuring, confirming out values and expectations, *jouissance*—usually translated as 'bliss' to retain its erotic sense—is unsettling and destabilizing." Chris Baldick, "Jouissance," *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 116.



focus on reproductive futurism. Obviously, these are modern notions, and neither I nor others doing queer biblical criticism expect awareness of them from ancient authors. The charge of anachronism is often leveled at biblical scholars engaging in one of the “ideological” methods, such as feminist, postcolonial, Marxist, or queer analysis. However, theories are created to explain the world, including human nature and the production of literature, so it is not unreasonable to use these theories to understand not just our own world but worlds gone by, including literary ones. As Lawrence writes, “Of course, we cannot assume that the biblical writers had gender specifically in mind when they wrote; rather, gender norms (*which have always existed, whether stated openly or not*) are portrayed in the text, sometimes explicitly, but more often implicitly.”<sup>45</sup> It is true that the lens of gender criticism comes from the reader and not from the text, but this is the case with any method, even historical-critical ones.

### History of Scholarship

In this section, I do not address everything that has ever been written about Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and *Biblical Antiquities* 31. Such an undertaking would be a book of its own rather than part of a single chapter. Additionally, it is questionable whether this would even be a useful exercise. My project focuses on sex and gender in the stories; as such, I endeavor to be thorough in covering the work of others who have addressed these issues.<sup>46</sup> More general

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<sup>45</sup> Lawrence, “Gender Analysis,” 333–334. Emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> There is a particular mode of scholarship on sex and gender in these stories that I do not treat here. This is the practice of “gendering” texts either “masculine” or “feminine,” as traces in the Hebrew Bible of “voices” that are one gender or the other. The approach was popularized in Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1993). Various scholars have applied it to the texts that are the primary focus of this project; see for example Jan Willem van Henten, “Judith as Alternative Leader: A Rereading of Judith 7-13,” in *Esther, Judith, and Susanna, A Feminist Companion to the*

concerns that affect my argument, such as date, provenance, and language of composition, will largely be footnoted.<sup>47</sup>

## History of Scholarship on Jael in Judges 4-5

### *Connection to History?*

Judges 4 and 5 are notoriously difficult to date, though many have tried.<sup>48</sup> For the sort of analysis I perform in the following chapters, dating and primacy concerns are not wholly irrelevant but definitely secondary.<sup>49</sup> A literary analysis should be undertaken with some basic

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Bible 7 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 224–52. I do not engage with discussions of “M” and “F” voices in the texts because I would hold that this schema both implies and reinforces a fixed gender binary, a notion that I would (and do, below) challenge. In addition, I would argue that the process of gendering texts is necessarily circular: texts are categorized as M or F based on arbitrary criteria, which were developed in the first place in order to categorize texts as M or F.

<sup>47</sup> Except where otherwise noted, translations of ancient material in this dissertation are my own. Exceptions, which are flagged as they occur, include Ugaritic material and some classical Greek texts.

<sup>48</sup> In a recent essay, Sasson gives an excellent summary of the scholarship on the dating and primacy of the two chapters. See Jack M. Sasson, “‘A Breeder or Two for Each Leader’: On Mothers in Judges 4 and 5,” in *Critical Engagement: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of J. Cheryl Exum*, ed. David J.A. Clines and Ellen J. van Wolde, Hebrew Bible Monographs 28 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 335–340. In brief, Sasson notes that scholarship has largely seen Judges 5 as a very early composition, nearly contemporary with the events it describes, and that the discoveries at Ugarit were used to provide support for its antiquity and primacy over Judges 4. Chapter 5 has thus often been read as a more authentic representation of events, written nearly in the heat of the moment, with chapter 4 a later, more polished version. I would agree with Sasson’s judgment that dating might not be useful here. He writes, “With better knowledge of ancient Near Eastern literature, we might recognize that neither biblical poetry nor prose cultivates *verismo* attachment to events; at least not to the extent that one would find it useful to seek inspiration from the other. Moreover, I am not sure that applying a date to the creation of either the prose or poetic version is a particularly useful enterprise as far as biblical studies are concerned. Normally, to set a composition within a specific interval is to promote reciprocal functions: the composition illumines the times and the contexts in which it was crafted while the milieu in which it originated explains the composition’s allusions and concerns. In Mesopotamian literature, for example, it will matter a lot whether a composition comes from the Old Babylonian or Neo-Babylonian period, because we can integrate the knowledge we extract from it into distinct cultures. With biblical works, at best we can assign it before or after the Exile. All other subdivisions or allocations and the glimpses they offer of their cultural contexts are hardly undisputed.” *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>49</sup> It is useful to sketch three positions taken by feminist scholars toward the interpretations of Jael’s story. The first is represented by Jo Ann Hackett, who aims to reconstruct the status of women in ancient Israel by analyzing stories in the Book of Judges. Jo Ann Hackett, “In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel,” in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles; Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 15–38. The second is represented by J. Cheryl Exum, who takes a literary approach to Judges 5. J. Cheryl Exum, “‘Mother in Israel’: A Familiar Figure Reconsidered,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Westminster Press, 1985), 73–85. The third approach is Susan Ackerman’s. Ackerman aims for a third way, surveying Hackett’s

idea of context for the text, but it is not necessary to get bogged down in the impossible tasks of dating or establishing which account came first.<sup>50</sup> I read these two chapters as they have come down to us, as variations on a common theme, mostly consistent with one another, though with different areas of focus. There is also the question of the historicity of the events described in Judges 4-5. Again, this is largely beside the point for a dissertation that treats the Bible as literature and not putative history. On the issue of whether the events in these chapters actually happened, Jack M. Sasson writes, “I need not note here that, as yet, we have no victory stela at Tabor or Taanach, no bas-relief honoring the deeds of Barak or of Jael, no shrine dedicated to Deborah, and no tombstone for Sisera.”<sup>51</sup> In short, there is no extrabiblical evidence for these events, so we treat them as history at our own risk.

One of the most thorough treatments of Jael from a feminist perspective is that of Susan Ackerman. I engage with many of Ackerman’s arguments in detail in chapters 2 and 3, but here I give an overview of her work. She begins from the assumption that Judges 5 predates Judges 4

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and Exum’s work and criticizing both historical literalism and “literary nihilism.” She writes, “[W]hile I will not assume a historical reality for any of the stories or characters I will be discussing, I do believe it is crucial to assume a historical reality for the authors who wrote these stories and for the audience for whom these authors wrote. I further believe it is crucial to assume that this historical reality matters, that the biblical authors shaped their stories about various ‘types’ of women in a certain way and that the biblical redactors preserved certain versions of tales about women because these narratives somehow ‘worked’ within the context—the mind-set and the worldview—of the authors’ and redactors’ day. Unlike a formalist literary critic, then, I will care about the dates of Judges’ texts, I will care about these texts’ authorship, I will care about these texts’ editing, and I will particularly care about the social world in which these texts were constructed and transmitted.” Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 14–15. I would argue that Ackerman makes two major missteps in her discussion of methodology. First, she misrepresents literary critics as wholly unconcerned with issues of context. I would hold that critics such as Exum do not ignore history; rather, they realize that, when a text’s date, authorship, and provenance are all but impossible to discern, analyzing the text as a text can be the best option. Second, while Ackerman’s goal of doing literary criticism that recognizes history without taking the biblical texts literally is laudable, she does not achieve it. While she does not take the biblical stories as describing real events, she is overly confident that they can be dated with reasonable accuracy. *Ibid.*, 30. In this project, I aim for a more conservative middle ground than the one Ackerman stakes out. As I discuss further in chapter 2, I endeavor to acknowledge a general literary milieu for the three stories I discuss, while recognizing that, especially in the case of Judges 4-5, dating is a perilous and probably unhelpful exercise.

<sup>50</sup> Contra Ackerman, it is hardly well established that Judges 5 stems from the 12<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century and Judges 4 from the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 30.

<sup>51</sup> Sasson, “A Breeder or Two,” 335.

by hundreds of years, and that the two texts have differing goals related to gender. Ackerman argues that Jael—along with Deborah, the woman of Thebez, and Judith—are all variations on the “woman warrior” in the mold of the Canaanite goddess Anat. She argues that Judges 5 in particular appropriates traditions about Anat and applies them to both Deborah and Jael.<sup>52</sup>

Regarding the Jael-Anat connection, Ackerman writes, “Especially significant here are the ways in which both the Judges 5 characterization of Jael and the Canaanite characterizations of Anat combine militaristic imagery with imagery of sexuality and seduction.”<sup>53</sup> She argues that, as Judges 5 contains many “supernatural” elements reminiscent of Canaanite tales of Anat, Deborah and Jael’s portrayals in this chapter are highly “mythological” in nature.<sup>54</sup> She contends further that the poem is not concerned with realism, so it is free to portray Deborah and Jael first and foremost warriors, a role that would have been unlikely for women in Late Bronze Age Palestine. She writes, “Judges 5, like other myths, legends, and myth- and legend-like texts, can put forward certain types of representation and characterization that more historically situated narratives cannot.”<sup>55</sup> Judges 4, meanwhile, plays up the erotic element of Jael’s encounter with Sisera, she argues, rendering more realistic chapter 5’s portrayal of Jael as primarily a warrior.<sup>56</sup> Ackerman argues that more “mythic” biblical texts about women warriors employ motifs

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<sup>52</sup> Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 56.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>54</sup> As Ackerman acknowledges, her argument is highly dependent upon Frank Moore Cross’s work on the Song of the Sea in Exod 15. See Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), chapter 12.

<sup>55</sup> Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 67. She further argues that the Book of Judith, by contrast, lacks mythic elements and so must focus on a more likely historically-accurate element of the heroine’s character, her seductiveness. *Ibid.*, 68. See also Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), chapter 4.

<sup>56</sup> Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 71–72. Ackerman sees significance in the use of sexual language in Judges 5 only after Sisera’s murder, arguing that this means sexuality has taken a backseat to violence in the poem. I would disagree that this purported difference means that sex is less a part of the story in Judges 5 than it is in Judges 4.

associated with Anat's violence, while more "this-wordly" texts will "instead maximize the more historically believable idea of the woman as an Anat-like seductress."<sup>57</sup>

As I will detail in the next chapter, I would challenge Ackerman's characterization of Anat as sexual, so I believe that her comparison between Anat and Jael fails. I find in my analysis of Anat that her erotic elements are a function of her modern interpreters and are not found in her character in the Ugaritic texts. In addition, I do not find that Jael is portrayed in terms that are especially "mythological" in Judges 5, nor do I agree with Ackerman's judgment that sexuality is more prominent in Judges 4 than in Judges 5. As I will detail in chapter 3, I see erotic imagery as very prominent in both the poetic and prose accounts of Jael's murder of Sisera. Further, Ackerman's constructed opposition between "myth and legend" and "historically situated" is faulty. As she acknowledges in her introduction, trying to reconstruct "history" from the Book of Judges is problematic.<sup>58</sup> I would agree, and thus would challenge her determination that one part of the biblical text is more "historically situated" than another.

### *Liminality*

Gale A. Yee also classifies Jael as a "woman warrior," alongside Deborah, Judith, and the woman who kills Abimelech, though her analysis is far more conservative in scope than Ackerman's. Yee uses anthropological theories of metaphor to explore the relation of "warrior," typically identified with men, and "woman," typically classified as a noncombatant, and comes to the conclusion that the woman warrior figure is liminal. Yee writes, "The woman warrior is neither female nor male as these are customarily defined, although she shares qualities of

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 11.

each.”<sup>59</sup> She contends that the liminality of this figure allows interpreters to use her to make a variety of arguments, some of them contradictory. For example, some feminists see women warriors such as Jael as empowering in their appropriation of power from men, while others see them as strengthening the patriarchy by buying into militarism.<sup>60</sup> She argues, “Because of her liminality the woman warrior metaphor can be used to great rhetorical effect to support, denounce, or modify different perceptions of gender relations.”<sup>61</sup>

I find Yee’s classification of Jael with other violent women of the Bible as “women warriors” to be helpful for my project. Though the group of characters I treat only overlaps partially with the group Yee treats, the recognition that there are commonalities among the violent woman of the Bible and early Jewish literature is a basic assumption of my project. Additionally, Yee’s argument that Jael has been a polarizing character for commentators precisely because of her status as a woman warrior is on the mark. Yee exposes the ideologies at work in interpretations of biblical women, even those by scholars working on the historical-critical enterprise.

However, I would argue against Yee’s classification of Jael as a liminal figure. The word “liminal” comes from the Latin *limen*, “threshold,” and originally referred to a state of passing from one stage of life to another, usually through a rite of passage.<sup>62</sup> Through the work of Victor Turner, the concept of liminality “has been extended far beyond its original sense of an intermediate or marginal ritual phase and has taken on new meaning as an autonomous and sometimes enduring category of people who are ‘betwixt and between.’”<sup>63</sup> Individuals, groups,

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<sup>59</sup> Yee, “By the Hand of a Woman,” 105.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 107–108.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>62</sup> Barbara G. Myerhoff, Linda A. Camino, and Edith Turner, “Rites of Passage,” ed. Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 386.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

and even historical periods may be described as liminal, with this generally carrying the meaning of people living on the margins of society and thus often freed to play with social norms.<sup>64</sup>

Turner identified androgyny as one of the frequent characteristics of figures he considered liminal, but Ackerman points out a major flaw in Turner's reasoning: androgyny "may in fact be a symbol that can be used to express liminal ambiguity *only* in cultures in which a clear sense of sexual dimorphism is present."<sup>65</sup>

The problem with the surge in biblical and Ancient Near Eastern characters being labeled "liminal" regarding gender is that the term assumes that there *is* a clear gender boundary or threshold for the characters to straddle. Deryn Guest aptly points out that the focus on liminality upholds the "relentless two-sex paradigm."<sup>66</sup> I am not denying that the ancients likely had some concepts of what qualities pertained to men and what qualities to women. Certain behaviors and skills were expected of men and certain others of women.<sup>67</sup> I do, however, argue that we cannot know how fixed and universal those concepts of gender were, or what they included. Recent research has shown evidence of gender ambiguity and fluidity in the Ancient Near East. For instance, individuals in ancient Mesopotamia with non-normative genitals were recognized as not fitting into the categories of male or female, and "castrates, eunuchs, transsexuals, and men with undescended testicles" even formed what Julia Asher-Greve terms a "third gender."<sup>68</sup> Ishtar was credited with the power to turn men into women and women into men, suggesting more

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Susan Ackerman, *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 96. Unfortunately, Ackerman goes on to identify Enkidu as a liminal figure owing to his androgyny, on the basis that Mesopotamian society was strictly dimorphic.

<sup>66</sup> Deryn Guest, "From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael Through a Lesbian Lens," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Theresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 19–20.

<sup>67</sup> Julia Asher-Greve, "Decisive Sex, Essential Gender," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*, ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Helsinki, Finland: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 15.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 1:21.

fluidity than we would expect if ancient Mesopotamia had a strict gender binary.<sup>69</sup> There are several examples from the Ancient Near East of figures whose physical appearance and clothing do not match in gender, such as a statue from Mari with breasts, narrow waist, wide hips, and no beard, wearing men's clothing and with a male name.<sup>70</sup> There are also several examples of the female pharaoh Hatshepsut represented in men's clothing and with a beard.<sup>71</sup> Kathleen McCaffrey proposes evaluating such gender-non-conforming images using a multi-gender system in which the genders are normative male, normative female, variant male, and variant female.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to the problems with assuming a strict gender dimorphism in the world of the Ancient Near East, it is suspicious that the figures most often dubbed "liminal" in this context are female.<sup>73</sup> If goddesses and mortal female characters in literature are repeatedly labeled as liminal on the basis of purported gender transgression, perhaps modern scholars are holding to an overly restrictive definition of what constitutes womanhood.<sup>74</sup>

Thus, though Yee's work on Jael is helpful in some respects, her description of Jael as liminal is not. Yee essentializes sex and gender. This is not uncommon among second-wave

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<sup>69</sup> Kathleen McCaffrey, "Reconsidering Gender Ambiguity in Mesopotamia: Is a Beard Just a Beard?," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Helsinki, Finland: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 379–380.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:380–381.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:390–391.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:388.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Rivkah Harris's description of Inanna-Ishtar: "Inanna-Ishtar is a liminal figure; she is androgynous, marginal, ambiguous. She is neither here nor there. She is betwixt and between." Rivkah Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites," *History of Religions* 30 (1991): 265. Harris also writes of the goddess, "What I want to emphasize here is the paradoxical juxtaposition of her manliness/maleness alongside her femininity/femaleness, the bipolarity which is the special character of the goddess." *Ibid.*, 270. See also Peggy Day's words on Anat: "As perpetual *bilt* she is suspended in the liminality of adolescence, where male and female social roles have not yet been fully differentiated. This lack of complete gender separation is expressed mythologically by a 'confusion of categories,' the absence of a boundary between male and female spheres of activity." Peggy L. Day, "Anat: Ugarit's 'Mistress of Animals,'" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51 (1992): 183.

<sup>74</sup> One also wonders whether there is not some modern bias regarding unmarried or childless women at work here. Are scholars perhaps projecting onto ancient societies contemporary ideas that females do not reach full womanhood unless and until they marry and bear children?



feminist biblical scholars. However, queer biblical criticism allows us to move beyond binary notions of gender and essentialist paradigms of manhood and womanhood.

### *Reading Separately or Together?*

Mieke Bal has also written extensively, and influentially, on Judges 4 and 5. She introduces the idea that the biblical texts carry with them “codes,” a set of rules dictating which topics and vocabulary are permissible and which are off-limits. Along with other codes, the biblical materials include “gender codes”: “A gender code is the code of a group, masculine or feminine, the members of which belong simultaneously to other groups whose codes they also use. When implicit, the gender code will have the same characteristics as the moral code.”<sup>75</sup> Bal’s arguments about codes almost anticipate Butler’s theory of gender performance in that, like Butler’s “gender,” Bal’s “codes” are all-encompassing and subtle. However, where Butler and the biblical scholars who use her methods disturb the gender binary, Bal reinforces it. Bal, abiding by the scholarly consensus at the time she was writing, begins from the assumption that Judges 4 and 5 were written at different times by different authors, with Judges 5 as the earlier of the texts.<sup>76</sup> She argues that the implied author or narrator of chapter 4 is “masculine” and of chapter 5 “feminine.”<sup>77</sup>

I would contend that Bal’s characterization of the texts this way needlessly essentializes gender. Further, the foundation upon which her argument is built, that Judges 5 predates Judges 4 significantly, is shaky at best. In the absence of firm evidence of dating and provenance for these

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<sup>75</sup> Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera’s Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 10.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

two chapters, I argue that, for the purpose of literary analysis, the best strategy is to analyze them as a unity. This is not to discount the real possibility that they were written at different times by different authors, but as texts in our hands today, they function as a unit. They each contain details the other lacks, and together, they form a complete picture.

Bal's work does provide another useful paradigm for my own, however. A major theme of Bal's biblical scholarship has been the instability of meaning and the multivalence of texts. She writes, "...we see multiple possibilities in the interpretation of texts that are culturally distant in time and/or space as well as in the production of new meanings in today's emerging subcultures."<sup>78</sup> Bal acknowledges that meaning is not inherent in the text and that the reader has a role in making meaning. In this regard, Bal's feminist analysis of the Bible paves the way for other ideological methods of criticism, such as the queer criticism I use in this project.

Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn's work on Judges 4 and 5 shows the value of reading the two chapters together, in their final form. Contra Bal, who advocates reading chapter 5 first and viewing chapter 4 as a later, somewhat unwelcome addition, Fewell and Gunn ask, "why not do the obvious thing and try reading five after four, as a single story?"<sup>79</sup> Fewell and Gunn bring out both the maternal and the sexual elements of Jael's interactions with Sisera.<sup>80</sup> Unlike some other interpreters, who choose one or the other, Fewell and Gunn show that it is possible to imagine Jael playing the roles of mother and lover simultaneously. Another strength of their analysis is the focus on the role Jael's gender plays in her actions. Noting that many commentators have expressed discomfort at Jael's apparent betrayal of principles of hospitality, Fewell and Gunn point out that she can hardly turn Sisera away for fear of how he may react

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>79</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4-5," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1990): 390.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 392.

(with sexual violence, they imply), and she can hardly shelter him fully for fear of her resulting treatment at the hands of the Israelite soldiers who will follow (again, sexual violence).<sup>81</sup> Their argument, that Jael is trapped and needs to find a way out, informs my own position that her way out is the skillful performance of womanhood.

### *Sexuality in Judges 4-5*

Many scholars have argued for the presence of sexual imagery and innuendo in Judges 4 and 5. I will discuss their arguments and my responses to them in detail in chapter 3; here, I wish to give an overview of the scholars' points and their relevance to my arguments. I will leave the discussion of specific verses, phrases, and words to chapter 3 and here treat only broad themes.

Robert Alter's literary reading of Judges 4-5 was one of the first works of modern scholarship to highlight a sexual element in the chapters. For my project, though, what is most instructive is Alter's treatment of Judges 4 and 5 as literature. He criticizes scholars who see the two chapters as representing different "traditions" about what happened between Jael and Sisera. While he argues for major differences in tone and characterization in the two chapters, he argues against them representing two distinct tellings. Alter contends, "In point of fact, all the differences between the two versions are a matter of the writers' interpretive rendering of the same event."<sup>82</sup> While I do not see a historical "event" underlying Judges 4 and 5, Alter's point that we need not interpret the two chapters as separate stories is well taken. His broader body of work, which argues for treating the final form of the biblical text as it is and analyzing its literary

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 396. Fewell and Gunn also note that the crass attitude of Sisera's mother and her friends "forc[es] the Canaanite women to approve unconsciously their own imminent rape": they speak approvingly of their men taking female spoils of war, but, since the Israelites have won, it is the Canaanite women who will now be sexually assaulted. Ibid., 408.

<sup>82</sup> Robert Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 55.

features, rather than performing dubious reconstructions of date, primacy, and authorship, deeply informs my own work in this project.<sup>83</sup>

Susan Niditch also brings out the erotic elements of, especially, Judges 5. Through extensive analysis of the language of the chapter, she makes insightful points about the connections between sexuality, mothering, and death. She notes that Sisera is duped because Jael is camouflaged as a “mere woman.”<sup>84</sup> Niditch writes, “He was tired and had been lulled to sleep by a woman warrior, disguised as a would-be lover or mother.”<sup>85</sup> Niditch’s line of reasoning on Jael’s “disguise” sets the stage for my own arguments about gender, sexuality, and performance.

A minority of scholars, notably Pamela Tamarkin Reis, go beyond noting the sexual implications of the encounter between Jael and Sisera and actually argue for sexual intercourse between the two. I will treat Reis’s detailed linguistic arguments in chapter 3. Here, I note that such arguments are intriguing and serve to emphasize the sexual innuendo already present in the text, but that they are speculative and, ultimately, unnecessary. We do not need to envision actual sex between Jael and Sisera to appreciate how the author(s) of Judges 4 and 5 use sexual imagery.

Scholars’ treatments of the encounter between Jael and Sisera as suffused with sexuality have not gone unchallenged. Serge Frolov, for example, criticizes arguments that see both maternity and sexuality in the text as inconsistent. As I will argue in more detail below, Frolov’s presupposition that these two themes cannot coexist is unsupported. In addition, Frolov misleadingly lumps together all scholars writing about sexuality in Judges 4 and 5, which

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<sup>83</sup> Alter describes literary analysis as “the manifest varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else...” Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 13.

<sup>84</sup> Susan Niditch, “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1989), 51.

<sup>85</sup> Niditch, *Judges*, 67.

conflates those who make a case for actual sex with those who merely see sexual innuendo and language. His argument that sexual readings of certain biblical texts are overreaching, prurient and damage the dignity of the Bible and its characters is also problematic for its assumptions about the biblical texts and the function of good scholarship.

### *Motherhood in Judges 4-5*

While some scholars focus on sexual imagery in Judges 4 and 5, others argue that Jael's behavior toward Sisera is more strongly maternal than sexual. For example, while acknowledging that there may be a sexual element in the text, Mieke Bal points out a motherhood piece that, she argues, other scholars have missed because of the "codes" they use to read the text. I will discuss the specifics of Bal's argument in chapter 3. Here, I note that Bal's work on Judges 4 and 5 is most instructive for my project for her recognition that there is both sexual and maternal imagery at work in these chapters. While she focuses on the maternal, she does not deny the presence of the sexual.

Cheryl Exum's work, which I also treat in more detail below, discusses the different pictures of motherhood presented by Judges 4 and 5, in the forms of Deborah, Jael, and Sisera's mother. Her insights on what these characters collectively say about the authors' perceptions of motherhood are helpful to my own project. Sasson builds on Exum's work, highlighting the maternal imagery in the relationship between Jael and Sisera. He brings in a potential Ancient Near Eastern parallel, comparing this relationship to that of Shamhat and Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Sasson also dismisses sexual interpretations of Jael and Sisera, arguing that it is illogical to imagine sexual intercourse between the two characters. However, as I argue below

both with regard to Sasson and to Frolov, one need not envision actual sex between them to acknowledge the sexual imagery that suffuses their story.

### *Language and Gender Identity in Judges 4-5*

In recent years, a few scholars have begun to interrogate the role and fluidity of gender in these chapters, often using linguistic evidence to bolster their arguments. While I will treat these philological arguments in more depth in chapter 3, here I summarize their conclusions and their relevance for my work. Ellen van Wolde has argued that Jael in Judges 4 is marked as masculine through her name, which, she contends, is the third-person masculine singular imperfect form of the verb *ʾlh*.<sup>86</sup> Scott C. Layton, however, has convincingly refuted van Wolde's linguistic arguments.<sup>87</sup> Further, as I argue below, Jael's actions toward Sisera overwhelmingly mark her as feminine, not masculine. However, I welcome van Wolde's attention to the importance and fluidity of gender in the interactions between Jael and Sisera.

Deryn Guest's queer reading of Judges 4 and 5 builds on van Wolde's linguistic argument but also goes beyond it, citing additional clues in the text's language that point to a masculine role for Jael. She argues that Jael and Deborah both appear to play the role of the man better than do the men in the story, Barak and Sisera. I find Guest's work to be most instructive for my own in her disruption of the entire system of gender. Guest criticizes feminist scholars who focus on "gender reversal" in the text for not acknowledging, first, that gender is not a binary that can be "reversed," and, second, that all characters, not just Jael, perform gender.

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<sup>86</sup> Ellen J. van Wolde, "Ya'el in Judges 4," *ZAW* 107 (1995): 240–46.

<sup>87</sup> Scott C. Layton, "Ya'el in Judges 4: An Onomastic Rejoinder," *ZAW* 109 (1997): 93–94.

Guest's challenge to the description of Jael as "liminal," which I discuss above, is also especially helpful for this project.

Lori Lefkowitz also discusses gender in Judges 4 and 5, situating the story among other biblical tales where women win and men lose in a bedroom setting. She uses queer-theoretical arguments about gender as a series repeated, stylized acts with no underlying substance, contending that Jael is able to control Sisera with her "command performance" of femininity.<sup>88</sup> Lefkowitz's argument is excellent, though I would contend that, in focusing only on Jael's "bed trick," she misses the character's performed motherhood. In addition, while others who have studied gender in Judges 4 and 5 delve into the linguistics of the chapters, Lefkowitz does not deal much at all with the Hebrew, which is a shortcoming.

### History of Scholarship on Judith

While it is not possible to precisely date the apocryphal Book of Judith, we can get much closer with this text than with Judges 4 and 5.<sup>89</sup> The majority of scholars date the text to the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Deborah Levine Gera opts for c. 100 B.C.E., "give or take a decade or two on either end."<sup>90</sup> Carey A. Moore favors a similar date, likely the end of the reign of John Hyrcanus I (135-104 B.C.E.) or the beginning of the reign of Alexander Janneus (103-78 B.C.E.).<sup>91</sup> Solomon Zeitlin opts for a date "in the late Hasmonean period or in the early Roman

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<sup>88</sup> Lori Lefkowitz, *In Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities* (Blue Ridge Summit, Pa.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 112.

<sup>89</sup> Another matter of scholarly debate is the original language of the Book of Judith. The balance of scholarship tilts toward an original Hebrew or Aramaic version underlying the Greek, but there is still much discussion. For an up-to-date summary of the debate, see Deborah Levine Gera, *Judith* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 79–94.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 38–44.

<sup>91</sup> Carey A. Moore, *Judith: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 67.

period,” meaning closer to 63 B.C.E.<sup>92</sup> Related to the issue of Judith’s date is the question of whether characters in the story are intended to stand in for real historical figures of the period of its composition. One oft-repeated suggestion is that the character of Judith was inspired by the Hasmonean Queen Salome Alexandra (Shelamzion), who took the throne after her husband Alexander Jannaeus died.<sup>93</sup> Some have suggested that Judith is meant to represent Salome Alexandra and either Holofernes or Nebuchadnezzar is meant to represent the first century B.C.E. Armenian King Tigranes.<sup>94</sup>

Numerous scholars have remarked upon the historical inaccuracies of the Book of Judith, such as the Israelites fighting Nebuchadnezzar, said to be king of the Assyrians, who rules from Nineveh, and the location of the action in the apparently fictional town of Bethulia. The overwhelming consensus is that this is a work of historical fiction, a novel or novella; that is, the events described in the Book of Judith did not actually happen, at least not the way the book describes them.<sup>95</sup> Judith herself does not appear until the midpoint of the book that bears her name; Toni Craven has convincingly demonstrated that this is likely a calculated authorial choice.<sup>96</sup> Many scholars have pointed out that the Book of Judith seems to build on and allude to the stories of Deborah and Jael in Judges 4 and 5.<sup>97</sup> Because my study focuses on the character of

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<sup>92</sup> Morton Scott Enslin and Solomon Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith: Greek Text with an English Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 28.

<sup>93</sup> See *Ibid.*, 181. Tal Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 127–153.

<sup>94</sup> See Samuele Rocca, “The Book of Judith, Queen Sholomzion, and King Tigranes of Armenia: A Sadducee Appraisal,” *Materia Giudaica* 10 (2005): 85–98. Gabriele Boccaccini, “Tigranes the Great as ‘Nebuchadnezzar’ in the Book of Judith,” in *A Pious Seductress: Studies in the Book of Judith*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits (Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 55–69.

<sup>95</sup> Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 1. Moore, *Judith*, 38–49. Gera, *Judith*, 5–6.

<sup>96</sup> Toni Craven, *Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983).

<sup>97</sup> For the most detailed treatment of this idea, see Sidnie Ann White, “In the Steps of Jael and Deborah: Judith as Heroine,” in *“No One Spoke Ill of Her”: Essays on Judith*, ed. James C. VanderKam, *Early Judaism and Its Literature* 2 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1992), 5–16.



Judith, I will review what has been written about her specifically and not more general studies that treat the remainder of the Book of Judith.

*Whose Judith? Judith as Masculine, Androgynous, Empowering, Anti-Feminist*

A few scholars have argued that Judith is an androgynous or masculine figure. Patricia Montley argues that Judith is an androgyne, “possess[ing] the characteristics usually attributed to males and the characteristics usually attributed to females.”<sup>98</sup> At an early date, 1978, Montley recognized that Judith is “playing” with gender throughout her story. I appreciate Montley’s acceptance of the malleability of masculinity and femininity, and her contention that Judith’s “gender” is not restricted by her “sex.” However, in chapter 4, I will challenge Montley’s reductive division of personality characteristics into “masculine” and feminine.” Also in chapter 4, I will challenge Montley’s contention that Judith “plays the man” at various points in her story. I will argue instead that, even in many of the places where Montley sees Judith as acting masculine, she is actually employing tricks of feminine performance.

Sandra Ladick Collins also argues that Judith acts like a man. She even disqualifies Judith from her classification of the “female heroic” because neither character has much to do with marriage and children, “matters profoundly associated with women,” and because they act for the communal good rather than individual concerns.<sup>99</sup> In chapter 4, I will challenge Collins’ conclusion that Judith acts like a man and that there is nothing particularly “female” about her. Several scholars have framed discussions of Judith, gender, and sexuality in terms of whether the

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<sup>98</sup> Patricia Montley, “Judith in the Fine Arts: The Appeal of the Archetypal Androgyne,” *Anima* 4 (1978): 39.

<sup>99</sup> Sandra Ladick Collins, *Weapons upon Her Body: The Female Heroic in the Hebrew Bible* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 125. Collins’ “female heroic” classification includes Lot’s daughters, Tamar, Bathsheba, and Ruth. She argues that Judith, Esther, and Deborah do not fit the mold. Though Esther is married, Collins argues that the Book of Esther does not deal significantly with her family life.

Book of Judith or its lead character can rightly be considered “feminist.” For example, in her commentary on the Book of Judith, Gera weighs the question of whether Judith can be considered a feminist tale, coming down emphatically against reading it that way. Gera argues that Judith’s use of sexuality to take down Holofernes is hardly feminist. Gera writes, “The message that women use their beauty to deceive and harm men is not a feminist one.”<sup>100</sup> Gera argues further that Judith is “silenced” after the heroic deeds described in the book, living out the rest of her life as a celibate widow.<sup>101</sup> She points out that, although Judith speaks to God throughout the story in the form of prayer, there is no real direct communication from God to Judith, only in her lies to Holofernes about receiving divine messages of Israel’s doom.<sup>102</sup> In addition, Gera contends, “Neither Judith’s behavior nor her concerns nor her outlook are those of a flesh and blood woman.”<sup>103</sup> She is, after all, without a husband or children, and she stands apart from the family concerns that we can infer would have preoccupied many other women in the world of the text. In chapter 4, I will challenge Gera on her conclusion that Judith is silenced after killing Holofernes. I will argue that she actually lives a post-war life of power and acclaim. I will also argue against Gera’s categorization of Judith’s behavior and concerns as unwomanly, showing that her lack of husband and children do not disqualify her from the world of women.

Amy-Jill Levine’s take on Judith and gender is nuanced. She argues that Judith, a character who transcends traditional gender restrictions but then, at the end of the story, returns to her proper place, “both reinforce[s] and challenge[s] Bethulia’s—and the reader’s—gender-determined ideology.”<sup>104</sup> She notes that many scholars have seen Judith as a metaphor for Israel,

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<sup>100</sup> Gera, *Judith*, 103.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>104</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, “Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith,” in *Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 223.

the forlorn but faithful widow who must gather her strength and act. However, she argues, the metaphor is incomplete; Judith stands apart from her community and especially from other women, because “Were all women to be like Judith, not only Holofernes would lose his head.”<sup>105</sup> Levine observes that the men in the Book of Judith are either absent, like Judith’s husband, or totally inept, like Holofernes and Uzziah.<sup>106</sup> Judith, meanwhile, “muddles sexual difference through her inversion of gender roles,” Levine writes.<sup>107</sup> In chapter 4, I will argue against Levine’s contention that Judith inverts gender roles, showing instead how Judith performs womanhood. I will further challenge Levine on what she sees as a nascent, but quickly quashed, opportunity for female power when Judith returns. In addition, I will challenge Levine’s reading of Judith’s own behavior and words at the end of the book. Contrary to Levine’s conclusions, I will argue that Judith does not reinscribe herself in the domestic sphere; nor do the words of her victory song denigrate women or her own achievements.

Pamela J. Milne asks whether Judith is a feminist heroine or can be seen as one by the reader who is so inclined. Using a Mieke Bal-inspired strategy of “[h]olding both the text and the reader accountable for meaning,” Milne answers in the negative.<sup>108</sup> She argues that the image of the *femme fatale* in Judith does not help “to redefine and restructure society, and all its institutions, in ways which equitably reflect and sustain women’s lives.”<sup>109</sup> Milne herself argues

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>108</sup> Pamela J. Milne, “What Shall We Do with Judith? A Feminist Reassessment of a Biblical ‘Heroine,’” *Semeia* 62 (1993): 40.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 48. Milne briefly reviews scholars’ conclusions on the question of Judith’s feminism, criticizing George W.E. Nickelsburg and Carey Moore especially for their labeling of Judith as a feminist character. Nickelsburg, Milne writes, seems to understand feminism as holding that women are superior to men and classifies Judith as a feminist character because she is portrayed in a better light than the men in her story; Milne also argues that Nickelsburg sees “the stereotypical presentations of female deceitfulness and seductive sexuality as being virtual feminist tools.” Ibid., 45. Milne criticizes Moore, meanwhile, for arguing that Judith’s transcendence of both masculinity and femininity in favor of asexuality renders her feminist; the denial of femaleness is not feminism, Milne argues. Ibid. Moore, *Judith*, 65.

against Judith as a feminist heroine by first exploring the book's literary genre. She contends that Heda Jason's "epic struggle" model of folktale seems to best fit the Book of Judith. Using this method of analysis, God, not Judith, is the clear hero of the story; Judith plays the secondary role of "helper-seducer," Milne argues.<sup>110</sup> She contends, "Even though Judith may act in some atypical ways, she is not a counter-cultural character, but remains very much a man's woman. . . . In short, the text presents Judith as the very antithesis of a woman-identified woman."<sup>111</sup> The text is anti-woman because it casts Judith in the role of serving men's interests while effacing or even denigrating her own role in the story, Milne argues.

Milne's work serves as a corrective to uncritical affirmations of Judith as a feminist role model. Her critique of those who see Judith as feminist because she is portrayed as "better" than the men in her story, or because she appears to be androgynous, is important. However, I would disagree with Milne on several points. In chapter 4, I will challenge her assignment of folklore-inspired "roles" to the characters in the book. Further, I will critique Milne's argument that Judith denigrates her own role in Israel's victory in a way that is harmful to women.

Betsy Merideth also questions whether it is proper to regard Judith as a positive figure for women. Her perceptive essay compares Judith and Delilah, two female characters who deceive men using sexuality but are regarded very differently from one another. Merideth argues that the concept of "betrayal," often applied to Delilah but rarely to Judith, is not objective but rather socially constructed.<sup>112</sup> She writes that it is ultimately the difference in the two female characters' sexual actions—Delilah has sex with Samson, while Judith is seductive but remains chaste—that determines whether we read their actions as heroism or betrayal. Merideth writes,

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<sup>110</sup> Milne, "What Shall We Do with Judith?," 53.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>112</sup> Betsy Merideth, "Desire and Danger: The Drama of Betrayal in Judges and Judith," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield, England: Almond, 1989), 68.

“This double standard—that she must be beautiful and sexual and yet chaste and untouched—reflects profound male ambivalence toward women’s sexuality: that it is simultaneously desirable and dangerous.”<sup>113</sup> While I appreciate Merideth’s perceptive comparison of Delilah and Judith, in chapter 4 I will aim to nuance her reading of Judith by arguing that she is more conscious and deliberate about her role as a chaste seductress than Merideth gives her credit for.

In her comparison of the characters of Esther and Judith, Sidnie White Crawford comes to what, surprisingly, seems to be a minority opinion in recent feminist scholarship: that Judith is an empowered and empowering character for women. Crawford argues that Esther meets patriarchal standards for women while Judith flouts them. Judith defies expectations in several ways, she argues: she gets her own extensive genealogy, she is a childless widow who has evidently disregarded any levirate obligation to remarry and produce an heir for her dead husband, she orders around the town elders, she goes unprotected into a dangerous all-male environment, she lies, and of course, she kills.<sup>114</sup> Further, while Gera and Levine interpret Judith’s behavior after killing Holofernes as resubmitting herself to patriarchy, Crawford comes to the opposite conclusion. She writes:

She retains her anomalous status as a widow, her control over her wealth, and her female servant as her second-in-command. Judith is not subsumed back into the patriarchal order. Any marriage that she might make would undercut the masculine ideal of the patriarchal household, because Judith has already decapitated that idea.<sup>115</sup>

It is because Judith’s story is so powerful for women that she must be marginalized, Crawford argues. In fact, she contends, it is the Book of Judith’s attitudes toward gender that likely kept it out of the Jewish canon and led early Christian writers to reinterpret Judith in more acceptable

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>114</sup> Sidnie White Crawford, “Esther and Judith: Contrasts in Character,” in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 73–74.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 75.

terms. Crawford argues the the Book of Esther, by contrast, presents a lead female character who is not as challenging.<sup>116</sup> She writes, “Why was the Book of Judith excluded when Esther, with all its theological problems, was included? Because Esther never threatened the status quo, but Judith was a dangerous woman who had the power to subvert Jewish society. Like Vashti before her, Judith had to go.”<sup>117</sup>

I would agree with Crawford; Judith is a more empowered and empowering heroine than scholars such as Gera and Levine give her credit for. I especially appreciate Crawford’s reading that Judith remains powerful and independent after returning to Bethulia. In chapter 4, I build on such notions of Judith’s power, showing how her power, violence, and gender performance are related.

André Lacocque also finds Judith to be an empowering character. He mentions the 20<sup>th</sup> century play *Judith* by Jean Giraudoux that portrayed Judith as a courtesan and Holofernes as a sympathetic character, commenting, “A second-century B.C.E. literary composition can indeed be much more progressive and liberating than its twentieth-century interpretation!”<sup>118</sup> Though others, such as Gera, have seen Judith’s chastity as confining, a way of blunting her influence and emphasizing her otherness, Lacocque argues that for Judith, chastity is empowering. LaCocque notes that her sexual continence is in part a sign of the idealization of chastity at the time of the book’s composition, but that it seems to be something more as well: “But, in the book of Judith, one cannot but think that chastity is also a sign of independence. She is without protector, but she does not need any.”<sup>119</sup> I would agree with Lacocque; for a character in this

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 75–76.

<sup>117</sup> Sidnie White Crawford, “Esther Not Judith: Why One Made It and the Other Didn’t,” *Bible Review* 18 (2002): 13.

<sup>118</sup> André Lacocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel’s Tradition* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1990), 42.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 38.

textual world, it is chastity that enables her to take on the role she does. As I will argue in chapter 4, she is able to play with the signifiers of gender and sexuality precisely because she knows that she is not sexually available.

Lacocque groups Judith with Susanna, Esther, and Ruth as what he calls “the feminine unconventional.” In doing so, he writes, “They are four women who break the stereotypes of femininity, not by becoming masculine, but by transcending the male-female polarity while remaining the ‘feminine’ females that they are.”<sup>120</sup> Lacocque does not use the language of queer theory or gender performance—writing in 1990, he could hardly have done so—but his assessment of Judith’s relationship to gender is instructive for my own argument. Contra Montley and Collins, Lacocque recognizes that Judith does not “play the man” but challenges the gender dichotomy anyway. Interestingly, he also notes Judith’s parallels not only with several biblical woman, but with David and Judah Maccabee as well. He writes:

Judith is subversive by showing that a woman can take the lead and become the model of faith and martyrdom, while ‘elders’ recoil in the holes of their complacency. Judith is not only a David redivivus of sorts, she is Judas Maccabee in the feminine; her very name says as much. At the time of the composition of Judith, it was surely not a trivial feat to feminize the hero of the day!<sup>121</sup>

With Montley, Lacocque also reads Judith as androgynous; he attributes her self-sufficiency to that androgyny.<sup>122</sup> Here, I would disagree with Lacocque, on the same grounds on which I challenge Montley above.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 38.

*Two Judiths: The Book of Judith and Judith Butler*

There are many feminist readings of Judith as well as non-feminist works that address issues of Judith's womanhood, but there are as yet precious few studies that use queer theory to explore gender and sexuality in the story. One scholar who has begun the work of using queer theory to look at Judith is Deborah F. Sawyer. Sawyer uses the work of Butler and Luce Irigaray to explore the gender performance of Judith, arguing that Judith consciously puts on a version of "womanhood." She writes, "Judith is not allowed merely to drift from 'non-feminine' to feminine—she consciously 'becomes' feminine. Her change of dress code, change of demeanour and change of language achieve this transformation. She crosses over to the world of sexual activity and wears the signals of availability."<sup>123</sup> Sawyer also notes that Judith upsets binary constructions of gender and astutely remarks that, for as long as forces have pushed a binary, rigid gender system, there have been challenges to it: "In other words, inseparable from the history of binary gender construction—that is inherently hierarchical, patriarchal, and heterosexually biased—is the history of its subversion."<sup>124</sup> I find Sawyer's arguments on these points persuasive; in chapter 4, I expand upon her research by doing a closer reading of the text than she does, paying special attention to phrasing and word choice and not only to the broad outlines of the plot. However, also in chapter 4, I challenge Sawyer on the theological spin she puts on her queer readings, arguing that she inaccurately represents the role(s) of God in biblical texts and unintentionally handicaps the possibilities of queer biblical analysis.

A second scholar who has brought insights from queer theory (or at least its predecessor texts) into the study of Judith is Claudia Rakel. Rakel, like Sawyer, brings Irigaray's concept of

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<sup>123</sup> Deborah Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 95.

<sup>124</sup> Deborah Sawyer, "Gender Strategies in Antiquity: Judith's Performance," *Feminist Theology* 28 (2001): 12.



“mimesis” into the discussion of Judith. Irigaray argues that the only option for women in a patriarchal society is to play fully the role of “womanhood” that is forced on them. In this way, women can, paradoxically, distance themselves from the reality that they are compelled to inhabit. Rakel argues that Judith’s mimesis is a form of resistance in that it opposes the notion that men are entitled to free rein over women’s bodies.<sup>125</sup> The Assyrian men want Judith, but, contrary to patriarchal expectations, they do not get to have her. Rakel’s vocabulary here is instructive for my own work. In chapter 4, I expand on the idea that Judith’s performance is a form of resistance. However, I find some of Rakel’s other conclusions less convincing. Also in chapter 4, I will critique her arguments that the Book of Judith is ultimately critical of war and that Judith herself represents an alternative model for conflict resolution. I also argue for nuancing Rakel’s contention that Judith reinforces stereotypes of femininity.

### History of Scholarship on Pseudo-Philo’s Jael

Given its status as an outsider to the canon, there has been far less scholarship on Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities* than on Judges 4 and 5 or the Book of Judith. The book was initially attributed to Philo of Alexandria, but modern scholars realized that it is written in a different style and is concerned with very different themes than the works of Philo.<sup>126</sup> The book is thus anonymous, with its author commonly referred to as Pseudo-Philo. *Biblical Antiquities* has been dated by nearly all to between the beginning of the Common Era and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., but

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<sup>125</sup> Claudia Rakel, “Judith: About a Beauty Who Is Not What She Pretends to Be,” in *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, ed. Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2012), 523.

<sup>126</sup> Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber antiquitatum biblicarum, with Latin Text and English Translation* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1996), 195–196. For a discussion of the various manuscripts of this work and of the *edition princeps*, see Guido Kisch, *Pseudo-Philo’s Liber antiquitatum Biblicarum* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1949), part 1.

scholars disagree on a more specific date. Some advocate a pre-70 C.E. date based on attitudes toward the Temple and sacrifice in the text, while others argue that Pseudo-Philo was living in the pessimistic era after the Temple was destroyed and that linguistic clues point to a later date.<sup>127</sup> In any event, the book was composed in the Roman period. Thus, it will be easier to engage to a limited degree with the general historical context of *Biblical Antiquities* than it was above to discuss the context of Judges 4 and 5.

*Biblical Antiquities* is extant only in Latin, though most argue that a Hebrew original must underlie the text because of its copious Hebraisms; scholars posit one translation from Hebrew to Greek and another from Greek to Latin.<sup>128</sup> *Biblical Antiquities* is a rewriting of the biblical story from Adam through Saul's death. It omits some stories entirely and in others, contains expansions not found in the biblical text. One notable and relevant feature of the book is that it tends to expand upon the Bible's stories about women, giving names to some female characters who lack them in the Bible and generally paying significant attention to many biblical women.<sup>129</sup> Some, notably Mary Therese DesCamp, have even suggested that the book was written by a woman.<sup>130</sup> Chapter 31, the section of *Biblical Antiquities* on which I focus in this project, is a prime example of this greater attention to female characters. As a retelling of Judges 4-5, chapter 31 of *Biblical Antiquities* naturally relies heavily on those biblical chapters. In addition, scholars have noted that *L.A.B.* 31 is also influenced by the Book of Judith.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Jacobson, *A commentary*, 195–210. Kisch, *Pseudo-Philo's Liber antiquitatum Biblicarum*, 17. Frederick James Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>128</sup> Jacobson, *A commentary*, 215–224, 273.

<sup>129</sup> Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible*, 258.

<sup>130</sup> Mary Therese DesCamp, "Why Are These Women Here? An Examination of the Sociological Setting of Pseudo-Philo through Comparative Reading," *JSP* 8 (1997): 53.

<sup>131</sup> For influences of the Book of Judith on the *Biblical Antiquities* story of Jael, see Gera, *Judith*, 12.

Most scholars have observed that the erotic undertones are more obvious in this version of the Jael story than in Judges 4 and 5.<sup>132</sup> An exception is William R.G. Loader, who sees a lack of sexual symbolism in *L.A.B.* 31 in contrast to Judges; for instance, he points to the fact that here Sisera is not said to fall between Jael's feet.<sup>133</sup> Loader ignores several quite apparent sexual references which other scholars notice; I would disagree with him that Pseudo-Philo's version of the Jael-Sisera encounter lacks sexual imagery. If the absence of Sisera falling between Jael's feet is significant, it is probably for reasons closer to those provided by Cheryl Anne Brown. Brown argues that the text wishes to emphasize that Jael's chastity is preserved. To that end, instead of him falling between her feet, which might be construed as connoting sex between them, it is clear that Sisera is in bed alone, since Jael rolls him onto the floor. This action, of course, also corresponds to Judith's treatment of the headless body of Holofernes.<sup>134</sup> Thus, while we might see the lack of reference to Sisera falling between Jael's feet as reflecting an authorial desire to stress that there was no sex between Jael and Sisera, contra Loader it is hardly enough to indicate a lack of sexual content in the chapter as a whole.

Multiple scholars have argued that the erotic content of the encounter between Jael and Sisera is played up, perhaps to fit Pseudo-Philo's demonstrated belief that the punishment must always fit the crime. Thus, as Frederick J. Murphy contends, elements reminiscent of the Book of Judith, such as Jael's beauty and Sisera's great lust for her and for Israelite women, are used to draw a connection between offense and fate. Sisera's lascivious intentions toward Jael, as well as his stated desire to steal Israelite women, lead to his ultimate, poetic fate: death "like a woman,"

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<sup>132</sup> For example, see Pieter W. van der Horst, "Portraits of Biblical Women in Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*," *JSP* 5 (1989): 36.

<sup>133</sup> William R. G. Loader, *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Apocalypses, Testaments, Legends, Wisdom, and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), 279.

<sup>134</sup> Cheryl Anne Brown, *No Longer Be Silent: First Century Jewish Portraits of Biblical Women: Studies in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities and Josephus's Jewish Antiquities* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 54–55.

by the hand of a woman. Murphy notes that the seduction implied in Judges 4 and 5 is explicit here; he gives the examples of the rose petals Jael scatters on her bed and of Sisera's inner thoughts, which show that Jael's erotic overtures are having their intended effect on him.<sup>135</sup>

Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch argues that Pseudo-Philo not only broadens the role of female biblical characters but also uses them to make important theological points, including, as Murphy also notes, that villains will get their deserved punishments.<sup>136</sup> Burnette-Bletsch writes:

[Sisera] has boasted that he will attack Israel with his mighty arm, that he will divide their spoils among his servants, and that he will take beautiful women as his concubines. Therefore, God ordains that the weak arm of a woman will attack him, maidens will take his spoils, and he will fall at the hands of a woman. Ironically, those women to whom Sisera poses the greatest threat will become the instruments of his downfall.<sup>137</sup>

She notes that Sisera states that he intends to take Jael with him, even though Jael says clearly that she will send only her servants to accompany him.<sup>138</sup> His nefarious motives thus serve to justify his death at Jael's hand. Burnette-Bletsch also sees this version of Jael's use of seduction, similar to Judith's use of the same tactic, as analogous to deceptive strategies that might be used by other powerless groups. She writes, "These characters use the most powerful weapon available to them in their society to transform what could be perceived as a weakness into strength. Because as women they belong to a subordinate societal group, much as the first-century Jews were politically subordinate as an ethnic group, they must employ trickery and seduction to achieve their goals."<sup>139</sup> I would see Burnette-Bletsch's argument here as an overreading; it is not clear to me that deceptive sexuality, specifically, is a tool used by all

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<sup>135</sup> Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible*, 141.

<sup>136</sup> Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, "At the Hands of a Woman: Rewriting Jael in Pseudo-Philo," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 9 (1998): 56.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 56–57.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

subordinated groups and not just groups subjugated for reasons of gender or sexuality. It is also unclear whether sexual seduction can be seen as analogous to other forms of trickery.

As Betsy Merideth does with Judith and Delilah, Burnette-Bletsch makes a comparison between Jael and Delilah. Burnette-Bletsch argues that a woman using her body to bring down a man is acceptable if it is done for the good of Israel, but not if it is done to harm Israel. Additionally, she argues, the comparison with Delilah shows that the seductive woman may only be considered a positive figure if she remains chaste.<sup>140</sup> As with Merideth, I would agree with Burnette-Bletsch's observation, but I would also argue that, like Judith, Jael in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* is quite conscious of the balancing act between sexiness and chastity that is required of her.

Burnette-Bletsch highlights the blend of motherhood and seduction that Jael offers to Sisera. She notes that *L.A.B.* 31 omits Sisera's command to Jael in Judges 4:20 and simply has Jael giving all the orders. She writes, "Having lured him into her tent using her sexuality, Jael now manipulates the man in a maternal manner. Through all of this, she acts within her appropriate societal roles as lover and mother pretending to fulfil every expectation of a woman in her society."<sup>141</sup> I find Burnette-Bletsch's focus on both the maternal and seductive aspects of Jael's behavior to be instructive for my own argument.

While Gale A. Yee contends that Pseudo-Philo transforms the independent heroine of Judges into a waffling creature who needs divine signs for every move she makes, Burnette-Bletsch argues that in general, Pseudo-Philo does not trust human agency and prefers to see God

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 60.

behind heroic actions.<sup>142</sup> Betsy Halpern-Amaru, on the other hand, makes a more complicated argument about agency in the *Biblical Antiquities*. Halpern-Amaru argues that God remains the chief actor throughout the book, and only Israelite women who act in partnership with God may be considered true heroines in Pseudo-Philo. As a non-Israelite, Jael cannot be a partner of God and therefore an active agent, but can only be a tool of the divine.<sup>143</sup> Halpern-Amaru argues that this is why Jael is portrayed as hesitant, needing divine reassurance at every step. She writes, “The overall impact of the creatively reconstructed narrative is the transformation of the independent biblical heroine into a clever, but less autonomous, instrument of divine vengeance.”<sup>144</sup> It is true that Jael awaits divine signals at every turn, but I would disagree with Halpern-Amaru that this marks her as something less than a heroine. Halpern-Amaru’s dividing line between heroine and tool of God seems to me arbitrary, and I have to imagine, given Pseudo-Philo’s apparent theological leanings, the idea that a character could be either a hero or a divine tool, but not both, would have been foreign to him as well.<sup>145</sup>

## Conclusion and Prospect

In this introductory chapter, I have set out the scope of this project, explaining why I have chosen these three texts to examine. I have set out and explicated the queer theory-based

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<sup>142</sup> Yee, “By the Hand of a Woman,” 122. She writes, “Jael in these expansions does not function as the autonomous actor of the biblical story, independently carrying out the assassination of an oppressor, but a beautiful pious waverer who needs divine signs in order to act.” Burnette-Bletsch, “At the Hands of a Woman,” 61.

<sup>143</sup> Betsy Halpern-Amaru, “Portraits of Women in Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities*,” in *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1991), 103.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>145</sup> In addition, prayer and divine guidance play a major role in *Biblical Antiquities* even for male characters. For example, there are lengthy prayers to God before acting on the part of Joshua in *L.A.B.* chapter 21, Cenaz in chapter 27, and Phineas in chapter 47.

methodology I will use to read Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and *Biblical Antiquities* 31, engaging deeply with current trends and disputes in the field of queer biblical hermeneutics. I have outlined the major works of scholarship dealing with gender and sexuality in these three texts. Detailed engagement with and critiques of previous scholarship will occur in chapters 3, 4, and 5, where I provide close readings and queer theory-informed analyses of Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and *Biblical Antiquities* 31, respectively. In chapter 2, I examine female literary characters from elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean world for potentially instructive similarities to the issues of gender and sexuality I raise in this project for Judith and the two versions of Jael. I first discuss the benefits and limitations of making cross-cultural literary comparisons; I then explore possibilities for queer readings of female characters in literature from the Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds.

In this project, I aim to provide thoughtful new readings of the “lethal woman” stories of the Bible and related ancient literature, both attentive to the intricacies of the texts and engaged with queer theory. Scholars have long debated the role of gender and sexuality in these tales, coming to a dizzying variety of conclusions about how issues of femininity and masculinity, chastity and sexuality affect the stories. Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, I show that the best explanation of gender and sexuality in the stories of Judith and the two iterations of Jael is that the characters use performed femininity as a weapon of war. They employ over-the-top versions of womanhood, including motherhood and seduction, in masterful ways. These gender performances serve as the engine driving forward the plot of the stories, allowing the characters to position themselves to slay the general and save the day.

## Chapter 2

### Striking Women in Ancient Mediterranean Literature

#### Making Cross-cultural Literary Comparisons

Before I analyze the three biblical/early Jewish stories that are the primary focus of this study, I wish to explore possible similarities in the literature of the Ancient Near East and, more broadly, the Mediterranean world. Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and the Biblical Antiquities were not composed in a vacuum; rather, they were written by authors living in a particular culture.<sup>146</sup> When we see motifs, themes, or characters in the literature of other Mediterranean cultures that call to mind biblical tales, that literature ought to be examined for relevance to the Bible. At minimum, a sober analysis of the similarities or lack thereof is necessary to respond to the scholars who have been making these comparisons for decades, sometimes less than soberly.<sup>147</sup> It is important to avoid overdrawing comparisons between biblical literature and the

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<sup>146</sup> See Tim Whitmarsh's statement that "no culture in antiquity, be it Jewish, Greek or any other, was born and remained in hermetic isolation. Cultural transfer is not necessarily a relay race, with a prior civilization handing a perfectly formed baton to a successor; there is, in fact, no reason why contact should not transform both parties simultaneously." Tim Whitmarsh, "The Romance between Greece and the East," in *The Romance between Greece and the East*, ed. Tim Whitmarsh and Stuart Thomson (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15.

<sup>147</sup> One endeavors to avoid what Samuel Sandmel famously dubbed "parallelomania" in his 1961 Society of Biblical Literature presidential address: "that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction." Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 1. More recently, Jack Sasson criticizes a tendency he calls "biblicizing": "To *biblicize* is to attach Bible-derived explanations to details in Near Eastern documents and artifacts on first exposure to them. The result then becomes evidence by which to clarify biblical contexts and passages. The logic is circular; the goal is to draw reciprocal benefits for biblical and Near Eastern lore by highlighting proximal parallels—and over time such commissions correct themselves. Occasionally, however, the process gives permanence to misconceptions." Sasson, Jack M., "On the Bible and the Ancient Near East," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2141.



texts of surrounding cultures. However, not to examine these texts at all deprives the scholarly community of a deeper understanding of the biblical texts and the reasons for their similarities to and differences from cognate literature.

I wish to clarify that I am not arguing for a direct reliance of any of the texts which are the primary focus of this dissertation on the comparative material. I do not suggest that I envision the scribe(s) responsible for setting down the story of Jael working with a copy of the Baal Cycle on the writing table, or the author of Judith cribbing directly from Herodotus' tales of Queen Tomyris. However, biblical scholars have long recognized the value of appealing to literatures from surrounding cultures to provide insight on the Bible, and there are types of intertextual influence that do not necessitate a direct connection<sup>148</sup> For example, attributing similarities between texts to cultural diffusion can also take the form of a mediated connection, a common source, or a common tradition. In any of these cases, we need to make sure there are plausible avenues for contact, and we also need to consider the genres of the texts under comparison.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Intertextuality, which builds on the work of theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva, holds that "texts acquire meaning to the extent that they are situated in relation to other texts in a web of mutual interference and illumination." George Aichele and Gary A. Phillips, "Introduction: Exegesis, Eisegesis, Intergesis," *Semeia* 69-70 (1995): 8. Another definition is offered by Danna Nolan Fewell: "A lone voice produces a particular sound, and issues a particular communication. To recognize that that voice is not lone after all, but in dialogue with another voice, or host of voices, is what intertextual reading is all about." Danna Nolan Fewell, "Introduction: Writing, Reading, and Relating," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 12. Intertextuality is not just a matter of cataloguing allusions to other texts, but of figuring out how those allusions are used to produce meaning, and, in the process, perhaps undermining that meaning. Aichele and Phillips, "Introduction," 11. As such, it may blur the boundaries between text and outside the text. *Ibid.*, 14. See also Andrea Seri's article about the applicability of intertextual techniques of literary analysis to ancient literature, in this case Akkadian texts, particularly the *Enuma Elish*. Seri demonstrates that intertextuality is not just a matter of one text quoting from another, and she shows that the *Enuma Elish* engages in multiple ways with itself and with other Akkadian compositions. Andrea Seri, "Borrowings to Create Anew: Intertextuality in the Babylonian Poem of 'Creation' (Enūma Eliš)," *JAOS* 134 (2014): 89–106.

<sup>149</sup> Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 4–5. K. Lawson Younger has also set out helpful criteria for making connections among biblical and Ancient Near Eastern texts. Younger writes that scholars hoping to make comparisons ought to assess potential nearness along four lines: geographic, linguistic, chronological, and cultural. K. Lawson Younger, "The 'Contextual Method': Some West Semitic Reflections," in *The Context of Scripture: Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 2002), xxxvii. Younger's method is applicable if one endeavors to make direct connections among texts. However, I do not argue for such connections here.

Scholars can also bypass the cultural diffusion explanation and attribute similarities in literature more broadly to the common human experience, though this explanation often ignores cultural similarities which do exist.<sup>150</sup>

Much has been written about the limitations of cross-cultural literary comparison in the ancient world. Here, I will discuss the major problems and then set out guidelines for the brand of comparative work I endeavor to do in this study. As Meir Malul points out, comparative work on the Ancient Near East often sets up the Bible on one side of the comparison and the entire rest of the region on the other. Scholars bringing this framework to the table may overdraw comparisons.<sup>151</sup> They may also emphasize similarities between biblical and Ancient Near Eastern texts, if the goal is to prove influence or borrowing, or stress differences, if the goal is to prove the uniqueness of the Bible. Malul argues that responsible comparative work must be even-handed, taking into account both similarities and differences, which I endeavor to do in this chapter.<sup>152</sup> Once one does weigh similarities and differences among texts, the questions arise: how close must two texts be to posit influence or borrowing? Do differences among texts negate claims of relationship? Here I cite Jeffrey H. Tigay's argument that differences should not be the death knell of the comparative endeavor. He argues that, just as there are significant differences between texts that are clearly variations on one another, such as the various versions of the *Epic*

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<sup>150</sup> Sparks, *Ancient Texts*, 4–5. For additional discussion of the importance of considering the Ancient Near Eastern intertextuality of biblical literature, see William W. Hallo, "Introduction: Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Their Relevance for Biblical Exegesis," in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo, vol. 1, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), xxiii – xxviii.

<sup>151</sup> Meir Malul, *The Comparative Method in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Legal Studies*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* (Kevelaer, Germany: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1990), 4–6.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 158–159.

of *Gilgamesh*, there can be differences in theme and content between Ancient Near Eastern texts and the biblical works that build on them.<sup>153</sup>

Comparisons between the Bible and other ancient literature are sometimes made without regard to genre.<sup>154</sup> However, to limit oneself to comparing only texts of identical genre may be to miss how the biblical authors used and transformed older texts to produce new meanings.<sup>155</sup> Similarly, limiting comparisons to texts which share a common theme would be to leave out cases where biblical writers may be alluding to or echoing other ancient texts specifically to subvert their theme.<sup>156</sup> There are also issues with even parceling the ancient texts out into genres in the first place. As Jack M. Sasson contends:

Each ANE culture attached a rudimentary roster of labels to some of its compositions. Yet for us these rubrics (often given as subscriptions or in colophons) are maddeningly imprecise or ubiquitous, drawing haphazard scholarly allegiance. No ANE composition was assigned a label that is anything like the terminology we use. This lack of classifying categories is matched by the absence of any argued theory of literature, its goals, and its many channels of interpretation.<sup>157</sup>

To limit oneself to comparing a text assigned a “maddeningly imprecise” genre only to others assigned the same possibly arbitrary genre seems self-defeating. In this chapter, I do occasionally

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<sup>153</sup> Jeffrey H. Tigay, “On Evaluating Claims of Literary Borrowing,” in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, ed. Mark E. Cohen, Daniel C. Snell, and David B. Weisberg (Bethesda, Md.: CDL, 1993), 254–255.

<sup>154</sup> Hallo argues that “the most fruitful literary comparisons and contrasts can be drawn on the level of genre, that is, of a compositional type conforming to a given pattern and serving a specific function.” William W. Hallo, “Compare and Contrast: The Contextual Approach to Biblical Literature,” in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 8.

<sup>155</sup> Christopher B. Hays, “Echoes of the Ancient Near East? Intertextuality and the Comparative Study of the Old Testament,” in *The Word Leaps the Gap* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 21.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>157</sup> Jack M. Sasson, “Comparative Observations on the Near Eastern Epic Traditions,” in *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Blackwell, 2005). Additionally, Sasson notes aptly, “We argue circularly whenever we address the nature of an ANE ‘epic.’ We justify the existence of the genre and assign narratives to it because we locate in the target examples literary characteristics – motifs, themes, structures, and modes – that were charted in classical and medieval literature long before ANE literature was seriously studied.”

compare texts that modern scholars may put in different genres, but I endeavor to acknowledge when I do this and what the possible limitations of such comparisons may be.

There are also problems stemming from uncertainty about the meaning of the texts. This can be because of difficulties reading and interpreting the ANE literature, because, for example, some texts are consonantal only.<sup>158</sup> The ANE texts may also present problems if they are fragmentary in nature. For example, the Ugaritic and Hittite texts discussed below are not complete tales, and the scholar who endeavors to compare them with the Bible must mind the gaps. Finally, many Ancient Near Eastern and biblical texts are of unknown date and provenance. As a result, “it is profoundly difficult to achieve consensus on mechanisms of historical influence or intention.”<sup>159</sup> When dates and provenance can be established, it is often the case that the biblical texts were composed quite some distance from the Ancient Near Eastern texts, in both a geographical and a chronological sense.<sup>160</sup> Again, this should not mean that comparisons are pointless.

While all these issues with comparing biblical and other ancient texts are not to be ignored, not to explore possible intertextual links at all would be overly limiting. I would argue that this is the case even when it is impossible to reconstruct exact paths of influence and connection. The unfortunate fact is that it is exceedingly rare for scholars to be able to show with any certainty how storytellers in one culture would have learned about stories from another. However, we do know that there were connections between Israel and its ANE and other Mediterranean neighbors via trade, imperialism, and diplomacy. Thus, unless it is judged highly unlikely that the biblical authors could ever have encountered a particular text from another

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid. Especially relevant for my purposes here is Sasson’s comment that “Ugaritic narratives, for example, are not for the faint, and determining what they say is more of a scholarly convention than is admitted.”

<sup>159</sup> Hays, “Echoes,” 25.

<sup>160</sup> Malul, *The Comparative Method*, 77.

culture, perhaps it is best to, as Christopher B. Hays suggests, “keep a very open mind about the availability of influences.”<sup>161</sup> This is especially true if the scholar is up front about the hypothetical nature of any reconstruction of influence and allusion.<sup>162</sup>

An excellent example of scholarship which successfully argues for cultural diffusion by a method other than direct connection is John J. Collins’ commentary on Daniel. Collins’ methodology can serve as a model for the comparison of biblical material with Ugaritic material, and, more broadly, with texts from other Mediterranean cultures. Collins notes the striking parallels between parts of the Ugaritic Baal Cycle and Daniel 7, which were composed more than 1,000 years apart. He clarifies that he is not arguing for Daniel’s author’s direct knowledge of or complete faithfulness to the Baal Cycle. A biblical text does not have to exactly reproduce the plot, imagery, or theme of a non-biblical text to be considered allusive. It is also possible, Collins notes, for a biblical author to use more than one ancient source in composing his material. Collins demonstrates that the author of Daniel 7 could have had access to the Canaanite traditions both through non-Israelite manifestations of the worship of Baal in the first millennium B.C.E. and through earlier biblical incorporations of the Ugaritic material.<sup>163</sup> Collins’ arguments about Daniel 7 and the Baal Cycle are instructive for my own comparative work in this study. Certain ancient texts are relevant for the biblical and extra-biblical tales I treat in this dissertation because there are strong correspondences. In addition, I argue, where other scholars have made these comparisons, it is imperative to explore them.

The evidence of Greek and Roman influence on biblical and post-biblical Jewish literature, and vice versa, is clearer. The Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods saw increases in

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<sup>161</sup> Hays, “Echoes,” 36.

<sup>162</sup> Jeremy M. Hutton, “Isaiah 51:9-11 and the Rhetorical Appropriation and Subversion of Hostile Theologies,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007): 279.

<sup>163</sup> John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1993), 286–294.

bilingualism. Several writers of the time who wrote in Greek use or claimed to use Ancient Near Eastern documents as their sources, and there are many bilingual inscriptions of the period.<sup>164</sup> The connections are especially strong between Greek and Jewish culture in the Second Temple period, when the latter was “extraordinarily vibrant, responsive and adaptive.”<sup>165</sup> There is major Greek influence, in language and ideas, on Jewish histories and narratives of the period, and of course, on the very existence of and innovations introduced by the Septuagint.<sup>166</sup> Some scholars have suggested that even Jewish authors writing in Hebrew or Aramaic at this time might have had knowledge of Greek sources through oral traditions.<sup>167</sup> Greco-Roman literary influence on the Book of Judith and the *Biblical Antiquities*, then, seems almost a foregone conclusion.<sup>168</sup>

### Scope and Content of Comparisons

From the literature of one of ancient Israel’s closest neighbors, Ugarit, I will examine portrayals of the goddess Anat, who is painted in the Ugaritic texts as a vicious warrior who is startlingly independent. It is necessary to explore the Anat materials because, since the discovery

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<sup>164</sup> Whitmarsh, “The Romance between Greece and the East,” 8–9.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15.

<sup>167</sup> See for example Mark Stephen Caponigro, “Judith, Holding the Tale of Herodotus,” in “*No One Spoke Ill of Her*”: *Essays on Judith*, ed. James C. VanderKam, Early Judaism and Its Literature 2 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1992), 58.

<sup>168</sup> Indeed, others have made connections between Judith and Greek literature. For example, Jennie Barbour argues that the stereotype of the petulant, tyrannical “Eastern king” found in Judith, Esther, Daniel, and the various books of Maccabees borrows from the way the Greeks portrayed the Persian kings. Jennie Barbour, “The Eastern King in the Hebrew Bible: Novelistic Motifs in Early Jewish Literature,” in *The Romance between Greece and the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 183–95. For an extensive discussion of Judith as novel, and a comparison of Jewish and Greek novels in the Hellenistic world, see Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). See also Lacocque, *The Feminine Unconventional*, 45–47. In this project, I focus on the gender issues surrounding the female characters in these stories, so the comparisons I make are along these lines. The purpose of this chapter is not to explore general commonalities between the biblical and early texts on the one hand and texts from around the ancient Mediterranean on the other, so I do not treat further general comparisons such as those made by Barbour and Wills.

of the Ugaritic literary materials in 1929, countless scholars have made connections between Anat and the characters who are the primary subject of this project, Jael and Judith. Scholars have found connections between Anat's lethality and the biblical women who kill, and between Anat's perceived sexuality and the seductive nature of Jael and Judith's characters. At their most dramatic, comparisons between Anat and the biblical women have taken the form of Susan Ackerman characterizing Jael and Deborah as Anat-figures and arguing that Judith, a later literary character, represents a later devolution and demythologizing of the Anat-motif.<sup>169</sup> With these scholarly connections between Anat and the biblical women in mind, I will discuss Anat's sexuality and connections with fertility, or lack thereof, since these issues go to the heart of any comparison with Judith or Jael. I will address comparisons which I argue are overblown and explore whether there remain connections among the stories which prove productive for my queer-theoretical analysis of the texts. I will also discuss the mortal woman Paghit, who, in the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat, puts on women's clothes over men's armor to take revenge on a henchman of Anat who has killed Paghit's brother. Next, I will examine the Hittite tales of Hedammu and Ullikumi, which tell of the goddess Ishtar/Shauska's attempts to defeat monsters through seduction.

Because the Book of Judith and Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* were written during the Greco-Roman period, it is crucial to examine materials from that cultural milieu, as well. Some of the more obvious potential connections are divine figures from Greek and Roman literature. These include the virgin warrior goddess Athena and the virgin huntress Artemis. There are also the Amazons, a race of fierce female warriors who kill men and spurn sexual involvement, except for rare instances of procreative sex to produce more Amazons. There are

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<sup>169</sup> Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 68.

also several mortal characters in Greco-Roman literature who may be instructive for what they can tell us about gender, sex, and violence in writing from the periods of Judith and the Biblical Antiquities. For example, there is Clytemnestra, particularly the fierce version portrayed in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, who welcomes her hated husband Agamemnon home from war with honeyed words and suggestions of marital intimacy, then murders him while he is bathing. Another possible resemblance can be found in the women of Euripides' *Bacchae*, who, under the influence of the god Dionysus, perform incredible feats of strength and violence. Relevant to Judith and Pseudo-Philo's Jael is the Dionysus devotee Agave, who unknowingly beheads her own son and presents his severed head as a trophy to her father. There is also the Persian Queen Tomyris, whom we know primarily from Greek literature. She is said to have presided over the defeat of Cyrus the Great, killing him, beheading him, and storing his head in a wineskin.

This study is intended to be wide-ranging but not necessarily all-encompassing. I surely leave out a few literary characters in whom others might see similarities to Jael or Judith, but in whom I do not.<sup>170</sup> These include the various goddesses and female monsters of Homer's *Odyssey*, such as Circe and the Sirens. Though there may be tenuous connections between these characters and the women of my study in terms of their threatened lethality to men, I do not consider the plotlines or themes to be similar enough to warrant extensive treatment. Similarly, I do not include Antigone in this chapter. In Greek literature, Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta who is condemned to death after violating the law by burying her brother's body. Much ink has been spilled about Antigone's relevance for postmodernism, including queer

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<sup>170</sup> I also decline to note connections between the stories I study and texts from other cultures unless they specifically deal with Jael's or Judith's gender or sexuality. For more general parallels between Judith and Greek literature, see Caponigro, "Judith, Holding the Tale of Herodotus." Gera, *Judith*, 57–78.



theory and gender criticism, but I do not see sufficient similarities to Jael or Judith.<sup>171</sup> Also not included in my analysis is Electra, the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra who conspires with her brother Orestes to kill their mother as punishment for her murder of their father. I do not see Electra as an effective comparison point for Jael or Judith: in most versions of her story, she does not do the killing herself but simply urges Orestes on. In addition, Electra kills a woman, not a man, and I would argue that a woman killing a woman does not carry the same implications for gender and queer theory as does a woman killing a man. Further, I do not discuss the Greek romantic novels. Though, as Lawrence Wills has observed, these books may have some stylistic affinities with Jewish literature of the Hellenistic period, I do not see them as comparable to the three key texts in plot, theme, or treatment of gender.<sup>172</sup> The Greek novels focus on women in sexual peril and stress the importance of extramarital chastity, but otherwise, their content, form, and style seem too far from the Jewish texts. I also decline to include here an analysis of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, the comedy about women who convince their men to stop warring by refusing them sex until peace is reached. Though *Lysistrata* shares with my primary texts an element of drag in the form of the women enticing their husbands by putting on ultra-feminine personae, it lacks any physical threat to the men by their wives. The tone of *Lysistrata* is also very different from that of the biblical material and, for that matter, from the Ancient Near Eastern and classical texts with which I do compare Jael and Judith's stories. Though there are

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<sup>171</sup> The reader who is interested in Antigone and postmodernism might explore Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) or S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė, *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>172</sup> See Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World*, 1–39. See also Mark Brighton, “A Comparison of Literary Conventions in Judith with the Ancient Greek Novel,” in *Hear the Word of Yahweh: Essays on Scripture and Archaeology in Honor of Horace D. Hummel*, ed. Dean O. Wenthe, Paul L. Schrieber, and Lee A. Maxwell (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 2002), 163–71.

comic elements in Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and *Biblical Antiquities* 31, none is an outright slapstick like *Lysistrata*, where seemingly every other line of dialogue is a penis joke.

## Goddess Comparisons

Many of the literary characters I will explore for possible comparisons with the biblical warrior women—Anat, Shaushka, Athena, and Artemis—are goddesses. Consequently, it is necessary to offer a few remarks on the special problems of writing about goddesses and the issues with comparing them to literary characters who are mortal women. Writing about goddesses can be a treacherous enterprise because of the scholarly history of overdrawing the contrasts between the religions of Israel and its “pagan” neighbors. Biblicists have historically tended to identify with the Hebrew Bible’s portrayal of Israelite religion as monotheistic, morally elevated, and spiritually minded and non-Israelite religion as polytheistic, debased, and preoccupied with earthly matters.<sup>173</sup> We can readily compare attributes of the Israelite God as described in the Hebrew Bible with the traits of male gods like Baal, El, and Marduk, but comparisons of YHWH with goddesses have been few. As a result, and because the orthodox version of Israelite religion espoused by some biblical texts—centered on a single, male-identified deity called YHWH—includes no goddesses, goddesses more than gods tend to bear the brunt of scholarly hostility toward “pagan” cultures. I will be attentive to potential problems in the literature on Anat, in particular, stemming from distaste for non-Israelite religions among biblical scholars. The negative portrayals of non-Israelite religions tend to be especially

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<sup>173</sup> This point of view perhaps reached its apex with William F. Albright, who wrote of the Canaanite conquest, “Thus the Canaanites, with their orgiastic nature-worship, their cult of fertility in the form of serpent symbols and sensuous nudity, and their gross mythology, were replaced by Israel, with its nomadic simplicity and purity of life, its lofty monotheism, and its severe code of ethics.” William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), 214.

pronounced in the case of the Canaanites, the Israelites' nearest neighbors and competitors for the land, whom the Bible describes as particularly deprived.<sup>174</sup> As such, it is necessary to make sure that scholarly descriptions of Anat as gleefully bloodthirsty reflect the reality of the text and not negative stereotypes about the violence and moral bankruptcy of Canaanite religion.

In addition, the portrayal of goddesses tends to focus heavily on fleshly aspects of non-Israelite religion, those aspects that lead to unfair descriptions of Israel's neighbors as obsessed with fertility and sex. Some but not all of this stereotyping comes from people bent on "reclaiming" goddesses, or, worse, "the Goddess," who wind up conflating deities from multiple cultures into one *ur*-goddess defined by and reduced to her biology. Such issues come into play for this project particularly in my discussion of Anat. As I will discuss further below, she is often described as a fertility or love goddess even though the textual evidence does not support this characterization. As Neal H. Walls has noted, scholars sometimes fall back on describing deities according to known "types" promoted by James Frazer and the myth-and-ritual school of the study of religion.<sup>175</sup> On a related note, some misconstrue literary texts as purely ritual in nature and thus interpret the gods' roles and actions in those texts as directly related to religious

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<sup>174</sup> Of course, several of the terms I use here as shorthand are highly problematic. These include "Israelite," "non-Israelite," and "Canaanite." There are major questions about how distinct the people whom the Bible calls "Israelites" would have been from their "non-Israelite" neighbors before, and even, to a lesser extent, after the Babylonian exile. There are issues with whether the label "Canaanite" reflected an actual national, ethnic, religious, and/or linguistic group in the Early Iron Age, or whether this label is a biblical construction. Perhaps more importantly, there are serious questions about how much to rely on the (in places conflicting) biblical descriptions of the political and ethnic landscape of pre-exile Palestine/Canaan/Israel. Such issues are interesting but far beyond the scope of this dissertation. For my purposes, I hope that it will suffice to acknowledge here the potential problems inherent in such terms. For more on the problematic nature of using terms such as "Israel" in a historical context, see Philip R. Davies, "Whose History? Whose Israel? Whose Bible? Biblical Histories, Ancient and Modern," in *Can a "History of Israel" Be Written?*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe (London: T & T Clark, 1997), 104–22; Bob Becking, "Inscribed Seals as Evidence for Biblical Israel? Jeremiah 40.7-41.15 Par Exemple," in *Can a "History of Israel" Be Written?*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe (London: T & T Clark, 1997), 65–83; Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel,"* [2nd ed.]. (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1995); Niels Peter Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (London: SPCK ; Louisville, Ky, 1998).

<sup>175</sup> Neal H. Walls, *The Goddess Anat in Ugaritic Myth* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1992), 3.

practice. The result is a picture of gods and goddesses who act largely to promote agricultural, animal, and human fertility.<sup>176</sup>

There are also difficulties in comparing goddesses to mortal women. Can we hold Jael to the same rules of behavior as Anat? Is it fair to compare portrayals of Judith and Athena? Many scholars have examined the nature of the relationship between portrayals of goddesses in a particular culture and the lives of actual women living in that culture, coming to various conclusions about how closely the two parallel one another.<sup>177</sup> I would argue, though, that the task at hand in this study is far less complicated. I do not endeavor to compare goddesses and flesh-and-blood women, but rather two sets of literary characters.<sup>178</sup> It is less problematic to compare goddesses in literature to mortals in literature than it is to compare either category to actual ancient women. Anat and the biblical women are all literary creations. I recognize that, even on paper, goddesses may have abilities and freedoms that mortals lack, but I would submit that, as characters in stories, they can be compared with each other.

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>177</sup> Kelly J. Murphy's review and discussion is particularly sensitive. Kelly J. Murphy, "Myth, Reality, and the Goddess Anat: Anat's Violence and Independence in the Ba'al Cycle," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 41 (2009): 525–41. She concludes, "...[I]t appears that Anat's character cannot be said to reflect or depend upon the vast majority of real life gender roles in the Late Bronze city state. Only Anat's property ownership finds a parallel among real women at Ugarit, and even here this is true just in the cases of a very few elite women. Moreover, even these high-status women were subject to the male dominated hierarchy which Anat appears to regularly transcend. The literary life of the goddess is quite different from the lives of real women at Ugarit." Ibid., 539. See also Carole R. Fontaine, "A Heifer from Thy Stable: On Goddesses and the Status of Women in the Ancient Near East," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 159–78.

<sup>178</sup> Sasson aptly suggested to me that comparing characters who share narrative roles in the Proppian sense might be a productive way of analyzing goddess characters alongside mortal-women characters. See Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, *The Russian Folktale*, ed. Sibelan Forrester, trans. Sibelan Forrester (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012). One might therefore compare two characters who serve as the hero(in)es of their respective stories, for example. Space and time do not permit a Proppian analysis for this dissertation, but such a study might be a useful future project.

## Anat

Most of what we know about the goddess Anat comes from Ugarit, specifically the Baal Cycle and the tale of Aqhat, which date to the 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>179</sup> In the Baal Cycle, Anat functions as the god Baal's general and chief supporter as he fights the other gods for supremacy. In Aqhat, Anat schemes to get a divine bow from the mortal Aqhat, eventually having a henchman murder him.<sup>180</sup> There is also Egyptian evidence on Anat, most of it iconographic,<sup>181</sup> as well as inscriptions mentioning Anat from the archives of Jews at the military colony of Elephantine, Egypt in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>182</sup>

Anat is frequently compared with Jael and Judith.<sup>183</sup> One of the most extensive cases for parallels between Anat and the biblical women comes from Susan Ackerman. She argues that

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<sup>179</sup> Mark S. Smith and Simon B. Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>180</sup> Evidence from Ugarit tends to be considered the gold standard for comparing the Hebrew Bible with the literature of Israel's neighbors in the Ancient Near East. Ugarit, located on the Mediterranean coast in modern-day Syria, is geographically closer to Palestine than most any other culture for which we have substantial evidence. Furthermore, the evidence from Ugarit is indeed substantial, and, perhaps most importantly, contains a large amount of written material. In addition, the Ugaritic language is closely related to biblical Hebrew, which can aid the comparison of material from the biblical and Ugaritic collections and help scholars decipher difficult Hebrew words. Several of the deities cited in the Ugaritic material are mentioned in the Bible as well: El, Asherah, Anat, Baal, the *rapiuma/ rēpā'im*, and Yam, for example. Finally, scholars have seen many parallels between the themes and content of the Bible and those of the Ugaritic literature. See *Ibid.*, 85–86. For all these reasons, Ugarit is a particularly rich source for comparative material on many subjects, and the woman warrior motif is no exception.

<sup>181</sup> For more on pictorial representations of Anat, see the thorough survey by Izak Cornelius, *The Many Faces of the Goddess: The Iconography of the Syro-Palestinian Goddesses Anat, Astarte, Qadesh, and Asherah C. 1500-1000 BCE* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Academic Press, 2004).

<sup>182</sup> For more on Anat at Elephantine, see Karel van der Toorn, "Goddesses in Early Israelite Religion," in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence* (ed. Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris; Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 83–97 and Karel van der Toorn, "Anat-Yahu, Some Other Deities, and the Jews of Elephantine," *Numen* 39 (1992): 80–101. Van der Toorn argues that Anat is identical with the "Queen of Heaven" mentioned at Elephantine and in Jeremiah chapters 7 and 44.

<sup>183</sup> Smith and Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 78 n. 2. J. Glen Taylor, "The Song of Deborah and Two Canaanite Goddesses," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 99–108.

Anat is a prototype of other woman warriors in the biblical tradition, such as Deborah, Jael, and Judith.<sup>184</sup> She contends that, since the biblical tradition requires that all but one actor in a given story be human, not divine, Anat's role must be performed by human women. Ackerman sees a "demythologizing" of the Anat tradition as time passes from the writing of Judges 4-5 to the writing of the Book of Judith, so that Judith must rely more heavily on her sexuality to be a believable heroine.<sup>185</sup> Because other scholars have used the character of Anat to shed light on the actions of the biblical women, it is important for me to discuss her as a prelude to writing about her putative Israelite/early Jewish counterparts.

The question of whether or not Anat is sexually active goes to the heart of any comparison with Jael and Judith and also directly to the specifics of a queer reading of the goddess. In both the Baal Cycle and the Aqhat epic, Anat is referred to several times as *btlt*, a word that has engendered much discussion among scholars.<sup>186</sup> Its Hebrew cognate, *bētûlâ*, is typically defined as "virgin."<sup>187</sup> This is how many scholars have interpreted *btlt*, as well.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Though Deborah, unlike Jael and Judith, is not described as wielding a weapon, she may be described as a warrior. Deborah is one of the judges of Israel, a position more akin to a general than a jurist. See Judg 2:18, 3:10, 3:15-22, and 11:1-12:7. She orders the attacks on the Canaanites (4:6-7) and is described as going with the troops to Kadesh (Judg 4:9-10, 5:15). Ackerman points out that, although Deborah is not described as actually fighting, Barak is not either, but interpreters invariably assume that he did. She suggests that perhaps the text means to convey that Deborah did, as well. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 31-32. Even without assuming that Deborah took up weapons, we can call her a warrior for her role in ordering and accompanying the attack.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-68.

<sup>186</sup> In fact, *btlt* is *only* used in the Ugaritic literature as an epithet for Anat. Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 82.

<sup>187</sup> Francis Brown, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon : With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 143; Ludwig Köhler, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, [1st English ed.]. (Leiden ; New York: Brill, 1994), 166-167. Despite the lexical definition, there has been much debate over this word, with many scholars arguing that it is primarily a designation of age and social status, not of physical virginity. See Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 78. Mark S. Smith points to biblical uses of *bētûlâ* that would call into question its definition as "virgin;" for example, Joel 1:8 refers to a *bētûlâ* with a husband. Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal cycle* (Leiden ; New York: Brill, 1994), 8-9.

<sup>188</sup> Cyrus Herzl Gordon, *The Loves and Wars of Baal and Anat, and Other Poems from Ugarit*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press; London, HMilford, Oxford University Press, 1943). Gray translates *btlt* as "virgin" but sees it as impossible that Anat is a literal virgin, suggesting instead that the word implies that she was a virgin when she first came to Baal as consort. J. Gray, "The Blood Bath of the Goddess Anat in the Ras Shamra Texts," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 11 (1980): 319. Kapelrud suggests that the "virginity" of goddesses such as Anat was not literal but meant to imply "that they were ever young and 'new';" that is, that their virginity would automatically "reset" itself after each encounter. Arvid Schou Kapelrud, *The Violent Goddess: Anat in the Ras Shamra Texts* (Oslo:

However, some translate it as “adolescent” and specify that a *btlt* is a young woman who has not yet given birth, regardless of virginity or marital status.<sup>189</sup> Walls translates “maiden,” since this does not necessitate Anat’s virginity but does imply it.<sup>190</sup> This seems like the most sensible option, especially in light of Walls’ conclusions on Anat’s lack of sexual activity in the Ugaritic texts.

In the secondary literature on the goddess, Anat is often described as Baal’s “consort” and depicted as engaging in sexual conduct with him.<sup>191</sup> She is also described in scholarship as a goddess of love, and sometimes, like many other female deities in the Ancient Near East, as a goddess of both love and war.<sup>192</sup> She is often described as a “fertility goddess.”<sup>193</sup> Some critics have seen major problems with these characterizations of Anat, arguing that they inaccurately

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Universitetsforlaget, 1969), 30–31. Such a meaning strains credulity considering the lack of any textual or iconographic evidence of Anat’s perpetual, renewing virginity.

<sup>189</sup> Smith and Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 165 and Peggy L. Day, “Why Is Anat a Warrior and Hunter?,” in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, and Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 1991), 144–145. Oddly, Cassuto advocated understanding *btlt* to signify “mother of nations,” connecting with Anat’s supposed role as a fertility goddess. Umberto Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath: Canaanite Epics of the Patriarchal Age*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971), 65.

<sup>190</sup> Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 79.

<sup>191</sup> Kapelrud, *The Violent Goddess*, 41; William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich: WB Eerdmans, 2005), 270.

<sup>192</sup> Kapelrud, *The Violent Goddess*, 25.

<sup>193</sup> For example, Umberto Cassuto wrote, “Like all the other female deities, Anath was associated with the idea of fertility; this explains why, despite her dreadful cruelty towards her foes, she was regarded as the goddess of life and as the ally of Baal, the god of life.” Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath: Canaanite Epics of the Patriarchal Age*, 64. More recently, Dever defends the understanding of Anat as a fertility goddess. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?*, 270. See also Lucy Davey, “The Legacy of ’Anat: Some Links with the Biblical Tradition,” in *Ugarit and the Bible: Proceedings of the International Symposium on Ugarit and the Bible, Manchester, September 1992* (Munster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1994), 29–30. Walls attributes the erroneous “fertility goddess” characterization of Anat to the pervasive assumption among modern scholars that the dominant role for women in the ancient world was motherhood and the resultant conclusion that all female deities must relate to this role. Walls also aptly argues that scholars ought to make better distinctions between goddesses associated with sex and those associated with reproduction. Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 15. Jo Ann Hackett has argued that scholars tend to incorrectly reduce all Ancient Near Eastern goddesses to fertility deities, which conflates them and portrays them as representative of some essential “feminine principle.” Jo Ann Hackett, “Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us? Ancient near Eastern ‘Fertility’ Goddesses,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (1989): 75. See also Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris, “Introduction: Exploring Female Divinity: From Modern Myths to Ancient Evidence,” in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*, ed. Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 6–21; Day, “Anat: Ugarit’s ‘Mistress of Animals,’” 182.

reduce the goddess to her sexuality and biological functions.<sup>194</sup> In a thorough, convincing analysis of the texts that other scholars have pointed to as evidence that Anat engages in sex, bears offspring, or serves as a wet nurse, Walls concludes that there is no solid support for her performing any of these functions in the available literature.<sup>195</sup> As far as we can tell from any of the Ugaritic and Egyptian texts about Anat, then, she is not sexually active.<sup>196</sup> Whether she is simply chaste or an actual virgin is unclear, but her epithet *btlt*, describing her as a young, probably adolescent female, would, I argue, tilt the scales in favor of the latter option.

Though there is no evidence within the confines of the Baal Cycle or the Aqhat story for Anat having sex, many scholars see suggestions of eroticism, particularly in Anat's dealings with Aqhat. In the story of Aqhat, Anat sees and covets Aqhat's bow, fashioned for him by the divine Kothar wa-Ḥasis, and demands that he give it to her. Delbert R. Hillers saw Anat's quest for the bow as a desire for Aqhat's phallus, arguing that the bow is a symbol of masculinity across Ancient Near Eastern literature.<sup>197</sup> Susan Ackerman, building on Hillers, argues that Anat is

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<sup>194</sup> Peggy L. Day writes, "She is further alleged to act like a hooker, both to entice Baal in particular and in her general conduct." Day, "Why Is Anat a Warrior and Hunter?," 141–142. Dever criticizes those, like Day, whom he sees as arguing against Anat's sexual nature because of their own prudishness and misguided feminist ideals. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?*, 270. Actually, though, those who argue against Anat being understood as a sexual being have solid textual grounds, as evidenced by Walls' work.

<sup>195</sup> Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 157.

<sup>196</sup> As Smith points out, there is an Egyptian textual tradition that both Anat and Astarte are wives of Seth. As he notes, this may simply relate to the Egyptian misunderstanding of Anat's connection with Baal as a sexual one. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal cycle*, xxiii.

<sup>197</sup> Delbert R. Hillers, "The Bow of Aqhat: The Meaning of a Mythological Theme," in *Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Harry A. Hoffner, Jr. (Kevelaer, Butzon & Bercker: Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 73. Further, he wrote, there is a recurring motif of a goddess of love and war taking away a male character's bow, "spring[ing] from man's experience of woman as attractive, yet threatening to his sexuality and his life." *Ibid.*, 78. I would argue that Hillers' position is weakened by the recognition by many in the decades since he wrote that Anat is not actually a goddess of love. If she is only a war deity and has no authority over love, sex, or reproduction, then perhaps it is necessary to rethink Hillers' idea that Anat's desire for the bow is actually a desire for Aqhat's phallus. There is also the uncertainty of whether Hillers sees Anat as seeking Aqhat's bow/penis because she wants to have intercourse with him, *à la* Ishtar in the Epic of Gilgamesh, or whether she covets a "phallus" of her own. Either way, Hillers' argument seems to derive its theoretical underpinnings from the Freudian concepts of penis envy and the castrating female, but the widespread existence of these complexes has been essentially disproven. For one of the earliest thoroughgoing critiques of Freud's penis envy theory, see Karen Horney, *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1939), VI.



sexually propositioning Aqhat and that her anger stems from his implicit rejection of her as a lover. She then uses this theory to characterize Anat, along with Jael and Judith, as an “erotic assassin.”<sup>198</sup> It is not accurate to paint Anat as a seductress on the basis of her role in Aqhat. There is no obvious element of eroticism in her encounter with Aqhat, just a flimsy argument about Aqhat’s bow being something other than a bow. During their interactions, Anat never offers Aqhat anything sexual. The only thing she proposes to him is eternal life, which is a frequent divine offer to mortals<sup>199</sup> and in no way related to Anat’s femininity or sexuality.

Walls admits that Anat’s attempted “seduction” of Aqhat in this scene of the epic remains speculative.<sup>200</sup> However, he does see a connection between the story and other tales in Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean mythology about male warriors promised something positive from the gods but receiving death instead. Further, Walls sees the encounter between Aqhat and Anat as necessarily sexually charged, whether or not Anat is bent on seduction. He argues, “As a divine, nubile adolescent, Anat is erotic whether she intends to be or not.”<sup>201</sup> But is this really the case? Do modern scholars see a goddess who has little or nothing to do with sexuality to nevertheless be erotic because she was, or because they find it inconceivable that a goddess could be entirely divorced from sexuality? If any goddess is to be read without recourse to the familiar trope of erotic danger, it is Anat, who, as Walls himself has shown, has few if any connections with sexuality. Perhaps we can give this chaste goddess the benefit of the doubt and see her as having achieved some sort of independence from the system of sexual exchange.

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<sup>198</sup> Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 60. Not only does Ackerman’s theory rely on what I argue to be the erroneous premise that Anat is an erotic figure, it introduces a needlessly complicated relationship between the stories of Anat and those of violent women in the biblical material. It is unnecessary to ascribe differences among the portrayals of biblical women who kill to the amount of time distance between each one and the composition of the Anat tales.

<sup>199</sup> See the story of Adapa, as well as Utnapishtim’s divinely-granted immortality in the Epic of Gilgamesh.

<sup>200</sup> Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 194.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

Especially because she is a goddess and thus not necessarily bound by the rules that might govern a human woman in literature,<sup>202</sup> it makes sense to grant her “permission” to not be seen as sexual when her portrayal warrants that conclusion. I am not arguing that Anat’s encounter with Aqhat cannot be understood as sexual—perhaps a case could be made that there are sexual undertones anytime a female deity is alone with a male mortal—but that it should not be, in the absence of any evidence other than her femaleness.

Walls goes further in his argument about what Anat’s femininity means to the story of Aqhat. He maintains that Anat in this story represents the danger of the unattached woman: she threatens Aqhat’s sexuality and, indeed, the entire social structure, since her actions lead to the death of the king’s heir.<sup>203</sup> This is an over-reading. As I have argued, there is no sexual element in Anat’s encounter with Aqhat, so she in no way threatens his sexuality. Unless we would maintain that any goddess, by virtue of being divine and therefore powerful, threatens any mortal man’s sexuality, there is no support in the text itself for Anat’s interactions with Aqhat being tinged with sexuality, be it menacing or benign. She threatens his life and by (great) extension his future reproductive capacities, but not his sexuality, *per se*. Furthermore, that Anat is unattached does not make her more sexual. If she is an unattached virgin or chaste woman, it might even make her less sexual, since she has no apparent history of seducing mortals or anyone else.<sup>204</sup> Anat’s danger to Aqhat here is primarily physical, not sexual. Indeed, when Aqhat is eventually killed, there is no sexual element to the murder. It is carried out not by Anat

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<sup>202</sup> See Murphy, “Myth, Reality, and the Goddess Anat: Anat’s Violence and Independence in the Ba’al Cycle” for a discussion of how Anat appears to assume special rights and powers because she is a goddess.

<sup>203</sup> Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 204–205.

<sup>204</sup> She stands in contrast here to Ishtar, who, when she proposes marriage to Gilgamesh in the Epic of Gilgamesh, has had several previous ill-fated romances.

directly but by her male agent, Yatpan. Yatpan does not even make off with Aqhat's bow, that alleged stand-in for a phallus.

Descriptions in the secondary literature of Anat's grooming routines also tend to portray her as sexual. Anat apparently prepares for battle by applying "henna for seven girls/with scent of musk and murex."<sup>205</sup> Following the battle, she washes her hands and bathes, then reapplies murex.<sup>206</sup> Some have seen her pre-battle application of henna and murex as a stunt to make her more attractive so her opponents would be confused into underestimating her, but there is no indication of this in the text.<sup>207</sup> While the substances she applies before battle may be used as cosmetics, nothing about the text indicates that she is putting them on for any erotic purpose. We can better interpret this as a pre-battle ritual unconnected to sex. Just as we would not interpret the application of "war paint" by male warriors as an attempt to beautify oneself for sexual purposes, we should not assume that Anat's paint and perfume are evidence of her sexual nature.<sup>208</sup> As for her post-battle ablutions, they may properly be seen as ritually cleansing, not erotic, in nature, and there is again nothing to indicate that her reapplication of murex relates to her sexuality. It should be stated that there is no apparent evidence of the use of face or body paint in battle by males or females in the Ancient Near East. However, evidence for this practice abounds in other cultures. For example, Herodotus writes about Ethiopian warriors who when they go into battle "painted half their bodies with gypsum and the other half with vermilion"

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<sup>205</sup> CAT 1.3.II.2-3, translation in Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle. Volume II, Introduction with Text, Translation and Commentary of KTU/CAT 1.3-1.4* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2009), 133.

<sup>206</sup> CAT 1.3.II.38-41, translation in *Ibid.*, 137 and CAT 1.3.III.1-2

<sup>207</sup> J. Aistleitner, *Die Mythologischen Und Kultischen Texte Aus Ras Shamra*, 2nd ed. (Akademiai Kiado, 1964), 25. Quoted in Kapelrud, *The Violent Goddess*, 49.

<sup>208</sup> Julie Faith Parker makes the case that Anat's cosmetic application before battle and Jezebel's before Jehu comes for her in 2 Kgs 9:20 are both intended to prepare for battle or confrontation. Julie Faith Parker, "Re-Membering the Dismembered: Piecing Together Meaning from Stories of Women and Body Parts in Ancient Near Eastern Literature (forthcoming)," *Biblical Interpretation* 23 (2015).

(*Hist.* 7.69)<sup>209</sup> The presence of this evidence should at least make us cautious about concluding with certainty that Anat's painting is related to beautification. We should ask whether our impulse to do so stems solely from her femaleness, especially since we lack any indication that she acts seductively in the Baal Cycle.

Anat's questionable status as an "erotic assassin" is not the only element of her character of potential relevance to Jael and Judith: her independence in the Ugaritic texts is also instructive. As Kelly J. Murphy points out, though Anat's violent actions have received significant attention in the scholarship, her independent nature has not.<sup>210</sup> Murphy's study foregrounds Anat's independence in the Baal Cycle, pointing out that she apparently has her own house and that she is not under the control of any other deity.<sup>211</sup> It is also worth noting that Anat acts independently in *Aqhat*, as well, moving about and making plans without seeking approval from other gods. In her independence from paternal or spousal authority, Anat is highly unusual.<sup>212</sup> We can see a similar type of independence in Judith, who, as a widow, has her own house and wealth. Judith, like Anat, moves relatively freely from one location to another. Though there are male characters in both cases who are technically higher-status than the women—the elders of Bethulia in Judith's case, El in Anat's—the men appear powerless to resist or stop the women.

There are also connections made between Anat on the one hand and Jael and Judith on the other in the secondary literature: there is a tendency among scholars to refer to all of these characters as "liminal."<sup>213</sup> For example, Walls contends, "Anat holds a liminal position with

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<sup>209</sup> A. D. Godley, *Herodotus* (London; New York: W. Heinemann; G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921).

<sup>210</sup> Murphy, "Myth, Reality, and the Goddess Anat," 528.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 534.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 535. Murphy correctly points out that, though El refers to Anat as "daughter," she is hardly under his control and, in fact, threatens him into doing what she wants in the Baal Cycle. *Ibid.*, 536–537.

<sup>213</sup> I will discuss liminality regarding Jael and Judith below. For general remarks on the concept of and problems with liminality, see chapter 1.

respect to the gender system and social ideology of the ancient patriarchal culture.”<sup>214</sup> He argues that this liminal position, a result of Anat “rejecting” the roles of wife and mother, destabilizes the patriarchy because she is not under a man’s control.<sup>215</sup> Day, too, uses this sort of language to refer to Anat, describing her as “caught in the liminality of adolescence.”<sup>216</sup>

As I argue in chapter 1, “liminality” assumes that there is a clear gender binary for characters to straddle. This is problematic with regard to Ugarit. As Walls states, “[d]iscussion of gender in ancient Ugaritic literature is difficult since so little evidence for the roles of female characters, human or divine, has survived.”<sup>217</sup> Since we have little evidence about whether Ugarit had a strict gender binary or whether, as is the case in other cultures in the Ancient Near East, there was substantial “blurring” of “male “ and “female,” it is especially problematic to refer to Anat as “liminal.”<sup>218</sup>

Though there are commonalities between Anat and the characters of Jael and Judith, the comparisons are imperfect. In large part, this is because the women of biblical and related literature who slay generals are not soldiers, but Anat is. While Jael in Judges 4-5, Judith, and Jael in Biblical Antiquities 31 kill because the time calls for it, Anat kills because she is a warrior, through-and-through. As Walls writes, “there is a difference between the expression of anger through violent behavior and the structurally recognized role of warrior.”<sup>219</sup> Anat takes

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<sup>214</sup> Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 2.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>216</sup> Day, “Why Is Anat a Warrior and Hunter?,” 145.

<sup>217</sup> Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 9.

<sup>218</sup> Walls acknowledges that gender is culturally constructed and culturally dependent but, in the same paragraph, seems to argue that ideals of “masculine” and “feminine” are universal. *Ibid.*, 14. While I would challenge Day and Walls on the identification of Anat as “liminal” on gender grounds, I would agree that her lack of marital or other sexual attachment is part of what gives her the independence to act as she does. However, it is not the whole story. As a putative unmarried virgin, Anat should, by all indications, still be under the authority of her father El. However, in the Baal Cycle, Anat demands of El a house for Baal and threatens to attack El if he does not comply, so it is clear that El does not have true power over her. Perhaps we can attribute Anat’s independence not only to her sexual status, but also to sheer force of personality. Anat’s sexuality is an important factor in her character and actions, but it is not the only factor.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

apparent pleasure in death, wading through warriors' blood up to her knees, making garments out of dead body parts, and play-fighting with her furniture after the battle is done. Unlike for Anat, for Judith and the two versions of Jael we have no indication that they derive pleasure or amusement from the deaths they bring about. The women of biblical and related literature kill by getting their opponents to see them as potential lovers and mothers, but Anat is different. She does not get in position to kill her opponents by playing up a stereotypical idea of femininity; rather, she approaches them on the battlefield, as a fellow warrior.

### Paghit

The next possible comparison for the woman-warrior motif in the Bible and early Jewish literature also comes from Ugarit. In the Aqhat story, after Anat and Yatpan kill Aqhat, Aqhat's sister Paghit undertakes a revenge mission that may be relevant. Paghit resolves to kill Yatpan<sup>220</sup> and prepares by applying cosmetics and putting on warrior's clothing with women's clothing on top. At nightfall, she arrives at Yatpan's camp to see him and drinks wine with him. As she serves him wine, he boasts of the murder of Aqhat. The end of the story is not extant, but most scholars conclude that Paghit uses her feminine appearance to convince Yatpan that she means him no harm, then makes an attempt on his life.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> There is no doubt that this is the goal of her mission. She states outright, "I would slay the slayer of my sibling,/finish [who] finished my brother." Following this, Danel affirms her mission, repeating, "May she slay the slayer of [her sibling],/finish who finished [her] brother." *Aqhat* 34-35, 39-40; Smith and Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 77.

<sup>221</sup> Smith and Coogan write, "Like the Jewish heroine Judith, Pugat applied cosmetics and put on her robe, but under it she concealed a dagger. Having arrives at Yatpan's camp, she managed to get him drunk, and in his cups he boasted of his murder of Aqhat. The tablet breaks off here, but it is probable that Pugat eventually killed Yatpan." David Wright and others interpret Paghit's dressing up as an attempt to masquerade as Anat herself. "Pughat covers her warrior clothes with female dress and otherwise appears to dress up as Anat. Anat hides among the vultures, perhaps even making herself appear like one so as not to be noticed. Both hide their respective weapons, a dagger

Parallels have been drawn between Paghit and Anat, but there are important differences.<sup>222</sup> Anat does not attempt to play up her femininity to slay her enemies. She cleanses herself and applies scents and pigments before and after her battle in the Baal Cycle, but this seems less like makeup to enhance her femininity and more like war-paint. There is also no indication in Aqhat or in the Baal Cycle that Anat's clothing choices or behavior are calculatedly "feminine." Paghit, on the other hand, after washing and applying cosmetics or paint and donning warrior's garb, is specifically said to put on women's clothing: "She washes [] and []./Rouges herself with shellfish,/Whose source is far in the sea./She puts on a hero's outfit [below],/Places a knife(?) in her belt(?),/In her scabbard places a sword,/A woman's outfit on top." (*Aqhat* 41-46)<sup>223</sup> This attention to Paghit's clothing is important. Both sets of attire she puts on are crucial to her mission: she must wear the warrior's clothing and sword so that she can kill Yatpan, engaging in battle and protecting herself with armor if necessary. But she will not even get into his camp if she does not wear women's clothing on top, both to cover her true intentions, symbolized by the sword and armor, and to masquerade as something she is not—at least not at this point in the story. She is preparing to kill Yatpan by consciously performing a role that will be most likely to get her into his tent: that of a harmless woman.<sup>224</sup> Another difference between

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and Yatupan, in their bags or belts, to be used on their victims." David P. Wright, *Ritual in Narrative: The Dynamics of Feasting, Mourning, and Retaliation Rites in the Ugaritic Tale of Aqhat* (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 217. See also Baruch Margalit, *The Ugaritic Poem of AQHT: Text, Translation, Commentary* (Berlin ; New York: De Gruyter, 1989). The issue of how a human woman would be able to pass herself off as a goddess convincingly enough for another deity to buy the deception may cast doubt on this theory.

<sup>222</sup> For a discussion of similarities and differences, see Stephen W. Hanselman, "Narrative Theory, Ideology, and Transformation in Judges 4," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield, England: Almond, 1989), 95–112. Hanselman argues that, while Paghit acts to restore patriarchal order by killing her brother's murderer, Jael subverts patriarchy by violating the peace between her husband's tribe and the Canaanites. *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>223</sup> Smith and Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 77.

<sup>224</sup> Paghit, unlike Jael in Judges 4-5, Judith, and Jael in the Biblical Antiquities, wears a warrior's clothing under her women's attire. There may be implications here for her gender performance. While visually, Judith and both versions of Jael do not deviate from the feminine personae they present to the generals they kill, Paghit makes explicit through her clothing that she expects to play two roles: warrior and harmless woman.

Anat and Paghit is that the former, as a fierce warrior and a deity, can kill her opponents with sheer violence. She has no need to incapacitate her victims first. Paghit, as an ordinary mortal woman, cannot overpower Yatpan by strength alone, so she gets him drunk. Once in his tent, Paghit accepts wine from Yatpan and drinks it, but he apparently drinks more than she does: “Twice she gives the mixed wine,/Gives to him the drink...” (*Aqhat* 61)<sup>225</sup> There are clear similarities here with all of the heroines who are the main focus of this project. Just as Paghit plies Yatpan with wine, Jael in Judges 4-5 soothes Sisera with milk or curds and tucks him in before killing him. Judith encourages Holofernes to drink to excess by inflaming his passions; once he is dead-drunk, she beheads him. Judith apparently drinks with him, though not to excess, another similarity to Paghit. Finally, Jael in the *Biblical Antiquities* mixes milk and wine for maximum soporific effect on Sisera, then drives a tent-peg through his head. There is also a comparison to be made between Paghit and the biblical woman with respect to their targets: all go after not the highest-ranked possible target, but the general or equivalent. Judith and both incarnations of Jael take on not the king who is responsible for waging war but the general who carries it out. Paghit does not attack Anat, the one ultimately responsible for her brother’s murder, but Yatpan, the one who physically killed him.

Though both Anat and Paghit take revenge on the one who killed their respective brothers—Anat in the Baal Cycle, but not in the story of *Aqhat*—only Paghit does it by deception. Anat is a full-time soldier and never acts like a mother or a lover to kill her enemies. Paghit, on the other hand, appears to get in position to kill Yatpan on the basis of her femininity, possibly even masquerading as a prostitute.<sup>226</sup> There is also the matter that “Paghit” is a common

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<sup>225</sup> Smith and Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 78.

<sup>226</sup> Walls writes that Paghit appears to be dressing as a prostitute, given the possible reference to her as “the woman we hired.” Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 208.



Ugaritic word for “girl.”<sup>227</sup> As a character, then, Paghit is the symbol of girlhood, of femininity. It is the femininity encapsulated in her very name that will allow her to attack Yatpan.<sup>228</sup> As such, Paghit is a better analog for Jael and Judith than Anat is, even though Anat comes up far more often in scholarly comparisons of the biblical women with Ancient Near Eastern literature. The connection with Judith seems especially apt: both Paghit and Judith enter into the enemy’s camp rather than receiving him at their own home. Both stories reach their apparent climax in a tent. Both stories pay significant attention to the pre-assassination grooming rituals of the women. Both Paghit’s and Judith’s plots involve copious amounts of wine. Paghit is clearly one example of a literary character who promises feminine comforts but (presumably) delivers death.

### Shaushka

A third character from the Ancient Near East who may provide precedent for the biblical women who kill is the goddess Shaushka in Hittite literature. Shaushka, identified with the Mesopotamian Ishtar,<sup>229</sup> plays an important part in the Hurrian stories known as the Kumarbi Cycle.<sup>230</sup> The theme of this cycle of stories is a battle for supremacy between Kumarbi, an

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<sup>227</sup> Chloe Sun, *The Ethics of Violence in the Story of Aqhat* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias, 2008), 134.

<sup>228</sup> On this point one may compare Paghit, “girl,” with Judith, “Jewish woman.” The names of both characters emphasize their (performed) gender, their greatest weapon.

<sup>229</sup> Alfonso Archi, “The West Hurrian Pantheon and Its Background,” in *Beyond Hatti: A Tribute to Gary Beckman*, ed. Billie Jean Collins and Piotr Michalowski (Atlanta, Ga.: Lockwood, 2013), 15. Shaushka was evidently quite popular in Hatti, perhaps in part because she was seen as the patron goddess of the powerful ruling couple Puduhepa and Hattusili III. Billie Jean Collins, *The Hittites and Their World* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 175.

<sup>230</sup> Shaushka is also known from other sources, including writings concerning Hattusili III and the rock relief from Yazılıkaya. In the latter, Shaushka is depicted in a procession of male deities rather than with her fellow goddesses. Robert L. Alexander, *The Sculpture and Sculptors of Yazılıkaya* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1986), 59.

underworld god, and Teshub, a celestial god.<sup>231</sup> In two of the stories in the cycle, the Song of Hedammu and the Song of Ullikumi, Shaushka allies herself with Teshub and works to defeat Kumarbi by going after the monstrous creatures he creates. She does this by means of seduction, which may provide an analogue for Jael and Judith.

In the Song of Hedammu, Kumarbi is castigated by the god Ea for threatening mankind. In response, he raises up a creature called Hedammu to fight against Teshub (*Hedammu* 6-7).<sup>232</sup> After speaking with Teshub, Shaushka goes to a bathhouse, apparently to prepare herself to take on Hedammu. The text is relatively fulsome in its descriptions of her preparations: “She washed herself. She [...]ed. She anointed herself with fine perfumed oil. She adorned herself. And (qualities which arouse) love ran after her like puppies.” (*Hedammu* 11.2) Shaushka then speaks to two other characters and tells them to play instruments, apparently to entice Hedammu. She then seeks him out in the ocean, where he lives, and “[holds] up her naked members before Hedammu.” (*Hedammu* 12.2) The two have a conversation, only bits of which survive. Hedammu asks what kind of woman Shaushka is and she tells him, “I am an angry(?) girl” (*Hedammu* 15.1).<sup>233</sup> She then entices him with a love potion and/or beer, which lulls him to sleep in the sea. Shaushka gets him to surface again by showing her naked body. In explicit and hyperbolic language, the song describes their coupling (*Hedammu* 16.2). Seduced by Shaushka, Hedammu leaves his throne.<sup>234</sup>

In the Song of Ullikumi, Kumarbi again seeks to raise a champion against Teshub. Kumarbi has sex with an enormous rock, which gives birth to a creature he calls Ullikumi.

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<sup>231</sup> Translation from Harry A. Hoffner and Gary M. Beckman, *Hittite Myths* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1998), 39.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>233</sup> Jana Siegelová, *Appu-Märchen Und Hedammu-Mythus* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1971), 56–59.

<sup>234</sup> It is difficult to tell precisely how the Song of Hedammu ends, but, as Beckman writes, Shaushka “seemingly disposes of the challenger.” Gary Beckman, “Hittite and Hurrian Epic,” in *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 261.

Kumarbi charges Ullikumi with fighting Teshub and the other gods, but entrusts him to the Irsirra deities until he is ready to do battle. Kumarbi wishes to protect Ullikumi from his enemies, including “Shaushka, the Queen of Nineveh” who “must not see him and snap him off like a brittle reed.” (*Ullikumi* 13) When Shaushka learns of Ullikumi’s existence, she sets out to vanquish him. She dresses up, ornaments herself, puts on perfume, and begins singing and playing music for Ullikumi. She apparently hopes to accomplish something similar with Ullikumi as she did with Hedammu. However, a wave points out to Shaushka that Ullikumi is both deaf and blind, so he will not be able to see or hear her (*Ullikumi* 36). Ullikumi attacks the gods.

In Shaushka’s character in the Kumarbi Cycle we have a possible comparison for Jael and Judith. The common element is a female character using her sexuality to defeat a male enemy. It is worth noting that the similarities are not exact. The sexual element in the Song of Hedammu, in particular, is far more explicit than in the biblical texts—or, for that matter, in the Paghit story, discussed above. In Hedammu, Shaushka actually thrusts her naked body before Hedammu, leaving no doubt about what she is offering him. Even in Judith, the most sexually frank of the three texts which are the focus of this dissertation, there is nothing quite so raunchy. In addition, in Judges 4-5, Judith, and the *Biblical Antiquities* 31, the woman kills her opponent. In *Hedammu*, it is unclear from the text whether Shaushka actually kills the monster or simply distracts him away from his throne. In *Ullikumi*, of course, the monster does not die because, being a deaf and blind rock, he is unaware of Shaushka’s seduction routine.

Despite these differences, I would argue that Shaushka in the Kumarbi Cycle offers a good analogue for the biblical stories of lethal women. There is similarity in their targets: just as Judith and both versions of Jael go after not kings but generals, Shaushka does not try to kill the

god Kumarbi but rather his agents/champions, Hedammu and Ullikumi. All use sexuality to entice their targets; though the sexual element is most explicit in the Hittite texts, it is present to varying degrees in the Israelite/early Jewish texts, as I will discuss in the following chapters. Shaushka offers another example of a woman who puts on a gendered performance to vanquish her enemy. She gets into character in a way that is reminiscent of Judith: both characters wash, anoint, and adorn in preparation for their missions. Like Judith and both versions of Jael, Shaushka goes out in search of her quarry, taking her performance on the road. She goes further than the biblical women in her performance, putting on what I would liken to a burlesque show for Hedammu and Ullikumi. With Hedammu, she directs other characters to play instruments to entice him, and with Ullikumi, she plays, sings, and puts a seashell and a pebble on as ornamentation. Like in the Book of Judith, the encounters take place in the enemy's territory; for Judith this is the Assyrian camp and for Shaushka the sea habitats of Hedammu and Ullikumi. Like Judith with Holofernes, Shaushka flatters Hedammu. Shaushka, like Judith and Pseudo-Philo's version of Jael, uses wine to further weaken her opponent's defenses. In the story of Hedammu, like in the biblical and early Jewish tales, the target falls asleep. Again, the comparisons are not exact, but they are present. The possibility of some relationship, direct or mediated, between the Kumarbi Cycle and the biblical/early Jewish texts should not be discounted.

### Amazons

Depictions of the Amazons are widespread in Greek art and literature, first appearing in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. at the latest. They are usually portrayed as existing around the period of

the Trojan War (dated to the 13<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E.); that is, they are seen as belonging to a much earlier era than the writers' time.<sup>235</sup> While some authors portrayed the Amazons as living entirely separately from men, dealing with them only fleetingly to conceive more Amazons, others wrote that the Amazons lived in a society of inverted sex roles where the women ruled and waged war and the men cared for the house and children.<sup>236</sup> It is necessary to examine the Amazons with regard to Jael and Judith because all are women who kill, and also because interpreters through the ages have clearly seen parallels. Judith, in particular, has been compared to the Amazons, especially in art. As Diane Apostolos-Cappadona notes, Renaissance artists made the connection between Judith and the Amazons by including elements of Amazon costuming—armor, upraised weapon—in Judith's attire.<sup>237</sup> Additionally, Yee connects the Amazons with Jael and Deborah with regard to how the characters' liminality has affected interpretations of them through the ages.<sup>238</sup> It is thus important to evaluate whether the various legends of the Amazons are a good comparison point for the violent women of the biblical tradition.

On one level, the affinities are not strong, for reasons similar to those concerning Anat. While Jael and Judith kill because the occasion calls for it, the Amazons are full-time warriors who engage in battle as a way of life.<sup>239</sup> Judith and Jael kill during war, but they are not soldiers. The Amazons, by contrast, are warriors to the core. Further, the heart of some Amazon legends is

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<sup>235</sup> Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (London: British Museum, 1995), 58.

<sup>236</sup> Those portraying the Amazons as isolated from the rest of society include Strabo 11.5.3. Diodorus Siculus 3.52 portrayed inverted sex roles. Lysias, in his Funeral Oration, described yet a third possibility, characterizing the Amazons as ruling over many other peoples and falling because of their greed for land. (*Lys. Funeral Oration* 2.4-6)

<sup>237</sup> There were also elements of Athena and Artemis in Judith's costume in Renaissance art. See also Yael Even, "Mantegna's Uffizi Judith: The Masculinization of the Female Hero," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 61 (1992): 10; Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, "Costuming Judith in Italian Art of the Sixteenth Century," in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies across the Disciplines* (Open Book Publishers, 2010), <http://books.openedition.org/obp/1017>.

<sup>238</sup> Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman," 108.

<sup>239</sup> Per Lysias, for example. See n. 101.

the death of the Amazon enemy; for example, the story of the Pentheselia's death by the sword of Achilles.<sup>240</sup> Jael and Judith, of course, are the heroines of their respective stories, so the climax of their tales is the death of the enemy general. In addition, while Judith uses her sexuality as a weapon and the two versions of Jael use both sexuality and motherhood, the Amazons use brute force. While the Amazons were sometimes eroticized in art and literature, perhaps because they were said to be sexually active outside the bounds of marriage, it would be incorrect to characterize them as intentionally seductive.<sup>241</sup> Similarly, although the Amazons are said by Strabo (*Geogr.* 11.5.1) to raise girl children—killing or giving away sons—they can hardly be said to be “maternal” in any stereotypical fashion. Ancient authors do not discuss in any significant way pregnancy, labor, or nursing among the Amazons, and they are not depicted in art or literature as tending to children. In some versions of the Amazon legend they are said to cut off or burn one breast so as to improve the strength of their arm for war and allow them to draw a weapon faster, thus abnegating part of their femaleness in a dramatic way. As Sue Blundell argues:

In the literary accounts the Amazons can be seen to represent an inversion of everything which a Greek male (in particular, an Athenian male) would have expected of a woman. They were active in the public arena; they were experts in warfare; they were in political control of the state in which they lived; they refused to marry; they were either asexual or sexually promiscuous; and they valued girl babies more highly than males. In later versions of the story, they also, in cutting off a breast, performed a symbolic denial of the characteristic role of women, motherhood.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> This story details Achilles killing Penthesilea and then, as she lays dead, falling in love with her beauty. It is seen in art from the centuries before the Common Era, but it appears in literature only much later, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. writings of Quintus Smyrnaeus. William Blake Tyrrell, *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 78–79.

<sup>241</sup> Erotic elements of the Amazons include Strabo's report (*Geogr.* 11.15.1) that they had sex with random Gargarian men once a year in an effort to conceive children, their sometime artistic depiction as going into battle with one breast bared, and the great beauty of certain Amazons, such as detailed by Homer in the *Iliad*. For the erotic appeal of their sexual practices, see Page DuBois, *Centaur and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 35.

<sup>242</sup> Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 62.

Many of these characteristics have the effect not only of being in direct opposition to femaleness, but of making the Amazons more like Greek men than anything else. While Jael and Judith perform femininity, the Amazons in many ways perform masculinity.

Crucially for any potential comparison, while Jael and Judith are held up as heroines and praised in song for their actions, the Amazons are a cautionary tale. Eva Cantarella contends, “The myth of the Amazons has been read as a monstrous representation by the Greeks of a barbarian and savage world, the opposite of ‘culture’: it is therefore no accident that it should be made up solely of women.”<sup>243</sup> In artistic representations of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Amazons are garbed like the Greeks’ Persian enemies, making further explicit the connection between these female warriors and what the Greeks perceived to be the forces of chaos and anti-civilization.<sup>244</sup> Some modern writers would hold up the Amazons as examples of female empowerment, but this was clearly not the intention of their Greek chroniclers.<sup>245</sup> Mary Lefkowitz claims about the Amazons, “[T]he Greeks treated them as negative illustrations of what might happen if warrior women were in control, as a means of avoiding a dangerous hypothetical situation the potential for which in fact did not exist.”<sup>246</sup>

There are ways, however, in which the Amazons can be instructive for the study of Jael and Judith. Jael and Judith’s apparent lack of motherhood and Judith’s chastity as a widow play an important role in my analysis of their interactions with ideas of gender. There are similar issues at work in artistic and literary representations of the Amazons. As mentioned above, the

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<sup>243</sup> Eva Cantarella, *Pandora’s Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 17.

<sup>244</sup> Elaine Fantham, *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 131.

<sup>245</sup> Some of the modern second-wave feminist treatments of the Amazons have the flavor of the materials coming out of the goddess movement at about the same time. That is, they paint the Amazons as proto-feminist role models squelched by the male establishment while minimizing or ignoring their actual function in Greek literature. In this vein, see especially Abby Wettan Kleinbaum, *The War against the Amazons* (New York: New Press, 1983).

<sup>246</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Women in Greek Myth*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 5.

Amazons do in some accounts conceive children and raise the females. However, they reject male babies entirely, a reversal of the Greek preference for women to mother sons.<sup>247</sup> To raise only one gender of children seems to be a version of Lee Edelman's refusal of futurism. How can an ancient culture fully replicate itself, directing its activities toward the existence of the next generation and the one after that, if it restricts itself to only half the genetic and anatomical material necessary to produce more of itself?

In the Amazons' rejection of marriage and, to varying extents depending on the teller, of men, we can see an analogue for Judith. They decline to cohabit with men, seeing them in some versions of the legend as a necessary and rare evil; men serve as sperm donors or, occasionally, vehicles for sexual satisfaction, but they are nothing more to the Amazons. There are also some versions of the Amazon story in which they are seen as perpetual virgins, even though they may be sexually active from time to time. The Amazons' limited engagement with men should be seen as tightly related to their power and agency. Just as Judith transcends the limitations of gender by refusing to remarry after her husband dies, the Amazons, by rejecting "civilized" (Greek) society and marriage, gain freedom. The one Amazon tale in which they do cohabit with men is instructive on this point. Herodotus writes that once the Amazon women pair up with Scythian men<sup>248</sup> who want to marry them, they agree to marriage, but only on their own terms, saying:

"We could not live with your women; for we and they do not have the same customs. We shoot the bow and throw the javelin and ride, but have never learned women's work; and your women do none of the things of which we speak, but stay in their wagons and do women's work, and do not go out hunting or anywhere else. So we could never agree

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<sup>247</sup> Tyrrell, *Amazons*, xiv.

<sup>248</sup> Herodotus wrote that the Amazons were taken prisoner aboard a ship but killed their captors and made landfall in the territory of the Scythians. When the Scythians discovered that the fierce warriors in their midst were women, they decided not to resist them but instead to send a delegation of men to stimulate the Amazons' sexual desires. The Amazons and Scythians camped closer to one another each day and, couple by couple, ended up intermarrying and having children with them. Herodotus used this as an origin story for the Sauromatians, a nomadic people of southern Russia whose women hunted and waged war. (*Hist.* 4.110-117)



with them. If you want to keep us for wives and to have the name of fair men, go to your parents and let them give you the allotted share of their possessions, and after that let us go and live by ourselves.”<sup>249</sup> (Herodotus *Hist.* 4.114.3-4)

The Amazons are reluctant to engage in the form of marriage first proposed by the Scythians specifically because it would restrict their activity and autonomy. They only agree to cohabit if they can be free of the strictures that, not coincidentally, would have governed Greek marriages.

Some authors also argue that the Amazons are liminal figures. If accurate, this description might inform my analysis of Jael and Judith who, as I will detail in the following three chapters, have often been characterized as liminal.<sup>250</sup> I would challenge the characterization of the Amazons as liminal figures suspended in adolescence. First, there is the problem I raised above with regard to Anat: that the concept of liminality presumes a rigid two-sex paradigm, which may be an inappropriate assumption with regard to ancient Greece.<sup>251</sup> There is also the issue raised above that “liminal” is a designation applied to female characters with suspicious

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<sup>249</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations of classical material come from the Loeb Classical Library via the Perseus Digital Library.

<sup>250</sup> Fantham describes the Amazons as representing an androgynous state between childhood and adulthood. Fantham, *Women in the Classical World*, 134. Similarly, Dubois writes, “Thus the Amazons represent a preadolescent female/male being, where the transvestism and male attributes of the women complement their worship of the huntress Artemis and the war god Ares.” DuBois, *Centaur and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being*, 69. Tyrrell uses the language of liminality to describe the Amazons’ behavior in the episode of the Scythian men, arguing that, once the two peoples marry, the Amazons “suspend their mates in limbo with them.” Tyrrell, *Amazons*, 77. I will argue below in the cases of Jael and Judith, as I did above for Anat, that liminality is not actually a helpful category of analysis for these characters. However, authors who describe these characters as liminal are responding to certain elements of their portrayal; if these elements are ones also found in the depictions of the Amazons, it is necessary to explore them for potentially instructive commonalities.

<sup>251</sup> A prime example of this is the *galli*. These were Greco-Roman priests of the deities Cybele and Attis who are reported to have castrated themselves as part of an ecstatic ritual, and who at times wore women’s clothing. Most of the evidence of gender transgression comes from Roman times, but we do know that the *galli* existed during the Hellenistic period. Will Roscoe, “Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion,” *History of Religions* 35 (1996): 195–230. In addition, there is the Greek god Hermaphroditus, a product of the union of Hermes and Aphrodite. Hermaphroditus, a beautiful young man, was seen by a nymph, who prayed that they should never be apart, and her prayer was answered by the combination of their two bodies to form a creature half-man and half-woman. Mike Dixon-Kennedy notes that statues of figures with male genitalia and female breasts can be found at least as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 1998), 160.

frequency. Any time a woman behaves in a way that a modern scholar dubs something other than feminine, she is called liminal.<sup>252</sup>

In addition, the particulars of the Amazon stories undermine a characterization of them as perpetual adolescents. Although occasionally there are reports that the Amazons removed one breast, usually they are depicted with womanly bodies. They are often depicted as sexually active, so it is not as if they are liminal for their refusal to engage in sex. They are sometimes even said to bear children, which, if one were to see childlessness as supporting an argument for liminality, would militate against applying the liminal label to the Amazons. The Amazons are not, then, suspended between childhood and adulthood, as Fantham argues; this characterization has the effect of infantilizing a group which, from literary and artistic depictions, seems anything but infantile. This is a tribe of fierce warriors, and to categorize them as perpetually liminal adolescents seems to underestimate them unfairly.

## Athena

Athena, as one of the most important deities of ancient Greece, appears early and often in religious and literary texts. Athena was revered as the patron deity of the city of Athens, responsible for maintaining its communal identity and order.<sup>253</sup> Precisely how early Athena achieved this status is uncertain, but by the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. her cult in Athens was

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<sup>252</sup> It is true that DuBois argues that both the Centaurs, male creatures, and the Amazons, women, are liminal with regard to sexual behavior. However, the Centaurs can also be classified as liminal based on their description as part-man, part-horse. The Amazons as described in art and literature are not hybrids of human and something else; their classification as “liminal” appears to come exclusively from scholars’ perception of them as gender-bending.

<sup>253</sup> Susan Deacy, *Athena* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 77.

extensive.<sup>254</sup> Athena tended to assimilate characteristics of other Mediterranean goddesses. In Cyprus by the 5<sup>th</sup> century at the latest, Athena was connected to Anat because they were both virginal warriors, even though their characterizations in art and literature were by no means identical. As Deacy notes, Athena and Anat were worshipped jointly at some sites, particularly in Cyprus, and a bilingual Greek-Phoenician inscription there uses the name “Athena” in Greek and “translates” it as Anat in Phoenician. Athena also assimilated the Roman goddess Minerva to such an extent that scholars cannot reliably isolate Minerva’s pre-Athena appearance.<sup>255</sup>

Unlike Jael and Judith, Athena is a warrior by trade and nature.<sup>256</sup> According to Hesiod, Athena springs fully grown from the head of her father Zeus, already clad in armor (Hesiod *Theog.* 929).<sup>257</sup> While Jael and Judith do battle when the times call for it, Athena is born a warrior. Like Anat and the Amazons, Athena can approach enemies as a warrior would.<sup>258</sup> Unlike Jael and Judith, she does not need to play the part of a mother or a lover in order to kill. In fact, when she does overtly play a gender role, it is a masculine one. In the *Odyssey*, for example, she appears to Odysseus in the form of a young man. (Homer *Od.* 13:221).<sup>259</sup> In the *Athena Parthenos* statue erected in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., she is unquestionably a woman in

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 135–136. Mary E. Voyatzis cautions, however, “against the assumption that similarities in deities’ attributes and iconography between periods or between cultures imply that we are dealing with the same deity.” Mary E. Voyatzis, “From Athena to Zeus: An A-Z Guide to the Origins of Greek Goddesses,” in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*, ed. Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 135.

<sup>256</sup> Athena is said in various texts to have a direct role in combat. For example, she is described as driving a chariot and horses during the war between the gods and the giants (Pausanias *Description of Greece* 8.47.1). In the *Iliad*, Athena and several of the other gods do battle with one another (Hom. *Iliad* 21.390-414). In iconography, too, she is represented as a warrior with helmet and shield.

<sup>257</sup> Athena is called Tritogeneia in this passage. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *The Homeric Hymns; and Homerica* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press; Heinemann, 1982).

<sup>258</sup> It should be noted that Athena’s violence, though undertaken through her status as a warrior, is not described in the same bloody, unrestrained terms as the warrior Anat’s violence. Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 29. In her more measured persona, then, Athena may be a better comparison for the methodical Jael and Judith.

<sup>259</sup> Homer and Samuel Butler, *The Odyssey, Rendered into English Prose for the Use of Those Who Cannot Read the Original* (London: J. Cape, 1922).

figure, but she is dressed, Louise Anne May argues, as a male hoplite, with a helmet and shield. It is only as a woman dressed in men's clothing that Athena can represent Athens and civilization; a woman in women's clothing could never stand for the virtues of Athens.<sup>260</sup>

However, Athena may represent a better comparison for Jael and Judith than do the Amazons simply because Athena was a heroine. While the Amazons battled epic heroes—and indeed were epic heroes, or villains, themselves—Athena fought for their side or provided divine assistance in a non-combatant role.<sup>261</sup> One would never view the Amazons as characters to be emulated—as discussed above, they are generally seen as a foil for the virtues of Athenian civilization—but Athena, by contrast, is a “good guy.”

Interpreters of Jael and Judith have even compared them with Athena. Judith is compared with Athena often in Renaissance art through the incorporation of Athena's symbols into Judith's costume.<sup>262</sup> In particular, Yael Even argues that Judith's representation in one of the Renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna's multiple representations of her story strongly recalls Athena. Even contends that Judith's noble bearing and “manly countenance” in Mantegna's drawing of Judith, combined with her Athena-like desexualization, bring to mind depictions of the goddess. Judith's muscular arm and hand which hold a sword in the drawing, too, are reminiscent of representations of Athena in art, Even argues.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Louise Anne May, “Above Her Sex: The Enigma of the Athena Parthenos,” in *Popular Religion, Visible Religion 3* (Leiden, 1984), 112. See also Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, “Sexy Athena: The Dress and Erotic Representation of a Virgin War-Goddess,” in *Athena in the Classical World*, ed. Susan Deacy and Alexandra Villing (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 242. Llewellyn-Jones writes in his study of Athena's dress that men's clothing in ancient Greek art was “stiff, tight, protective” and intended to “suggest physical, social, and moral dominance... Men's garments tend to enlarge the body through use of strong colours and bulky fabrics, and to emphasize angularity with rectangular shapes and sharp points. They call attention to well developed leg, shoulder, and arm muscles and increase the width of shoulders and chest. This is precisely the outline encountered in early portrayals of Athena” in the art of the early fifth century.

<sup>261</sup> See especially her role as Odysseus's patron and helper in the *Odyssey*.

<sup>262</sup> Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *18. Costuming Judith in Italian Art of the Sixteenth Century* (Open Book Publishers, 2010).

<sup>263</sup> Even, “Mantegna's Uffizi Judith: The Masculinization of the Female Hero,” 11–13.

There are certain other affinities that may prove instructive, particularly between Athena and Judith. These involve Athena's perceived status as a virgin and her virginity's relationship to her power. As May notes, Athena is first referred to as *parthenos* in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>264</sup> This century also marks the dedication of the massive *Athena Parthenos* statue in Athens.<sup>265</sup> Athena is seen in Greek literature as a perpetual virgin, and scholars have argued persuasively that it is by declining sexual engagement that she is able to gain and maintain her power.<sup>266</sup> Eva Cantarella contends of Athena's role in the *Odyssey*, "It is significant that Athena is the goddess born from the head of Zeus, the *parthenos*, the virgin who by refusing marriage never assumes a female role. The only woman who has a constant influence and who is recognized as a counselor and protector is a nonwoman."<sup>267</sup> In an era when Greece is increasingly sex-segregated and when

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<sup>264</sup> For a comprehensive study of the concept of virginity in ancient Greece, see Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990). Note especially Sissa's discussion of scholarship on the word *parthenos*. She cites other authors' conclusions that *parthenos* did not necessarily mean "virgin" but had the implication of a young, unmarried woman. This would give *parthenos* a similar meaning to the Ugaritic *bilt*, discussed above. Sissa, however, concludes convincingly that *parthenos* and *parthenia*, usually translated "virginity," were sexual, not sociological concepts, since a girl's *parthenia* is something that could be empirically tested or determined by divine means. However, *parthenos* cannot unambiguously mean "virgin," either, since the Greeks write of children born to *parthenoi*. Ibid., 73–86. Sissa writes that a woman could still be called a *parthenos* if she was sexually active, but her sexual activity, since it was outside of marriage, was not recognized by society and thus did not factor into her designation. Ibid., 90–91. Sarah B. Pomeroy argues that neither Athena nor Artemis was actually virginal: "rather, as befits mother goddesses, they had enjoyed many consorts. Their failure to marry, however, was misinterpreted as virginity by succeeding generations of men who connected loss of virginity only with conventional marriage." Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 6. While I appreciate Pomeroy's caveat that *parthenia* need not necessitate physical virginity, she does not cite any evidence of Athena having consorts in Greek literature. (She also conflates Athena with Artemis, who had a connection with childbirth, in labeling the former a goddess of maternity.) We cannot read lovers for Athena back into the literature where none exist. All of this leads me to surmise that the designation of the goddess as *Athena Parthenos* would have strongly implied Athena's physical chastity. In the absence of Greek literature testifying to Athena engaging in intercourse, and in the presence of literature testifying to her commitment to remaining sexually inactive, it seems safe to conclude that Athena was seen in ancient Greece as a virgin goddess.

<sup>265</sup> May, "Above Her Sex: The Enigma of the Athena Parthenos," 111–112.

<sup>266</sup> For theories about the reasons for Athena's virginity, see Eleanor Irwin, "The Invention of Virginity on Olympus," in *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, ed. Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 13–23. Irwin argues that several Olympian goddesses were seen as virgins partly so that they would not bear children who might depose Zeus. In Athena's case specifically, Irwin argues that her virginity symbolized her unwavering loyalty to Athens, which did not have to worry about her taking her favors elsewhere.

<sup>267</sup> Cantarella, *Pandora's daughters*, 28.

women are often derided in print for their weak and illogical natures, Athena can only stand for wisdom, strength, and restraint because of her asexuality.<sup>268</sup> The correspondences here with Judith are instructive. Judith is not a virgin but a chaste widow, but both roles allow the woman in question to free herself from engagement with men on a sexual plane. How the two characters use this ability is different: while Athena acts like a male warrior, Judith uses her own knowledge that she is not available for sexual consumption to make believe she is. As I will argue in chapter 5, Judith's lack of engagement with the sexual marketplace allows her to play her seductress role without actually "sully" herself. Athena and Judith are alike in that each uses her asexuality as a major element of her power.

By refusing sexuality, Athena also refuses motherhood. This provides another potential comparison to Jael and Judith, the implications of whose apparent childlessness I will discuss in depth below.<sup>269</sup> The one instance in which Athena is portrayed as a mother is, I argue, the exception that proves the rule. When Hephaistos chases her, he does not manage to rape her but does ejaculate on her leg; she wipes the semen off with a piece of wool and throws it on the ground. A child, Erichthonius, is born of this non-union, and Athena, though not actually his mother, raises him in Athens. He becomes king and actively perpetuates Athena's cult (*Apollod.* 3.14.6). The only time, then, that we see Athena acting as a mother, it is a) not related to any active sexual behavior on her part and b) to a character who represents her beloved city of Athens. Athena's only motherhood is symbolic rather than actual.

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<sup>268</sup> Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 29.

<sup>269</sup> As I will discuss in the chapters that follow, Jael and Judith's childlessness can be understood in the context of Lee Edelman's "refusal of futurism." These characters act not to replicate future versions of themselves but to preserve society as it is. I do not use this argument in quite the same way in the case of Athena because it seems problematic to claim that an immortal deity is unconcerned with the future. However, her childlessness may say something about her commitment to preserving the present societal order.

Many scholars of Greek literature have observed that Athena is not threatening to Greek men because, though she is an armed warrior, she always acts on behalf of the patriarchy.<sup>270</sup> She uses her power to carry out her father Zeus's plans.<sup>271</sup> Most clearly, in Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, Athena declines to convict Orestes of the murder of his mother Clytemnestra, who had killed her husband Agamemnon. In her verdict, she cites her allegiance to men above women. Athena says:

It is my duty to give the final judgment and I shall cast my vote for Orestes. For there was no mother who gave me birth; and in all things, except for marriage, whole-heartedly I am for the male and entirely on the father's side. Therefore, I will not award greater honor to the death of a woman who killed her husband, the master of the house. (*Eum.* 734-739)<sup>272</sup>

Athena also uses what is considered the feminine art of trickery to advance the causes of male heroes, as in her plotting on behalf of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*.<sup>273</sup> By contrast, Athena frequently harms female characters; she is a woman goddess but not a goddess of women.<sup>274</sup> Similarly, some feminist biblical scholars have argued that Jael and Judith's actions are more reactionary than revolutionary, serving to shore up the patriarchy. For example, Pamela J. Milne argues that Judith identifies only with men and denigrates women's abilities by her self-effacement and thus is no feminist heroine.<sup>275</sup>

Like the female characters who are the primary focus of this study, and like the other female warriors discussed in this chapter, modern scholars sometimes label Athena as "liminal."

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<sup>270</sup> Deacy, *Athena*, 30–31. May, "Above Her Sex: The Enigma of the Athena Parthenos."

<sup>271</sup> Sheila Murnaghan, "The Plan of Athena," in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 63. Athena is even given access to the instrument of Zeus's power, his thunderbolt. Deacy, *Athena*, 31.

<sup>272</sup> Herbert Weir Smyth, *Aeschylus* (London; New York: W. Heinemann; G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1927).

<sup>273</sup> Murnaghan, "The Plan of Athena," 64.

<sup>274</sup> Deacy, *Athena*, 71. As Deacy notes, some 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist writers saw Athena as a traitor to her sex. *Ibid.*, 37. A notable example comes from the lyrical Luce Irigaray: "The voices of the divine women of the earth reduced to silence by the goddess of the heights: the daughter of the Father... Deception, in the service of the master. Treachery, to the father's advantage. Chaining women to household drudgery, but, for herself, preferring public life. Favoring boys, but refusing marriage, her father's virgin." Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 101–102.

<sup>275</sup> Milne, "What Shall We Do with Judith?," 54–55.

For example, in her discussion of Athena and Artemis as virgin goddesses who engage in “male” pursuits, Sue Blundell dubs them “boundary-crossers.”<sup>276</sup> The same criticisms I make above regarding calling Anat or the Amazons “liminal” apply to affixing this epithet to Athena, as well.

## Artemis

Artemis, another Greek virgin goddess, may provide some useful analogies as well. Artemis is seen as the daughter of Zeus and Leto, a twin sister to Apollo.<sup>277</sup> She is associated with hunting and animals, but also with female lifecycle events, particularly childbirth.<sup>278</sup> Artemis is portrayed as the patron goddess of the Amazons.<sup>279</sup> Like her fellow *parthenos* goddess Athena, Artemis is also often seen as a natural ally for men and male-dominated institutions. As John J. Winkler argues, Artemis’s chastity means that she can be depicted in the *Odyssey* “not as a problematic or willful female but as a reliable collaborator with the interests of the male gods.”<sup>280</sup>

Artemis is different from Athena, and perhaps closer to Jael and Judith, in that she is not depicted as a warrior by trade or nature. She is not a goddess of war but a goddess of the hunt, so it is possible to argue that Artemis’s violence against humans is closer to the as-needed aggression of the biblical characters. Nevertheless, weaponry and violence, if not war, are part of

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<sup>276</sup> Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 44.

<sup>277</sup> See my discussion above about Greek goddesses’ virginity.

<sup>278</sup> Tobias Fischer-Hansen and Birte Poulsen, “Introduction,” in *From Artemis to Diana: The Goddess of Man and Beast*, ed. Tobias Fischer-Hansen and Birte Poulsen, Danish Studies in Classical Archaeology 12 (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2009), 11–17; Helen King, “Bound to Bleed: Artemis and Greek Women,” in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 109–27.

<sup>279</sup> Fantham, *Women in the Classical World*, 134.

<sup>280</sup> John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 140.



Artemis's daily existence makeup, which makes her different from Judith or either version of Jael.

Perhaps the best comparison between Artemis on the one hand and Jael and Judith on the other is the former's reputation for defending herself and others against unwanted sexual encounters. As Walls writes, "This maiden is particularly deadly to those males who encounter her in a possibly sexual situation..."<sup>281</sup> For example, Apollodorus writes of the legend that Actaeon was killed by Artemis after he saw her bathing. The goddess is said to have turned Actaeon into a deer and then set his pack of hunting dogs on him (*Apollod* 3.4).<sup>282</sup> There is also Boupagos, shot by Artemis "because he attempted an unholy sin against her godhead" (Pausanias *Descr.* 8.27.17). Artemis is said to have turned Sipriotes into a woman after he saw her bathing (Antoninus Liberalis *Metam.* 17.203-205).<sup>283</sup> There are also stories of Artemis killing those who threaten other women sexually; for example, some versions of the interaction between Artemis and Orion say she killed him because he tried to rape a virgin (*Apollod.* 1.4).

Artemis's defense of her own and other women's chastity calls to mind similar actions by Judith and, particularly, Pseudo-Philo's version of Jael. Judith symbolically protects virginity when she defends the city of Bethulia, literally, "virgin," from the Assyrians who wish to penetrate its defenses. As I argue below, the Book of Judith implies that the heroine's defense of the city also spares its women from literal rape by the marauding enemy army. Judith also defends her own chastity against the lustful Holofernes by killing him before he can have sex with her. The text is clear that Judith remains unsullied; thus the assassination not only saves Bethulia but also Judith herself from being violated by Holofernes. Judith also explicitly

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<sup>281</sup> Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 33.

<sup>282</sup> For variant versions, see Pausanias *Description of Greece* 9.2.3, Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.138 and *Diod.* 4.81.3-5.

<sup>283</sup> Translation from Francis Celoria, *The Metamorphoses of Antoninus Liberalis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1992).

compares herself with Simeon and Levi in their vengeance against those who had sex with their sister Dinah, a virgin (*Jud.* 9:2). Jael in the Book of Judges can also be said to undertake Artemis-like defense of chastity by killing Sisera, but the message is less explicit here. We must rely on the words of Sisera's mother and her attendants, who imagine that Sisera is delayed because he is dividing the spoils of war, which include women. The implication is that, by killing Sisera, Jael has spared women from being captured and, presumably, raped by the Canaanite soldiers. The idea that Jael is defending women's chastity is more obvious in the *Biblical Antiquities*. In this version of the story, the reader has access to Sisera's thoughts, which include his intention to take Israelite women as concubines and, later, to carry off the already-married Jael to be his wife. In Artemis's defense of her own virginity and the virginity or chastity of others, she is an apt comparison for the actions of Jael and Judith in protecting themselves and others from becoming spoils of war and rape victims.<sup>284</sup>

We may also find an instructive similarity to Jael in Artemis's connection to childbirth. This is counterintuitive, since Jael has nothing to do with children, as I will discuss further below. However, the common element is that Artemis and Jael apparently have no children themselves, yet engage with functions of motherhood. Artemis is not portrayed as bearing or raising children, but she helps birthing women, thus establishing herself, paradoxically, as a non-

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<sup>284</sup> It should be noted that Artemis's violence is not confined to men. She is said to demand virginity in her devotees, and she gets violent when they disobey. For example, after Zeus has sex with and impregnates an Artemis follower named Callisto, Artemis shoots her, either at the behest of a jealous Hera or because Callisto did not remain a virgin. In another version, Artemis turns Callisto into a bear but Zeus spirits the bear away to the stars so she is not killed (*Apollod.* 3.8.2). Pausanias tells of a priestess of Artemis named Comaetho who falls in love with a man and ends up having sex with him in the temple of Artemis. Artemis sends disease and death on their home region until both lovers are sacrificed to her (7.19.2-5). Artemis also exercises violence against women in cases not involving their chastity. For instance, she kills the 12 children of a mortal woman who boasts that she has more offspring than Artemis's mother Leto (Homer *Il.* 24.602-614). Homer and A. T. Murray, *The Iliad* (London: William Heinemann, 1924). She also leads Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to her (Aeschylus *Aga.* 195ff.).

maternal goddess of maternity.<sup>285</sup> Jael in both tellings of the story does not appear to have children, but she uses the trappings of motherhood to entrap and kill Sisera. These characters engage with societal ideas that women should be involved in motherhood while not directly participating in it themselves. Perhaps this can be seen as a parodic nod to expectations of their sex, even while they fail to fulfill these expectations in a biological sense. Artemis and Jael distract the reader or listener's attention from their lack of actual children by in Artemis's case, becoming known as the patron deity of childbirth and, in Jael's mothering a grown man to death.

Artemis, like other female characters in ancient literature, is often labeled "liminal" by modern scholarship. Scholars point to her role as patron of life cycle boundaries crossed by women, such as first intercourse and childbirth, while avoiding crossing such boundaries herself, and her connection with hunting, an activity supposedly in-between nature and culture.<sup>286</sup> I would challenge the construction of Artemis as liminal, as I have done with other female characters above and as I will do further below. When virtually all of the interesting, lively female characters in ancient literature are called "liminal," one has to wonder if liminality is an overused concept.

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<sup>285</sup> On goddesses of childbirth who do not bear children, Walls writes, "By retaining their own sexual energies and creative abilities, celibate females are thought to have a certain power which is helpful to females under their ministrations." Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 31–32. Blundell says both Athena and Artemis "are boundary-crossers—being capable in their case of passing over the dividing line between women and men..." Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 44.

<sup>286</sup> Walls, *The Goddess Anat*, 31–32.

## Clytemnestra

In Greek literature, Clytemnestra is the sister of Helen and wife of Agamemnon. She kills her husband and is then slain by their son Orestes, who collaborates with his sister Electra, in retribution. The reasons given for Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon vary by source but include Agamemnon's sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia to guarantee military success in the Trojan War, Agamemnon's long-ago murder of Clytemnestra's first husband and child and their forced marriage, Agamemnon's long absence followed by his return home with his mistress Cassandra, and Clytemnestra's adulterous relationship with Agamemnon's cousin Aegisthus. Clytemnestra is mentioned as early as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but she receives fullest treatment in the tragedies of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.: Aeschylus's trilogy *Oresteia*, Sophocles's *Electra*, and Euripides's *Electra and Orestes*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. In Homer's treatment of the Clytemnestra story, her lover, Aegisthus, kills Agamemnon, but by the time Aeschylus writes and thereafter, it is Clytemnestra herself.<sup>287</sup> Blundell notes of the shift, "the woman's attempt to rule and her violent overthrow was added at a later stage, at a time when patriarchal domination in Greece was firmly established."<sup>288</sup> Unlike with many of the literary characters I discuss above, Clytemnestra has not been compared with Jael and Judith to any significant degree. However, I bring her into the discussion because I believe she can provide useful comparisons. I will focus on Aeschylus's depiction of Clytemnestra in the pages

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<sup>287</sup> There is a contradiction, though, in *Od.* 11.385-439, where Agamemnon's ghost says that Clytemnestra planned the murders. Wolfe notes that the only parts of the *Odyssey* that blame Clytemnestra are recognized interpolations. Rachel M.E. Wolfe, "Woman, Tyrant, Mother, Murderess: An Exploration of The Mythic Character of Clytemnestra in All Her Forms," *Women's Studies* 38 (2009): 696.

<sup>288</sup> Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 18. For a fuller treatment of the ways in which the shifts in Clytemnestra's characterization tracked changes in Greek society and the perception of women, see Wolfe, "Woman, Tyrant, Mother, Murderess."

that follow, since this is the fullest portrayal of the character and the most fruitful for comparisons with Jael and Judith.

As with the Amazons, any potential comparisons between Clytemnestra and the biblical women are undermined by Clytemnestra's unsympathetic portrayal in much of the literature that discusses her.<sup>289</sup> Jael and Judith are painted as heroines by the biblical and extrabiblical texts that discuss them, and their actions are seen as benefitting their societies. However, as many scholars have argued, Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon comes to stand for the evils of unchecked female power, particularly in the works of Aeschylus.<sup>290</sup> In the final play of the *Oresteia*, the *Eumenides*, Orestes is being pursued by the female-gendered Furies or Erinyes, who want to punish him for his murder of his mother Clytemnestra.<sup>291</sup> Athena intervenes and Orestes is put on trial, with his sin, matricide, weighed against Clytemnestra's, mariticide. Apollo successfully argues that men's rights should trump women's, and Athena casts the deciding vote to acquit Orestes. Patriarchy is vindicated. The takeaway is that, once a marriage breaks down and women are not appropriately controlled, they are monsters and a threat to society.<sup>292</sup> Clytemnestra is "a terrifying embodiment that females are out of control—thus threatening all of civilization."<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Rachel M.E. Wolfe calls her "one of the most detested villains in the canon of Greek myths and legends." Wolfe, "Woman, Tyrant, Mother, Murderess," 692.

<sup>290</sup> Cantarella, *Pandora's daughters*, 65.

<sup>291</sup> It should be noted that in the *Eumenides*, the Erinyes are transformed from beings that avenge the killing of one's parents to beings who are honored and ensure fertility and prosperity. As Zeitlin writes, "The pacification of the Erinyes becomes the ideological effort to solve the dilemma of the inextricable connection between female fertility and female sexuality, between female beneficence and female malevolence, for the equation of the female with sterility and death creates a new impasse that spells an end to society and to life itself." Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 97. Beings who are virginal and serve to avenge murdered parents become, by the end of the play, creatures who ensure the birth of children and their upbringing in a patriarchal society.

<sup>292</sup> Tyrrell, *Amazons*, 102. See also Froma I. Zeitlin: "'Clytemnestra, the female principle, in the first play is a shrewd, intelligent rebel against the masculine regime. By the last play, through her representatives, the Erinyes, the female principle is now allied with the archaic, primitive, and regressive, while the male, in the person of the young god Apollo, champions conjugality, society, and progress.'" Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, 89.

<sup>293</sup> Kathleen L. Komar, *Reclaiming Klytemnestra* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 27.

That said, there are commonalities between Clytemnestra on the one hand and Jael and Judith on the other. All engage in erotic trickery using by performance of the gender “female.” Judith uses a hyper-feminine persona and the implied promise of sex to get close enough to Holofernes to kill him. Jael’s eroticism in Judges is subtler; as I detail extensively in Chapter 3, she combines performed motherhood with performed seduction to gain Sisera’s trust. Jael in the *Biblical Antiquities* is more overt in performing the role of seductress than her counterpart in Judges. All three iterations of the lethal woman in the Bible and early Jewish literature slay the general after making sexual overtures; Clytemnestra does the same. She speaks of a woman’s joy in “unbar[ing] the gates” for a husband returned from war, in the same breath that she swears that she has been appropriately “seal[ed]” in his absence.<sup>294</sup> She praises Agamemnon extravagantly when he finally returns home, strewing his way into the house with tapestries and persuading him to walk on them (*Aga.* 855-974).<sup>295</sup> One is reminded of Judith’s exceedingly deferential words to Holofernes, which, as I argue below, serve as foreplay. The same argument can be made of Clytemnestra here.<sup>296</sup> Agamemnon has returned home after many years apart from his wife, so one might expect their reunion to have sexual overtones in any case; when this sexually-charged situation is combined with Clytemnestra’s fawning words and actions toward

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<sup>294</sup> David H. Porter, “Some Inversions Not Righted: A Note on Aeschylus’ Eumenides,” *The Classical Journal* 101, no. 1 (2005): 3.

<sup>295</sup> The tapestries also foreshadow the rivers of blood that will soon flow from Agamemnon.

<sup>296</sup> For more on Clytemnestra’s speech, particularly the ways she uses “gendered” speech patterns to great effect, see chapter three of Laura McClure, *Spoken like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). McClure argues that Clytemnestra goes back and forth between “masculine” and “feminine” modes of speech, unsettling gender norms. She uses typically “female” speech genres such as ritual cry, prayer, and statements about the correct behavior of women, combined with “male” patterns such as public address, boast, and persuasion. *Ibid.*, 79. See also Komar: “She declares her feelings in metaphor, but only an arrogant Agamemnon could miss all the implications of her speech. In a moment of dramatic irony, the audience and the chorus surmise her double meanings and are terrified. Klytemnestra’s multivalent statements mark her ability both to do violence to language and to announce violence through language. Hers is an intellectual as well as a physical violence. She has the ability to wrest meanings from language that are hidden by its surface declarations. Her detractors might say that she misuses words, exerts a deforming control over them and subverts their referential function. Such capacities make her a danger to society, which must rely on a transparent use of language to sustain social intercourse.” Komar, *Reclaiming Klytemnestra*, 32–34.

Agamemnon, it reads as the prelude to a hot and heavy sexual reunion. As recounted by the prophetic Cassandra, Clytemnestra next entices Agamemnon with a bath, traps him in a robe or cloth, and kills him with a sword (1107-1129). The erotic implications of a wife offering her long-absent husband a bath as a welcome home, after she has lavishly praised him, are obvious. The murder of Agamemnon itself is sexualized too, with Clytemnestra describing how her husband “breathed forth quick spurts of blood” and “struck me with dark drops of gory dew; while I rejoiced no less than the sown earth is gladdened in heaven’s refreshing rain at the birthtime of the flower buds” (*Aga.* 1388-1392). Clytemnestra describes both the flow of blood and her joy at feeling it hit her in terms reminiscent of the sex act, reinforcing the reader’s impression of the murder and its lead-up as sexually charged.<sup>297</sup>

There are also analogies in the use of maternal imagery in Jael’s stories and Clytemnestra’s. Jael, portrayed as childless, plays the mother to lure Sisera into feeling safe. Clytemnestra, who is portrayed as having children, invokes motherhood as well, though perhaps for very different reasons. In Clytemnestra’s case, I would argue, her invocation of motherhood and children serve to emphasize her role as avenger of Iphigenia’s death and, later, to highlight the seriousness of Orestes murdering her. Maternal imagery may be seen alongside the sexual hints in Clytemnestra’s remarks upon Agamemnon’s death, quoted above; the reference to the sown earth and new buds are reminders of fertility.<sup>298</sup> Her other allusions to motherhood involve dawn being born from night (*Aga.* 265, 279); the child Orestes safe elsewhere, unlike, of course, his dead sister Iphigenia (*Aga.* 875-885); Clytemnestra’s nursing of Orestes (*Cho.* 896-899, 907); and her threats to him that killing one’s mother is an offense that will be avenged (*Cho.* 921-924). She also makes frequent mention of the avenging of her child Iphigenia (*Aga.* 1415-1420,

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<sup>297</sup> Wolfe, “Woman, Tyrant, Mother, Murderess,” 701–702. Porter, “Some Inversions,” 3.

<sup>298</sup> Porter, “Some Inversions,” 3.

1431-1434, 1525-1530, 1555-1560). There are also many mentions of birth, motherhood, and children in the speech of the other characters in the *Oresteia* trilogy, particularly the chorus.

The implications of Clytemnestra's character for the system of sexual exchange portrayed in Greek literature may also prove instructive for the examination of Jael and Judith. As Victoria Wohl notes, drawing on the work of Gayle Rubin:

Greek tragedy dramatizes the exchange of women with almost obsessive regularity: imported as brides, captured as war booty, given as gifts, won in competitions, stolen through rape, hoarded as treasures, bequeathed as inheritances, even offered as sacrifices to the gods, women become objects of a transaction that provides a focal point for tragedy's exploration of social and economic relations, gender, and the nature of the self. . . . By the end of each play [the] havoc is contained; the male self and his world are rebuilt and resecured, but upon a foundation that has been shown to be essentially unstable.<sup>299</sup>

Tragic plays such as Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Wohl argues, reveal the problematic nature of a society that relies so heavily on the exchange of women through showing the women's struggles to act as their own subjects.<sup>300</sup> Similarly, we might see the plots of Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and chapter 31 of the *Biblical Antiquities* as being fueled in large part by the exchange of women and the women's resistance or reaction to this exchange. All three of the stories indicate, to varying extents, that the doomed generals wish to take women as the spoils of war.<sup>301</sup> It would be a stretch to say that the desire to fight for subjectivity and against the exchange of women fuels the entire plots of these three stories, but this desire does play a role. Accordingly, Wohl's

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<sup>299</sup> Victoria Wohl, *Intimate Commerce: Exchange, Gender, and Subjectivity in Greek Tragedy* (Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 1998), xiv.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, xv. In the case of *Agamemnon*, Wohl argues, the key exchanges that fuel the plot are the theft of Clytemnestra's sister Helen and the sacrifice of Clytemnestra's daughter Iphigenia. The kidnapping of Helen sparks the Trojan War, and Agamemnon's desire for calm seas for that war leads to the sacrifice of his daughter. In turn, Iphigenia's death at Agamemnon's hands, plus, perhaps, Agamemnon's relationship with his war captive, Cassandra, and Clytemnestra's own taking, long ago, by Agamemnon, lead Clytemnestra to kill Agamemnon.

<sup>301</sup> Even though Sisera does not state his intentions to take women, his mother certainly expects that he will (Judg 5:30).



insightful analysis of sexual exchange in *Agamemnon* can provide new insights into Jael and Judith.

There is a final, more esoteric correspondence between the stories of Clytemnestra, on one hand, and Jael and Judith, on the other. In all of these tales, curiously, textiles play a key role in the killing. In Judges 4:18, Jael tucks in Sisera by covering him with a rug.<sup>302</sup> It is through this and other maternal and sexual gestures that Jael convinces Sisera that he can trust her. In the Book of Judith, the heroine uses fabric to enhance her appearance by changing from sackcloth to beautiful clothing (10:3). Her lovely appearance, enhanced by the clothing, allows her to gain Holofernes's ardor. Textiles also play a role after Judith assassinates Holofernes, when she pulls down the canopy from his bed (13:9) and brings it back to Bethulia as a trophy (13:15).<sup>303</sup> Fabric plays a double role in Clytemnestra's assassination of Agamemnon, as well. Clytemnestra softens up Agamemnon for the kill by persuading him to walk on the palace tapestries on his way into the house; it is an over-the-top hero's welcome (*Aga.* 855-974). And of course, in *Agamemnon*, fabric plays an important role in the murder itself: Clytemnestra throws a robe or cloth around Agamemnon during or after his bath, trapping him so she can stab him fatally (*Aga.* 1380-1384).

There is a close historical association of women with fabric. Elizabeth Barber's study of the history of textile production uses textual and archaeological evidence to show that women have been responsible for textile production in every historical era, which Barber attributes to the

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<sup>302</sup> The word that I translate as "rug," *šēmikâ*, is a *hapax legomenon*. I discuss this word and its implications in depth in chapter 3. In Pseudo-Philo's version of the Jael story, there is no rug or blanket, but Jael adorns herself before going out to meet Sisera. We might assume that these adornments include pretty clothes, and that this is part of what entices Sisera to trust Jael. Textiles then, may play a role in the *Biblical Antiquities* version of the story, though it is a reduced role as compared to the story told in Judges.

<sup>303</sup> I discuss the canopy and its sexual implications in chapter 4.

compatibility of spinning and weaving with childcare.<sup>304</sup> Cloth often used as a signal of a woman's marriageability, embroidered with patterns that suggest female genitalia, and employed in pregnancy and birth rituals.<sup>305</sup> Assyrian texts show that women were often responsible for buying cloth or the makings thereof from merchants.<sup>306</sup> Even queens were sometimes responsible for supervising the production of textiles, as indicated by letters about the Mesopotamian city of Karana.<sup>307</sup> Greek stories also associate women with fabric. The marquee example is Penelope's constant weaving and unraveling in the *Odyssey* (*Homer Od.* 2.90-109). We also see fabric at work in the stories of Nausicaa of Phaeacia, who goes with her companions to wash her marriage garments and ends up encountering and clothing the naked Odysseus, and Nausicaa's mother, who spins yarn (*Homer Od.* 6). Also in the *Odyssey*, Helen gives Odysseus' son Telemachus a robe she has woven as a gift for his future bride (*Homer Od.* 5.105-129). The association of women with textiles clearly extends to the Bible as well, as Barber points out; the "woman of valor" in Proverbs 31 is praised lavishly for her ability to make and sell textiles.<sup>308</sup> Women are also associated with fabric ownership, even when they do not own much of anything else independently. The property a bride brings with her into a marriage, for example, has generally included textiles.<sup>309</sup> I would argue that the use of textiles in the preparation, act, or aftermath of all of these killings serve as a further marker of the assassins' performed gender. What else but the quintessential women's material should Jael, Judith, and Clytemnestra employ in the service of the murders they commit?

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<sup>304</sup> E. J. W. Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: Norton, 1994), 29–30.

<sup>305</sup> Barber, *Women's Work*.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>309</sup> See for example Annalisa Azzoni, *The Private Lives of Women in Persian Egypt* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 50–52.

## Tomyris

According to Herodotus, Tomyris was a widow and queen of the Massagetae people; her army was responsible for the death of Cyrus the Great. After his death, Tomyris filled a bag with blood, found Cyrus's corpse on the battlefield, cut off his head, and plunged it into the bag (*Hist.* 1.214). Interpreters have seen commonalities in the stories of Judith and Tomyris, as evidenced by their depiction together in some Renaissance art.<sup>310</sup> The historical accuracy of this account of Cyrus's death, or even the historical existence or nonexistence of Tomyris, is not relevant for the purposes of this analysis. If the author of Judith was influenced by Herodotus's story about Tomyris, it does not matter if either tale actually happened; the question is only whether there are potential literary commonalities between the two.

The most obvious similarity between Tomyris and the biblical heroines is the role of the commander's head. In both versions of Jael's story, Sisera dies by a tent-peg to the head, and in the Book of Judith, Holofernes is decapitated. Judith is clearly the better analogy for Tomyris because both of their targets are beheaded, and in both cases the head is placed in a bag.<sup>311</sup> In addition, both are widows, giving them unique freedom to act independently. Another similarity is that Cyrus's forces are able to capture and kill many of the Massagetae soldiers after enticing them by leaving out food and wine so the Massagetae will eat, drink, and fall asleep. Similarly,

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<sup>310</sup> Elena Ciletti and Henrike Lähnemann, "Judith in the Christian Tradition," in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies across the Disciplines*, ed. Kevin R. Brine, Elena Ciletti, and Henrike Lähnemann (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 57; Margarita Stocker, *Judith: Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 16.

<sup>311</sup> In Herodotus, Tomyris herself places Cyrus's head in a skin of blood, while in the Book of Judith, Judith hands the head to her maid, who puts it in their food-bag (13:9-10). While one beheading is the manner of death and the other is done postmortem, both are acts of desecration and shaming.

Judith attacks Holofernes after he passes out from too much wine. However, there are problems with trying too hard to make the connection: the supposed Judith-analogue, Tomyris, has nothing to do with the food-and-wine plot; in fact, the plot is perpetrated against her army by Cyrus, not the other way around. In addition, though in Jael and Judith's tales, food and drink are intimately connected with sex and gender play, in Herodotus's tale of Cyrus and Tomyris there is no such connection.

Another potential commonality is the theme of disgrace by death at the hands of a woman.<sup>312</sup> This is mentioned in Judith 13:15 and 16:5 and in *Biblical Antiquities* 31:1, 7, and 9, and, arguably, strongly implied in Judges 4:9. Similarly, in his account of Cyrus's death at the hands of the Massagetae, Herodotus has Cyrus heed the advice of his counselor Croesus, who says, "...[I]t would be a shameful thing and not to be endured if Cyrus the son of Cambyses should yield and give ground before a woman" (*Hist.* 1.207.5). All of these stories emphasize the shame that accrues to a general beaten by a woman, which makes the relevant woman's victory all the sweeter and more remarkable.<sup>313</sup>

However, I would argue that, for the purposes of this study, Tomyris is not a good analogue to Jael or Judith, except for her widowhood and the head-in-a-bag motif her story shares with Judith's. Jael and Judith kill the generals themselves instead of leaving it to the male warriors. Tomyris, by contrast, is the queen but does not fight or kill Cyrus herself. This project focuses on the ways in which Judith and Jael play with signs of gender and sexuality in order to

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<sup>312</sup> Jeremy Corley, "Imitation of Septuagintal Narrative and Greek Historiography in the Portrait of Holofernes," in *A Pious Seductress: Studies in the Book of Judith*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), 35.

<sup>313</sup> For further comparisons between the Book of Judith and Herodotus's account of Cyrus's death, see Corley, "Imitation of Septuagintal Narrative and Greek Historiography in the Portrait of Holofernes." Caponigro also argues for influence of Herodotus's *Histories* on the Book of Judith, though he does not touch on potential parallels between Tomyris's beheading of Cyrus and Judith's beheading of Holofernes. Caponigro, "Judith, Holding the Tale of Herodotus." For the purposes of this project's concern with gender and violence, though, the links with Tomyris are the closest and most relevant of any potential connections between Judith and Greek historiography.

get their targets close enough to kill. Were Jael or Judith queens, they would not have needed such exaggerated feminine displays; it is because they have no access to military might that they undertake over-the-top gender performances. Tomyris does not need to play the woman to entice Cyrus, since she has an entire army at her disposal. In addition, part of the relevance of Judith's widowhood to the Book of Judith is that, although she knows she is sexually unavailable, her target, Holofernes, does not. Her status as a childless, celibate widow is part of what allows her to kill him. In the case of Tomyris, her widowhood is irrelevant to the death of Cyrus. Her sexuality or lack thereof plays no role in his death. Judith and Tomyris are both widows, but they do not use the power available to them as such in the same way.

### Bacchae

Greek literature gives us another tale of a woman carrying around the head of a slain man. This comes from Euripides's late-5<sup>th</sup> century tragedy *Bacchae*. The god Dionysus, angered that Thebes does not recognize his divinity, gets revenge by orchestrating the murder of the Theban ruler Pentheus by a crowd of frenzied female Dionysus-worshippers, the bacchantes. The mob is led by Pentheus's own mother Agave, who carries her son's head as a trophy back to her own father, thinking she has killed a lion. Amy-Jill Levine has made the connection between *Bacchae* and the Book of Judith, particularly because of the presence of the *thrusos*, the women dancing, and the severed head in both.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation," 218.

Again, the plot would seem to prevent the reader from drawing serious comparisons between Judith and Jael on the one hand and Agave on the other. Jael and Judith are heroines and Agave is a tragic figure. The biblical women are praised in song for their powerful actions, while the power of the bacchantes represents a madness-induced threat to the social order.<sup>315</sup> Jael and Judith's portrayal as childless is notable; Agave's role in the *Bacchae* revolves around her role as Pentheus's mother. Jael in both of her incarnations encourages Sisera to treat her like his mother; Agave ignores Penthesus's pleas not to kill him because she is his mother. Jael and Judith carefully calibrate their gender performances to entrap their generals; Agave kills Pentheus unknowingly, under the influence of a vengeful deity.

Are there useful similarities to be found? The role of speech laden with dramatic irony may be one such commonality. Judith's statements to Holofernes are masterful examples of double-speak. So, too, are Dionysus's words to Pentheus. For example, Dionysus tells Pentheus before leading him down to see the bacchantes, "You will return here being carried... in the arms of your mother" (965-969).<sup>316</sup> Pentheus believes he will return in Agave's arms after he has released her from Dionysus's spell; Dionysus knows that Agave will carry Pentheus's severed head in her arms. However, I would argue against placing too much significance on the use of

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<sup>315</sup> There are those who argue that, historically, the female-centered cult of Dionysus was a much-needed outlet for the oppressed women of ancient Greece. For example, Arthur Evans writes, "When possessed by the madness of Dionysos, women suddenly found themselves free of the patriarchally imposed definitions of self, womanhood, and sanity." Arthur Evans, *The God of Ecstasy: Sex-Roles and the Madness of Dionysos* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 18. This may nor may not be the case in a historical sense. However, literarily, the frenzied mob of bacchantes who tear apart Pentheus in Euripides's *Bacchae* are not viewed positively. I would therefore disagree with Evans's assessment that "[t]he ultimate cause of the king's bloody death is not so much the seeming madness of women but his hatred for their power when they act in groups independent of men." *Ibid.*, 19. It is true that Euripides does not paint Pentheus as a hero, but he also hardly argues that misogyny is grounds for Pentheus's murder. As Ross S. Kraemer writes, "If the cult of Dionysus temporarily reverses the standards for sanity, and for socio-biological roles and values, it must be stressed that such reversal is necessarily temporary and ultimately confirms the appropriateness of the reversed roles." Ross S. Kraemer, "Ecstasy and Possession: The Attraction of Women to the Cult of Dionysus," *The Harvard Theological Review* 72 (1979): 68.

<sup>316</sup> Theodore Alois Buckley, *Tragedies of Euripides* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850).

dramatic irony in these two texts. It is, of course, a common literary technique, and we should not draw overbroad conclusions from its use in both places.

Pentheus puts on drag in the *Bacchae*, which one might be tempted to liken to what I argue below is the gender performance of Judith and both iterations of Jael. Pentheus, at the disguised Dionysus's urging, agrees to dress up as a woman in order to spy on the bacchants (*Bacc.* 825ff.). There are major differences between the drag performance here and those of Jael and Judith. The biblical characters undertake feminine drag as part of well-thought-out plans; Pentheus does it at the urging of a false friend and in the grip of madness (850-854). Jael and Judith put on the gender expected of them; Pentheus does not.<sup>317</sup> Jael and Judith seem never to lose sight of who they are behind the exaggerated performances; Pentheus, by contrast, seems at times to disappear into his drag, as when he worries about whether his dress is hanging right (942).<sup>318</sup> The biblical women find success through their performances by killing the enemy; through his performance, Pentheus brings on his own death.

In terms of gender, Dionysus might be a better comparison for Jael and Judith than Pentheus is. Dionysus himself blurs gender lines in the play, and his power lies partly in his irresistibility to both men and women.<sup>319</sup> As Wohl points out, there is an undercurrent of

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<sup>317</sup> I would not conclude, as Wohl does, that Pentheus's death at the hands of the bacchants means that he is unconvincing as a woman or that Euripides means to make a larger point about the inviolability of sexual difference. Wohl writes that "even his transvestitism reaffirms the sexual difference it seems to transgress: Pentheus can dress like a woman, but Dionysus and his bacchants know he is a man." Victoria Wohl, "Beyond Sexual Difference: Becoming-Woman in Euripides' *Bacchae*," in *The Soul of Tragedy: Essays on Athenian Drama*, ed. Victoria Pedrick and Steven M. Oberhelman (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 142. The bacchants do not tear Pentheus apart because they recognize him as a man; they tear him apart because they are possessed by Dionysus (1124). In fact, Agave is not even aware until much later that she has killed a man and not an animal.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>319</sup> Dionysus is often represented as effeminate by other authors, such as Aeschylus and Diodorus Siculus, and in art. Evans, *The God of Ecstasy*, 20–21.

eroticism between Dionysus and Pentheus.<sup>320</sup> For example, when the two first meet, Pentheus observes,

But your body is not ill-formed, stranger, for women's purposes, for which reason you have come to Thebes. For your hair is long, not through wrestling, scattered over your cheeks, full of desire; and you have a white skin from careful preparation, hunting after Aphrodite by your beauty not exposed to strokes of the sun, but beneath the shade" (*Bacc.* 451-459).

Like Jael and Judith, Dionysus's beauty and eroticism fool his opponents into thinking he is harmless.<sup>321</sup> Jasper Griffin observes, "The god seems helpless, he is exotic, soft, girlish, no match for macho men, but when violence is used against him, it recoils on the user."<sup>322</sup>

Dionysus, like the biblical characters, uses his soft, sexy persona against his enemy. Who would ever think that what looks like a helpless, effeminate stranger could bring down the ruler of Thebes? And who would think that the gentle, motherly (yet sexy) Jael of Judges or the beautiful, deferential Judith could bring down a general? Griffin further comments on the god's "unshakeable and increasingly sinister calm" during the play.<sup>323</sup> Jael and Judith, too, are calm and collected throughout their mission. All of these characters know that their gender performance, their deadly serious play with the signifiers of sexuality, will bring victory.

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<sup>320</sup> Wohl, "Beyond Sexual Difference," 143–145.

<sup>321</sup> Dionysus, like Jael, Judith, and most of the female characters studied in this chapter, is called "liminal" by some scholars for the way he supposedly crosses gender boundaries. See for example Eric Csapo, "Riding the Phallus for Dionysus: Iconology, Ritual, and Gender-Role De/Construction," *Phoenix* 51 (1997): 253–95. This is one of the rare cases of a male character being called liminal, and in that respect it is a refreshing break from the usual pattern of any interesting female character being classified as liminal. In another way, though, it serves to shore up my argument against seeing Anat or the Amazons or Jael as a liminal figure. The concept of gender liminality as applied by modern scholars can serve to reinforce the artificial notion of the gender binary and imply that ancient societies had a firmer two-sex duality than the evidence actually suggests. To see Dionysus as liminal is to deny that a male god could display feminine characteristics without necessarily being seen as aberrant or "other."

<sup>322</sup> Jasper Griffin, "Bacchae: A Sexy Sect and the Death of a Statesman," in *Euripides Talks*, ed. Alan Beale (London: Bristol Classical, 2008), 10.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.



## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored stories about lethal women from the ancient Mediterranean from outside of the Israelite and Jewish contexts. While there is no story that perfectly replicates the themes and gender play of the tales of Jael in Judges, Judith, or Jael in Pseudo-Philo, there are a number of texts that provide valuable elements of comparison.

The story of Anat has been much discussed with regard to Jael and Judith, but I have argued here that most of the elements which have been brought out by scholars as possible parallels for the biblical women are in fact not very convincing. The one element of Anat that I would maintain does provide useful background, particularly for studying the character of Judith, is her capacity for independent action. This independence is formed in part from Anat's lack of sexual or procreative attachment, something which is also helpful for understanding the remarkable independence of the chaste widow Judith. From the Ugaritic literature, the best comparison for Jael and Judith is actually not Anat but Aqhat's sister Paghit. Though the text describing her is frustratingly incomplete, her story appears to involve the seduction and murder of the deity who killed Aqhat. Paghit's use of "put-on" femininity—including her very name, "girl"—and drink to make Yatpan vulnerable mirrors Jael and Judith's actions nicely and shows some Ancient Near Eastern precedent for this use of gender and sexuality as weapons. Finally from the ANE realm, the Hittite goddess Shaushka's seduction of Hedammu and attempted seduction of Ullikumi provides a helpful analogy to Jael and Judith. Though the texts describing Shaushka's actions against the two monsters are incomplete, there are several plot points common to Shaushka's story and those of Jael and Judith: the targeting of a general or champion rather than a ruler, the element of travel, bathing and adornment as preparation for the mission,

the use of wine, and the fact that the target enemy falls asleep. Shaushka provides another example from the ANE of a lethal woman performing femininity.

From the Greek context, there are some instructive takeaways from stories about the Amazons. The Amazons's partial refusal of motherhood brings to mind similar themes in the stories of Jael and, especially, Judith. The Amazons's rejection of marriage and, in some versions of their legend, men, also provides an instructive comparison to how Judith's rejection of sex and remarriage enables her independence and heroic actions. Likewise, the goddess Athena's status as *parthenos* who is at times erotic is a helpful comparison for Judith's sexy chastity. Athena's general lack of motherhood, combined with her connection to the child born from Hephaistos's semen, is also instructive for understanding how Jael and Judith, who have no children but sometimes play the mother, interact with ideas of maternity. Athena's fellow *parthenos* goddess, Artemis, proves useful to this study for how she violently defends her own chastity and that of other women, which calls to mind how Jael and Judith's actions implicitly save the female population from abduction and rape. Artemis is also enlightening for her connection to childbirth, though she is herself childless; Jael and Judith, too, connect themselves to motherhood in symbolic ways, though apparently not biologically.

Also instructive for understanding Jael and Judith is Clytemnestra, particularly the way she is characterized in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. Clytemnestra provides an excellent comparison for Jael and Judith in her use of erotic words and imagery to facilitate her murder of Agamemnon. The way her character, as interpreted by Wohl, resists the system of sexual exchange provides a framework in which to understand how Jael and Judith interact with and subvert this system. Clytemnestra's use of fabric in the murder of her husband also provides a common element with the stories of Judith and the two versions of Jael, perhaps pointing to a relationship between

textiles and gender performance. The character of Tomyris in Herodotus's *Histories*, though she has been likened to Judith in artistic representations, actually does not provide much of an analogy in terms of gender and sexuality performance, though there are the common plot elements of the lethal widow and the severed head of a general. Finally, the *Bacchae* provides an example of gender performance involving the male character, Dionysus, whose girlishness gives him cover to bring down his enemy. Though the underlying sex of the character involved is different—as much as a literary creation can have an underlying sex—the performance and effect are startlingly similar to the stories of Jael and Judith.

This exploration of commonalities between the stories that are the primary focus of this project and stories from elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean is necessary to show the larger cultural, literary, and social contexts in which Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and *Biblical Antiquities* 31 reside. Without the frame provided by this chapter, it would be difficult to analyze the ways in which these three texts use concepts of gender and sexuality because it would not be clear whether these texts are outliers or representative of larger cultural literary trends. With the valuable comparative data from the Ancient Near East and the classical Greek and Hellenistic contexts explored in the preceding pages, however, we are well situated to consider how Judith and both versions of Jael conform to and subvert cultural ideas of gender and sexuality.

## Chapter 3

### Judges 4-5

Jael is not the Bible's ideal woman. First of all, she is a foreigner, or at least a foreigner-by-marriage.<sup>324</sup> The Kenite, *qênî*, is often depicted in the Bible as friendly to Israel, but unquestionably distinct from it. Kenites have been seen as the descendants of the *qayîn* (Cain) of Genesis 4 and, consequently, connected with the artisan tradition Cain is credited with introducing. Many have seen them as metallurgists and, because of this, a group with marginal status in society.<sup>325</sup> There is also an apparent association of the Kenites with Moses, since Judg 1:16 identifies Moses' father-in-law as a Kenite. Jael's husband, Heber, has chosen to live away from the other Kenites for some unspecified reason, but he is not an ally of the Israelites by mere virtue of proximity.<sup>326</sup> From 4:17 the reader learns that he has a peace agreement with Jabin.

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<sup>324</sup> Lillian Klein reads Jael as an Israelite "because the text takes care to identify even half-assimilated non-Israelites such as Jael's husband." Her actions, Klein argues, identify her as an Israelite. Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Sheffield: Almond, 1988), 43. This is an argument from silence. I prefer to read Jael, like her husband, as a Kenite and not an Israelite; even if she is of Israelite birth, her marriage to Heber would likely ally her with his clan, effectively "de-Israeliting" her. Her actions in support of the Israelites are not evidence that she is one but rather a detail underscoring of the double irony of the story: not only will Sisera be delivered "into the hand of a woman," but that woman will not be the judge Deborah, as the reader might suspect, but an even less likely candidate: a foreign woman.

<sup>325</sup> Paula M. McNutt, "The Kenites, the Midianites, and the Rechabites as Marginal Mediators in Ancient Israelite Tradition," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 109–32. McNutt asserts that metal-working peoples tend to be marginal and, hence, wind up serving as cultural intermediaries. See also Isaac Kalimi, "Three Assumptions About the Kenites," *ZAW* 100 (1988): 386–93. Kalimi argues against the common arguments that 1) the Kenites were metallurgists, 2) the Kenites were an Israelite tribe, and 3) the Kenites can be identified with the Bedouin tribe known as *banu al-Kain*. He ably proves that each of these scholarly suppositions is based upon insufficient or incorrectly-interpreted evidence. See also Baruch Halpern, "Kenites," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992).

<sup>326</sup> Benjamin Mazar took an innovative stance on the status of the Kenites, connecting the sanctuary excavated at Arad during the 1960s with the Kenites. He based this assertion on Judg 1:16-17's statement that the Kenites were descendants of Moses' priestly father-in-law and that they migrated to Arad. Mazar then uses this purported connection to argue that Sisera fled to Jael's tent "because of the special exalted position of Jael, and because her dwelling place, Elon Bezaannaim, was recognized as a sanctified spot and a place of refuge where protection was given even to an enemy." B. Mazar, "The Sanctuary of Arad and the Family of Hobab the Kenite," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 24 (1965): 302. I find Mazar's conclusion, while serving as a tidy explanation of Sisera's interactions with Jael, to contain several unfounded assumptions. Ackerman takes Mazar's thesis and expands it. She argues, for example, that Jael is pictured as located near the city of Kedesh, geographically improbable considering its distance from the other sites mentioned in the story, because this was a levitical city of refuge and

Heber's very name may signify "friend;" later in the chapter, when his wife kills a supposed ally to help the Israelites, this name's ambiguity—friend of whom, exactly?—is revealed, but in v. 17 it is to be taken to mean that he is a friend of Jabin and Sisera.<sup>327</sup> The danger of foreign women to the Israelites is emphasized again and again in the Bible, from the Moabites in Numbers 25, Solomon's dangerous foreign wives in 2 Samuel 11, and the banished foreign wives in Ezra 9-10 to Potiphar's wife in Genesis 29, Delilah in Judges 16, and the strange woman in Proverbs 7. Foreign women will seduce upright Israelite men and lead them astray; they are not, with the exception of Ruth, to be considered heroines.

Jael also differs from the ideal biblical woman in her story's lack of concern with biological motherhood. While so many biblical women are either mothers or miserably barren non-mothers, Jael does not have anything to do with children at all.<sup>328</sup> It is difficult to imagine Jael inviting Sisera into a tent filled with children, lulling him to sleep amidst her crying,

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thus a known religious site. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 97–98. To Ackerman, Jael's identification as "Kenite," too, emphasizes her cultic role. *Ibid.*, 99–102. Are we then to conclude that all Kenites, or all Kenite women, were cultic functionaries? This is illogical. Ackerman also argues that women were more likely to wield religious power in times of instability, stipulates that the era described in Judges is such a time, and concludes that Jael and Deborah's religious authority can be attributed in part to the power vacuum during this period. *Ibid.*, 104–107. There are major issues with this argument, not least of which is the uncertain historical context of the book; it likely was not written at a time anywhere close to the late second or early first millennium B.C.E., which it purports to describe. The argument is also weak because its reasoning is circular: Ackerman argues that women had more power in uncertain times and thus can be seen as wielding such power in Judges 4-5, then uses Judges 4-5 as evidence of women's religious power. While Ackerman's thesis is intriguing, it, like Mazar's, fails because it based on flimsy evidence and unsupported assumptions.

<sup>327</sup> Other possibilities include a connection to the term *hibrum* as found in documents from Mari, meaning "a nomadic unit that has not yet settled down," or to a Hebrew root related to divination, as in Deut 18:10-11. Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 261–262.

<sup>328</sup> For examples of miserable barren women, see Gen 16, where Sarai is so distressed over her inability to conceive that she tells Abram to impregnate her servant Hagar and is then so distressed over the pregnant Hagar that she mistreats her; Gen 30:1, where Rachel is envious of her fertile sister and tells their husband Jacob, "Give me children or I will die;" 1 Sam 1-2, where Hannah prays fervently for a child, conceives, and praises God, and in the extracanonical work *4 Esdras* 9:41-45, where a vision of a grieving woman (later revealed to symbolize events in Israel's history) tells the writer of her infertility and her prayers for a child. There are also instances where childless women do not themselves show distress at their lack, but in these cases, the childlessness is remedied anyway, indicating a worldview whereby the absence of children is a problem that must be corrected. For examples, see Gen 25:21, where Rebekah is said to be barren but it is Isaac who prays, successfully, for a child; Judg 13:2-3, where an angel appears to Manoah's barren wife to announce that she will conceive and have a son; and 2 Kgs 4, where Elisha, wishing to reward the childless Shunammite woman for her hospitality, grants her a son, even though it is Elisha's servant and not the woman herself who tells him that this would be a good idea.

whining, running, playing offspring. It is even more implausible to imagine her striking the fatal blow with a wide-eyed, knee-high audience. It is possible to imagine that Jael's children are grown, or perhaps that they are big enough to leave the tent during the day to work in the fields or tending the flocks. However, Jael clearly knows enough about current affairs not only to understand that there is a war on nearby, but to recognize a Canaanite general when she sees one; if she did have children, it seems unlikely that she would let them out to roam with the sheep at such a time.

## Judges 4 and 5 in Biblical Scholarship

### Sexuality

Robert Alter brought out the sexual suggestiveness of 5:27 by translating, “Between her legs he kneeled, fell, lay, between her legs he kneeled and fell, where he kneeled, he fell, destroyed.”<sup>329</sup> Earlier translators rendered *bên raglēhā* as “between her feet,” but, following Alter, several scholars now elect to translate as “between her legs” to make clear the sexual element of the verse. I appreciate Alter's reasons for the more explicit translation, but in my own translation in chapter 3, I opt for “between her feet.” I argue that this more accurately reflects the meaning of *raglāyīm*, and that, in the context of biblical translation, “feet” carries its own hefty dose of sexual suggestiveness. In addition to making the case for sexuality in Judges 5, Alter argues that the penetration of Sisera with the tent peg in 5:26 is a symbolic rape and recognizes

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<sup>329</sup> Robert Alter, “From Line to Story in Biblical Verse,” *Poetics Today* 4 (1983): 630.

the maternal undertones of Jael's sheltering and feeding of Sisera in chapter 4. Alter writes, "By intimation, then, Jael here is in turn seductress, ministering mother, and sexual assailant..."<sup>330</sup>

Susan Niditch follows Alter in bringing out the erotic overtones of Jael's story. She argues that several features of Judges 5 have sexual connotations, particularly in 5:27: the description of Sisera lying *bên raglêhā*, the construction *kāra ' nāpal*, the verb *šākāb*, the adjective *šādūd*. Niditch argues:

Double meanings of violent death and sexuality emerge in every line. He is at her feet in a pose of defeat and humiliation; he kneels between her legs in sexual pose. He falls and lies, a dead warrior assassinated by a warrior better than he; he is a supplicant and a would-be lover. This one verse holds an entire story. The final twist and nuance of the tale awaits the last line, which nevertheless retains the doubleness of meaning. He is despoiled/destroyed.<sup>331</sup>

Niditch also notes the maternal symbolism of Jael's behavior toward Sisera.<sup>332</sup>

Pamela Tamarkin Reis made waves with her argument that we should read the sex in Judges 4-5 as more than metaphorical.<sup>333</sup> Reis argues that the *hapax legomenon* in 4:18, *šēmikā*, is not, as most translate it, a blanket or rug. Rather, Reis argues for an exchange of *sin* for *samek*, which would make the root of the word *smk*, "to lean, lay, rest, support."<sup>334</sup> She holds that Jael covers Sisera not with fabric but with her own body; that is, the two had sex with Jael on top. Reis sees the second act of covering, in v. 19, as a second instance of copulation. She argues that

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 635.

<sup>331</sup> Niditch, *Judges*, 50.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>333</sup> More than 20 years earlier, Yair Zakovitch argued that the original account of Jael and Sisera's encounter included the detail that they had sex, but that this was later excised. Yair Zakovitch, "Sisseras Tod," ZAW 93 (1981): 364-74. Zakovitch's article has been widely cited, but mainly in the service of dismissal of his argument. Also before Reis, Mieke Bal noted the case for actual sex between Jael and Sisera. Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 129. Reis's treatment of the question of sex between Jael and Sisera, however, remains the most extensive.

<sup>334</sup> Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading," 29.

Jael has intercourse with Sisera twice to get him to let down his guard and to tire him out, at which point she will kill him.<sup>335</sup> (Reis reads 4:22 as Jael having sex with Barak as well!)<sup>336</sup>

While Reis's argument is well reasoned and intriguing, it ultimately rests upon a tenuous supposition about the meaning of *šēmîkâ*, one that goes counter to the plain meaning of the text. With Sasson, I would opt for a more traditional interpretation of *šēmîkâ*, one that is based upon the preceding verb, a form of *kissāh*, a *piel* verb meaning "to cover," which suggests that whatever a *šēmîkâ* is, it is something with which one can cover a man.<sup>337</sup> The Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon is not much help here; it does not offer a suggested a root for *šēmîkâ*.<sup>338</sup> Though Reis's argument that *šēmîkâ* comes from *smk* is supported by *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, tracing the word to this root does not actually help Reis's case much.<sup>339</sup> The semantic field of *smk* includes supporting, leaning, laying hands on, and resting upon something, all of which would make the best sense if *šēmîkâ* is a blanket, rug, or mantle.<sup>340</sup> There are no attested uses of *smk* in a sexual sense.<sup>341</sup> Early translations of the text support this interpretation as well; one Septuagint manuscript's Greek, *epibolaiō*; the Vulgate's Latin, *pallio*; and Targum Jonathan's Aramaic, *gōnakā*, all carry the sense of a "covering."<sup>342</sup> What is more, if the

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 29–31.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 35. Reis's argument is based upon the use in 4:22 of *wayyābō 'ēlēhā*, "and he came to her," a phrase Reis characterizes as sexual. Robert Chisholm argues that the phrase is not always sexual; rather, he contends, its context in other locations, but not in 4:22, marks it as such. Robert B. Chisholm, "What Went on in Jael's Tent (Part Two)," *SJOT* 27 (2013): 217. I would argue that, even if Reis is correct that the collocation is sexual, it should not be read here to indicate intercourse between Jael and Barak. Sex between these two characters would add nothing to the story. Rather, the use of *wayyābō 'ēlēhā* is likely meant to add to the sexual tone of the passage.

<sup>337</sup> Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 266.

<sup>338</sup> Brown, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 970.

<sup>339</sup> Ludwig Köhler, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Study edition. (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2001).

<sup>340</sup> Niditch notes that the cognates of *smk* in Akkadian and Arabic mean "to cover." Niditch, *Judges*, 63.

<sup>341</sup> Köhler, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1337. Brown, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 701.

<sup>342</sup> Alfred Rahlfs and Privilegierte württembergische Bibelanstalt, *Septuaginta; id est, Vetus Testamentum graece iuxta LXX interpretes* (Stuttgart, Privilegierte württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1935), Bonifatius Fischer and Robert Weber, *Biblia sacra: iuxta Vulgatam versionem* (Ed. tertia emendata.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983), Menachem Cohen, *Mikra'ot gedolot ha-Keter* (Ramat-Gan: Universitat Bar Ilan, 1992).



author(s) of the text had wanted to establish that Jael and Sisera had sex, surely there would have been better ways to do that than with awkward phrasing and a rare word with no connection to sex. Robert Chisholm puts it well when he writes in response to Reis, “the presence of sexually suggestive language, used for purposes of literary irony, does not mean that Jael actually invited Sisera to have sexual relations with her or that he did so.”<sup>343</sup>

Elie Assis notes that Jael uses “her femininity” to kill Sisera in Judges 4. He points out the sexual allusion in “Turn in, my lord, turn in to me” (4:18), and perceptively remarks on the sensuality implied by the repeated sibilance of the phrase *sûrâ âdônî sûrâ ’ēlay*.<sup>344</sup> Assis argues, “The weaker sex will overcome the stronger one by exploiting the weakness of men for women.”<sup>345</sup> He sees sexuality suffusing the encounter between Jael and Sisera. Assis’s central argument is that Jael’s place in the narrative is secondary, meant to emphasize the heroism and leadership of Deborah. He argues that Jael serves as Deborah’s “hand,” an extension of the prophetess, when she kills Sisera.<sup>346</sup> In that vein, Assis contends, the emphasis on sex serves to underline Deborah’s prophecy that Sisera would fall by the hand of a woman.<sup>347</sup> Though Assis recognizes the sexuality running through Judges 4, I would argue that he misses the artifice in Jael’s seductive behavior. As I will show in chapter 3, the “femininity” that Jael uses to take down Sisera is not “hers;” it is a conscious performance of what she knows he wants to see.

In a paper criticizing recent sexual interpretations of tales from the Book of Judges, Serge Frolov argues that seeing both sexuality and maternity in Judges 4-5 is a contradiction. He writes of the sexual interpretation of the story that has gained traction in the past three decades, “The

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<sup>343</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, “What Went on in Jael’s Tent? The Collocation *והכימשו והסכת* in Judges 4,18,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 24 (2010): 143.

<sup>344</sup> Elie Assis, “‘The Hand of a Woman’: Deborah and Yael (Judges 4),” *JHS* 5 (2000): 9–10.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–11.

interpretation's steadily growing popularity was not even hampered by the fact that, almost concurrently, the relationship between Jael and Sisera came to be seen in mother-son terms (e.g. Brenner 1990). Indeed, some authors explored both motifs simultaneously, apparently seeing little tension between them."<sup>348</sup> Frolov does not, however, say why there *should* be tension between the two motifs. Their coexistence may provoke unpleasantly oedipal associations for the reader (and the scholar), but that hardly means they cannot coexist. One need only refer to the film and television trope of a woman caring for a wounded man, then becoming sexually interested in or involved with him, to illustrate that mothering and seduction are not necessarily mutually exclusive.<sup>349</sup>

Frolov also seems rather literal-minded in his critique. Though he mentions scholars such as Niditch, Fewell and Gunn, Ackerman, and van Wolde, he seems to lump them in with Bal, Zakovitch, and Reis in assuming that all argue for actual sex between Jael and Sisera. He writes that scholars overlook Sisera's condition in Jael's tent: Sisera, fleeing on foot and fearing death, would have been in no mood for sex, Frolov argues.<sup>350</sup> As I argue above regarding Sasson's work, acknowledging that there is sexuality in the story does not necessitate arguing that sexual intercourse occurs. In chapter 3, I show how the text of Judges 4 and 5 creates a sexually charged atmosphere, but I do not argue that the text means to suggest that sex between Jael and Sisera has taken place. Further, Frolov's arguments against Sisera being in the mood for sex seem tone-deaf in light of the realities of rape in wartime.<sup>351</sup> If we take at face value the words ascribed to

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<sup>348</sup> Serge Frolov, "Sleeping with the Enemy: Recent Scholarship on Sexuality in the Book of Judges," *Currents in Biblical Research* 11 (2013): 311.

<sup>349</sup> See for example Jim Sharman, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Comedy, Musical, 1975. Steven Spielberg, *The Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Action, Adventure, 1981. Robert Zemeckis, *Back to the Future*, Adventure, Comedy, Sci-Fi, 1985.

<sup>350</sup> Frolov, "Sleeping with the Enemy," 318.

<sup>351</sup> Frolov sounds a similarly off-key note when he argues against Niditch's contention that the word *šādūd* has a sexual connotation. He critiques Niditch's reference to the word being used in Jer 4:30 to describe "an unfaithful Israel to a sleazy harlot, beautifying herself for her lovers" and writes, "In fact, the word describes the condition of a

Sisera's mother and her companions, Sisera in this text must be anticipating the sexual use of captive women. We can imagine a textual world where, those intentions frustrated, Sisera is more than receptive to Jael's suggestion of carnal comforts. Having Jael sexually may be a "consolation prize" for the fleeing Sisera; he can no longer hope to bring home multiple captive women to rape, but perhaps he can at least enjoy himself with the obsequious, accommodating woman who shelters him.

Frolov also argues that, as the "novelty" of sexual interpretations has worn off, what is left is seediness and sexism. He writes that "titillation comes at the expense of giving biblical imprimatur to bigoted attitudes and sexist stereotypes that the exegetes doubtlessly find personally abhorrent."<sup>352</sup> Reading sex into Judges 4-5, he writes, unfairly justifies patriarchal beliefs that women need constant supervision if they are to be prevented from having sex with any man with whom they are alone. Frolov criticizes feminists who "try so hard to bolster it by forcing sexuality into a biblical scene that effortlessly reads as a platonic, if ultimately lethal, encounter between two people of different genders."<sup>353</sup> It is true that, for centuries, Judges 4-5 has been "effortlessly read" without sexuality by the majority of commentators. However, as I show in chapter 3, it can also be "effortlessly read" as sexually charged. Ultimately, one's interpretation of this text—of any text—depends heavily on what one brings to the table. Frolov does not see sexuality here because the hermeneutic he uses is not attuned to such concerns.

I would also challenge Frolov's concern for the "dignity" of the texts and characters which scholars interpret as sexual. He writes, "It is possible to argue that when it comes to

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woman whose former lovers reject and seek to kill her—a non-sexual situation if there has ever been one." *Ibid.*, 316. I am baffled by Frolov's characterization of the elaborately made-up, sinful, female-personified Israel being hunted down and "despoiled" by ex-lovers as "non-sexual."

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

sexuality, some of the recent Judges scholarship is akin to prying journalism that airs embarrassing revelations about individuals, whose lives might arouse public interest, without consideration for their already excruciating circumstances.”<sup>354</sup> He goes on to detail how difficult the situation of characters such as Jael and Sisera must have been, without scholars adding sex and metaphorical rape to the mix. My first objection to Frolov’s point is that it presupposes that the personages and events described in the biblical text are historical. Many of the scholars who see sexuality in Judges 4-5, myself included, are interpreting the chapters as literary creations. There is a fundamental disconnect here. Would Frolov worry about the “dignity” of Shakespeare’s Juliet when she is subjected to literary criticism? On a related note, his concern for the “dignity” of the characters would stilt productive interpretation by declaring some topics or some biblical figures off-limits. “Dignity” is a subjective notion, and to classify sexuality as a subject that might violate it is to reinforce the idea of the Bible as a document that is “above” such earthy matters. In this respect, Frolov’s proposed schema for reading is the opposite of Stone’s “Bibles that startle and surprise.”<sup>355</sup> I would also object to Frolov’s argument on the grounds that, in characterizing the exercise of journalism as often exploitive, he does not account for the necessary societal benefit served by bringing to light revelations that may “embarrass” their subjects.<sup>356</sup> Sometimes, journalists must embarrass people by bringing to light what the public needs to know; similarly, biblical scholars sometimes must engage in analyses that may strike some as prurient, in the service of better understanding the Bible. That an interpretation might appear unseemly to some is not a valid reason to argue against it.

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 321–322.

<sup>355</sup> I thank Annalisa Azzoni for this insight.

<sup>356</sup> Frolov also seems to conflate unhelpfully “tabloid” and general journalism. Frolov, “Sleeping with the Enemy,” 321–322.

## Motherhood

While some scholars highlight the sexual element in Judges 4-5, others focus primarily on the maternal imagery in the text. In critiquing Yair Zakovitch's exploration of sexuality in Judges 4-5, Mieke Bal brings out maternal themes she argues Zakovitch missed. While Zakovitch cites the milk Jael offers Sisera as an soporific designed to lead him more easily into her bed, for both sex and sleep, Bal points out that "Jael's milk" is a clear symbol of her mothering role toward Sisera.<sup>357</sup> Similarly, the phrase *bên raglêhā* in 5:27, which Zakovitch understands purely as a reference to sexual intercourse between Jael and Sisera, for Bal also calls to mind motherhood. She cites Deut 28:57, which refers to "her afterbirth which comes out between her feet (*bên raglêhā*)."<sup>358</sup> Sisera falls between Jael's legs like an infant coming out of the womb.<sup>358</sup> Bal writes:

What Jael offers him are the basic attributes of maternity: protection, rest, and milk. These attributes, which have the power to *restore*, mark the bottom line to which Sisera has descended. He can go no farther: the door is closed upon his public life, upon that existence where honor and the level of civilization counted. The roles are reversed: here, it is the woman who controls, who gives—and who kills. She gives life and then she takes it back.<sup>359</sup>

When Jael covers Sisera, Bal argues, it is an act symbolic of motherhood, sex, and (duplicitous) hospitality—all at once.<sup>360</sup> Like Bal, I do not see an irreconcilable tension between sexual and maternal imagery. I build on this assumption to show how motherhood and sexuality work together to create a gendered portrayal of Jael which is marvelously effective.

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<sup>357</sup> Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 105.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 121. See also Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 267–268.

<sup>360</sup> Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 123.

J. Cheryl Exum argues that both Sisera and Barak in Judges 4-5 are symbolic “little boys,” with Jael and Deborah playing their mothers. Deborah is the “good mother” who saves her people through her brave leadership. Jael is the bad, “death-dealing mother” who offers safety but brings destruction. Exum writes:

The bad mother is cold and bloodthirsty. She may attack her son in his sleep, when he is utterly defenseless (4:21). Or she may turn on him in the essential motherly act of feeding him (5:25-27). The differing descriptions of Jael’s assassination of the unsuspecting Sisera in Judges 4 and 5 are different expressions of anxiety about the mother’s threatening side.<sup>361</sup>

Reflecting male ambivalence about the female body, this bad mother is also erotic, Exum notes. Sisera’s mother, meanwhile, is the mother who parrots patriarchal ideology and justification for war.<sup>362</sup> The three mothers combine to form an image of patriarchal anxiety about the power of mothers, Exum argues. I find Exum’s work on motherhood in these texts insightful, and they inform my own arguments about Jael’s performance of the maternal.

Sasson also focuses on Jael as a mother-figure to Sisera. He writes, “In a handful of verses, Sisera moves from being a frightened, albeit proud, commander to a child seeking his mother’s shelter. From the outset, Jael has him figured out.”<sup>363</sup> Sasson compares Jael’s mothering of a man who is not her son to the relationship between Shamhat and Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh, where Shamhat civilizes the feral Enkidu through both sex and careful instruction on the ways of the city.<sup>364</sup> Sasson criticizes those who see sex in the story of Jael and Sisera; for instance, he questions Niditch’s interpretation, asking what sexual position the two could have been in to produce the fall described in 5:27, how Jael could have wielded weapons at

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<sup>361</sup> Exum, “Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?,” 71–72.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>363</sup> Sasson, “A Breeder or Two,” 343.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

the time, and whether a fleeing general would have been in the mood for sex.<sup>365</sup> I would argue that Sasson interprets Niditch too literally. I agree that sex between Jael and Sisera within the confines of the text seems improbable, but I do not see literal sex as the core of Niditch's argument. The important element of Niditch's case is that there is sexual innuendo in the tale. The suggestion of sex is everywhere, even if actual sex is logistically unlikely.

### Language and Gender Identity

Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos's work on Jael's agency in Judges 4 is instructive. She sees *heber haqqênî* (4:17) designating not "Heber the Kenite," but a clan of Kenites named for someone called Heber.<sup>366</sup> Jael is then not "wife of Heber the Kenite" but "a woman of [the clan] of Heber [of] the Kenites." Van Wijk-Bos thus reads this verse and 4:11 as indicating that a clan of the Kenites, of which Jael is a member, has separated from the main group and allied with the Canaanites. In van Wijk-Bos's reading, Jael goes against not her husband but her whole clan when she kills Sisera. Van Wijk-Bos writes:

More than that of Tamar, the story of Yael shows a cracking of the patriarchal structures themselves. To be sure, Yael serves patriarchal Israel, but her actions break the rules of patriarchy. They are not based on derived identity, on her connection with men, nor on the restrictions of certain activities as belonging to one gender, with the public sphere and its activities reserved for the male. Yael draws the public domain into her tent and acts on her own."<sup>367</sup>

One need not agree with van Wijk-Bos's reading of *heber haqqênî* to appreciate her point about Jael's actions as a blow against patriarchy. As I will argue below, Jael's actions do even more

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>366</sup> Johanna W. H. Bos, "Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4:17-22; Ruth 3," *Semeia* 42 (1988): 52.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 55–56.

than van Wijk-Bos allows: they expose the silliness of patriarchal structures by parodying them through a type of drag.

Ellen van Wolde uses linguistic arguments to make a case for the masculine nature of Jael and her actions in Judges 4. Van Wolde argues that *yā'el*, when repointed to *yā'al*, is a third-person masculine singular imperfect form of the verb *'lh*, “to go up.” That the character is called *yā'el* and not *tā'el*, the third-person feminine singular imperfect form, marks her as masculine, she contends. In being one who “goes up,” Jael is distinguished from the ineffectual Barak and Sisera, whose movements in the story are downward rather than upward. Van Wolde argues that Jael’s active role in the story further differentiates her from Barak, who must be told what to do.<sup>368</sup> Her actions themselves also have a masculine sexual cast, van Wolde contends: she takes up a tent-peg, a “thing-to-pierce-with,” goes into Sisera, and drives the tent peg into his temple and then the ground.<sup>369</sup> Van Wolde thus makes the case that Judges 4 is about reversal of male and female.

While van Wolde’s perceptiveness about the importance of gender to the story of Jael and Sisera is welcome, Scott C. Layton’s critique of her theory about Jael’s name is on target. Layton argues against reading Jael as a form of *'lh* and for seeing it instead as a noun meaning “mountain goat.” He marshals evidence of other biblical “animal names” and of well-attested cognates of Jael in related languages. Having established that Jael is not a verb form, he dismisses the alternative that her name is a play on *'lh* by arguing that this verb is unrelated to any of Jael’s actions in the narrative.<sup>370</sup> I would thus dismiss van Wolde’s theory about Jael’s very name attesting to gender reversal in Judges 4. However, there is still van Wolde’s argument

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<sup>368</sup> van Wolde, “Ya’el in Judges 4,” 244.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 244–245.

<sup>370</sup> Layton, “Ya’el in Judges 4: An Onomastic Rejoinder,” 93–94.



that Jael's actions mark her as masculine. I acknowledge that Jael's penetration of Sisera with a tent-peg might be seen as indicating a masculine nature, but before concluding that Jael is performing "man" rather than "woman," it is necessary to examine the rest of the text. As I will argue below, the balance of the textual evidence in Judges 4-5 shows that Jael acting like a woman, not a man.

Deryn Guest builds on van Wolde's argument that Jael's name is the third-person *masculine* singular imperfect of *'lh* and that her murder of Sisera by driving a tent peg into his head is a sort of symbolic sexual penetration, something usually performed by men. Guest also sees special significance in Sisera's use of the masculine imperative for "stand," *'āmōd*, where, if he were more grammar-conscious, he would have used the feminine imperative, *'imdī*.<sup>371</sup> Guest argues that Jael (and Deborah) "appear to 'do man'" better than the two men in the story, Barak and Sisera. At the same time, she criticizes feminist approaches to Judges 4 and 5 for focusing too much on Jael as a woman doing male activities (gender reversal). All gender in this story, not just Jael's appropriation of "male roles," represents performance, Guest argues.<sup>372</sup> Though she does not focus on the actions that function to construct Jael's gender as female, she writes in her conclusion that "Jael's acts of seduction or maternal womanly attributes are equally performative of a sex that has no abiding substance."

I would agree with Guest's assessment that we need to look beyond the traditional gender binary in reading Judges 4 and 5, though I would emphasize Jael's performance of "woman" more than Guest chooses to. It is true that the text plays with gender by having Sisera use the

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<sup>371</sup> Sasson suggests that this may be a case of the infinitive absolute serving in an imperative sense. Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 268.

<sup>372</sup> Deryn Guest, "From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Theresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 19–20.

masculine imperative toward Jael and having Jael penetrate Sisera—following Layton, I do not agree with van Wolde’s reading of Jael’s name as masculine—but there are far more clues in the text pointing to Jael’s performance of “female” than to her performance of “male.” I would judge Guest’s work as most influential in its challenge of Jael as “liminal” and of the very notion of liminality itself. As I address above with regard to Yee, Guest adroitly criticizes the idea of gender liminality as artificially reinforcing a faulty gender binary.

A final queer-theory-influenced discussion of Judges 4-5 comes from Lori Lefkowitz’s brief treatment of the story in a book chapter called “Bedrooms and Battlefields: Command Performances of Femininity.” Lefkowitz situates the story of Jael among other tales where women win and men lose in an intimate setting: those of Judah and Tamar; Samson and Delilah; Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman; and Judith and Holofernes. She also draws a modern analogy with the stereotype of the seductive but icy Jewish American Princess, who with feigned sexual interest controls men. She argues, “In these stories, the women exploit their sexuality for political ends, in imbalanced contests between a man made to want a woman and a woman who pretends to want a man but actually wants access to his power.”<sup>373</sup> Lefkowitz argues further, “[T]he women in these stories are all pretending.... ‘Woman,’ being all pretend, has no actual, discernible content.”<sup>374</sup> She also recognizes the inherent danger in the actions of Jael and the other female tricksters; all put themselves in peril in service of their goals. She astutely notes that these characters “testify to and promote a terror of female sexuality even as they reveal the extent to which gender and sexual identity are elaborate performances and even as their story structure (one of reversal) depends on the premise that it is women who are ordinarily at risk of sexual

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<sup>373</sup> Lefkowitz, *In Scripture*, 112.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*

violence.”<sup>375</sup> In the specific case of Jael, the reader learns that “the bedroom is the battlefield where men always lose.”<sup>376</sup>

I would disagree with Lefkowitz’s assertion that Jael and the other characters she addresses want “access to [the man’s] power.” Jael may be interpreted as wanting many things—safety, political leverage, preemptive revenge against a man she fears will rape her or other women—but Sisera’s power is not one of them. It is unclear, further, how she would gain “his” power by killing him. Lefkowitz’s treatment of Jael’s gender performance in Judges 4-5 is excellent, as far as it goes. However, in situating Jael’s story among other tales of men, women, and sex, she misses Jael’s performed motherhood, which is a major facet of both the prose and poetic accounts of Sisera’s murder. As just one part of a book chapter, Lefkowitz’s account of Jael’s performed femininity also lacks detail; In particular, Lefkowitz does not much engage with the Hebrew of Judges 4-5. Below, I attempt to fill in some of the gaps left by Lefkowitz’s work.

### The preparation

<sup>4</sup><sup>17</sup> As for Sisera, he fled on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite, for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. <sup>18</sup> Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me! Do not be afraid,” and he turned to her, toward her tent, and she covered him with a rug. <sup>19</sup> He said to her, “Please, give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.” She opened a skin of milk and she gave him a drink and she covered him. <sup>20</sup> He said to her, “Stand at the opening of the tent, and if it happens that any man comes and asks you, ‘Is there a man here?’ say, ‘None.’”

<sup>5</sup><sup>24</sup> Jael is blessed among women,  
Wife of Heber the Kenite,  
She is blessed among tent-dwelling women.

<sup>25</sup> He asked for water,  
She gave milk,  
In a bowl fit for nobles

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 115.

She brought him curd.

To trap Sisera, Jael serves him up a stereotypical mother, played to the hilt, with a side order of implied seduction. She is not herself a mother, but she intuits that a mother is precisely what a general on the run will want. He is tired, scared, and desperate; his dire straits are indicated by the fact that he commands 900 chariots yet has fled on foot. He just wants to go home and be taken care of, fed, soothed. (And would the man whose own mother assumes that he will return from battle with a sexual plaything or two really turn down more carnal comforts if they were available?) As Freema Gottlieb points out, it might have galled the fierce warrior Sisera to have a woman see him so vulnerable—but not if that woman was playing a maternal role for him. There is no shame in a mother seeing her son experience a moment of weakness.<sup>377</sup> From the moment Jael and Sisera meet, she tells him what he wants to hear. In more words than she needs to use, she tells him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me! Do not be afraid” (4:18). The lady doth protest too much; Sisera absolutely *should* be afraid. But in the manner of a mother soothing a child—“I promise you, there is absolutely nothing to be afraid of here; see, no monsters in the closet!”—Jael reassures him lavishly.

We can see Jael calling Sisera *’ădōnî* as a seductive move as well. As Jack Sasson points out, this form of address, commonly translated as “my lord,” is a term of respect, but when used by a woman toward a man, it is usually done to “strok[e] the ego” of a man who is higher in status. Thus, Sasson points out that it is used by Rebekah with Abraham’s servant (Gen 24:18), Hannah with Eli (1 Sam 1:15), Abigail with David (1 Sam 25:24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, and 41), and Ruth with Boaz in Ruth 2:13).<sup>378</sup> Other examples are Rachel with Laban (Gen 31:35), the

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<sup>377</sup> Freema Gottlieb, “Three Mothers,” *Judaism* 30 (1981): 200.

<sup>378</sup> Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 265–6.

woman of Tekoa with David (2 Sam 14:9), and Bathsheba with David (1 Kgs 1:17, 18, 20, and 21). In the cases of Abigail and Ruth, the women use the honorific with men whom they later marry, and Bathsheba uses it with her current husband. I would take Sasson's point a step further and argue that, in these instances, 'ādōnî is almost as much foreplay as is it ego-stroking. A woman who addresses a powerful man in this manner is expressing that she is linguistically "below" the man in question, if not (yet) physically beneath him. Abigail uses 'ādōnî constantly, almost as if it is a verbal tic, in her speech to David aiming to save her household from his wrath after her husband Nabal's impudence. Abigail is said to be *tôbat-śekel* (1 Sam 25:3), "good in insight" or simply "intelligent," so one would expect that she could deduce that the sexually-tinged compulsive use of 'ādōnî would be a wise strategy to put David in a better mood. Clearly something about Abigail catches David's fancy, because after Nabal is dead, he summons her to be his wife (1 Sam 25:29). I would argue that it is not just her beauty but her exaggerated subservience that piques his sexual interest in her. In the case of Ruth, she uses 'ādōnî toward a man who she has said specifically she would like to impress (Ruth 2:2). Throughout the Book of Ruth, Naomi keeps her instructions to Ruth about Boaz ambiguous, perhaps to maintain plausible deniability should Ruth's actions bring trouble on them. Ruth's actions toward Boaz, however, are tinged with sexuality, most notably in chapter 3, where she approaches him at night on the threshing floor and has a suggestive conversation, and perhaps more than a conversation, with him. Her use of 'ādōnî, too, constitutes a bit of verbal foreplay, and it works: Boaz gives her special treatment in the field and responds favorably to her later advances. Bathsheba repeatedly refers to David as 'ādōnî when she is "reminding" him of his promise to name Solomon as his successor. The doddering old king may not be up to the task, but surely a reminder of good times past wouldn't hurt Bathsheba's case for making Solomon king. Jael's words to Sisera outside the

tent carry the same suggestive subtext as the words of Abigail, Ruth, and Bathsheba, I would argue.

When Sisera enters the tent, Jael covers him with a rug or blanket, again a maternal gesture.<sup>379</sup> He is a supposedly fierce general reduced to a little boy, and she tucks him in, cocooning him in a coverlet. It is impractical to interpret this as an act of concealment, designed to hide Sisera from his pursuers. First of all, would either Sisera or Jael expect that anyone searching for him would look in a strange woman's tent? It wasn't as if Sisera had been going from tent to tent, looking for a place to hide; there is no indication that he would have ended up in Jael's tent at all had she not beckoned him there.<sup>380</sup> As other scholars have pointed out, Sisera must have been aiming for Heber's tent, not Jael's, because he knew Heber was an ally.<sup>381</sup> His request that she stand at the entrance to the tent and tell anyone who asks that there is no one inside suggests that such an action by itself could be sufficient to dissuade Sisera's pursuers from looking in the tent. Secondly, neither one of them could logically suppose that anyone who *did* come looking for Sisera would poke his head into the tent, see the man-shaped lump under the rug, shrug, call "all clear!" to his comrades, and move on. No, Jael covering Sisera is not an act of hiding but one of mothering. The covering can also be seen as an act of symbolically returning him to the womb, where he will be safe and warm.<sup>382</sup>

Next, Sisera asks for a drink of water, but she brings him milk instead.<sup>383</sup> A woman supplying milk to a man, particularly one who has shown himself to be more of a child, is

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<sup>379</sup> The word used for what Jael covers Sisera with, *šēmikā*, is a *hapax legomenon* and its meaning has occasioned much debate. See above.

<sup>380</sup> See Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 265. for why we can reasonably expect that Jael would have had her own tent.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>382</sup> Other scholars have proposed that the tent itself can be seen as a symbolic womb. See Nicole Duran, "Having Men for Dinner," *BTB* 35 (2005): 118.

<sup>383</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn argue that the water request itself is suggestive, since water in biblical texts may symbolize sexuality. They cite Prov 5:15, 5:16, 9:17, and Song 4:15 as evidence. Fewell and Gunn,

reminiscent of nursing.<sup>384</sup> Nicole Duran points out that this is yet another way in which Jael misleads Sisera about her true intentions: while some foods, such as meat, might be associated with death, milk is unquestionably connected with life.<sup>385</sup> How can we expect a woman who brings such a basic food of sustenance to Sisera to strike a killing blow? Even the poetic rendering's statement that Jael brought Sisera curds in "a bowl fit for nobles" carries a hint of the mother-child relationship. A woman hosting a general under ordinary circumstances might serve his food on her "good china" as a sign of honor, but the action takes on a new meaning when the general in question has proven himself a coward by fleeing battle and is now lying under a rug in the tent of a stranger, asking pitifully for refreshment. We can interpret Jael bringing Sisera his curds in a bowl fit for nobility as a simple act of mocking—"how noble you are now, Sisera!"—but I prefer to see it as akin to the old practice of feeding a young child with a silver bowl and spoon or similarly opulent utensils. With the choice of serving-ware, Jael seems to be saying in a baby voice, "What a grown-up boy you are! My grown-up boy needs a grown-up bowl for his curds!" It is mocking shaded with maternity.

In the prose account, after Jael gives Sisera milk and covers him (again?),<sup>386</sup> he tells her to station herself at the entrance to the tent, and, if anyone comes by and asks if there is someone

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"Controlling Perspectives," 392. Of course, there are far more references to water, including to the drinking of it, that have no connection to sex. I would disagree that Sisera's request for water has anything to do with sex.

<sup>384</sup> The majority of references to milk, *hālāb*, in the Bible are to the promise of "a land flowing with milk and honey." A number of other verses treat milk as a luxury beverage; for example, Gen 18:8, Isa 55:1, and Prov 27:27. However, at least one verse connects the consumption of milk to nursing children. For example, Isa 28:9, which reads, "To whom would he teach knowledge, and to whom explain a message? Those who are weaned from milk, those removed from the breast?" Milk-as-child's beverage is more commonly cited in the New Testament; see 1 Cor 3:2, Heb 5:12, and 1 Pet 2:2. However, despite the paucity of biblical evidence for the drinking of milk being associated with the nursing of children, I would argue that this is a natural connection stemming from the biological fact that small children drink their mothers' milk. Evidently I am not alone, for a rabbinic interpretation has Sisera drinking milk from Jael's breast! (*b. Nid.* 55b) See also Sasson, who writes that milk was "in ancient times a drink hardly for adults, as it induces slumber and intensifies halitosis." Sasson, "A Breeder or Two," 343.

<sup>385</sup> Duran, "Having Men for Dinner," 119.

<sup>386</sup> See Sasson, who argues not for two separate coverings, but for "a single act of covering that sandwiches a request." Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 268.

in the tent, to say no. As other scholars have pointed out, the Hebrew emphasizes the absence of manhood in the tent; literally, he says to her, “Stand at the opening of the tent, and if it happens that any man comes and asks you, ‘Is there a man here?’ say, ‘None.’” Scholars have interpreted this as a comment on Sisera’s lack of masculinity; there is no one in Jael’s tent who deserves to be called a man.<sup>387</sup> Some have seen this as a comment also on what they see as the text’s gender inversion: Jael, with her decisive actions, is more of a man than the passive Sisera. However, we can also see it as an affirmation of Sisera’s regression to childhood: there is no man here, only a little boy, tucked in, fed his milk, and gone to sleep.<sup>388</sup>

At the same time as Jael is lulling Sisera by playing the mother, she perhaps hints at less wholesome comfort, because the mere act of inviting a man into her tent has sexual overtones. Where in the Bible do we see an unrelated man and woman alone in a secluded spot *without* sex specified or implied? Her choice of words, “turn aside to me,” and the narrator’s, “he turned aside to her,” is also sexual in tone. It is, it should be noted, the same verb, *swr*, used by the sexually suggestive Lady Folly in Prov. 9:16, when she calls out, “Whoever is simple, let him turn aside here!” Sisera is simple indeed, and he answers Jael’s sexually-tinged invitation to “turn aside.” As Pamela Tamarkin Reis notes, the formulation, “Jael went out” in v. 18 may also carry a hint of sexuality; this collocation results in sexual activity in other places where it is used, such as with Leah and then with her daughter Dinah.<sup>389</sup>

As I argue above with regard to Reis’s case that Jael and Sisera have sex (twice!) in her tent, we need not envision actual sexual intercourse between Jael and Sisera to recognize that sexual imagery abounds in Judges 4-5. As Ken Stone has written, “Sex is a powerful symbol,

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<sup>387</sup> Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 213–214.

<sup>388</sup> With Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives,” 393.

<sup>389</sup> Reis, “Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading,” 26.



and the successful rhetorician learns to manipulate it.”<sup>390</sup> We must assume that the author(s) of Judges 4 and 5 would have recognized this as well.

### The Act

4<sup>21</sup> Jael wife of Heber took a tent-pin, and she took a hammer in her hand, and she came to him stealthily and struck him in the temple with the hammer, and it went into the ground—he was fast asleep and exhausted—and he died.

5<sup>26</sup> She reached her hand out towards the tent-peg,  
And her right hand towards the workman’s mallet,  
And she struck Sisera,  
Destroyed his head,  
Shattered and pierced his temple.

Many scholars have pointed out that Jael’s assassination of Sisera “bear[s] a strong resemblance to the sexual act.”<sup>391</sup> As van Wolde notes, the word *maqebet*, usually translated “hammer” or “mallet,” comes from the root *nqb*, “to pierce,” which gives the passage a phallic tone. She also points out that the description of Jael “coming in to” Sisera uses language often associated with sex, *wattābô’ ’ēlāyw*.<sup>392</sup> (Usually in those cases, the verb is masculine, *wayyābô’*.) Van Wolde also proposes that *raqqâ* be translated “throat” instead of the usual “temple,” thus giving the sense that Jael orally violates Sisera with the tent-pin.<sup>393</sup> She bases this

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<sup>390</sup> Ken Stone, *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 9.

<sup>391</sup> van Wolde, “Ya’el in Judges 4,” 245. See also Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*. and Niditch, “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael.” Yee, “By the Hand of a Woman,” 116.

<sup>392</sup> See Gen 16:4, 38:2, 38:9, 2 Sam 12:24, 2 Sam 16:22, 1 Chr 7:23, and Ezek 23:44. For a verse that uses this formulation and may be sexual in implication, see 1 Kgs 1:15. The only verse I have found where this phrasing is used without any apparent sexual connotation is 2 Chr 28:19, though here word *pēnîmâ* is intervening.

<sup>393</sup> Sasson notes that one Septuagint manuscript gives the part of the body pierced as Sisera’s “jaw,” another gives “temple,” and the Vulgate says it is his “brains.” Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 269.

proposal on the fact that the presumed root of *raqqâ* is *rqq*, which has a primary meaning of “to be thin, weak,” but a secondary meaning of “to spit.”<sup>394</sup> This translation, while appealing for giving symmetry to the sexual images, is slightly puzzling when applied to the other context in which we find this word, the Song of Songs. There, the male speaker twice compares his beloved’s *raqqâ* behind her veil to a pomegranate. It is easy to see how an ancient Israelite veil could cover a woman’s temple, less so how it could cover her throat; we have no indication that the biblical veil was akin to a *niqab*.<sup>395</sup> Fewell and Gunn suggest a translation of “mouth,”<sup>396</sup> thus making the imagery of the tent-pin penetrating Sisera even more overtly sexual, but this translation runs into the same problem as “throat” when it comes to the term’s use in the Song of Songs; why would her mouth be behind her veil? On the other hand, a mouth being compared to a pomegranate would make more sense, color-wise, than either a temple or a throat being likened to this red fruit. Perhaps, if we want to stick with the traditional “temple,” we can see the Song of Songs mentions of *raqqâ* as indicating texture rather than color; the skin on the beloved’s temple is appealingly smooth and firm, like the skin of a pomegranate. Thus we avoid the veil problem. In my opinion, we don’t lose much sexual meaning by translating *raqqâ* as temple; even if Jael does not jam her tent-pin into Sisera’s open mouth, she still uses it to penetrate him, inherently an act filled with sexual significance.<sup>397</sup> The sexual connotations of the act are even clearer when the verses detailing the murder are read in conjunction with the ones at the end of chapter 5, recounting the speculations of Sisera’s mother and her attendants on why Sisera has not arrived

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<sup>394</sup> van Wolde, “Ya’el in Judges 4,” 244–5.

<sup>395</sup> For more on veiling in ancient Israel, see Susan Niditch, *My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man : Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Karel van der Toorn, “The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995).

<sup>396</sup> Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives,” 393.

<sup>397</sup> It is also unclear whether forced oral sex would have called to mind forced vaginal intercourse for a reader or hearer in antiquity.

home yet. Sisera's mother anticipates that her son and his men are busy dividing up the spoil, including the human spoil. She uses the shockingly crude designation *raḥam raḥmātayīm* to describe the expected booty, a phrase variously translated as "a damsel or two," "a maiden, two maidens," and "a girl or two" but probably better rendered as something baser and more anatomically reductive.<sup>398</sup> The mother's attribution of sexual motivations to Sisera allows us to see Jael's penetration of him as preemptive poetic justice. According to his own loving mother, Sisera would have overseen the forced penetration of women; instead, a woman forcibly penetrates him. (Pseudo-Philo makes this connection between Sisera's intentions and Jael's actions more explicit, but loses some of Judges' subtlety and artistry in the process.)

The poetic description of the killing in Judges 5 is even more redolent of sex than the prose.<sup>399</sup> While the prose account implies that Sisera was lying down, asleep, when Jael struck

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<sup>398</sup> Guest writes, "although it may be unpalatable, I wonder if a more realistic translation would be 'a cunt or two for every dick.' This catches the fleshy reference to women's bodily parts and also the euphemistic connotations of 'for each *head* of a *geber*.'" Guest, "Bible Trouble," 35. I disagree with Guest that an ancient audience would have read *rō'š* as a euphemism for penis, but I think her proposal has the advantage of capturing the base, earthy sense of *raḥam raḥmātayīm*.

<sup>399</sup> Ackerman argues that while the poetic version of events implies sexuality mostly while and after Jael kills Sisera, the prose account puts the sexual element up front, in the preparation for assassination. She thus sees Judges 5 as closer in nature to stories about the warrior Anat, with Judges 4 "redacted" to minimize Jael's warrior elements and foreground the sexual element. She sees the change from Judges 5 to Judges 4 as a "demythologizing" of the mythological Anat into a more realistic mere human, and she holds that the decreased focus on ferocity and increased focus on seduction in chapter 4 supports this view: "[I]n texts where mythological imagery becomes obscured in favor of historical representations, the Canaanite depictions that assign *primacy* to Anat's role as a ruthless and mighty warrior over her role as a seductress give way to portrayals more in keeping with the norms of Israelite culture. In such portrayals, the society's convictions about a woman's appropriate gender roles come to the fore so that the *initial* and *primary* focus of Judg 4:21 becomes Jael's role as a seductress." Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 72. I would take issue with several of the assumptions underlying Ackerman's argument. First, though scholars have theorized that Judges 5, as a poetic text with so-called "archaic" elements, predates Judges 4, this is by no means a settled question, particularly if one finds persuasive recent scholarly contentions that all or most biblical texts are comparatively late and that nothing in the biblical corpus dates earlier than the monarchy. Even if Judges 5 does predate Judges 4, the absolute dating and relative accessibility to the scribal class of both is unclear, so it is risky to conclude that one text represents a "redaction" of the other. As I argue in chapter 1, it is better to consider both chapters from a literary perspective rather than a historical one, analyzing them as a unity for these purposes. We can thus view the two chapters as complementing rather than competing with one another. The sexual and warrior elements in chapters 4 and 5 combine to form an overall picture of Jael, not two different pictures depending on which text one reads. Further, the fact that one chapter is poetic and the other prose may account for some or all of the differences in how Jael is characterized. What Ackerman sees as a more "mythological" element of Jael's actions in Judges 5 may just be a reflection of the form in which the descriptions are made. I might argue that Judges 5 appears thematically closer to the Ugaritic Anat material merely

the fatal blow, the poem suggests that he was at least partially upright: “Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay/Between her feet he bowed, he fell/Where he bowed/There he fell, destroyed” (5:27). What position could Sisera have been in relative to Jael if he fell “between her feet”? The implication in this account is that the two were interacting in some way, and that they were close enough for him to fall between her feet when she struck him. There is also the matter of “feet” as a common euphemism for genitals, remarked on by several other commentators.<sup>400</sup> Further, in addition to its frequent use in reference to supplication<sup>401</sup> or death<sup>402</sup>—both of which are relevant here—the word *kāra* ‘ can have a sexual meaning, as in Job 31:10, “May my wife grind for another and may others bow (*yīkrē ‘ûn*) upon her.” Similarly, the verb *škb*, used to describe Sisera’s lying down position, is frequently used in reference to sexual intercourse.<sup>403</sup> Sex is suggested, though again, I do not think we need to see an actual act of intercourse between Jael and Sisera to appreciate the sexualized description of the assassination.

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because they both use the conventions of West Semitic poetic texts, while chapter 4’s prose uses a different set of literary norms. What is more, it is far from clear to me that Ackerman is right to characterize Judges 5 as more mythological in tone and content. First, I would question whether Judges 4 describes a Jael who is less warlike than Judges 5. Second, I do not see anything supernatural in Jael’s takedown of Sisera in Judges 5; even if we see the two chapters as separate like Ackerman proposes, chapter 5 simply omits the information that Sisera was asleep but in no way implies that Jael overpowered him by force alone, rather than because, for example, his back was turned. Finally, it is by no means as obvious as Ackerman claims that the author or redactor of any of this material had “historical” intentions, or, if he or she did, whether notions of history-writing in the first millennium B.C.E. would match our own.

<sup>400</sup> See, for example, Niditch, “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael,” 47–8. Niditch even translates as “between her legs.” For passages where *raglê*, the construct form of the dual *raglayim*, is likely used euphemistically, see Exod 4:25, where Zipporah touches a just-removed foreskin to someone’s “feet;” Judg 3:4 and 1 Sam 24:4, where “covering his feet” is euphemistic for relieving himself; 2 Sam 11:8, where David directs Uriah to return home and “wash his feet” when what David really wants is for Uriah to have sex with Bathsheba; 2 Kgs 18:27, where the water of their feet” refers to urine; Isa 7:20, where “hair of the feet” appears to refer to (men’s) pubic hair. In places where lexica have identified “feet” as a euphemism for women’s genitals, it should be noted that literal “feet” could be meant as well, though those literal feet might also carry a sexual sense. See Deut 28:57, which refers to “the afterbirth which comes out from between her feet” and Ezek 16:25, where the prophet accuses Jerusalem, personified as a woman, of spreading “her feet” to every passerby. The Ezekiel passage is clearly intended to sexually shame the “woman,” but if she is having intercourse, she is most likely actually spreading her feet or legs as well.

<sup>401</sup> See, for example, 2 Sam 22:40, 1 Kgs 8:54, 2 Chr 29:29, and Ezra 9:5.

<sup>402</sup> See 2 Kgs 9:24, Isa 65:12, and Ps 20:9.

<sup>403</sup> For a small subset of the many instances of the verb used to signify sexual intercourse, see Gen 19:32–35, Exod 22:15, Lev 15:24, Num 5:13, 2 Sam 11:14, Ezek 23:8, Zech 14:2.

There is also an element of motherhood in the text's description of Jael's assassination of Sisera. In chapter 4, we can read Jael's silence in approaching Sisera as akin to a mother's care not to awaken her sleeping child.<sup>404</sup> Having tucked Sisera in and watched him fall asleep, she must tiptoe around so that he continues to sleep. Instead of creeping up to him to make sure he is comfortable or to fix his blanket, as a real mother might, Jael creeps up to kill him. Instead of watching out for his life, she deals death. As Cheryl Exum points out, the juxtaposition of the "good mother" Deborah with the "bad mother" Jael and with Sisera's mother, who parrots the patriarchal justification for war, may reflect the (male) author's ambivalence and unease with the power of motherhood.<sup>405</sup> The locution "between her feet" is also suggestive of maternity, as in Deut 28:57, which refers to "the afterbirth that comes out from between her feet." Jael has metaphorically both given birth to Sisera and killed him. Further, just as the root *kr'* may have a sexual meaning, it can also be used to describe the birthing posture, as in 1 Sam 4:19 and 39:3. Here, though, instead of Jael being in the position of giving birth, Sisera is.

### The Aftermath

<sup>422</sup> Barak was pursuing Sisera, and Jael went out to meet him, and she said to him, "Come and I will show you the man you seek." And he came to her, and there was Sisera, fallen dead, with a tent-pin in his temple.

<sup>527</sup> Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay,  
Between her feet he bowed, he fell,  
Where he bowed,  
There he fell, destroyed.

<sup>28</sup> Through the window she looked down,  
Sisera's mother cried shrilly

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<sup>404</sup> As Niditch points out, there is also sexual connotation to Jael's approach; Ruth approaches Boaz the same way, *ballāt*. Niditch, *Judges*, 66.

<sup>405</sup> Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?," 71–72.

Through the lattice,  
 “Why is his chariot so delayed in coming?  
 Why does the noise of his chariots tarry?”  
<sup>29</sup> The wisest of her princesses answered her,  
 She also repeated her words to herself,  
<sup>30</sup> “Aren’t they finding and dividing the spoil?  
 A womb or two for each man’s head,  
 Spoil of dyed cloth for Sisera,  
 Spoil of dyed cloth,  
 An embroidered cloth or two,  
 Spoil for their necks!”

There is both a sexual and maternal vibe in the depiction of the aftermath of the assassination in chapter 4. We can see Jael’s ushering of Barak into her tent to see the dead Sisera in two ways: as the sexual aggressor displaying her successful conquest and as the new mother showing her man what she has just given him. Jael flags down Barak and he follows her into her tent—the language, *wayyābō ’ēlēhā*, is, again, typical of a sexual approach, lending an extra dose of sexual innuendo to the encounter<sup>406</sup>—and she displays to him the man she has “ravished.” Jael is proud of what she has done: she has lured a strange man to her tent and “done” him, and now she is showing off her quarry. There is also a note of violent voyeurism: Jael promises to show Barak “the man you seek,” only as Barak has never seen him before. She shows Barak the real man, the real Sisera. Barak left the battlefield in pursuit of a fierce general, albeit one who has just fled in cowardice, but what he encounters in Jael’s tent is a shattered, penetrated corpse, a bloody, bashed-in trophy of conquest.

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<sup>406</sup> As mentioned above, Reis reads this as indicating sex between Jael and Barak. While I agree that the language is sexual, I cannot justify seeing an actual sex act here. While I also disagree with Reis’s reading of intercourse between Jael and Sisera, it at least would serve some narrative purpose, while sex between Jael and Barak would just be gratuitous. It would neither solve a philological crux nor add anything to the story; in fact, it would detract from the themes and apparent goals of the story. I prefer to read this wording as innuendo, adding to the salacious tone of the scene but not signifying actual sex.

The maternal theme is also present in this scene. It appears from biblical references to childbirth that this was an event that took place in the company of women only; we never see a man present for a birth.<sup>407</sup> Combined with the motherhood imagery in Jael's treatment of Sisera, her welcoming Barak into her tent to see him lying dead on the floor is suggestive of the man finally being welcomed into the women's quarters to see the child that has been born. Like a 1950s father in the hospital waiting room being notified by the nurse that the gory part is now over and he may see his new baby, Barak is being summoned to see what Jael's labor has wrought. Instead of a peacefully sleeping infant, what he sees is a grotesque parody: Sisera, reduced to a child in the last moments of his life, is lying down and tucked in, yes, but he has been pinned to the ground by a tent-peg through the head.

In the poetic rendering of the aftermath, the sexual element is readily apparent. The participle used to describe Sisera after he has been penetrated by Jael is *šādûd*, "destroyed" or "despoiled." The root is common in the Bible and can sometimes carry the suggestion of sexual despoiling; that is, rape. This is the case where the object of the despoiling is a female-personified city or a woman and where there is a connection made between despoiling and shame, as in Ps 137:8, Jer 4:30, 9:18, 48:18, and 51:48, 53, 55-56. That Sisera lays *šādûd* between Jael's feet drives home the point that she has penetrated him and left him destroyed. The connection to sex is further reinforced by the remark of Sisera's mother and her lady that the victorious troops must be dividing the spoils, with "a womb or two for each man's head." This crude locution recognizes the reality that women's bodies are often included in the plunder of war, but it is ironic because, instead of Sisera getting a woman or two to penetrate for his

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<sup>407</sup> See Gen 35:16-18, Exod 1:15ff. Even in the vivid metaphor of God caring for Israel since the day of its birth in Ezekiel 16, the male-gendered deity is not present for the labor itself but comes upon a bloody newborn Israel, cast out in a field (Ezek 16:6).

figurative “head,” his head has been penetrated by a woman. Instead of being the perpetrator of literal rape, he has become the victim of symbolic rape. Her son will not return to her with spoils, because he has become someone else’s spoil.

The maternal imagery is also apparent at the end of chapter 5, with the introduction of Sisera’s mother. She has not until now been a character in the story, and her entrance serves multiple purposes. First, she provides a vehicle for the aforementioned irony. Next, her presence allows the Israelite audience to indulge in *schadenfreude*: this woman waits greedily for her son to bring her the material and human spoils of war, allowing the audience to assuage any residual guilt at feeling glad over Sisera’s demise. The mother’s introduction clearly conveys that, by killing Sisera, Jael has prevented the plunder of Israel’s wealth and the rape of its women. Finally, the character of the mother reinforces Jael’s status as a “mother” in this tale. Now we see what Sisera was aiming for when he fled the battlefield in search of sustenance and rest: someone to play the part of his own mother. Presumably, had he made it all the way home, he would have expected his mother to do many of the same things that Jael has done for him: tuck him in, give him drink and food, and generally pamper him.<sup>408</sup> Rather than reaching his own nurturing mother, however, he encounters the *faux* nurturer Jael, who plays the mother role long enough to get in position to slay him. The mention of Sisera’s mother provides a brilliant parallel and contrast for Jael-as-mother.

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<sup>408</sup> Given the short but effective portrait of Sisera’s mother we get in these last verses, however, one wonders if she would have instead berated him for returning empty-handed!



## Jael through the Lens of Queer Theory

In Judges 4 and 5, Jael shows herself to be a brilliant mimic and an excellent student of what men want. She intuits that the fleeing general will want a mother, a lover, or a (somewhat disturbing) combination of the two.<sup>409</sup> With the accoutrements of motherhood and hints of sex, she gets Sisera exactly where she needs him in order to kill him. I argue that she does this by means of drag performance. As Judith Butler has argued, all gender is performance, akin to a drag show; drag is just more explicit about its imitative intentions.<sup>410</sup> Gender is the sum of a set of repeated acts, and it's not any less of a drag act when the genotype or phenotype of the performer matches the performed gender. As Butler quotes the film critic Parker Tyler on Greta Garbo, often assumed in modern scholarship to have been a queer woman:

Garbo 'got in drag' whenever she took some heavy glamour part, whenever she melted in or out of a man's arms, whenever she simply let that heavenly-flexed neck... bear the weight of her thrown-back head... How resplendent seems the art of acting! It is all *impersonation*, whether the sex underneath is true or not.<sup>411</sup>

Just like Garbo, and, really, like any woman, Jael performs a set of behaviors that someone in her society would clearly recognize as female. She might not—and does not—embody her society's feminine ideal, but she executes the feminine in such a way that she can execute the general in her tent.

The phenomena of the femme lesbian, the neo-burlesque scene, and the faux-queen scene are instructive in addressing the constructed nature of gender in Judges 4-5. A femme lesbian,

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<sup>409</sup> In his Judges commentary, Sasson argues against the widely-held view that Judges 4 is laced with sexuality, writing that there is nothing to indicate that Jael has sex with Sisera. Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 274–5. I agree that interpreting Jael and Sisera's encounter as described in the narrative as including sex is an over-reading, but I judge it appropriate to note that the language of Judges 4 conveys a strong undertone of sexuality.

<sup>410</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137.

<sup>411</sup> Parker Tyler in *The Garbo Image*, quoted in *Ibid.*, 128.

often defined in opposition to the masculine-seeming butch lesbian, is a homosexual woman who adopts a typically feminine appearance and manner. Scholarship on the femme tends to focus on the disconnect, for society if not for the femme herself, inherent in women who present as highly feminine, yet are not sexually available to men. Sue-Ellen Case sees the butch-femme pair as revolutionary for understanding gender, because they are performing the roles of masculine and feminine without actually dealing sexually with men. The butch and femme take male-female sexuality out of the equation, exposing all gender as artifice by performing femininity or masculinity as over-the-top “camp.” Case writes, “Camp both articulates the lives of homosexuals through the obtuse tone of irony and inscribes their oppression with the same device. Likewise, it eradicates the ruling powers of heterosexist realist modes.”<sup>412</sup> Essentially, by removing men from the romantic relationship, women are free to either parody femininity, with the realization that they are indeed effecting parody, or assume the power that usually goes along with maleness. Says Leah Lilith Albrecht-Samarasinha on being a femme, “The men had no place in their heads for a woman in heels and a tight dress who wasn’t scared or threatened by them, who was wearing all the cultural signifiers of sexual vulnerability, but who was not someone who they could fuck with.”<sup>413</sup> The femme lesbian, in her adaptation of traditional signifiers of femininity without embracing the sexual roles that usually go along with them, problematizes gender. She unmoors femininity from its typical bearings and exposes it as the artifice that it, and in fact all gender, is. As Albrecht-Samarasinha says, “Drag queens and femmes both have that blatancy, that in-your-face outrageousness, and sense of being too much.”<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> Case, “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” 298.

<sup>413</sup> Leah Lilith Albrecht-Samarasinha, “Gender Warriors: An Interview with Amber Hollibaugh,” in *Fem(me): Feminists, Lesbians, and Bad Girls*, ed. Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker (New York: Routledge, 1997), 213.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

The neo-burlesque scene is related to the idea of the femme. In the documentary *FtF: Female to Femme*, femme lesbians who perform burlesque speak about “transitioning” to a femme presentation and about learning how to display the signs of femininity. Especially regarding their stage performances, the women talk of learning to adopt a feminine persona, calling into question any notion that femininity is “natural.” Says a femme who goes by the stage name Starr 69, “We had a show and I realized I actually had to put on makeup and I was like, my gosh, where does it all go? How do you do it?...It wasn’t who I was day to day and I was just doing it in front of people. It was definitely more about putting on a different type of gender performance and expressing that on stage.”<sup>415</sup> For burlesque performers, the order of the day is camp and there is no such thing as “too much.” A femme burlesque performer who goes by Sugar L’Amour describes her brand of performance thusly: “You can never have too many accessories, you can never have too much makeup, and too much frills and gaudy jewelry. I think just, over-the-top. You think you’re overly decorated, and then put 10,000 more things on it.”

Related to burlesque is the recent phenomenon of women performing as drag queens. Female drag queens are biological women who go on stage in the style of queens who are biologically male, with big hair, sparkly makeup, sequined dresses, over-the-top cleavage, and ribald humor. Such a performer might style herself a “faux queen, bio queen, drag queen, high femme, high femme dragster, female female impersonator, a drag queen trapped in a woman’s body, [or] biologically challenged drag queen.”<sup>416</sup> This kind of performance, just like drag queen shows, can serve to highlight the constructed nature of gender.

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<sup>415</sup> Kami Chisholm and Elizabeth Stark, *FtF: Female to Femme*, Documentary, 2006.

<sup>416</sup> Brandi Amara Skyy, “Fauxqueens.com Home and Welcome Page,” *Fauxqueens.com*, April 22, 2012, <http://fauxqueens.com/>.

The drag concept of “realness” can also inform an understanding of Jael’s gender performance. One of the key points of the documentary *Paris Is Burning* is the drag ball scene’s focus on realness contests. Ball contestants compete not just in how well, for instance, a biological man can wear an evening gown, but also in categories such as “military,” “schoolgirl,” and “executive,” where mostly working-class queer people of color perform an identity clearly not their own. People who would have been ineligible to join the American military in the 1980s somberly march and about-face in crisp uniforms, teenagers with limited educational opportunities perform as students at elite universities, and people triply disadvantaged (by race, class, and sexuality) don power suits and carry empty briefcases to simulate the high-class executive. By appropriating the markers of groups to which they did not and often could not belong, whether soldiers, students, or glamorous women, ball contestants showed the artifice of even “real” examples of these types. This is a point reinforced by director Jennie Livingston’s choice to intercut shots of the drag participants with footage of “real” people on the streets of New York; it is clear from the juxtaposition that the “normal” people outside the ballroom were playing roles, no less than the gender- and class-benders inside. At the balls, contestants were judged on realness, how well they could “pass” for what they were not. At the same time, as the documentary’s *grande dame*, an older drag queen named Dorian Corey, puts it in the movie, realness was an essential survival strategy outside the ballroom for many of the attendees, particularly those who were biological men passing as women: “When they’re undetectable, when they can walk out of that ballroom, into the sunlight and onto the subway and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies, those are the femme realness queens.” As Ken Stone shows in his essay casting David and Saul’s feud as a *Paris Is Burning*-style contest for manly realness, the twin concepts of realness and passing can be useful in

exploring how both the appropriation and subversion of gender norms by biblical figures influences the plot and message of their stories.<sup>417</sup>

Stone's observations about David and Saul can be helpful in understanding Jael as well. Just as the two would-be dynastic leaders both appropriate and subvert notions of regal masculinity in a battle for supremacy, Jael has an ambivalent relationship with femininity. As discussed above, the character of Jael as described in Judges 4 and 5 would not have fit the Bible's notions of ideal womanhood. Jael knows enough, however, to use tropes of femaleness when they are needed. The "realness" with which she performs the feminine is key to her survival. Butler's observation that the performance of gender is always a survival strategy is apt here.<sup>418</sup> Inviting a fierce general into one's tent is a decision fraught with danger. If Jael's performance is anything less than flawless, she risks Sisera uncovering her treachery and killing her. To survive and succeed, Jael must be real enough to pass, before Sisera at least, as a doting, motherly type and a potentially available sexual partner.

Johanna van Wijk-Bos argues that the story of Jael "shows a cracking of the patriarchal structures themselves."<sup>419</sup> I would argue that Judges 4-5 lays bare not only patriarchy but also society's gendered assumptions of and expectations for its members. The story shines a light on ideas of the feminine through Jael's performance of the "female" roles of seductress and mother.

Van Wijk-Bos writes:

To be sure, Yael serves patriarchal Israel, but her actions break the rules of patriarchy. They are not based on derived identity, on her connection with men, nor on the restrictions of certain activities as belonging to one gender, with the public sphere and its

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<sup>417</sup> Ken Stone, "Queer Reading between Bible and Film: Paris Is Burning and the 'Legendary Houses' of David and Saul," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Ken Stone and Theresa J. Hornsby (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 75–98. See also Erin Runions, "Zion Is Burning: 'Gender Fuck' in Micah," *Semeia* 82 (1998): 225–46.

<sup>418</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 139.

<sup>419</sup> Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 55.

activities reserved for the male. Yael draws the public domain into her tent and acts on her own.<sup>420</sup>

I hold that Jael does not serve the patriarchy but actually destabilizes it, in her way. She exposes the silliness and oppressiveness of patriarchal strictures of gender by parodying them through drag. To be clear, I am not arguing that a Jael living sometime in the first millennium B.C.E. would have seen herself as putting on the gender “female” to trap Sisera; that would be, as the least of its sins, mapping postmodern ideas onto a pre-modern society. But I do argue that, as modern readers interacting with a literary text, we can see the characters acting in ways that we might characterize as gender performance.

Though, as I write in chapter 1, I disagree with Deryn Guest’s emphasis on Jael performing “man” rather than “woman,” her arguments serve to point out that strict notions of gender are problematic in this text. Whether we read Jael as “doing woman” or “doing man,” we recognize that the gender of this literary character is complex and defies the traditional gender binary.

In Judges 4-5, Jael plays with what Israelite culture expects and assumes of her as a foreign woman. *A woman must be a mother? Jael seems to ask. Fine, then I will be motherly. You think I, a foreign woman, am a temptress with unacceptable sexual appetites? Fine, then I will be sexual. I will be more maternal and erotic than you can imagine. I will invite into my tent a strange general, and I will both baby him and seduce him. I will tuck him in and give him milk to drink, and then I will penetrate him and watch him fall and lay between my “feet.” I will be everything you (and he?) already think I am, and that is how I will take him down.*

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 55–6.

## Chapter 4

### The Book of Judith

Like Jael, Judith diverges from the ideal of biblical (and post-biblical) womanhood. Her otherness comes not from foreign status—the Book of Judith gives her an extravagant genealogy, tracing her lineage back a whopping 16 generations—but from widowhood.<sup>421</sup> It is not that widows would have been uncommon in the post-exilic period in which the book is set, or in the Hellenistic time in which it was likely written. What may have been unusual, however, was a wealthy, childless widow who showed no interest in remarrying.<sup>422</sup> The widow is an object of pity and charity throughout the Ancient Near East and in Hebrew Bible, a theme which continues into the apocryphal literature of the Second Temple period.<sup>423</sup> She is assumed to be without means of support and therefore vulnerable.<sup>424</sup> Judith, by contrast, is anything but: she has a nice house, livestock, gold, silver, fine clothing, and at least one servant. Because of her wealth, she is independent, an unusual situation for a woman at the time.

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<sup>421</sup> Gera suggests that the mention of a judge (Gideon), a prophet (Elijah), and an adviser to a foreign ruler (Joseph) in Judith's genealogy, as well as several names associated with the priestly tribe of Levi, are meant to foreshadow or encapsulate her own roles in the story. Gera, *Judith*, 27–28.

<sup>422</sup> So Karel van der Toorn: “Judith is the rare example of a young widow with a beautiful appearance and a lovely face who does not yield to the temptations of the flesh by remarrying.” Karel van der Toorn, “Torn Between Vice and Virtue: Stereotypes of the Widow in Israel and Mesopotamia,” in *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, ed. Ria Kloppenborg and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 12. Remarriage was seen as the most desirable outcome for a widow, and Tal Ilan notes most widows mentioned in Josephus's writings and rabbinic literature remarried. She writes, “To judge from the sources, not many Jewish women remained widows for long.” However, Ilan also writes that Judith exemplifies a tradition that saw the woman who refrained from remarriage as pious and respectable. This can be seen in the early Jewish Christian community and in the case of one woman in rabbinic literature, the widow of Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Shimeon. Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 149–151. Wealthy widows may not have been uncommon, but widows in the Ancient Near East and the Bible are often portrayed as poor. Van der Toorn perceptively suggests that this was “a social strategy designed to present the state of widowhood as undesirable and to make the picture of matrimony all the brighter. In reality, not all widows were poor.” van der Toorn, “Torn Between Vice and Virtue: Stereotypes of the Widow in Israel and Mesopotamia,” 4. He also observes that widows are often portrayed as either very poor or very rich; either way, they deviate from the norm of the rest of society. *Ibid.*, 6. Even though wealth in the Bible was considered a blessing from God, the poor, including poor widows, were often portrayed as humble and righteous. *Ibid.*

<sup>423</sup> For a small sample of references, see Deut 10:18, Ps 146:9, Job 24:21, Sir. 35:17, Wis 2:10.

<sup>424</sup> van der Toorn, “Torn Between Vice and Virtue: Stereotypes of the Widow in Israel and Mesopotamia,” 2.

Also apparently as a result of her wealth, and perhaps her beauty and piety as well, Judith has a high status in the community, not the usual state for a widowed woman. We might expect the other residents of Bethulia to resent Judith's wealth and her refusal to share it by remarrying, or to be uneasy with her continued widowhood, but this is not the case. The text is clear on her status in the community: "And no one pronounced an evil word about her because she feared God greatly" (Jdt. 8:8). This status is also reflected in Judith's dealings with the male leaders of Bethulia. When she hears that they plan to surrender to the Assyrians if God does not bring a miracle within five days, she sends her maid to bring the men in charge to her—and they come (8:10-11)! The leaders of the town do the bidding of a mere woman, and a widow at that. The reader has the sense that Judith is granting the leaders an audience, not the other way around.<sup>425</sup> When she excoriates them for their faithlessness in planning to surrender, they put her off, but they do so with flattery, implying that this widow is not to be dismissed rudely but must be respected and placated (8:28-31). What is more, when Judith tells Uzziah, Chabris, and Charmis that she has a plan that requires them to open the gates of the town and let her out, but that they must not ask her what the plan is, they comply (8:32-36). It seems that the meeting Judith requests is a mere formality, and that she is just humoring the leaders of the town by making them believe their opinion matters to her. Right after the leaders turn down her demand that they not surrender, she comes back with the statement that she already has a plan (8:32). Is the reader supposed to think that Judith came up with her elaborate Trojan-horse mission on the spot after

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<sup>425</sup> Wills proposes that Judith does not leave her house to see the elders but has them come to her in order to preserve her modesty. Lawrence M. Wills, "The Book of Judith," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. III, XII vols. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2001), 1137. Despite Judith's ascetic lifestyle, we have no indication from the text that she remains cloistered in her house, nor do her actions later indicate that she is so concerned with preserving modesty that she does not even go outside. 8:4 has her *en tō oikō autēs* during her widowhood, but I would read this as a simple statement that she had resources enough to keep living in her nice home, with servants, after her husband's death. It is also unclear why it would have been less modest to see the leaders out in public than to receive them privately in her home. Further, Wills cites no evidence from contemporary texts to indicate that widows or other women had the practice of remaining confined indoors.



the leaders refused to consider not surrendering? No, it is more reasonable that we are supposed to understand that Judith has been planning this all along, in the likely event that the leaders dismiss her call not to give in to the Assyrians.

Like Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith is not explicit about its heroine's lack of children, but it is the logical state of affairs. Judith is living in the house she inherited from her late husband Manasseh; if she had a grown son, he might have inherited the property and been obligated to take in his mother.<sup>426</sup> If Judith has smaller children, we do not see them or hear about them at all as she leaves home for several days to carry out her mission, which seems unlikely. In fact, in the nine chapters in which we hear about Judith's lineage and her own life at length, including her death and legacy, there is no mention of offspring. I would argue that we are intended to read this literary character as childless.<sup>427</sup>

## [The Book of Judith in Biblical Scholarship](#)

### **Judith as Masculine**

Patricia Montley argues that Judith is androgynous, adopting masculinity at some points in her story and femininity at others. Judith adopts these gendered versions of her personality sequentially, according to Montley. In her initial appearance in the story, she is asexual, free from gender roles as a celibate, ascetic widow. Then, she acts like a man with the elders of Bethulia. Next, she acts like a woman when she ventures into the Assyrian camp. Then, she acts

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<sup>426</sup> Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 53.

<sup>427</sup> For others who read Judith as childless, see Moore, *Judith*, 180.; Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 62.; Gera, *Judith*, 102.

like a man again in cutting off Holofernes' head. Finally, after the Israelite victory, she returns to her widow's asexuality, Montley writes. She argues:

Judith's personality/temperament is androgynous, for she combines what her culture (and the author's audience) would have defined as "masculine" traits and "feminine" traits: the "male" characteristics of wisdom, independence, forcefulness, and bravery with the "female" characteristics of physical beauty, guile, and sexual seductiveness.<sup>428</sup>

While I appreciate Montley's early attention to the malleability of gender in the Book of Judith, I would challenge her arguments along two main lines. First, I would argue that her division of personality characteristics into "masculine" and "feminine" traits is reductive and fails to take into account the cultural and literary context of the Book of Judith. As I discuss in chapter 2, many of the traits that Montley asserts would have been considered "male" are to be found in numerous literary treatments of women in the ancient Mediterranean world. To divide personality traits so easily into "masculine" and "feminine" risks what seems to be the opposite of Montley's goal: the reinforcement of the idea that there is a gender binary, rather than a fluid continuum. Montley also seems to classify all assertive or violent behavior as "masculine," thus automatically marking the woman who engages in this behavior as an androgyne. Following this line of reasoning, she argues of Judith, "She is the archetypal androgyne; and it may well be this androgyny that accounts most of all for Judith's special attractiveness to those hundreds of artists who have celebrated her story."<sup>429</sup> Rather, I would argue that Judith is the archetypal lethal woman; it is the combination of her performed femininity and her startling violence, not her "androgyne," that has likely fascinated artists.

My second challenge to Montley's argument stems from her contention that Judith acts like a man at points in her story. I would argue that Judith's violence and authority do not disrupt

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<sup>428</sup> Montley, "Judith in the Fine Arts: The Appeal of the Archetypal Androgyne," 40.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

her performance of the gender “female” or mean that she is performing the gender “male.” A close examination of the characterization of Judith during her conversation with the elders and her murder of Holofernes reveals that Judith is not portrayed as “masculine” in these actions. As I will show throughout this chapter, she couches her behavior in feminine gender performance, even when she takes actions that Montley would classify as “male.”

Sandra Ladick Collins also argues that Judith acts like a man. For example, writing about commonalities between Judith and Joan of Arc, Collins contends:

These female characters reproduce the universal experiences of the hero. *But there is nothing truly gendered about their actions.* These characters present no unique traits that would identify them as uniquely female heroes; all we have here are examples of women who successfully act like men. Nothing remarkably female attaches to what they do; they simply imitate masculine characteristics. . . . I would argue that these female figures are celebrated for how well they play the man.<sup>430</sup>

Judith does the deeds of a man, Collins argues. Collins even writes that Judith and some other biblical women commonly considered to be heroines are not truly such unless they are deeply engaged with what she deems womanly concerns. This is problematic, since Collins’ definition of what counts as femaleness is quite limited. Secondly, Collins’ decision to disqualify as female heroes women who do not act out of self-interest is troubling. The women she excludes for this reason—Judith, Deborah, and Esther—are, of course, acting in their own self-interest when they act to save their people; if the people die or are captured, so are the heroines. One could also argue that the women she includes, particularly Lot’s daughters and Bathsheba, act in part out of public concern. Finally, Collins neglects several prominent elements of Judith’s story which deal expressly with femininity. As I argue below, Judith can best be understood not as “playing the man” but as playing the woman.

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<sup>430</sup> Collins, *Weapons upon Her Body*, 85. Emphasis in original.

## The Debate over Judith's "Feminist Cred"

Several scholars have debated the issue of whether Judith can be considered empowering for women. Deborah Levine Gera is one of those who argues that Judith is no feminist. I would challenge Gera's characterization of Judith as "silenced" after her great victory. It is true that she returns home and (apparently) does not participate further in affairs of state; the modern feminist might prefer to read that, after the murder of Holofernes, she becomes leader of Bethulia and the first recorded female priest in Israel. However, she is hardly forgotten; on the contrary, she becomes quite famous (16:21) and, among Israel's potential enemies, feared (16:25). She lives to an advanced age, often a mark of divine favor in biblical literature.<sup>431</sup> When she dies, all of Israel mourns her for seven days (16:24), further emphasizing her high status. Judith continues to exercise agency, freeing her maid. Gera, with Amy-Jill Levine, sees Judith's continued celibacy as the price she pays for being able to rejoin her community.<sup>432</sup> It is true that powerful women in antiquity are often celibate, but we should not necessarily see Judith's continuing sexual continence as her "silencing." What stops the reader from imagining a Judith who, even apart from her heroic turn, has no interest in remarrying or becoming sexually active again? Perhaps in the world of her story, celibate widowhood is the way for her to preserve her autonomy and power; for this, we cannot fault the character of Judith.<sup>433</sup> Further, I would not read Judith's lack of reciprocal communication with God as a deficit in the story's treatment of her as a heroine. That Judith is not depicted as a prophet, receiving direct instructions and encouragement from God, should not dim the reader's view of her as a powerful figure in the story.

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<sup>431</sup> See for example Gen 25:8, Deut 34:7, Josh 14:10-11, Judg 8:32, and Chr 29:28.

<sup>432</sup> Gera, *Judith*, 104.

<sup>433</sup> See Rakel's comment: "If Judith remains a widow, she remains in the only space in ancient Near Eastern societies where women have the right to speak for themselves without a male guardian." Rakel, "Judith: About a Beauty," 525.

I would also challenge Gera's dismissal of Judith on the grounds that her concerns are not those of real women, since she is unmarried and without children. "...[S]he is not 'womanly,' for she does not take part in the world of ordinary women," Gera writes.<sup>434</sup> While we can reasonably assume that the majority of women at the time the Book of Judith was written would have married at some point in their lives, we can also imagine that many of them would have lived as widows for some amount of time, if not for the remainder of their lives. Judith's widowhood thus places her firmly within "the world of ordinary women." Further, while the majority of married women must have birthed children, certainly there were women who could not do so. There must have also been women whose children died, leaving them without offspring. Judith's experience as a woman without children, then, may have been unusual but would not have been unprecedented. Gera's view of womanhood in the textual world of Judith is thus too narrow, essentializing "woman cred" as requiring a husband and children. Dismissing Judith's credibility as a female hero because she is unmarried and childless is akin to concluding that U.S. Supreme Court Justices Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor are lacking in "womanliness" or feminist credibility because they are unmarried and have no children.

While I appreciate Amy-Jill Levine's nuanced treatment of gender ideology in the Book of Judith, I would challenge some of her conclusions. Levine mentions Judith's "gender inversion;" though she does not elaborate, she seems to be implying that Judith acts like a man. As I detail below, I believe that Judith is better characterized as acting like a woman, playing to gender stereotypes to get what she wants. There is no gender "inversion;" Judith performs her "own" gender.

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<sup>434</sup> Gera, *Judith*, 102.

Judith's potential threat to the male leadership of Israel is greatest when she returns home from the Assyrian camp with Holofernes' head, Levine argues. She contends, "Upon her return, the seeds of Judith's threat begin to flower in Israel. By her actions and by her presence, she offers those previously marginal to or excluded from the power base—Jewish women, Achior the Gentile, the maidservant—roles in society and cult."<sup>435</sup> In particular, Levine notes that the women of Israel, who have until now presumably been at home (7:32), now become active, donning wreaths, taking up the *thruses*, and following Judith in a celebratory dance. Like Judith, they become "phallic women," a threat to patriarchal society.<sup>436</sup> Levine argues that Judith is returned to her proper place as a woman in several ways: her song in the final chapter of the book once again stresses the abnormality of Holofernes being slain by "the hand of a female;" she gives full glory for her deeds to God; she "submits to priestly ministrations" in 16:18; she gives up the spoil she has taken from the Assyrian camp; and she goes home, though Levine notes that she is not said to resume her ascetic lifestyle.<sup>437</sup>

I contend that Levine over-interprets both Judith's threat to the patriarchal order when she returns home and the extent to which she reinscribes herself in the domestic sphere. As evidence of the new empowerment of the women of Israel upon Judith's homecoming, she cites their gathering in public to dance. However, Levine does not note, as others have with regard to the dance of the women in the Book of Judith, that there is precedent for it elsewhere in the Bible (Exod 15:20, Judg 11:34, 21:21, Jer 31:13). The women are not transcending their gender roles by dancing; they are embodying them. Further, the text says nothing about the dancing being problematic or the male leaders telling the women to disperse and go home, so it does not appear

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<sup>435</sup> Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation," 218.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 221–222.

that the author sees the dance as a threat. As for the wreaths and *thrusoi*, which Levine interprets as signs of the women's new agency, I would contend that they are simply the *accoutrements* of dance in the Hellenistic age and have no special significance for female power.

I would also interpret Judith's actions at the end of the book differently than Levine does. As I argue below, Judith's repetition in her victory song that Holofernes has been killed by a woman functions not to undermine Judith but to emphasize that it is her "womanhood" that let her slay him. I would also argue that Judith attributing her actions to God is not a way to undermine the heroine but an expected theological statement by a character portrayed as deeply religious. In the world of the text, God is not responsible for Judith's victory because Judith is a woman, but because God is responsible for *all* Israelite victories. Further, I contend that Levine overstates her case in arguing that Judith submits to priestly authority in 16:18; the verse simply has the people of Israel going to Jerusalem to purify themselves and sacrifice and does not involve Judith at all. Would we expect Judith to stage a revolt against the authority of the priesthood? She is described as pious in her mourning rituals, diet, and bathing, so her victory being followed by sacrifices in Jerusalem makes sense. Levine would have a better case for the disbursal of Assyrian spoils undermining Judith if the plunder had been taken by the leadership and not freely given by Judith. As is, Judith's contribution reads, again, like the logical actions of a pious woman who attributes her victory to her cultic fidelity. Finally, as I argue above regarding Gera's work, Judith's return home hardly muzzles her.

In addressing Judith's suitability as a feminist heroine, Pamela J. Milne argues that it is not helpful to the cause of women's equality when Judith emphasizes the shame of death at the hands of a woman and when she stresses her role as a *femme fatale*. Milne cites 9:9-10, 13:15, and 16:5, where Judith calls "extra attention" to the shame of being killed by a "female;" 9:10,

9:13, 13:16, and 16:8, where Judith casts her actions not as simple deceit but sex-tinged trickery; and 8:33, 9:7-14, 11:6, 12, 22, 12:4, 8, 13:4, 7, 16:1-8, where Judith or other characters ascribe primary responsibility for her deeds to the deity.<sup>438</sup> Judith is also problematic for feminists because figures who use their sexuality as a deadly weapon reinforce women's outsider status and men's fear of women, Milne writes:

In Judith, beauty and deceit are fashioned into a woman's weapon against men so successfully that she appears to some as a female warrior. While this may not be problematic for the character herself, it has serious consequences for the image of women it projects, and, hence, for the impact it has on women. A woman's sexuality and physical beauty are not external to her person but integral to it. Therefore, when a woman's beauty is observed by men, or when a woman expresses sexual interest in a man who has been thoroughly schooled in the dangers of the *femme fatale*, there is inevitable ambiguity, to the detriment of women. In each and every instance a man must determine whether he is encountering a woman as a "woman" or a woman as a "female warrior." Through the propaganda of the *femme fatale*/female warrior character, men are taught, above all, to fear women. The otherness of women is thereby emphasized and women become objects to be viewed suspiciously and trusted not at all.<sup>439</sup>

I would also argue against Milne's point that Judith effaces and denigrates her role in Holofernes' murder in a way that is significant for her status as hero or positive figure for women. Judith credits God for her deeds, but this is to be expected in the context of a religious book about a deeply religious woman who carries out a virtual ritual sacrifice to save her people. Milne does not give feminist readers enough credit for being able to recognize that a woman in such a text will express pious sentiments about God's ultimate responsibility for her heroic actions. Ascribing glory to God does not diminish Judith for anyone reading the book with its context in mind. I would also contend that Judith's repeated reference to her status as a "female" is not intended as self-denigration, but rather as a narrative technique to emphasize the

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<sup>438</sup> Milne, "What Shall We Do with Judith?," 54–55.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.



“femininity” she performs to kill Holofernes. I would make the same argument regarding Judith’s references to the sexual nature of her deception; she is not belittling herself but rather stressing the tools that help her accomplish her task.

While Milne’s analysis of the damage done to women by images of the *femme fatale* is perceptive, it is not the final word. As I address in this project, performances of “femininity,” such as putting on drag or “femme” personas, can serve to undermine the very idea of a natural “womanhood.” I find in my own analysis of Judith that her character rises to the level of parody, exposing the silliness of sex stereotypes and even the gender binary itself. When Milne writes that men must always wonder whether they are “encountering a woman as a ‘woman’ or a woman as a ‘female warrior,’” the quotation marks are more apt than she acknowledges. Even the normal “woman” persona, whatever that is, is a performance. Without going so far as to advocate “reclaiming” all damaging female stereotypes as empowering, I am providing another way of looking at the lethal woman.

I would further take issue with Milne’s ascription of the role of “helper/seducer,” and not “heroine” to Judith. Her use of narrative analysis derived from folklore studies raises questions when applied to biblical texts. Milne sees God as the hero of the Book of Judith, with Judith herself relegated to the role of helper/seducer. This conclusion raises questions about applying folklore criticism to the Bible, where the deity is often the ultimate hero of the story. God is said to stand behind male characters, such as Joshua, David, and Daniel, and direct their actions as well; are we to conclude that God is the sole hero of all of their stories, too? Where a deity is said to direct human activities, it may be problematic to use folklore analysis to anoint the deity as the only hero; at the very least, should we consider that there might be more than one hero in some biblical stories, a human hero and a divine hero? Alternatively, can we take for granted that God

is the ultimate hero of much of the Bible and use folklore criticism to find only the mortal hero of a given tale? Claudia Rakel finds similar problems in Milne's analysis. She writes:

...[T]he mere fact that YHWH only appears one single time as an active subject in the entire book (4:1) speaks against such an analysis. This is incompatible with the narrative role of the hero, since traditionally most components of the plot are associated with that role. The central function of the God question does not mean that the role of Judith is not that of heroine in the narrative sense.<sup>440</sup>

I would concur with Rakel's critique. Milne's analysis seems to me overly reductionist and consequently not well-attuned to the realities of the text.

Betsy Merideth's argument concerning Judith, Delilah, betrayal, and the power of female chastity also merits further discussion here. Merideth convincingly argues that what happens to Samson in Judges 16 is not unambiguously a betrayal because he is an active participant and is never deceived.<sup>441</sup> By contrast, the plot of the Book of Judith is driven by an actual betrayal, with Judith intentionally misleading a clueless Holofernes, Merideth argues.<sup>442</sup> However, readers identify with Judith as a heroine but not with Delilah. Merideth comments that Judith is given a background, a pedigree, and a symbolic connection to the Jews through her name, while Delilah has none of these. However, it is not wholly because of nationality—Judith is Israelite while Delilah's origin is unknown but often presumed to be Philistine—that Judith is seen as a heroine but Delilah is read as a villain, she contends. More importantly for readers' impressions of the two characters, Delilah has sex with Samson, while Judith remains chaste. It is in large part Judith's continued chastity that allows her to serve as the heroine of the story, Merideth contends. Further, Judith's unconsummated seduction of Holofernes provides a negative view of women's sexuality. She writes, "The message could not be more clear: woman's beauty and

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<sup>440</sup> Rakel, "Judith: About a Beauty," 517.

<sup>441</sup> Merideth, "Desire and Danger," 72–73.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, 73–74.

sexuality are dangerous to men because women use their attractiveness to deceive, harm and kill men.” Ultimately, apparently “positive” stories such as Judith’s, and not just “negative” ones, can contain anti-woman ideology, Merideth concludes.<sup>443</sup>

I appreciate Merideth’s comparison of Judith and Delilah, especially her observation that, to be a heroine, Judith must remain chaste. I will not argue with this premise. However, I would attribute to Judith more consciousness about the role she plays and about her own sexual continence than Merideth allows. As I argue below, Judith knows what she is doing both when she plays the ascetic widow and when she plays the sexually available, alluring woman. I contend that reading Judith as parodying womanhood can open up new avenues for interpreting her degree of power and agency.

### **Queer Readings of Judith**

One of the most insightful voices on Judith and gender is Deborah F. Sawyer, who uses the work of Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray to argue that Judith is performing the gender female. I would, however, challenge Sawyer’s theological take on queer readings. In a methodological essay on gender criticism, Sawyer writes of the importance of doing gender analysis, but cautions that would-be biblical gender critics must keep in mind that God, not any “male” or “female” person, is the ultimate source of action in biblical stories. She writes:

The analysis of gender construction is vital to understanding the way in which the themes of biblical texts often interact between one another within the canon, where the given gender behavioural patterns in one text are challenged in another. But gender roles are enacted by the secondary characters in the major plot, God, the one main character,

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 76.

remains in place throughout the biblical narrative; sometimes this deity is quite hidden, often wearing different guises within and outside gendered boundaries, even cross-dressing, but always steering the plot and being served by the supporting cast. While it is important to analyse human biblical characters, the minor players, in order to understand the plot, and to gain insights into the main character, to over-invest in their significance is to lose sight of the grand narrative. In biblical literature these secondary characters with their stories always remain shadows, reflecting a diminished form of the divine glory.<sup>444</sup>

Sawyer argues elsewhere that in all biblical books, there is a “consistent subjective agency” in the form of “divine omnipotence.”<sup>445</sup> She also refers to the “divinely ordained roles described in the Bible for men and women,” a statement which implies that there is only one such scheme described in the Bible.<sup>446</sup>

Sawyer’s argument is problematic in that it assumes a monolithic theology and “grand narrative” of the Hebrew Bible. She views the Bible canonically, with the opening chapters of Genesis setting the theology and gender-relations paradigm for everything that follows.<sup>447</sup> With good reason, many scholars now question the idea of any overarching “message” of this motley collection of narrative, poetry, etiology, genealogy, existential theodicy, love lyrics, and aphorism. Sawyer’s cautionary note to doing gender analysis of the Bible falls apart when the idea of a coherent master plan to the Bible does. Likewise, Sawyer assumes that the amount and nature of God’s involvement in human affairs stays constant throughout the Bible, which is an unwarranted leap. Freed from the fundamentally conservative idea of God pulling all the strings all the time in the same way, the scholar can analyze biblical characters on their own merits, as one would do with any piece of literature. I am not proposing discounting the role of the deity in the narrative—my analysis in this project of “lethal woman” texts takes God into account—but

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<sup>444</sup> Sawyer, “Gender Criticism,” 8.

<sup>445</sup> Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible*, 3.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

to give God exclusive pride of place in all biblical literature needlessly shuts down discussion about the human characters. My own queer theory-influence readings of biblical characters are not limited by a theologically-based reading of the Bible. I would argue that treating these texts as literary compositions frees the scholar to better explore how their plots interact with ideas of gender and sexuality.

Claudia Rakel also brings the work of Irigaray to bear on the Book of Judith, focusing on mimesis. Rakel writes:

The mimesis concept applies precisely to the actions ascribed to Judith by the text. She plays a beauty whose reality is not consistent with her own, but rather with that of men... By imitating beauty with its erotic impulses without allowing them to become her own reality, she makes these into a form of resistance, which she uses to create a different reality: the liberation of Israel.<sup>448</sup>

While I find Rakel's language of imitation and resistance to be instructive for this project, I would take issue with some of her other points about Judith and gender. For instance, she maintains that the Book of Judith contains a "critique of war and dominance" by privileging a weak woman over a strong army, and that God rejects war as well as imperialism.<sup>449</sup> I would disagree. God is not pictured in the Book of Judith as rejecting war; rather, the implication is that God is assisting his favored side. The problem with the Assyrians invading Israel is not one of imperialism but rather that the people being attacked are, from the point of view of the text, God's chosen ones. Rakel also argues that, by emphasizing that Judith's beauty wins the fight for the Israelites, the text "opts against a male form of conflict resolution and for a female form."<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Rakel, "Judith: About a Beauty," 523.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid., 518.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid. See also a more in-depth treatment of Rakel's argument in Claudia Rakel, *Judit--über Schönheit, Macht und Widerstand im Krieg: eine feministisch-intertextuelle Lektüre* (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2003), 106–110. Rakel bases her conclusion that the Book of Judith is a critique of war in large part on her interpretation of Judith's victory song in chapter 16.

Of course, as Rakel herself points out, Judith ultimately delivers the killing blow with a sword, not a makeup brush, and the murder of Holofernes hardly reads like “conflict resolution.”

Rakel builds on the idea of the book presenting gendered forms of conflict resolution to argue that the text expects men and women to act differently based on sex, and that, even though the character of Judith is viewed positively, she reinforces stereotyped ideas of femininity.<sup>451</sup> Even a woman portrayed in a positive light can reinforce androcentrism and patriarchy, she argues. Rakel also contends that the behavior of the male and female characters in the Book of Judith reify the notion that there is a clear gender binary.<sup>452</sup> While I would agree with Rakel that a sympathetic female character is not automatically a feminist heroine, I would nuance her conclusion that Judith plays into stereotypes of femininity. As I argue in this chapter, Judith’s relationship to gender and sexuality is not that simple. I contend that Judith knowingly plays with the signifiers of femininity throughout the book, performing “womanhood” in complex and fluid ways. I would further disagree with Rakel that the characters reinforce the idea of a gender binary. As I argue below, Judith’s performance, as an over-the-top parody of femininity and female sexuality, can best be read as exposing the artifice of womanhood and thus complicating the gender binary.

### The Preparation

<sup>8</sup> <sup>4</sup>Judith was a widow for three years and four months in her house <sup>5</sup>and she made for herself a tent on the roof of her house. She put sackcloth around her loins and dressed in the attire of her widowhood. <sup>6</sup>She fasted all the days of her widowhood except the day before the Sabbath and the Sabbath itself, the day before the new moon and the day of the new moon, and the joyous feast days of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup>She was beautiful in appearance and exceedingly lovely of face. Manasseh her husband had left her gold and silver and male and female servants and livestock and fields, and she stayed upon them.

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<sup>451</sup> Rakel, “Judith: About a Beauty,” 518.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 519.

10 <sup>1</sup>When she had ceased crying out to the God of Israel and finished all these words, <sup>2</sup>she rose from where she had fallen and called her maid and went down into the house in which she passed the days of her Sabbath and her feast days. <sup>3</sup>And she took off the sackcloth she was wearing and took off the attire of her widowhood and she bathed her body with water and anointed thickly with perfume, and she combed the hair of her head and put a tiara on it and dressed herself in the festive attire she had worn in the days when her husband Manasseh was alive. <sup>4</sup>And she put sandals on her feet and she put on the bracelets and the anklets and the rings and the earrings and all her jewelry, and she made herself exceedingly beautiful to beguile the eyes of any man who might see her.

10 <sup>23</sup>When Judith came before him and his attendants, they all wondered at the beauty of her face. She prostrated herself and did obeisance to him, and his slaves raised her up.

11 <sup>5</sup>Judith said to Holofernes, “Accept the words of your slave and let your maidservant speak in your presence, and I will report no lie to my lord this night. <sup>6</sup>If you follow the words of your maidservant, God will do something completely with you and my lord will not fail in his pursuits. <sup>7</sup>As Nebuchadnezzar king of all the earth lives, and by the power of the one who has sent you to set right every living thing, not only men serve him on your account, but all the beasts of the field and the cattle and the birds of the sky through your strength will live by Nebuchadnezzar and all his house. <sup>8</sup>For we have heard of your wisdom and the cleverness of your mind. It is known in the whole world that you alone are the best in the whole kingdom, powerful in skill and wonderful in military strategy.”

11 <sup>23</sup>“Now you are both beautiful in appearance and eloquent in your words. If you do as you say, your God shall be my God and you shall dwell in the house of King Nebuchadnezzar and be famous throughout the whole world.”

At every stage of Judith’s plot to slay Holofernes, we can see her playing with gender, using the appropriate signifiers for each moment. When we first meet Judith in chapter 8 of the book, she is in full-on celibate-widow drag. The text lingers approvingly on the description of her appearance and behavior as a widow: she refuses to live inside her perfectly good house, instead setting up a tent on the roof (8:5).<sup>453</sup> She fasts more days than not (8:6). She will not wear any of her fine clothing from the days when Manasseh was alive, instead dressing in “the

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<sup>453</sup> Enslin and Zeitlin hypothesize, based on Neh 8:16 and Acts 10:9, that the roof was a site of prayer. Thus Judith living on the roof (and wearing sackcloth all the time) “are to indicate that what for most was but occasional was for her regular routine.” Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 111. Gera translates “her waist” but sees the sackcloth as worn underneath her clothes, which I would argue bolsters my case that the sackcloth means Judith’s loins are in mourning. Gera, *Judith*, 263.

clothing of her widowhood” (8:5, 10:3). She wears sackcloth around *osphun autēs*, which some translators render as “her waist” but is better translated here as “her loins.”<sup>454</sup> This translation helps the reader understand the full ramifications of Judith’s performance of the role of a widow: the sackcloth, a garment of mourning, is wrapped around her loins in a symbolic gesture of sexual unavailability. How could she think of remarrying or otherwise being sexually active, even three years and four months after her husband’s death, if her very genitals are still clad in mourning attire? She might as well be wearing a chastity belt. Judith even plays up her widowhood in her prayer to God before setting out for the Assyrian camp. Twice in this prayer, only a few verses apart, she calls herself *chēras*, a widow. Perhaps she is alluding to the biblical tradition of special protections for the widow and the orphan, on the theory that emphasizing her widowhood might arouse sympathy in God.<sup>455</sup> This is rather ironic because, as discussed above, Judith is hardly the destitute, powerless widow of biblical tradition. However, she does not hesitate to invoke the loaded word “widow” when she intuits it might help her case.<sup>456</sup> She is in-your-face about playing her gendered role as a widow, with all the implications therein—even before the deity.

In addition to marking Judith as a woman who has removed herself from the sexual marketplace, her emphasis on her widowhood serves to underscore the drama of her new role as seductress. She takes off that oh-so-symbolic sackcloth from her loins, removes the special clothing that marks her as a widow, and replaces it with *ta himatia tēs euphrosunēs*, “clothing of

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<sup>454</sup> Henry George Liddell, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 574. For evidence of the translation “loins,” see for example Deut 33:11, Jer 13:1, Job 38:3, Heb 7:5, Acts 2:30. For another translation that uses “loins” rather than waist, see Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 111.

<sup>455</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 180.

<sup>456</sup> Van der Toorn points out that widows in the Ancient Near East, Hebrew Bible and related literature, and New Testament, including Judith, are often seen as fervent religious devotees and natural intercessors with the divine. van der Toorn, “Torn Between Vice and Virtue: Stereotypes of the Widow in Israel and Mesopotamia,” 8–10.



gladness” or “festive attire.” In a literary sense, her clothing and adornment choices are not only designed to beautify her; they are also meant to indicate that she is outwardly presenting herself the way she did when she used to be sexually available. By putting on these clothes, which she has for years deemed off-limits to herself in her role as ascetic widow, she is consciously aiming to give the impression that she is back on the sexual market. She is not, of course; she must know all along that she will not actually have sex with Holofernes. The goal of her attire and grooming, however, is to convince him (and other men) that she very well might. In terms of the attire itself, Judith’s new clothing and jewelry again call to mind drag. She does not just put on jewelry; she puts on *tous chlidōnas kai ta pselia kai tous daktulious kai ta enōtia kai panta ton kosmon autēs*, “the bracelets and the anklets and the rings and the earrings and all her jewelry” (10:4). Even the way the Greek is phrased gives the sense that Judith is piling one thing on top of another on top of another, as if she puts on a bracelet, then adds another, then perhaps an anklet, then a pair of earrings, then decides to go for broke and put on everything she owns. She even puts on a tiara (10:3), as if to crown herself royalty.<sup>457</sup> Indeed, for our purposes, Judith is a “faux queen.” It’s just as the femme burlesque performer Sugar L’Amour, quoted above, describes: “You think you’re overly decorated, and then put 10,000 more things on it.”<sup>458</sup>

Judith’s preparation is also touched upon in the long victory hymn in chapter 16. Just as the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 retells the prose version of Jael’s assassination of Sisera in Judges 4, Judith’s hymn retells her plot to slay Holofernes. In 16:7-9, the reader gets a poetic retelling of the steps Judith takes to ensnare Holofernes: “For she took off the attire of her

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<sup>457</sup> Some versions translate *mitran* as “turban.” Gera translates “headdress.” Gera, *Judith*, 438. I prefer the NRSV’s “tiara” for the royal association it calls to mind for the modern reader. For uses of *mitra* that pertain to royalty, see Ezek 26:16, *Bar* 5:2, and *Pss* 2:21. For uses of the word pertaining to priests, who may be considered religious royalty, see Exod 28:37, 29:6, 36:35, 36:38, and Lev 8:9.

<sup>458</sup> Chisholm and Stark, *FtF*.

widowhood to raise up those who were oppressed in Israel. She anointed her face with ointment and fastened her hair with a tiara and took a linen robe to deceive him. Her sandal overpowered his eye and her beauty captured his mind...” The last of these verses in particular put Judith’s achievements in military terms. Paradoxically, this has the literary effect of emphasizing that it is Judith’s affected hyper-femininity and not any affected version of masculinity that allows her to kill the general. The verbs used in v. 9, *harpazo* and *aichmalōtizō*, are both verbs associated with war.<sup>459</sup> However, it is not a warrior who brings down Holofernes but a beautiful woman, using her beauty and charm as her weapons.

When Judith is switching from widow drag to sexpot drag, she bathes as well (10:3). For a Jewish woman in Hellenistic Palestine, this must have been a loaded act, more complicated and carrying more meaning than a bath would for us today. Leviticus 15:19-24 prohibits men from having intercourse with a woman who is menstruating. Second Samuel 11:4 appears to be an early witness to women’s practice of purifying themselves after their menstrual periods by bathing; it indicates that when David saw Bathsheba bathing from his roof, she was purifying herself after the end of her period.<sup>460</sup> Menstrual impurity and ritual immersion afterwards is also a major topic in rabbinic literature.<sup>461</sup> Could a woman bathing have signified the end of her

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<sup>459</sup> For *harpazo*, see for example Deut 28:31, Hos 5:14, Bar 4:26, and Acts 23:10. The case for martial associations is admittedly stronger for *aichmalōtizō*; see Judg 5:12, 1 Kgs 8:46, 2 Kgs 24:14, 2 Chr 28:8, 28:17, 30:9, Tob 1:10, 14:15, 1 Macc 1:32, 5:13, 8:10, 10:33, 15:40, Ps 106:46, and Luke 21:24. Ackerman also notes the dual implications of sex and violence in these Greek words. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 61.

<sup>460</sup> Some translate *wēhî’ mitqaddešet mittum ’ātāh* in reference to Bathsheba’s sexual contact with David, i.e. that she had to purify herself because she had had intercourse. A better interpretation is the one followed by NRSV, NJPS, NJB, and others, which see this phrase as a parenthetical referring the reader back two verses, to where David sees Bathsheba bathing. Note the reversal of the usual word order in this clause; when a pronoun comes before its verb, it usually expresses some disconnect with what went before. The interpretation that Bathsheba was purifying herself after her period also goes to explain why she became pregnant after sex with David; she was in her fertile time. It also lends an extra air of irresponsibility to David’s summoning of Bathsheba: did he not realize that she was ending her time of menstrual impurity and thus would be extra-fertile and likely to conceive? Finally, this interpretation gives Bathsheba’s bath an extra erotic charge: she is now ready for intercourse, and any child she conceives directly after her purification bath will unquestionably belong to the man with whom she has intercourse.

<sup>461</sup> For a summary of Jewish writing on menstruation during the Greco-Roman era, see Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 100–105.

period of menstrual uncleanness and therefore the resumption of her sexual availability to her husband? Judith taking a bath (in the midst of a citywide water crisis, no less) might have been less about cleanliness than part of her sexually-available woman drag. (As will be discussed further below, Judith also goes out from the Assyrian camp to bathe each night of her stay there.)

In her prayer in 9:2, Judith reminds God of how he helped her ancestor Simeon enact revenge on the Shechemites for the rape of Dinah. Judith draws a parallel between God's assistance to Simeon in defending the honor of a virgin and what she wants to do to defend Bethulia. Other scholars have seen Judith's invocation of Simeon as an example of her playing a masculine role.<sup>462</sup> As with Jael in Judges 4-5, I argue that the relationship between Judith and gender is more complicated than this. It is certainly notable that Judith identifies herself not with Dinah, the poor raped virgin, but with Simeon, her brother and avenger. But there are important differences between what Judith plans and what Simeon did. The brutality with which Simeon and Levi avenge the loss of Dinah's honor by tricking the Shechemites into circumcising themselves, then slaying all of the men while they are recuperating, is legendary. Many scholars see Jacob's condemnation of the two brothers in Genesis 49 as a commentary on the indiscriminate violence of their revenge. Judith's actions also involve subterfuge and the defense of the honor of a "virgin," but the similarities end here. While Simeon and Levi avenge their sister's rape by slaughtering an entire town and taking women, children, cattle, and goods as plunder, Judith's defense of her virgin city is more surgical—literally. She kills just one person, presumably because she has determined that one headless general is adequate to throw the Assyrians into disarray and get them to retreat. While Simeon and Levi are excoriated by Jacob for the unnecessary force they use in avenging their sister, Judith is praised through the

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<sup>462</sup> See for example Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation," 211. By contrast, see Rakel, "Judith: About a Beauty," 521. Rakel argues that Judith is identifying herself with Dinah since Judith, too, will be threatened with rape.

generations for her more restrained actions. Another key difference between Judith's story and that of the ancestor she invokes is that Judith takes spoil, but only material wealth, not people. Scholars have not made much of Simeon and Levi's capture of the women and children of Shechem, but the reader can assume that some of the women and female children are raped, as has been common practice in warfare throughout the ages and the world.<sup>463</sup> Part of Simeon and Levi's revenge for the inappropriate sexual use of their sister Dinah must be to use the female relatives of Shechem similarly inappropriately, as is alluded to in Judith 9:4, which says that God "gave their wives for booty and their daughters to captivity."<sup>464</sup> Judith, on the other hand, takes no human captives for slavery or sexual service. I do not want to essentialize gender by characterizing Simeon and Levi's actions as "masculine" and Judith's as "feminine," though it is not an overreach to point out that the female warrior does not take sexual plunder while the male warriors do. However, even without marking Judith's style of vengeance against a rapacious enemy as uniquely "feminine," the above comparison of Genesis 34 and the Book of Judith makes clear that my thesis that Judith is performing the gender "female" is not undermined by her self-comparison with Simeon. She is not "acting like a man" just because she invokes one.

Judith's invocation of Simeon is relevant here for another reason. By making the comparison, Judith makes explicit the implication contained in Bethulia's name. "Bethulia," a fictional town name, is too close to the Hebrew word for virgin, *bētûlâ*, for coincidence. Judith is

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<sup>463</sup> For a history and analysis of wartime rape, see chapter 3, "War," of Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975). See also Rakel, "Judith: About a Beauty," 521.

<sup>464</sup> Moore translates, "handed over their wives for rape." Moore, *Judith*, 189. While I appreciate that this translation is clearer, and truer to what actually would have happened to captured women, than "gave their wives for booty," I cannot agree with translating *pronomēn* as "rape." Multiple examples from the Septuagint show that the word generally carries the simple meaning of "booty." See for example Num 31:11, Josh 7:21, and Ezek 36:4. In addition, the word "rape" implies a crime committed against a person who possesses agency and has a choice on whether or not to consent to sexual activity. Multiple passages in the Bible imply that a woman's sexuality is not hers to give or withhold, but belongs to the man who is in charge of her. See, for example, Deut 22:13-30, which deals with violations of the right to control a woman's sexuality. Moore's translation inappropriately presumes a modern concept of rape.

trying to prevent the Assyrians from penetrating the narrow mountain passes and entering the fortified town of “Virgin,” making the siege of Bethulia a rape metaphor and Judith the equivalent of Simeon, who took revenge for the rape of a virgin. What does Judith’s status as a celibate widow mean for her defense of the city of “Virgin”? Here I find instructive the model of the goddess Artemis in Greek literature. Artemis the virgin is on many occasions said to zealously defend of her own chastity and that of other women. In Judith’s defense of the city of “Virgin,” her self-comparison with Simeon and Levi, and her clear commitment to her own sexual inviolability, she recalls the avenging virgin Artemis. In her defense of the city, there is also an implicit assurance that now, the women of Bethulia will not be sexually violated by the Assyrians, subjected to rape as a weapon of war.<sup>465</sup> The celibate widow, Judith, and the celestial virgin, Artemis, have similar commitments to protecting chastity.

Judith’s donning of clothing and adornments associated with sexually available women effects a change in how others perceive her. When she approaches the city gate dressed to kill, the town leaders take notice: “When they saw her, that her face was different and her clothing changed, they wondered very greatly at her beauty” (10:7). The Greek does not just have the leaders wondering, but wondering with a double dose of intensifiers, *polu sphodra*. They are, we can imagine, jaw-droppingly, droolingly, embarrassingly awestruck at Judith’s new appearance.<sup>466</sup> Previously, when confronted with Judith in her familiar celibate widow incarnation, the leaders were moderately encouraging, telling her, “Go in peace, with the Lord God before you, to take vengeance on our enemies” (8:35). Now, when they encounter the new-and-improved sexy Judith, they say, “May the God of our fathers be gracious to you and fulfill

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<sup>465</sup> For more on the symbolic importance of Judith in resisting both her own rape and the “rape” of her land, see Rakel, “Judith: About a Beauty,” 520.

<sup>466</sup> The New Jerusalem Bible actually translates, “they were lost in admiration of her beauty,” which, though less literal than my translation, nicely captures the mood of the text.

your pursuits to the exaltation of the Israelites and the acclamation of Jerusalem” (10:8). This second dose of encouragement is far more lavish, with its hopes that Judith will not only bring low the Assyrians but, in the process, glorify Israel and Jerusalem. Earlier, they issued comparatively bland wishes to the respected town widow, but now, they have high hopes for this newly-minted siren who is about to depart their gates. To them, she has become a different, more effective creature by her adoption of the persona of a tempting, sexually available woman. The leaders are willing to discard common sense to let two unarmed women leave their fortified city in the middle of a war to walk into a region crawling with enemy soldiers. The Bethulian leaders foreshadow the reaction to the Assyrians’ reaction to Judith: they are entirely under her spell.

Indeed, the reaction the dressed-up Judith gets when she enters the Assyrian camp is over-the-top. The Assyrian soldiers who capture her and her maid designate 100 men to escort her to the tent of the general. The image of 100 soldiers surrounding two women to lead them to Holofernes is a humorous one, as is the picture the text gives us of the whole rest of the military camp turning out to watch Judith make her way to the general’s tent.<sup>467</sup> The scene puts one in mind of the famous pictures of GIs crowding around as USO sweethearts like Betty Grable, Marilyn Monroe, or Ann-Margret made their way to the stage to perform. The text is explicit that Judith gets this reaction in large part because of how she looks: “Now when the men heard her words and inspected her face, as she was in their judgment exceedingly, wonderfully beautiful” (10:14). We see in 10:7 a different form, *ethaumasán*, of the same word used here, *thaumasion*, showing that both sets of men, the town leaders and the Assyrian soldiers, are wonderstruck at her extreme beauty. The reader gets the idea: had Judith had spoken the same words dressed in her widows’ garments, without the attention to hair, fragrance, sandals, and jewelry, she surely

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<sup>467</sup> Moore points out that the word used to describe Judith’s arrival in the camp in 10:18, *parousia*, is often used in reference to gods or kings. Moore, *Judith*, 207.

would not have cast the same spell on either the Bethulians or the Assyrians. Her beauty is so intoxicating that it even alters the Assyrians' perceptions of the Israelites. As 10:19 reads, "They wondered at her beauty and wondered at the Israelites on account of her, and they said to each other, who can be disdainful of this people which has such women among them? It would not be good to leave alive any of their men who, if we let them go, will be able to outwit the whole world."<sup>468</sup> Again, Judith's appearance produces the same feeling: extreme wonderment. One can imagine these fictional Assyrians being astonished that one woman could so completely encapsulate their ideal of femininity. This statement is fascinating for its humorous suggestion that the Assyrians' military policy will be affected by the beauty of a single Israelite woman. The verse is also a masterpiece of multi-layered irony. First, it is ironic that the Assyrians worry about leaving any Israelite men alive; their own words show that it is not the men they are concerned about, but the women.<sup>469</sup> Next, the statement is ironic because, even while observing that such a beautiful woman could outwit the whole world, they are blind to the fact that she is in the process of outwitting them. They worry about what could happen if they let Israelite men survive the siege, but they ought to be worried about the combination Helen of Troy/Trojan Horse who has just sashayed into their camp.<sup>470</sup> At the next step of Judith's journey through the military camp, there is yet more wonderment.<sup>471</sup> When the crowd of 100 soldiers escorting her finally gets her to Holofernes' tent, he and all of his attendants, too, "wondered at the beauty of her face" (10:23). In this verse, Judith literally prostrates herself to Holofernes, but it is he and

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<sup>468</sup> NRSV and Moore translate "who can despise this people," but I prefer "who can be disdainful of this people." The verb here, *kataphroneō*, can carry either meaning, but the rest of the verse makes clear that the Assyrians are cautioning one another not to underestimate the Hebrews, rather than not to hate them. Cf. "who will look down upon this nation," Gera, *Judith*, 340.

<sup>469</sup> NJB translates *andra* as gender-neutral, but it plainly is not, as most other translations reflect.

<sup>470</sup> For Judith-as-Helen, see Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation," 216. For Judith-as-Trojan horse, see Jeremy Corley, "Judith: An Unconventional Heroine," *Scripture Bulletin* 31 (2001): 73.

<sup>471</sup> Rakel notes that the repeated mentions of men's awe at Judith appearance serves to hold the male gaze up to ridicule. Rakel, "Judith: About a Beauty," 523.

his men who are figuratively bowing down to her, granting her access and privilege not in their best interests. Judith's beauty is brought up twice more during her conversation with Holofernes. In 11:21, his attendants say, "There is no other woman from one end of the earth to the other whose face is so beautiful and whose words so wise." Two verses later, Holofernes tells her, "You are not only pretty in your appearance but good in your words" (11:23). These statements are both ironic: none of the soldiers understands the true value of her words, since she speaks in clever double entendres. Again, the extremely positive reactions to Judith's carefully-constructed appearance are high camp—and very funny.

Adding to the humor value of Judith's foray into the Assyrian camp is the over-the-top nature of Holofernes' surroundings. Holofernes' tent is all decked out in a parody of the pomp that should surround a top commander's tent; it makes sense that his tent would be nicer than others', but perhaps not that a battlefield bed has a canopy of jewels or that his movements are preceded by attendants carrying silver lamps (10:21-22). As Moore points out, the lamps may be a way of emphasizing his wealth and power.<sup>472</sup> It is ironic that the over-decoration of the tent of a general, a figure who should epitomize masculinity, bears more than a passing resemblance to the over-decoration of Judith herself.<sup>473</sup>

Just as Judith's body is loaded with jewelry and other ornamentation, her speech to Holofernes is loaded with flattery. This assertive widow is playing the part of a submissive flirt, and she is doing it well. Her speech is also a masterpiece of double entendre, all of which is lost on Holofernes. Like Jael calling Sisera 'ădōnî, Judith repeatedly refers to Holofernes as *kuriō mou*, "my lord"—or so he thinks. When Jael speaks of her lord, she is actually referring to God.

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<sup>472</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 208.

<sup>473</sup> For more on the feminizing effect of Holofernes' decorated *kōnōpion*, see Barbara Schmitz, "Holofernes' Canopy in the Septuagint," in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies across the Disciplines*, ed. Kevin R. Brine, Elena Ciletti, and Henrike Lähnemann (Open Book Publishers, 2010), <http://books.openedition.org/obp/990>.



Thus, when she says, “I will report no lie to my lord tonight,” (11:5) she is being truthful, even though she falsely tells Holofernes that her people have sinned and that she will help him conquer them. Even as she lies to Holofernes, God, to whom she has revealed her plan in prayer, knows the whole truth. Judith also plays the part of the submissive female by calling herself first *doulēs sou*, “your slave,” and then *paidiskē sou*, “your maidservant.” To use both terms in a single sentence is laying it on a bit thick, but that is the order of the day for Judith’s performance. She is appealing to what is surely Holofernes’ fantasy of having a beautiful woman humble herself before him.

Next, Judith appeals to Holofernes’ apparent desire for fame, telling him that if he listens to her, “God will do something completely with you and my lord will not fail in his pursuits” (11:6).<sup>474</sup> What Holofernes hears is a promise of future glory: if he listens to Judith, God will act through him and he will not fail. What Judith intends is different: God will, indeed, do “something” with or through Holofernes, and her lord, God, will not fail. Judith continues by ascribing great power to Nebuchadnezzar and, by extension, to his general Holofernes. Nebuchadnezzar, she says, is “king of all the earth,” and because of Holofernes’ great might, not only people but also animals serve Nebuchadnezzar (11:7). The idea of animals recognizing a human king is very silly, adding to the comic, over-the-top tone of the story. As Moore puts it, “Judith, with a perfectly straight face, is mocking Holofernes,”<sup>475</sup> but this ridiculous statement is carefully calculated. It is apparently precisely what Holofernes wants to hear from Judith: that he is so mighty a warrior, even nature is bent to his will. Judith further puffs up Holofernes by telling him that everyone “in all the earth” has heard of his brilliance as a general, that he is the

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<sup>474</sup> Other translators render *meta sou* as “by you” or “through you,” but I prefer “with you” for its more effective encapsulation of the ambiguity of Judith’s statement. This reading is supported by the Latin, *tecum*, “with you.”

<sup>475</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 209.

best there is (11:8). This, too, is mocking; as Enslin and Zeitlin point out, his lack of brilliance will soon be on display for the reader.<sup>476</sup> But again, it is what Holofernes wants to hear. What general would not want to be told that even by his enemies, he is recognized as the best military strategist? In 11:10, she again refers to him as “lord,” here coupling it with “master,” to obsequious effect.

She repeats the “my lord” designation again in the next verse, again producing a statement that can be read in two ways; Holofernes clearly understands her words, “that my lord not be defeated and frustrated,” to refer to him, though she intends them to refer to God (11:11). She outright lies when she tells Holofernes that her people in their desperation have decided to eat food that it supposed to be dedicated to God. But she again speaks in double entendre when she tells him that, on the day that the Israelites get permission from the priests in Jerusalem to eat the sacrificial animals and actually eat them, they will be delivered into Holofernes’ hands (11:15). Judith and the reader know that the Israelites will do no such thing, so it follows from her statement that they will never be conquered by Holofernes. Holofernes, however, believing Judith that the Israelites are about to commit this grievous sin, is made to understand that on the very day this happens, God will allow him to take Israel. In the next verse, Judith again refers to herself as “your slave” (11:16). She then continues on the theme of God acting through or with Holofernes, telling him, “God has sent me to do things with you at which all the earth will be amazed when it hears.” This, to coin a phrase, is actually a triple entendre. Judith means that people will be amazed that a lowly woman, and a widow at that, was able to infiltrate the enemy camp and kill the general. Holofernes might understand that the whole world will be amazed at his military prowess when he defeats the Israelites. However, he could also understand Judith’s

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<sup>476</sup> Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 138.

words as a bit of verbal foreplay: she will do things so salacious with Holofernes that their sexual congress will be world-famous. For a general who has just been told, by an astonishingly beautiful woman who keeps calling him “my lord” and herself “your slave,” that he is the best general in the entire world, either one of these possibilities must be irresistible. Judith’s flattering words and extravagant promises are carefully calculated to appeal to both Holofernes’ thirst for military glory and his hunger for sexual satisfaction.

Next, she offers to act as his direct line to God. With another “my lord” and two more “your slave”s, she tells him that she will leave the camp every night and pray, so that God will tell her exactly when the Israelites are eating the forbidden food (11:17). The offer of a direct connection with God must be so tantalizing that Holofernes does not think about the fact that it is foolish to allow a foreigner staying in his camp to come and go as she pleases. It cannot hurt that she essentially tells Holofernes that she is a prophet. She says, “This was told to me through my foreknowledge; it was announced to me and I have been sent to announce it to you” (11:19). If Judith’s well-crafted speech and beautiful appearance are not enough to convince Holofernes to disregard caution and trust her, she throws in the assertion that she is divinely inspired. She also tells Holofernes in 11:19 that, when he vanquishes the Israelites, she will personally lead him through the land and set up a throne for him in Jerusalem.<sup>477</sup> This again must be a seductive possibility for the general. Judith implies that with her by his side, Holofernes will gain new stature. He literally cannot lose with this beautiful, wise, yet submissive woman in his camp. It must also be thrilling for him to picture marching through the land of Israel with a woman such as Judith as his advance guard. One can imagine him picturing the reaction of the conquered

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<sup>477</sup> The word used for “throne” is *diphron*, which is literally a seat or a chariot-board and elsewhere in the Bible does not definitively signify a throne. However, translation of this word as “throne” in 11:19 is near universal. There is some textual support outside the Bible for this translation; see Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon.

people who see him on the march, astonished, just as he and his men are, by his companion's beauty.

Here it is necessary to discuss further Judith bowing down to Holofernes in 10:23. This action, like her self-beautification, is carefully calculated to produce a certain reaction from the general. The verb used in this verse is *proskuneō*, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *hištaḥăwâ*. The verb is most often used to describe people doing obeisance to God, God's messengers, or other deities. When it is used to describe interactions between people, the person bowed to is typically a king or other social superior, and often the bower is looking for favor or pardon.<sup>478</sup> When the bow is performed by a woman toward a man, there is often a sexual subtext, as in Ruth's obeisance to Boaz (Ruth 2:10), Abigail's to David (1 Sam 25:23, 41), and Bathsheba's to David (1 Kgs 1:16, 31). In all these cases, the woman and the man have been or later become sexually involved with one another. As with my argument about the use of *'ādōnî* as foreplay, the deep bow too can carry intimate implications.<sup>479</sup> The woman is literally lowering herself before the man, a gesture which may hold an implied promise of physical involvement to come: if she is willing to assume a prone position before him, perhaps she is also willing to assume a supine position under him. Judith prostrating herself before Holofernes is an act intended to provoke his lust. It is part of her performance of the role of seductress.

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<sup>478</sup> See for example Gen 23:12, 33:3, 42:6, 2 Sam 14:22, Est 3:5.

<sup>479</sup> Moore would read Judith as bowing to the elders of Bethulia as well, instead of what the text says, *prosekunēsen tō theō*, "she prostrated herself before God/bowed to God," in 10:8. Moore, *Judith*, 201–2. As he acknowledges, however, there is no textual evidence for this, as all manuscripts have Judith bowing to God, not the elders. I would not support a reading that relies on an unsupported textual emendation, especially when the text as we have it makes perfect sense. Wills shares Moore's interpretation that Judith bows to the elders and, in my view, misreads both this purported bow and her bow to Holofernes as mere "social graces" and not inherent to her plot. Wills, "The Book of Judith," III:1149.

Just as scholars have characterized Jael as a liminal figure, some have described Judith as liminal, too. For example, Wills weaves together Judith's physical position in the Assyrian camp and her gender signifiers, arguing that both mark her as liminal:

The zone she is in while she is between the gates—a liminal period between the thresholds—is one of being sexually provocative, treacherous, deceitful, and murderous. She meets her nemesis and greatest challenge, Holofernes, while in this zone, and Judith's violations of Jewish taboos for female behavior occur during this period; her challenge to gender roles is located in this zone.<sup>480</sup>

In terms of Judith's physical location, "liminal" is probably not the best description. She is not within the gates of her own city, but she is within the confines of an army encampment. In addition, Wills posits a rather reductionist view of gender, one that points to some of the problems with the framework of liminality. By positing a space in between two poles of behavior, it reifies the binary of those poles and obscures the complexity of both gendered identities and character more broadly.

Judith's subsequent words to Holofernes and actions during her stay in the camp are, like this initial speech, a blend of apparent submissiveness and seduction. Her nightly baths in the camp may be read as an example of seductiveness. Judith 12:7 states that, on each of the three nights she spent with the army, she went out to the valley of Bethulia to pray and also that she *ebaptizeto en tē parembolē epi tēs pēgēs tou hudatos*, "[ritually] bathed<sup>481</sup> in the spring of water in the camp."<sup>482</sup> The next verse indicates that she *eisporeumenē kathara*, "returned pure" or

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<sup>480</sup> Wills, "The Book of Judith," III:1148.

<sup>481</sup> Enslin and Zeitlin suggest that this rare use of *baptizō* signifies that Judith actually immerses in the water rather than just taking a sponge bath. Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 146. Certainly this is also the more appealing choice if we read Judith's baths as calculated to titillate.

<sup>482</sup> Moore notes that most manuscripts of Judith read "in the camp," but a few have her bathing "from the uncleanness." He prefers the latter reading and locates the spring where she bathed near, but outside, the camp. Moore, *Judith*, 219. This argument requires multiple assumptions: that Judith was originally in Hebrew, that the Hebrew writer wrote *mhndh*, "from her uncleanness," that misreading of multiple letters transformed this into *bmhnh*, "in the camp," but that some Greek manuscripts were evidently made from the "correct" version. Even if

“returned purified” to her tent, indicating that there was a ritual cleansing component to her bath. Unfortunately, the text does not provide Judith’s reasons for bathing, though others have hypothesized that it relates to purifying herself after her menses.<sup>483</sup> Others have proffered reasons relating to prayer, food, and even purification after the mere possibility of intercourse.<sup>484</sup> Still others suggest that it was meant to convince Holofernes of the holiness of her nightly forays and the likelihood that she was actually receiving divine communication.<sup>485</sup> I propose that Judith’s motivations for her nightly immersions may have more to do with seduction than cleanliness or ritual purity. If she is going out of the camp each night anyway to pray in the valley, one wonders why she does not bathe there as well, instead of inside the camp. The obvious answer is that she wishes to be glimpsed by Holofernes, or at least that she wants him to be aroused by the prospect of her bathing, presumably naked or lightly clothed, so nearby.<sup>486</sup> This is especially apparent when Judith’s bathing is read in the context of other biblical literature; two other women in this body of literature who bathe wind up attracting the sexual attentions of the men

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Moore is correct, my interpretation of her bath as a titillation strategy is only minimally affected; Judith’s making sure Holofernes knows she is bathing can still be a seduction tool. See also Gera, who writes, “It is simplest to understand ‘in the camp’ in the wider sense of ‘the area under enemy control,’ despite its more limited meaning earlier in the verse.” Gera, *Judith*, 373.

<sup>483</sup> “It should be noted that Judith made no mention here of the need for bathing or ablutions, although in a Hebrew midrash reminiscent of the Judith-story, the heroine’s bathing represented her ritual cleansing at the end of her menstruation period, thereby making sexual intercourse possible.” Moore, *Judith*, 219.

<sup>484</sup> Jonathan D. Lawrence wonders if her baths might be preparatory for her prayers or her meals. In support of some relationship between bathing, prayer, and food, he cites a passage of Josephus describing the Essenes’ practice of prayer, followed by work, bathing, and a communal meal. Jonathan David Lawrence, *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 60–61. By contrast, Lawrence Wills argues that Judith bathes because of the mere suggestion that sexual intercourse between she and Holofernes could have occurred. He writes, “Although Judith has not had sexual intercourse with Holofernes, her presence in his sleeping quarters and in his thoughts renders her symbolically unclean (cf. Matt. 5:27-28). In this fictional world, she bathes in order to cleanse herself from even the insinuation of sexual intercourse. Perhaps her bathing is now simply a regular part of her personal devotion, paralleling the bathing that she performed at the end of her prayer in 10:3.” Wills also points to the Qumran sect’s focus on bathing as a means of ritual purity, but it should be noted that the document he cites, the *Manual of Discipline*, appears to be addressed primarily to men and so does not contemplate bathing as a means of cleansing from menstrual impurity. Wills, “The Book of Judith,” III:1158.

<sup>485</sup> Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 146.

<sup>486</sup> Wills, though he dismisses this possibility, describes it aptly as bathing “for erotic effect.” Wills, “The Book of Judith,” III:1158.

around them.<sup>487</sup> The first is Bathsheba, who is famously seen bathing by David as he paces on his roof, then summoned to him for a sexual liaison (2 Sam 11:3-4). The second is Susanna, found in the Apocryphal additions to Daniel. Susanna, a beautiful married woman, is being secretly watched by two lustful elders of the community, but it is not until they see her bathing or about to bathe in her garden that they are emboldened to demand sex from her (*Sus* 1:15-21). In the texts of 2 Samuel and Susanna, there is no hint that either Bathsheba or Susanna is purposely trying to seduce anyone with her bathing.<sup>488</sup> “[N]othing is said in the text about Bathsheba’s desire or consent,” Ken Stone notes.<sup>489</sup> J. Cheryl Exum writes about how Bathsheba is an object who is “taken” by David, and how the story makes the reader an accessory to David in the voyeurism perpetrated against Bathsheba. Susanna’s story is another example of the male gaze in

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<sup>487</sup> The careful reader will note that there is a third biblical woman who bathes: Pharaoh’s daughter in Exod 2:5. There is no sexual content to her story whatsoever, but then, she is surrounded by other women at the time. The two women who bathe alone wind up in sexual situations.

<sup>488</sup> This has not stopped some commentators from ascribing seductive intent to the characters. For example, Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg wrote of Bathsheba that she might have been engaging in “feminine flirtation” by bathing in a place where David could see her from her roof. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox, 1964), 309. See also an article by George Nicol, who writes, “It cannot be doubted that Bathsheba’s action in bathing so close to the king’s residence was provocative, nor can the possibility that the provocation was deliberate be discounted. Even if it was not deliberate, Bathsheba’s bathing in a place so clearly open to the king’s palace, can hardly indicate less than a contributory negligence on her part.” George G. Nicol, “Bathsheba, A Clever Woman,” *Expository Times* 99, no. 12 (1988): 360. Some Renaissance painters portraying the story of Susanna focused heavily on Susanna’s nude form, portraying her as seducing the elders through her bathing. As Nicole Tilford writes, “The nude or seminude Susanna is no longer the chaste wife; rather, she flaunts her sexuality as she bathes, enticing the hapless elders into their crimes. As art historians have noted, by inviting the (male) viewer to identify with the perspective of the elders, such painters exonerate them; the fault now lies with Susanna, whose self-absorption and vanity seem an open invitation to the attentions of the elders.” Nicole Tilford, “Susanna and Her Interpreters,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary: Revised and Updated*, 3rd edition. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 433–434. Jennifer Glancy notes that commentators have sometimes seen Susanna’s beauty, rather than the elders’ corruption and rapaciousness, as the cause of all of the action in the story. She points out Robert Dunn’s comment on the text’s attention to the details of Susanna’s bath; he writes, “What these details suggest is that the old judges have a reason for responding to Susanna the way they do, for she is shown as especially lovely.” Robert P. Dunn, “Discriminations in the Comic Spirit in the Story of Susanna,” *Christianity and Literature* 31, no. 4 (1982): 25. Amy-Jill Levine points out that two others post-biblical texts, Jubilees and the Testament of Reuben, use the trope of the bathing woman who seduces a man with her beauty, in this case Bilhah and Reuben. Amy-Jill Levine, “‘Hemmed in on Every Side’: Jews and Women in the Book of Susanna,” in *Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, Feminist Companion to the Bible (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 314. The Testament of Reuben explicitly blames Bilhah for Reuben’s sin of lying with his father’s wife by portraying him as too overcome with lust to possibly resist and her as passed out drunk. Here we can see how interpreters, both early and modern, have ascribed seductive intent to characters where the biblical literature itself provides none.

<sup>489</sup> Ken Stone, “1 and 2 Samuel,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest et al. (London: SCM, 2006), 213.

action; as Jennifer Glancy puts it, “The consistent and exclusive object of the gaze is Susanna, thus presenting femininity as ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’.”<sup>490</sup> Judith is both similar to and different than Bathsheba and Susanna in her bathing. She is reminiscent of Bathsheba and Susanna in that her bathing is connected to her sexuality and the sexual desire of others for her. However, where Susanna clearly believes she is not being watched and there is nothing indicating that Bathsheba positioned herself to be seen by David, Judith is a different story. She uses the idea that a bathing woman is an irresistible object of desire to her advantage and so arranges these semi-public baths in the camp. Whereas Bathsheba and Susanna are solely objects of the male gaze, Judith is a subject: she grabs and manipulates that gaze, directing it for the desired effect on Holofernes and his soldiers. I would argue that Judith, unlike the other two bathing women, choreographs her exposure for maximum effect. Judith wants Holofernes in a state of high arousal, so eager to bed her that he makes himself vulnerable. She wants his men so besotted with her that they disregard their own good judgment and fail to alert Holofernes that she might pose a threat. Even if she does not anticipate Holofernes actually watching her bathe, she may still plan for word of her baths to reach and excite him. Were his men to report back to him that this stunning creature was bathing in his camp, his sexual interest in her would surely be stimulated. He would be even more interested if he knew or deduced that Judith’s baths were not merely for cleanliness, but served to purify her after her menses and put her in a state where she would be receptive to sexual intercourse.<sup>491</sup> This is particularly the case when one considers that, aside from her nightly

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<sup>490</sup> Jennifer A. Glancy, “The Accused: Susanna and Her Readers,” in *Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 293.

<sup>491</sup> Indeed, a *midrash* on Judith reaches just this conclusion. In this late writing on the theme of the Judith story, the general, here called Seleucus instead of Holofernes, asks Judith to have sex with him, and she replies, following Enslin and Zeitlin’s translation, “My lord king, for this very thing I came hither with all my heart, but now it is impossible, as I am in my impurity; tonight is the time of my purification; I therefore desire the king to herald throughout the camp that no one should stay the woman and her handmaid, when she goes out in the night to the fountain of water. When I return I will give myself over to the king, that he may do what is pleasing in his sight.” Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 145.



forays, Judith spends all of her time in her tent (12:5-9), perhaps creating an air of mystery around herself. What must Holofernes and the rest of the camp think of Judith, who hides her beauty from them all day, then emerges at night and disrobes for a bath?

Holofernes reacts just as Judith plans to her calculated attempt to arouse him. On the fourth day of her sojourn in the camp, he holds a banquet to which he invites only Judith and his servants. It is noteworthy that Holofernes sends Bagoas, who is described as a eunuch, to summon Judith to the banquet and not one of his other, non-eunuch servants (12:11). Just as eunuchs were used as palace harem guards partly because they were thought to be physically unable to usurp the king's sexual rights and have sex with the royal wives or concubines, I would argue that Holofernes sends a eunuch to deal with Judith because he does not want to take any chances.<sup>492</sup> Holofernes knows how desirable Judith is; he must have noticed the 100-man phalanx that escorted her to his tent and the looks of awe on the men's faces. He does not want to risk letting anyone who could possibly have intercourse with Judith have access to her before he does. With Bagoas the eunuch, though, Holofernes assumes he is safe. Perhaps the fact that Holofernes sends a eunuch is reassuring for Judith; her plan seems to rely on having to contend with and kill only one man besotted by lust, and if she believed that Holofernes intended to share her with his men, she might have had to rethink her plan. But perhaps when Judith sees that Holofernes has sent Bagoas, she understands that he wants her to himself and will therefore send everyone else from the tent before attempting to have sex with her. The way Holofernes phrases his instructions to Bagoas is also interesting: "Go and persuade the Hebrew woman who is in

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<sup>492</sup> Though eunuchs in later times were sometimes connected with hedonistic sexuality for its own sake and not for procreation, there was also the tradition of the "perfect servant," a man freed from all sexual desire and able to remain celibate. Kathryn M Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 11. Of course, either of these extremes of characterization is overly simplistic, especially given the wide range of anatomical configurations that could mark someone as a "eunuch." See note 86 below. Also see Jacob L. Wright and Michael J. Chan, "King and Eunuch: Isaiah 56:1-8 in Light of Honorific Royal Burial Practices," *JBL* 131 (2012): 104 n. 18.

your charge to come to us and eat and drink with us. For look, it would be shameful to us if we let such a woman go without consorting with<sup>493</sup> her, because if we do not entice<sup>494</sup> her, she will laugh at us.”<sup>495</sup> To Holofernes, Judith is the very epitome of womanhood, a seductive siren come sashaying right to his doorstep. Even apart from any sexual desire he may feel toward her, he is afraid that failing to have sex with such a woman would call into question his efficacy as a powerful man. For three days now, as Holofernes must see it, Judith has been practically wearing a neon “seduce me” sign; between the clothes, the ornaments, the obsequious language, the physically lowering herself before him, and the baths, she is sending him all the right signals. If he does not respond to these signals, what does it mean about him? His statement<sup>495</sup> can also be read from a Butlerian point of view, as a performance of the gender “man.” Holofernes knows the script and he knows what his role is supposed to be: a beautiful woman throws herself on his mercy, so he is supposed to be intimate with her, whether by consent or rape. Holofernes does not say to Bagoas, “For look, I am overcome with lust and must have her now.” He says, in effect, “This is what I am supposed to do in this situation, so I should probably do it now, because otherwise, she might question my masculinity.” I am not suggesting that Holofernes does not want to have sex with Judith; it is obvious that he does. However, his desire for her is

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<sup>493</sup> The verb here, *homileō*, can mean “to be in company with,” “to consort with,” “to converse with,” and a range of other meanings. Moore is correct when he observes that its use in Susanna (1:37, 57, and 58) can only connote sexual intercourse. Moore, *Judith*, 223. It is also sexual in meaning in Prov 5:19. Moore consequently translates “without having her.” However, the verb is used in several non-sexual contexts as well: Prov 23:31, Sir 11:20, Dan 1:19, Luke 24:14-15, Acts 20:11, and Acts 24:26. I translate it as “consort with,” since this English verb can mean either “associate with” or something more intimate, the latter clearly being what Holofernes has in mind.

<sup>494</sup> The verb here, *epispāō*, is problematic, as evidenced by the wide variety of translations, from NRSV’s “seduce” to Moore’s “make” to Enslin and Zeitlin’s “force.” While I agree with Moore’s observation that “genteel” translations can “sanitize” the Greek or Hebrew of the Bible, I do not see enough linguistic evidence to translate as he does here, even though, as he points out, to “make” a woman could encompass both seduction and rape. *Ibid.*, 223–224. Likewise, Enslin and Zeitlin are true to the sense of the story but not to the literal meaning of the word when they observe, “To read in the thought of ‘enticing’ or ‘coaxing’ is as false to the Greek as it would have been to Holofernes. Force her is surely more accurate than ‘allure’ or ‘persuade’...” Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 148.

<sup>495</sup> Although it is not out of the question that Holofernes uses the first-person plural here because he intends to allow others to have intercourse with Judith after he does, we can also read this as the “royal we.”

not the reason he gives his servant for summoning her. In this story, Judith embodies over-the-top femininity and Holofernes responds with the compulsory display of masculinity.

Bagoas then goes to Judith and phrases Holofernes' request for her presence more gently than Holofernes himself has, but still leaves no doubt as to Holofernes' intentions. Bagoas invites her to eat and drink with Holofernes and "become today like one of the Assyrian women who serve in the house of Nebuchadnezzar" (12:13). As Moore puts it, this is "a very polite but subtle 'request' for Judith to serve Holofernes *as fully as* Nebuchadnezzar's palace women serve their king."<sup>496</sup> Judith knows now that her plan is working; she is being summoned for a drinking party and sex with Holofernes. She responds with one of her double entendres, by now familiar to the reader but not to the Assyrians: "Who am I to oppose my lord? Everything that he desires I will hasten to do, and this will be a great joy to me until the day of my death" (12:14). Just as before, her words can be interpreted in two ways. The first is as a statement of her willingness to do "everything" Holofernes wants, including eating and drinking with him but especially having sex with him. Not only is she willing, but she herself is so honored by Holofernes' interest and eager to be intimate with him that she will remember their tryst with joy for the rest of her life. This is clearly how Judith intends Bagoas and, by extension, his master Holofernes, to understand her words. The second interpretation, though, is that Judith would never oppose her true Lord; that is, God. This meaning implies that it is God himself who desires the death of Holofernes at Judith's hands, and that she will not hesitate to follow God's orders to that effect. Not only will she do the bloody deed, but she will think on it with joy forever. Again, Judith plays the perfect seductress, telling Holofernes, by way of his proxy Bagoas, everything he wants to hear from her, while keeping a secondary, completely contradictory meaning for herself. What man would

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<sup>496</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 224. Italics in original.

not want to hear that, yes, the woman he desires has basically said that she will do anything he wants and that she expects to remember with joy their night together as long as she lives?

When Judith prepares to go to Holofernes' tent for the party, she again dresses to the nines. It is unclear from the text whether, when she is in her tent, she has reverted to some version of her former self, eschewing the fancy clothing and jewelry she wore when she entered the camp, or whether she is simply "freshening up." In any case, she "got up and adorned herself with her clothing and all her woman's jewelry" (12:15). The text emphasizes the femininity of her look: this is attire pertaining exclusively to women, designed to entrap a man. In preparation for her ultimate test, Judith is putting on her battle dress. In order to survive the next several hours, she will need to continue "passing" as the perfect male fantasy, even as she ventures into much closer contact with her target than she has had previously. Everything must be in order, and Judith must play the seductress role to the hilt. In the service of this goal, she now enlists her servant in a bit of perfectly choreographed titillation for Holofernes. The woman "went before and spread opposite Holofernes the lambskins she had received from Bagoas for her daily use for reclining to eat on them" (12:15). Presumably the lambskins are to remind Holofernes of Judith "reclining" and further whet his sexual appetite.<sup>497</sup> To heighten his anticipation, she has her servant bring the skins in and spread them out for him; surely it would be rather clumsy and anticlimactic for Judith herself to walk in with the skins under her arm. In addition, it is much more majestic for Judith to simply to glide in empty-handed and immediately recline on a soft bed of skins. It gives her the appearance of a queen, who has servants who are there to make her as comfortable as possible. Perhaps this, too, is meant to excite Holofernes: how wonderful that such a wealthy and refined woman is willing and eager to be with him! Indeed, as soon as Judith

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<sup>497</sup> So Moore describing Alonso-Schökel's position: the lambskin is "a prop for Judith appearing more sexually alluring." Ibid.

walks in and reclines, “the heart of Holofernes was amazed by her and his soul was shaken. He was exceedingly eager to have intercourse with her; he had been looking for a time to deceive her since he had first seen her” (12:16).<sup>498</sup> All of her words and behavior for the past three-and-a-half days have been carefully calibrated to arouse Holofernes, and here she sees that she has succeeded. He has responded to her seductive persona exactly as she has intended, which makes him vulnerable.

Here Judith must proceed with caution. It seems as though her plan is predicated on Holofernes being in a weakened state, whether asleep, drunk, or both.<sup>499</sup> She cannot lead him to believe that she is so eager to be with him that she cannot wait, or she may have to actually follow through on her seduction act. Fortunately for Judith, Holofernes does not decide that he wants to hurry things along; he apparently believes that wine will make the night more festive. He invites Judith to drink and be merry<sup>500</sup> with him, and she happily assents, saying, “I will drink then, O lord, because my life is made greater today than on any other day since I was born” (12:18).<sup>501</sup> This is another statement with two possible meanings. Judith clearly intends Holofernes to hear that sleeping with him, her “lord,” will make this the best day of her life. The reader, however, is aware that this will be her finest day because she will kill Holofernes and

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<sup>498</sup> As Craven points out, Judith and Holofernes are engaged in a contest to see who can deceive the best. Judith wants to deceive the Assyrians and thus foil their attack plans, and Holofernes wants to deceive (beguile) Judith into becoming intimate with him. Judith wins the contest. Craven, *Artistry and Faith*, 96.

<sup>499</sup> Though some commentators have proposed that Judith would have been willing to sleep with Holofernes if it had come to that, this is inconsistent with her character and behavior in the story so far and subsequently. For Judith, “it’s all about the teasing and not about the pleasing.” Ryan Murphy, “Glee,” *Showmance* (FOX, September 9, 2009). Betsy Merideth aptly points out that part of the reason why Judith has been read by commentators as a heroine while Delilah has been read as a villain is that Judith, unlike Delilah, remains chaste. Even though Judith uses her sexuality to bring Holofernes to his downfall, she does not actually have intercourse with him. Merideth writes, “This double standard—that she must be beautiful and sexual and yet chaste and untouched—reflects profound male ambivalence toward women’s sexuality: that it is simultaneously desirable and dangerous.” Merideth, “Desire and Danger,” 75.

<sup>500</sup> Moore rightly points out that this is probably “a subtle invitation for Judith to enjoy herself sexually.” Moore, *Judith*, 225.

<sup>501</sup> Or “because today is the greatest day in my whole life” (NRSV).

thus save her people. Her vocative *kurie*, “O lord,” can be read two ways as well; she may be addressing Holofernes or God. To match Judith’s best day since her birth, Holofernes then drinks “much more wine than he had ever drank in a single day since the day he was born” (12:20). Judith has performed ably so far, deceiving Holofernes by her appearance, words, and actions into being foolish and irresponsible. The stage is now set for assassination.

### The Act

13<sup>2</sup>Now Judith was left alone in the tent, Holofernes having thrown himself on his bed, sodden with wine. <sup>3</sup>Judith had told her maidservant to stand outside the bedchamber and wait for her to come out, as she went out every day, for she said that she would go out for her prayers, and she had also spoken these words to Bagoas. <sup>4</sup>Now everyone had left his presence and no one, small or great, remained in the bedchamber. Judith, standing beside his bed, said to her own heart, “Lord God of power, look with favor this hour upon the work of my hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup>Now is the time to help your inheritance and do my plans to wreck the enemies who rose up against us.” <sup>6</sup>And she came to the bedpost which was next to Holofernes’ head and pulled down his sword from there. <sup>7</sup>Coming near to the bed, she grabbed the hair of his head and said, “Give me strength this day, Lord God of Israel.” <sup>8</sup>She struck his neck twice with all her strength and took his head from him. <sup>9</sup>She rolled his body off the bed and pulled the canopy from the pillars. Soon she went out and handed over to her maid Holofernes’ head. <sup>10</sup>And she put it into her food bag.

Judith waits until everyone else has left the tent to carry out her plan. This reveals the purpose of her days of working up Holofernes’ appetite for her: her idea all along was to get him alone, which could only happen if he believed they would have sex. Any other way of her getting a face-to-face meeting with Holofernes would likely have resulted in her being in a room with both Holofernes and his servants; at no other time that we meet Holofernes is he by himself. Such an eventuality would have prevented her from attacking him and, had she tried, would likely have gotten her killed. But since Judith was so skillful in her performance of the role of a seductive woman, she is now alone with him and can strike the killing blow.

While Judith's actions so far have been centered on seduction, her deeds here are highly reminiscent of the act of sexual intercourse. The most obvious point of commonality between what Judith does to Holofernes and what he was hoping she would do is the bed. Holofernes strategically chooses to hold the party in his chambers; he or Bagoas must also have conveyed to the attendants that they should leave tactfully so that Holofernes would be alone with Judith. The locus of his intended actions with her is the bed; this is also where she performs the assassination. Instead of getting into the bed with him, as he had no doubt intended, Judith stands over it, but the bed is still the center of the action. There is also a heavy dose of irony here, given the implication in 12:12 that Holofernes would have sex with Judith even if she did not consent. In such a situation, he might find himself standing over Judith as she is forced onto the bed. Here, though, Judith is the one who is standing up, and Holofernes is the one laying powerless on the bed. The unrealized potential for Holofernes to rape Judith is also interesting in light of Judith's use of a phallic instrument to remove his head. He could have used his literal phallus against her; instead, she uses his figurative phallus, the sword, against him.<sup>502</sup> As Wills points out, Judith removes the phallic sword from another phallus-shaped object, the bedpost.<sup>503</sup>

Some, reading Judith through a Freudian lens, have seen the beheading itself as related to the story's motif of sexuality. In this reading, the murder becomes a symbolic castration,<sup>504</sup> with Holofernes' head representing his penis, the instrument with which he would have attacked Judith.<sup>505</sup> As Margarita Stocker points out, even the early Christian interpreters of Judith saw

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<sup>502</sup> Duran, "Having Men for Dinner," 120.

<sup>503</sup> Wills, "The Book of Judith," III:1161.

<sup>504</sup> Proponents of this theory use the term "castration." This term typically does not refer to the removal of the penis but to the removal of the testicles.

<sup>505</sup> Stocker, *Judith*. Stocker offers a fascinating history and interpretation of the use of Judith's story in art, literature, and politics in Christian cultures. Her brief exploration of the original story of Judith is highly influenced by the Freudian preoccupation with the phallus. She sees a castration motif running through the Book of Judith, culminating in the beheading of Holofernes. *Ibid.*, 7. She writes, "When Judith decapitates Holofernes—man, lover, ruler, commander—she beheads patriarchy." *Ibid.*, 8. I would challenge Stocker's facile links between head and

Judith's beheading of Holofernes as related to sexuality; St. Jerome wrote that Judith, representing chastity, decapitated Holofernes, representing the sin of lust.<sup>506</sup> The problem here is that Jerome was reading the values of the early Church, including a distinct discomfort with sexuality in general, back into a story likely written around 150 years before the start of the Common Era. It is unclear whether the author of Judith or readers of the story in its own time would have understood lust to be a grievous sin, or chastity to be an unparalleled virtue. Likewise, it is not clear to me that Judith's contemporary audience would have drawn the same parallel Freud and Stocker do between the head and the penis, and between removing one and removing the other. Certainly there is nothing I know of from the Hebrew Bible or Apocrypha that makes this connection between head and penis, or between beheading and castration. What is more, while "head" can be a euphemism for penis in modern English, this usage is not widely

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penis; beheading and castration; and phallus, masculinity, and power. It is unclear to me whether an ancient audience would have drawn the same immediate connection between the head and the penis that Stocker does. Further, I would argue, Stocker is stretching her case when she marvels at the Book of Judith's "acknowledgement of the phallic concept of power." Her connection of Achior's circumcision with Holofernes' beheading and both of these with a recognition that God is "the only possessor of supreme masculinity" is also far-fetched. *Ibid.*, 7. Additionally, I would challenge Stocker's characterization of the Book of Judith as "a battle of the sexes which is also the contest of godly with ungodly." *Ibid.*, 6. This is an oversimplification of the book which does not account even for the ambiguous position of the Bethulian elders, much less for the heroic and very "godly" status of Achior. See also Alan Dundes, "Comment on 'Narrative Structures in the Book of Judith,'" in *Narrative Structures in the Book of Judith* (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1975), 28. Dundes connects Judith not losing her "maiden head" to Holofernes—he sees her as "the functional equivalent of a 'virgin'—with her taking Holofernes' head.

<sup>506</sup> Stocker, *Judith*, 5. Stocker also opines that Holofernes' servant and "avatar" Bagoas being a eunuch foreshadows Holofernes' own symbolic castration. *Ibid.*, 7. Since Holofernes does not actually but only symbolically has his penis removed, this may be an over-reading. It is also worth noting that Bagoas's status as a eunuch does not necessarily mean he lacked a penis. "Eunuch" and its equivalent in other languages could refer to a whole range of men with variant genitals or even sexual identity. Writes Kathryn Ringrose: "At one extreme was the 'doubly castrated' boy (all of whose genitalia were removed) who was a deliberately created and marketed sex object. At the other were celibate monks who had not been castrated but were referred to as eunuchs, and even nuns whose celibacy caused some authors to describe them as 'eunuchs' in a complimentary way. Greek sources of Late Antiquity, at least in polite prose, used the term *eunuch* to encompass a diverse class of individuals without reference to the extent or nature of their castration, the age at which they were castrated, or their social or civil status. By the second century A.D. . . . the word was also a blanket term covering a variety of genital mutilations, ranging from the cutting of the *vas deferens* (as in a modern vasectomy) to the removal of one or both testicles to the total removal of all sexual organs." Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant*, 13–14. Though Ringrose's book addresses eunuchs of the Hellenistic period only on the way to her main topic, eunuchs in Byzantium, her comments here provide a necessary reminder that a character like Bagoas cannot be assumed to have had no penis.



attested in other languages. Most to the point, it is not a recognized usage in Hebrew or Greek. While I find the Freudian reading to be unsupported by the text itself, it is interesting that even before Freud, commentators have related Holofernes' beheading to his sexuality.

The beheading itself is also recapitulated in the poetic hymn in chapter 16. Here, it comes as a gory punch line to the list of Judith's weapons against Holofernes: "Her sandal overpowered his eye, her beauty captured his mind, and the sword passed through his neck" (16:9) The parallelism in this verse is masterful. In each clause there is a one-to-one correspondence between Judith's weapon and Holofernes' body part: "her sandal"/"his eye," "her beauty"/ "his mind," and "the sword"/"his neck." Each of her weapons acts on a specific part of Holofernes' anatomy. Perhaps there is significance in the lack of a third-person feminine pronoun after *akinakēs*, "sword." The text identifies the other "weapons," those pertaining to Judith's performance of the feminine, as "hers." The sword, however, the one weapon which is not part of that performance, is just "the sword" instead of "her sword." The hymn, it seems, is putting distance between Judith and her final weapon, the one which she uses to strike the killing blow.

When Judith rolls Holofernes' body off the bed (13:9), he ends up in the same position as Sisera relative to Jael in Judges 5: lying dead at her feet. As Moore writes, "Now Holofernes has fallen at Judith's feet, figuratively and literally."<sup>507</sup> This posture evokes death, but it also calls to mind sex, specifically violent rape: Holofernes is Judith's conquest, ravished and left lying, despoiled, on the ground.<sup>508</sup> Had Holofernes raped Judith, she would have been left, figuratively, less of a woman, since her chastity and virtue would have been wrecked. Now, Holofernes is

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<sup>507</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 227.

<sup>508</sup> Others have seen Judith rolling Holofernes' headless body onto the floor as a means of stopping the sound of his blood splashing from the corpse onto the ground so the other Assyrians would not hear and come to investigate before Judith has made her escape. Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 153. This is illogical; surely the sound of a grown man's body hitting the ground would have been louder and more likely to wake the neighbors than the noise of blood flowing from the bed to the ground. However, Enslin and Zeitlin's conclusion that Judith pushed the body off the bed to "[add] insult to injury" likely has some merit. *Ibid.*

literally left less of a man. What remains after their encounter, loaded with sexual innuendo, is a headless corpse.

There is also the matter of the canopy. In 13:9, we learn that Judith “pulled the canopy from the pillars.” This is the same canopy mentioned in 10:21, over-decorated for something in a battlefield tent, woven with jewels. She takes it with her back to Bethulia, but no explicit reason is given for this curious action. Enslin and Zeitlin write that other scholars have read the stolen canopy as a way for her to wrap the head for the journey back to Bethulia, but there is no indication in the text that she wraps the head in anything. More likely, Enslin and Zeitlin propose, the canopy serves as a trophy of her kill.<sup>509</sup> The trophy theory seems likely, but there is more: as Wills proposes, we can draw an analogy between Holofernes’ canopy and the *bētûlîm* of Deuteronomy 22.<sup>510</sup> This chapter deals with what is to be done if a husband claims that his new bride was not a virgin when they married. If she truly is a virgin, her father is to bring evidence of her virginity, referred to as *bētûlîm*, and spread it out before the elders of the town.<sup>511</sup> The proof here is presumably the bloody sheets from the wedding night, proving that the woman bled when her hymen broke and thus had been a virgin when she was married. The blood serves to show that intercourse between the bride and groom has occurred and that the bride had been pure. Wills argues that in Judith’s case, the canopy serves a similar role as the bed sheet in

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<sup>509</sup> Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 153.

<sup>510</sup> Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World*, 149.

<sup>511</sup> The uses of *bētûlîm* in the Hebrew Bible are: Deut 22:14, which lays out the scenario of the man who makes up a charge that his wife was not a virgin at the time of marriage, saying, “I did not find her *bētûlîm*”; Deut 22:15, which states that if the bride is accused, her parents must take the *bētûlîm* of the girl to the elders at the city gate; Deut 22:17, which says that if the groom says he did not find “the *bētûlîm* of your daughter,” the girl’s father is to say, “here is the *bētûlîm* of my daughter” and “spread out the garment before the elders of the city;” Deut 22:20, which deals with what is to be done if the girl’s *bētûlîm* was not found; and Judg 11:37, where Jephthah’s daughter consents to be sacrificed but requests time for her and her companions to “cry over my *bētûlîm*.” All of these occurrences except for Judges concern the same case law and appear to relate to physical proof of virginity. The use in Deut 22:17 of *hasšimlâ*, “garment,” “cloth,” or “sheet,” implies that the *bētûlîm* is the bloody bedclothes. In Judg 11:37, however, such a meaning is not possible; how and why would Jephthah’s unmarried daughter be crying over the bloodied sheets from her marriage? Perhaps this passage is best understood as the daughter mourning the fact that she will never have such sheets; that is, that she will not live long enough to marry or have sexual intercourse.

Deuteronomy 22. Judith brings Holofernes' canopy to the elders of her town as proof that she has "done" him.

The maid's placing Holofernes' head in her food bag deserves brief comment as well. Presumably Judith and the maid need to put the head into the bag to conceal it as they leave the camp and correctly expect that no one will question Judith leaving to say her prayers with a bag of her special food. But there are other meanings for the head-in-food-bag device as well. Earlier in the story, Judith tells Holofernes that because her people have sinned they will be handed over to him as *katabrōma*, which can be translated as "food" or "prey" (10:12). Instead, Holofernes' head leaves the camp as metaphorical food. It is also notable that the purported sin of the Israelites which Judith tells Holofernes led to her defection is consumption of food meant for sacrifice. It is a neat parallel that both the supposed sin—eating sacrificial animals because Holofernes' army was besieging and starving Israel—and the exit of the proximate cause of that supposed sin, Holofernes, both relate to food. As Duran writes, "Holofernes' death is not killing, but kosher slaughter, an act done according to divine law, in support of the life of the community, which must not go hungry."<sup>512</sup>

### The Aftermath

13<sup>15</sup>Look, the head of Holofernes, commander of the Assyrian army, and look, the canopy under which he lay in his drunkenness! The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman.<sup>16</sup>As the Lord lives, who has protected me in my way that I went, my face deceived him into his destruction and he did not commit a sin with me to defile and shame me.

13<sup>18</sup>You are blessed, my daughter, by God the most high, above all women on earth, and blessed be the Lord who created the heavens and the earth, who directed you to strike the head of the leader of our enemies.

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<sup>512</sup> Duran, "Having Men for Dinner," 120.

15<sup>12</sup> All the women of Israel gathered to see her and bless her, and they did a dance for her. She took wands wreathed in ivy in her hands and gave them to the women who were with her <sup>13</sup>and they crowned themselves and those with them with olive, and she went before all the people in a dance, leading all the women. All the men of Israel followed, armed and crowned, with songs in their mouths.

After Judith kills Holofernes, she and her maid walk right out of the camp with his head in their food bag (13:10). How is this possible? Getting into the camp was one thing, but how is it that these two women get past what is surely an armed guard—with the general's head in a bag, no less? The answer is that Judith has laid the groundwork for the escape through her performance up to this point. Through her dressed-up beauty, double-speak, and obsequious manner, she has endeared herself to the soldiers and ensured that they trust her even though they should not. She has also set a precedent, with Holofernes' approval, that every night she be allowed to go out of the camp and pray, so that God will tell her when the Israelites have sinned and the Assyrians may attack. Why would the soldiers on guard see anything wrong with Judith leaving the camp late at night when she has been doing the same thing for the past three days? If she indeed follows up her nightly prayers with a bath inside the camp, the besotted soldiers may even have learned to look forward to her evening prayer forays because they know her bath, upon which they perhaps can spy, is next on the agenda. She has also set the precedent that she will eat only her own food, which necessitates her maid carrying that food bag around for her. If this has been their practice up until now, the maid lugging the food bag out of the camp on this night should not cause much concern. After all, from the soldiers' point of view, what is wrong with Judith making provisions for a midnight snack in the valley to follow her prayers? She has also made sure that Holofernes' personal servants, at least, believe that she intended to have sex with him on this night. Of what threat to the camp could a woman who has just sexually entertained the general be? From the Assyrians' point of view, if the woman who is so favored

by Holofernes wants to go out for a little post-coital prayer, who are they to stop her, and to what end?

Judith and her maid get past one set of guards in the Assyrian camp and then, when they reach Bethulia, they encounter another set of guards. Here, though, Judith does not need to rely on any subterfuge to get past them: when she sounds the alarm, all of the people wake up and come to hear what she has to say. Once Judith begins interacting with her own people, the reader sees the tone of her speech change dramatically. No longer is she deferential, flirtatious, focused on pleasing the listener, and prone to double entendre, as she had been with Holofernes and the Assyrians. Now her words are assertive, direct, and God-focused, if colored by adrenaline. For example, in 13:11, she calls to the town watchmen, “Open, open the gate! God, our God, is with us, showing his strength in Israel and his power against our enemies, just as he did today!” She further tells them, “Praise God! Praise! Praise God, who has not withdrawn his mercy from the House of Israel but has broken our enemies by my hand tonight!” (13:14) Judith is no longer playing the part of the seductress. Now she is a pious warrior, returning from battle to tell the people that they are saved. She exhorts the people to praise God, to whom she gives all credit for her successful plan. Next, she literally confronts the people with the gory deed she has done by pulling Holofernes’ head out of the bag and showing it to them. She says, “Look, the head of Holofernes, commander of the Assyrian army, and look, the canopy under which he lay in his drunkenness! The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman” (13:15). I would argue that this last statement serves two purposes. First, it harks back to Judges 4:9, where Deborah tells Barak that God will “sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” The character of Judith is clearly influenced by that of Jael, and Judith 13:15 makes this connection more explicit. The message is that God, again, has chosen a woman to take down a mighty general. Just as this out-

of-the-ordinary thing happened in the days of the judges, when Israel was first fighting other nations for the land, so it happens in the time of Judith as well, when Israel is trying to resist the Assyrian incursion. The second purpose of Judith's statement in 13:15, from the standpoint of the queer theory arguments I have been making, is to emphasize that Holofernes had to be brought down by someone doing what Judith did: he had to be killed by someone perfectly and purposefully playing the role of "woman." Whatever associations come to mind when Judith describes herself as *thēlus*, "a woman" or "a female," these are the traits she has performed for Holofernes and the Assyrians, and these are the traits that allow her to kill him. She emphasizes her status as a woman because her femininity, or the femininity she adopts for the occasion, is the decisive factor in her victory.

Judith next swears to her fellow Bethulians that, though she dressed up for her foray into the Assyrian camp and was alone with the general, "my face deceived him into his destruction and he did not commit a sin with me to defile and shame me" (13:16). This is a key point for Judith's character: she walks the walk and talks the talk, but she does not do the deed. The implication of the verse is that her face, but not her body, enticed Holofernes.<sup>513</sup> This is not quite the case, though: it is not just Judith's face and words, but also her actions, which drive Holofernes to act against his best interests. As discussed above, Judith's performance involves not just appearance but also deeds, such as bowing to Holofernes, reclining before him on a lambskin, and eating and drinking with him. Her performance is not limited to the beauty of her face but is far broader. However, it stops short of actual sexual contact, allowing Judith to keep her honor and to be a hero to her people. As Betsy Merideth points out, Judith can be a heroine while the similarly tricky Delilah cannot be, partly because the former stays chaste while the

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<sup>513</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 232.

latter does not.<sup>514</sup> Merideth acknowledges that Judith is an Israelite while Delilah is generally read as a Philistine, but she denies that this is the only reason why one is viewed as a heroine and the other as a villain. It also comes down to male attitudes about female sexuality: “This double standard—that she must be beautiful and sexual and yet chaste and untouched—reflects profound male ambivalence toward women's sexuality: that it is simultaneously desirable and dangerous.”<sup>515</sup> This seductive chastity is a key part of Judith's persona. As I will explain further below, it is also an important element in reading her through the lens of queer theory.

The people then bless God (13:17). Uzziah, though, blesses Judith as well: “You are blessed, my daughter, by God the most high, above all women on earth, and blessed be the Lord who created the heavens and the earth, who directed you to strike the head of the leader of our enemies” (13:18) Like Judith 13:15, which references “the hand of a woman,” this verse is also strongly reminiscent of the story of Jael. It calls to mind Judges 5:24, “Jael is blessed among women/Wife of Heber the Kenite,/She is blessed among tent-dwelling women.” Clearly this verse is meant to call to mind the Judges tale, but, like 13:15, it also serves to emphasize the protagonist's feminine performance. It is worth noting that the only other place in Scripture where a character is called “blessed among women” is Luke 1:42, where Elizabeth blesses Mary and the unborn Jesus, adding “and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” This verse purposely invokes Jael and Judith but with a major twist: Mary is blessed not for killing a man but for her impending motherhood of the savior. Brittany E. Wilson writes, “Of the trio of biblical women called ‘most blessed,’ Mary is an odd addition to the already existing duo. As the Lucan story unfolds, it becomes apparent that Mary's faithfulness to Israel stands in stark contrast to her

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<sup>514</sup> Merideth, “Desire and Danger,” 75.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

pugnacious predecessors.”<sup>516</sup> She argues that Luke invoked Jael and Judith in order to draw a stark contrast between Israel’s violent past and its peaceful future; from now on, Luke says, blessedness among women will involve peaceful listening, not violent action. Operating with a Christocentric point of view, Wilson sees Mary’s blessedness as “better” than Jael’s and Judith’s. However, I would flip Wilson’s argument around and point out that Mary is blessed for, in essence, her passive role as the vessel for Jesus. Jael and Judith, by contrast, are blessed for their active roles in saving Israel from its enemies. Mary listens to an angel and accepts the motherhood of Jesus, but Jael and Judith speak and act on their own. As exemplars of female blessedness, Jael and Judith are far more interesting than Mary.

After Uzziah’s blessing of Judith, she instructs the Bethulians to hang Holofernes’ severed head on the wall of the town.<sup>517</sup> This calls to mind another story from the Apocrypha: in 1 Maccabees 7, Judas meets the Seleucid general Nicanor in battle and kills him. His troops then cut off Nicanor’s head and right hand and hang them on the wall (1 Macc 7:47). The comparison between the murder of Nicanor and that of Holofernes is clear;<sup>518</sup> indeed, some scholars have seen Judith as heavily influenced by the story of the Maccabees.<sup>519</sup> Here, though, the assassin kills the general not on the battlefield, a stereotypically “masculine” arena, but in a tent, at “home,” in effect. She slays him not where he expects danger but where he expects comfort, both material and sexual. Judith kills Holofernes backed not by an army but only by a maidservant. She lacks Judas’s strength and knowledge of military tactics but possesses the looks, skill, and

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<sup>516</sup> Brittany E. Wilson, “Pugnacious Precursors and the Bearer of Peace: Jael, Judith, and Mary in Luke 1:42,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68 (2006): 447.

<sup>517</sup> Tracy M. Lemos argues that the primary purpose of the removal and display of Holofernes’ head is to shame him by impugning his masculinity and that of his entire army and regime. T. M. Lemos, “Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 234–235.

<sup>518</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 234; Wills, “The Book of Judith,” III:1167. Lacocque, *The Feminine Unconventional*, 39. There is also the matter that the name “Judith” is the feminine form of Judas/Judah.

<sup>519</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 234.



brains necessary to perform the part of the seductress. The weapon is the same in both cases—a sword—but its wielder and the circumstances of the death are different in ways that are very revealing about Judith’s character and performance.

The text again emphasizes that it was a woman who killed Holofernes is stressed again in 14:18, when Bagoas finds his master dead. He exclaims, “The slaves have thwarted us! One Hebrew woman has brought shame on the house of King Nebuchadnezzar; look, Holofernes is on the ground and the head is missing!” I read Bagoas’s emphasis on the fact that it was a Hebrew, acting alone, and a woman at that, as emphasizing the shame that attaches to Holofernes, and, by extension, all of the Assyrians, including the king. To be killed by a weaker enemy, the Hebrews, is bad; to be cut down by a single Hebrew rather than an army is worse; but to be beheaded by one Hebrew woman is most disgraceful of all. However, the verse also serves to emphasize that it is only a woman with Judith’s skills who *could* have killed Holofernes in this way. In addition, the dramatic scene where the Assyrians, seeing the Israelites in attack position, rush into Holofernes’ tent and find him headless is possible only because his men believe him to be sleeping in after a night of passion with Judith (14:14). Had this not been the case, one of his servants might have been in during the night or earlier in the morning to attend to Holofernes. As is, the servants likely let him be so as not to interfere with his sex life. Only someone perfectly playing the seductive woman could have gotten in position to kill the general in his own tent, left the camp without being stopped or attacked, and been safely back home by the time the body was discovered.

When the people of Israel gather in Judith’s honor, the women take the lead, dancing with wands and wreaths.<sup>520</sup> As Wills points out, this is not the only place in the biblical literature

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<sup>520</sup> Literally, the “wand” is a *thrusos*, which was “a wand wreathed in ivy and vineleaves with a pine-cone at the top.” Liddell, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott’s*

where victory is celebrated by women singing and dancing. It also happens after the crossing of the Reed Sea, where Miriam and the Israelite women dance and sing with timbrels (Exod 15:20-21); after David kills Goliath (1 Sam 18:6); and after Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites, when his daughter dances out to meet him (Judg 11:34).<sup>521</sup> Here, though, it is especially fitting that the women are the main actors in the celebration of the Israelite victory. It is a woman who accomplished the victory. She did it not by going out to battle as a man, but by playing—overplaying, even—the role of “woman.” It makes sense that a victory that depended so much on performed femininity is celebrated by a cadre of women doing what women tend to do in biblical literature: singing and dancing.

Judith's victory hymn in chapter 16 continues hitting the theme of Judith's performed femininity as her weapon. She exclaims, “the Lord Almighty has thwarted them by the hand of a woman” (16:5). Like the similar statement in chapter 13, this verse serves to call to mind Jael, increase the shame of the Assyrians, and reinforce the idea that it was Judith's femaleness that let her do the job. She further presses the point in the next verse. Judith 16:6 reiterates, in succinct poetry, how the heroine accomplishes her task—and how she doesn't. It reads, “For their powerful one did not fall by young men, nor did the sons of Titans smite him, nor did lofty giants set upon him, but Judith daughter of Merari weakened him with the beauty of her face”. Despite some scholars' interpretation that Judith is acting like a man when she goes out to entrap Holofernes, this verse is quite clear that she is *not* the classic male hero. She lists three sorts of hero she is not. She is not one of a group of *neaniskōn*, young men. This word is used several

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*Greek-English Lexicon*. It was associated with followers of the god Bacchus, or Dionysus. The wreath, too, is a Hellenistic touch, as other commentators have observed. Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, 167; Moore, *Judith*, 247. The *thrusos* is also mentioned in 2 Macc 10:7 in the context of celebrating the victory of the Jews over the Seleucids.

<sup>521</sup> Wills, “The Book of Judith,” III:1173–1174.

times in the Book of Judith, generally to refer to targets of the Assyrians (2:27, 7:22, 16:4). The young men would have been a logical choice to stop Holofernes, but they did not; instead, they wasted away with the rest of the people while Judith devised and executed her plan.

Judith also says that she is not *huioi titanōs*, sons of Titans. The Titans were the ancestors of the Greek gods and used to rule the world,<sup>522</sup> so the sons of Titans are the gods. Moore finds this reference “out of place on the lips of Judith” and ultimately explains it by noting that the word *titanes* is used in the Septuagint in 2 Sam 5:18 and 5:22<sup>523</sup> to refer to the Hebrew word *rēpā`îm*, and that *rēpā`îm* seem to be mortals, so the “sons of Titans” must also be mortals.<sup>524</sup> This is an unsatisfying explanation. In these two verses, the Valley of *rēpā`îm* is being translated as the Valley of Titans; this is a place name and not a straight reference to *rēpā`îm*. What is more, in several other places in the Septuagint, the Valley of *rēpā`îm* is translated either as the Valley of *gigantōn*, “the Valley of Giants,” or it is left untranslated, rendered into Greek as *Raphain*.<sup>525</sup> Where *rēpā`îm* are mentioned on their own, they tend to be portrayed as other than normal mortals.<sup>526</sup> A better explanation is that Judith’s reference to the “sons of Titans” not defeating Holofernes is a further reflection of her piety: it is not other gods, but YHWH, who, through her, has defeated Holofernes. As is evident throughout the book, the author of Judith clearly had some familiarity with Greek culture and traditions, so a mention of this element of

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<sup>522</sup> J. W. (John Willoby) Roberts and Oxford University Press, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>523</sup> Moore mistakenly cites 2 Kgs 5:18 and 5:22 instead of 2 Sam.

<sup>524</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 248.

<sup>525</sup> For *rēpā`îm* translated as *gigantōn*, see 1 Chr 11:15 and 14:9. For *rēpā`îm* rendered as *Raphain*, see Josh 15:8, 18:16, and 2 Sam 23:13.

<sup>526</sup> See for example Gen 14:5 and Deut 3:11, which seem to imply human-like creatures of great size. See also Job 26:5, Ps 88:10, Prov 2:18, 9:18, 21:16, Isa 14:9, 26:14, and 26:19, which seem to use *rēpā`îm* to mean “shades.” See also the Ugaritic material on the *rapiuma*, a cognate of Hebrew *rēpā`îm*, KTU 1:20-22. As Simon Parker writes, the *rapiuma* “have been viewed as representing (a) minor deities, (b) heroic warriors, (c) a tribal group, (d) the shades of the dead, or (e) some combination of (a)-(d)... [M]ost scholars emphasize their connection with the cult of the dead...” Smith and Parker, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 196.

Greek mythology is not odd, especially because it is used to show Judith's trust in her God over the deities of the surrounding peoples.

Judith next avers that *hupsēloi gigantes*, “lofty giants,” did not kill Holofernes. *Gigantes* is generally used in the Septuagint to translate *rēpā'îm*, *nepilîm*, or *ʿānāqîm*, which are portrayed as either overly large or supernatural.<sup>527</sup> In any event, Judith is drawing a firm distinction between herself and the giants. She is neither semidivine nor exceedingly large; her weapon is not her great size or strength but her beauty. It is also noteworthy that this verse refers to Judith defeating *dunatos*, “their powerful one.” As Moore notes, this is the same word the Septuagint uses to describe Goliath in 1 Sam 17.<sup>528</sup> Unlike in that chapter, though, in the Book of Judith it is not a young man who vanquishes the powerful one but Judith, “with the beauty of her face.” Philip Esler spends an entire book chapter on the parallels between David and Judith,<sup>529</sup> but ultimately, 16:6 makes the point that Judith is *not* a new David. In the point of view of this hymn, she is something even better, because she fells the enemy despite the dreadful handicap of being a woman and not a young man like David. However inadequate to the task David's weapon against Goliath, it is still a weapon, while Judith goes into “battle” armed only with her beauty. Her actual weapon, the sword, comes only later. The verse also serves to reinforce the point that it is by playing up her beauty that Judith is victorious.<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> Moore, *Judith*, 248.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid.

<sup>529</sup> Philip Francis Esler, *Sex, Wives, and Warriors: Reading Old Testament Narrative with Its Ancient Audience* (Eugene, Or: Cascade Books, 2011), 258–299. Esler argues that the author of Judith relied most heavily not on the story of Jael but on the story of David. I would agree that there are certainly correspondences between Judith and that tale, but the parallels are not enough to justify claiming that it represents the main influence of the author of Judith. In particular, Esler's argument of equivalence between David and Judith because both are outsiders is weak. It ignores that, in the social world of ancient Israel, the unlikeliest male hero, provided he is an Israelite, is never as much of an outsider as a woman. See Ibid., 287.

<sup>530</sup> Wills aptly points out the artistry in this verse and the surrounding verses. Verse 16:6 lists three types of warriors who did not play a part in Holofernes' demise, then ends with an exclamation that it was “Judith daughter of Merari with the beauty of her face.” Wills, “The Book of Judith,” III:1177.

## Judith through the Lens of Queer Theory

Many scholars have seen Judith as “acting male.” For example, as Benedikt Otzen has it, “Judith is a female, but she acts in all respects as a male...”<sup>531</sup> Wills writes that Judith is defined in opposition to the men around her: “She is aggressive and active, like a male warrior, while they are weak willed, passive, ‘feminine’ by most cultures’ standards.”<sup>532</sup> I would argue against those like Otzen and Wills who see Judith’s success as due to her ability to act like a man. Instead, Judith, like Jael in Judges, can be understood as performing the gender “female,” to spectacular effect. She sees that someone needs to bring the Assyrians down, and she intuits that she has the unique skill set necessary to accomplish the task. It is not simply that Judith is a woman. It is that she affects—by her clothing, perfume, jewelry, and more—beauty so stunning that no man can resist, that she is a master of seductive behavior, that she knows how to flatter, and that she has a quick wit. In short, Judith is a faux queen, loading herself up with bauble after bauble, playing the coquette, and literally throwing herself at her quarry’s feet to gain his lustful attention. She performs the desires and expectations of her male audience so well that they lose their common sense. We see this not only with Holofernes and his men but even earlier, in chapter 10, when Judith beguiles the leaders of Bethulia into allowing her to undertake a secret mission in the middle of a war zone. Her behavior is no less a performance of gender because she is a female character to begin with; this fact actually makes clearer that all gender is a

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<sup>531</sup> Benedikt Otzen, *Tobit and Judith* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 111.

<sup>532</sup> Wills, “The Book of Judith,” III:1132.

performance. What is more, in a Butlerian sense, her performance actually destabilizes the gender binary through parody.<sup>533</sup>

The concept of the lesbian femme can contribute to our understanding of Judith as well. Sue-Ellen Case writes about how the lesbian butch and femme play with gender, divorcing feminine signifiers from the idea of sex with men. She writes, “butch-femme roles evade the notion of ‘the female body’ as it predominates in feminist theory, dragging along its Freudian baggage and scopophilic transubstantiation.”<sup>534</sup> The butch and femme have freedom because they are outside the heterosexual system of sexual exchange. Judith enjoys a similar, though not identical, freedom. Judith is a widow and clearly, throughout the story, intends to stay that way. Her sexuality, tempting though it is, is never up for grabs, for either Assyrian or Israelite men. She enters the Assyrian camp dressed to kill and sets the soldiers drooling, but never intends to have sex with any of them. And at the end of the book, we read, “Many desired her, but no man knew her all the days of her life from the time Manasseh, her husband, died and was gathered to his people” (16:22).

Of course, although Judith knows that she is sexually unavailable, the men in her life clearly do not, as evidenced by Holofernes’ plan to have sex with her and by her many suitors after the assassination. This raises the question of whether a chaste woman is fully outside the transactional system of sexuality.<sup>535</sup> Is celibacy a way of removing oneself from the sexual

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<sup>533</sup> For more on Judith and parody, see Sawyer, “Gender Strategies in Antiquity: Judith’s Performance,” 14–15. Sawyer’s analysis is sound, but her conclusion that the goal of the Book of Judith’s transgressive engagement with gender is “confirmation of the limitless power of the deity” seems like overreaching to me. As Sawyer’s work on Judith appeared in journals of theology, not biblical studies, however, perhaps it makes sense that she focus more on God’s hand in the book than I am wont to do here.

<sup>534</sup> Case, “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” 304.

<sup>535</sup> The “traffic in women” is a concept pioneered by Gayle Rubin. Rubin weaves together expansions and critiques of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s writings about the use of people to build capital, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s theories of kinship and gift exchange, Sigmund Freud’s theory that human psychological development is, or should be, controlled by the biological imperative to reproduce, and Jacques Lacan’s theory that women feel acutely the lack of a phallus not for its physicality but for the social status it confers. Rubin argues that cultures are built in large part on

marketplace? In commercial terms, has Judith removed herself from the shop window, or is she still displayed there, but with a “not for sale” sign across her chest, inviting passersby to ogle wistfully what they will never have? Judith Halberstam’s essay on the stone butch, the butch lesbian who does not permit sexual partners to physically stimulate her, is instructive.

Halberstam writes, “The stone butch has the dubious distinction of being possibly the only sexual identity defined almost solely in terms of what practices she does *not* engage in... What are the implications of a negative performativity for theorizing sexual subjectivities?”<sup>536</sup>

Halberstam attempts to make the stone butch legible by viewing her refusal to be touched as a result of her performed masculinity meeting her bodily femininity. The predilections of the stone butch do not necessarily represent pathology or even a lack, according to Halberstam. By refusing to be stimulated, she is not being stubbornly inscrutable but reacting to the difficulties of being “masculine on the streets and female in the sheets.”<sup>537</sup> The stone butch is not, however, the only example of sexual identity defined by the absence of sex; sexual continence, both virginity and celibacy, are also characterized by what they don’t involve.

Kathryn Schwarz’s article on virginity in the early modern period, centering on Queen Elizabeth I, extends Halberstam’s work, making it more plainly applicable to Judith. Schwarz asks a question highly relevant for Judith: “What happens if women perform, knowingly, the conditions that lend them social value?”<sup>538</sup> She writes further:

Social compliance, the deliberate playing of prescribed sexual roles, seems... an evacuation of choice through the acquiescence in bodily use. Yet something in that deliberateness, that knowing satisfaction of requirements, has the potential to turn askew

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the exchange of women, whether as slaves, prostitutes, or wives. Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” 176. Men have rights to women that women do not have to men, or even to themselves. *Ibid.*, 177. Rubin’s theory accounts for the economic, sociological, and psychological causes and effects of this phenomenon.

<sup>536</sup> Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 123.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>538</sup> Kathryn Schwarz, “The Wrong Question: Thinking through Virginity,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13 (2002): 6.

the locations from which demands are spoken and the processes through which they mean.<sup>539</sup>

In effect, when virginity is “done right,” it can be a sexual orientation of its own, a radical one by which a woman intentionally distances herself from men and resists the patriarchy. Some aspects of Schwarz’s article are uniquely applicable to virginity, such as her discussion of the early modern idea that a virgin is a blank slate on which her first lover can impress his will. However, Schwarz’s broader argument about abstinence and agency is easily applied to the chaste widow. Just as there was something campy and subversive about Elizabeth’s vaunted public virginity, there is something in Judith’s portrayal of the sexually virtuous widow that is a little too well-played to be incidental. Before she paints on the makeup and loads on the jewelry to do sexually-available-woman drag, Judith wears sackcloth, sleeps in a tent on the roof, and fasts obsessively to do celibate-widow drag. Just as she plays ostentatiously with the signs of femininity to mess with Holofernes’ head, she overdoes the ascetic routine to send clear “keep away” signals. After Judith completes her mission and returns to Bethulia, she consciously adopts the chaste widow role again. We are not told whether she returns to her prior fasting, tent-sleeping, sackcloth-wearing ways, but she does reject all suitors—and there are a lot of them to reject. What is more, right after we learn that Judith refuses to remarry, the text says that she “became increasingly great.” The connection of her greatness to her chastity is not explicit, but we can deduce that she is considered great in part because she rejects all proposals of marriage, staying celibate. She is appealing and admirable because she is lovely, virtuous, and completely off-limits. It’s not that she is out of the game entirely; it’s that she’s making the rules.

Halberstam’s point about a sexuality defined by what it does not involve works doubly well for Judith: as a celibate widow, she is defined by her lack of sexual engagement, and as a

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<sup>539</sup> Ibid., 7.



widow, she is defined by her lack of a husband. A widow is a woman whose husband has died. It is not an active condition; one does necessarily not need to *do* anything to move from wife to widow. It is something done *to* a woman, as evidenced by the verb form's transitive status; her late husband has "widowed" her. A woman can become a widow through losing her beloved husband of 50 years to a heart attack or through ordering a hit on a husband who abuses her. Her activity does not matter. Once she has become a widow, she remains one unless she dies or remarries (and in the latter case, she is still one who has been "widowed," even though she is no longer a "widow"); whether she observes her widowhood by donning a black veil and joining a bereavement group, or by donning skinny jeans and joining Match.com, she is still a widow. Judith takes the passive condition of widowhood and makes it an active one. She constructs her widowhood daily by her extreme self-denial, and she actively maintains her status throughout the story by avoiding remarriage, even though getting remarried would clearly be the natural choice for a woman of her status, beauty, and historical period.

The answer to my earlier question about Judith's status on the sexual market is that she is still in the window of the shop, there for customers to peruse, made even more desirable by the fact that she isn't available for purchase. What's more, she has dressed herself up for display, and she has made the not-for-sale sign. She cannot completely take herself out of the system of sexual exchange, but she can construct her own identity that is defined by the lack of sex. She can play the role of the widow to the hilt, and, because it is a role, she can turn around and put on another, that of the temptress, when the times call for it. Men—the Assyrians, her Israelite suitors, even the Bethulian leaders who tell this strident woman to leave them alone and go pray for the town's deliverance—look at her and see a female body, but all along, she is playing with roles and signs.

The theoretical framework of Lee Edelman on reproductive futurism is also instructive for the story of Judith. For Edelman, reproductive futurism is the relentless focus on the child and, in turn, on the self-perpetuation of the individual.<sup>540</sup> He asks what it would mean not to take the side of the child and comes up with queerness as his answer, not only as a resistance to the focus on the child but also a refusal to view history as a “linear narrative.”<sup>541</sup> In other words, the concept of queerness can serve as a locus for addressing the here-and-now rather than directing all one’s energies to the future. In this way, we can see Judith as a character with a certain queerness. One of the reasons she is so fascinating in the context of biblical literature is her childlessness, and, more than that, the fact that the text makes nothing of it. The Bible and extracanonical literature are filled with begetting, particularly the begetting of sons, but not for Judith. As such, she stops the linear history clock; when we read her story, we do not think of the fate of her children. For whatever reason, Judith is outside the bounds of the biblical world’s reproductive futurism. While other biblical heroines’ stories, like those of Ruth and Tamar, end with a report of the sons they have borne, Judith’s ends with her own death and the assurance of her people’s security.

This is especially striking because the Book of Judith as a whole is engaged with reproductive futurism, even while Judith herself is not. In the first seven chapters, before Judith appears, eight references are made to children. For example, Judith 7:27 reads, in reference to the Assyrians, “For it would be better for us to become spoil for them: we will be slaves, but we will remain alive and we will not see our infants dying in front of us, or our wives’ and our children’s lives stopping before us.”<sup>542</sup> The inhabitants of Bethulia frame their desire for surrender in terms

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<sup>540</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>542</sup> The other references to children in the first seven chapters are in 4:10, 4:11, 4:12, 7:14, 7:22, 7:23, and 7:32.

of their children's welfare. There are frequent references to the child; the struggle of the Judeans acquires meaning through the appeal to future generations. By contrast, three of the four times Judith herself, in the second half of the book, invokes children, it is in the metaphorical sense, comparable to the locution "children of Israel." An example is her prayer to God in 9:4: "You gave their wives for spoil and their daughters into captivity, and all their plunder to be divided among your beloved children, truly zealous for you, who abhorred the pollution of their blood and appealed to you for help..."<sup>543</sup> The children here are God's children, the Israelite people. They are not the future of Israelite society; they are the present of Israelite society. Once, in her victory song in chapter 16, she refers to actual infants and children, but, though she calls them "my children," they plainly are not. The line reads, "He said he would burn my borders and kill my young men with the sword and cast my sucklings on the ground and give my infants for plunder and my virgins for spoil" (16:4). The children are no more Judith's than the young men and the virgins are, but in this verse she refers to them as "hers," presumably because, by saving them, she has some responsibility for them. It is a vague reference in contrast with the male leaders' specific appeals to the well-being of their actual children. The verse also calls to mind the biblical Deborah, who refers to herself as "a mother in Israel" although she is not reported to have children (Judg 5:7). Both Deborah and Judith are metaphorical "mothers" in that they delivered their people through battle, but neither is apparently a mother in the reproductive sense.<sup>544</sup> It also stands out for being Judith's only reference to actual children in a book where the men reference them frequently.

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<sup>543</sup> Judith's other references to children in a metaphorical sense are in 9:13 and 16:12.

<sup>544</sup> These texts' connections between motherhood and war are not entirely unique. For use of warrior imagery in Ancient Near Eastern childbirth rituals, see Meredith Burke Hammons, *Before Joan of Arc: Gender Identity and Heroism in Ancient Mesopotamian Birth Rituals* (Thesis Ph.D. in Religion--Vanderbilt University, 2008), 101–119.

Judith as a heroine can be seen as standing against the idea of reproductive futurism elsewhere in the book and, indeed, in the Hebrew Bible in general. When she saves her people, nothing indicates that she is thinking of the children or the future. She is oriented toward the here-and-now. She is not concerned with protecting the future replication of herself or her society, but with saving the people as they already exist. We can extrapolate that Judith's bravery assures the survival of her people as a religious and ethnic entity in the future, but it is an abstract survival. Those notional children referred to by the town leaders will survive. The line of Judith herself, though, will have no future. In Edelman's terms, she has a certain queerness. Edelman argues that queerness is not a "death drive" but in fact allows people to live in themselves without the obsession with replicating the future in the form of offspring. Judith embodies this principle. In contrast to Mary, who, as discussed above, is also praised as "most blessed among women," Judith's (and Jael's) blessedness is unconnected to reproduction or to the future. Unlike Mary, who is valuable because of her child, Judith is valuable because she delivers the people who already exist.

Edelman's theory of futurism and queerness, though, goes beyond the reproductive, calling into question the obsession with the future in general. He coins a term, *sinthomosexuality*, which involves a sense of *jouissance* and an appreciation of individual existence, along with a refusal to buy into the idea that the present takes its meaning from the future. Those who fail to buy into the cult of the child are suspect because they force the rest of the world "to brood upon the abyss," Edelman holds.<sup>545</sup> It is not the homosexual who is controlled by the death drive, as Edelman quotes a handful of conservatives speculating, but all who rely on futurism to give meaning to what is seen as an otherwise meaningless existence.

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<sup>545</sup> Edelman, *No Future*, 41.

Judith can be understood through Edelman's frame of the *sinthomosexual*. The male leaders of Bethulia are preparing to surrender to the Assyrians, for the sake of the children, unless a miracle comes along. Judith, by contrast, is not willing to sell the present for the sake of the future, and she is not prepared to wait for God to decide whether to intervene. Judith as a character seems to instruct the reader to see her on her own terms. She focuses relentlessly on the present, as in her entreaty to the town leaders to give up their surrender plan, saying, "Never in our generation nor in this day has any tribe or family or people or city worshipped hand-fashioned gods, as happened in previous days" (8:18). She argues that the present generation is righteous enough to win the favor of God, and it is on this basis that she pleads with the leaders to reconsider their plan. In this speech, she does not invoke the likely suffering of the children under the siege, as the town leaders, the Moabites and Edomites, and the narrator all do in the preceding chapter. Instead, she invokes the potential "slaughter of our brothers" if the surrender occurs (8:22). Her speech reads like a rebuke. She seems to be saying, "Stop planning only for the future; if you surrender, you will destroy the present."

Judith also shows a lack of engagement with futurism by actively performing her present role as a widow, as discussed above. Her widowhood is invoked seven times in the text, three of those by Judith herself in her prayer and victory song. She does not focus on what she could be one day—a wife, again—but on what she is and what she has in the present. She uses her present tools—status, wits, and good looks—to accomplish what the men of the town can't or won't. When she takes them to task for agreeing to surrender in five days if God does not come through for them, they tell her they have no choice and must simply wait, and that she should go home and pray. She does pray, twice invoking her status as a widow when she speaks to God, but she also refuses to sit and wait. She has faith in God, but not in the leaders, and she knows she must act

now. When she refuses passivity in her role as widow, she also refuses the relentless focus on what will happen in the future.

Judith's non-engagement with futurism provides her the space to be transgressive in matters of gender. If she were to buy into the futurism that preoccupies others in the book, she would likely have to be sexually available. Sexual availability would have hampered her ability to play with the signs of femininity and widowhood. She is only able to do this to such great effect because she knows that she is entirely unavailable: she will not have sex with Holofernes, and she will not remarry. With celibacy, she is like Case's butch and femme or Schwarz's virgin queen, able to use gender and sexual signifiers in her own way. Without celibacy, she would be incapable of true gender camp; the reader would always wonder whether her story would end with a seduction or perhaps a marriage, thereby bringing all of her play with signs retroactively under the umbrella of normative sexuality. Judith *must*, for the sake of the plot, play with gender and sexuality. Would the leaders of the town have given her their blessing to do who-knows-what with the Assyrians had she not played her part as the virtuous widow so well? Would they have acceded to her demand for them to open the gate to let her out into the night? Would she have been able to win Holofernes' trust had she not been so beautiful, so done-up, so obsequious (though, to our knowledge but not his, double-tongued) in her flattery? Would she have been able to move in and out of the Assyrian camp so easily? Would she have gotten Holofernes alone and dead-drunk had she not led him to believe she would put out? Would she have been as well-remembered by her people had she not come back home and become the dutiful widow again?

## Chapter 5

### *Biblical Antiquities* 31

Like Judith and the Jael described in Judges, the version of Jael in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* is not the ideal woman. In a Jewish text, she is not portrayed as Jewish. Just as in the earlier Jael story, the Jael of the *Biblical Antiquities*, or *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, is a Kenite (*L.A.B.* 31:3). While she is described in Judg 4:17 as "Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite," here her husband's name is not mentioned.<sup>546</sup> She gets even less of a backstory than in the earlier text. She is not "wife of Heber the Kenite" but simply "wife of a/the Kenite."<sup>547</sup> She is not given any social location other than her status as a foreigner, or at least the wife of a foreigner.<sup>548</sup> Foreign women, and foreigners in general, are not treated kindly in the Jewish literature that is roughly contemporaneous with Pseudo-Philo.<sup>549</sup> If intermarriage or war captivity is implied, this

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<sup>546</sup> Jacobson notes that a variant manuscript adds the name "Aber" for Jael's husband but that all other manuscripts lack the husband's name. Jacobson, *A commentary*, 848. Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch sees the absence of Jael's husband's name as "de-emphasiz[ing] her foreign connections" so as not to credit a foreign woman with saving Israel. Burnette-Bletsch, "At the Hands of a Woman," 58. This does not ring true to me, as Pseudo-Philo could have better accomplished such a goal by leaving out Jael's Kenite affiliation altogether. As the text stands, it gives Jael less of a pedigree, presenting her simply as the wife of a foreigner, not even the wife of a foreigner who is important enough to be named.

<sup>547</sup> Since Latin nouns normally lack a definite or indefinite article, a translation must be decided on the basis of context or syntax.

<sup>548</sup> Unlike in Judges, however, Jael in *L.A.B.* praises the Israelites lavishly. In her prayer in 31:5, she avers that God has favored Israel, comparing that nation to the lead ram in a flock. Though she may be a non-Israelite, she apparently has a fervent belief in the God of Israel and the Israelite nation's inherent chosenness.

<sup>549</sup> In other parts of the *Biblical Antiquities* itself, for example, intermarriage is equated with idolatry and major concerns are expressed about foreigners, particularly foreign women. Loader, *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality*, 299. Burnette-Bletsch, "At the Hands of a Woman," 54. In *L.A.B.* 18, Balaam plots against Israel by telling Balak to station beautiful Midianite women naked and draped in gold and jewels to entice the Israelite men. Philo of Alexandria also lingers on an extrapolation of the Midianite threat of Numbers 31, focusing again on the danger of foreign women. William R. G. Loader, *Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in the Writings of Philo and Josephus and in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), 77. It is true that most of the negative depictions of foreign women in this period are in the context of painting them as unsuitable marriage partners for Jewish men. This is obviously not a concern in the case of Jael, whose husband is not Jewish. However, I would hold that there are ramifications for a character like Jael of the negative portrayal of foreign women. When the literature of this period paints foreign women as hypersexual and sinful, would an audience of the time conclude that such women are only problematic when trying to seduce Jewish men? More likely, readers or listeners would come away with a negative impression of foreign women in any situation. A character like Jael, then, would be an unlikely heroine for a 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. Jewish reader. In Philo's

could be relevant for Pseudo-Philo's Jael. If Jael is envisioned as a Jewish woman married to a Kenite instead of as a Kenite herself, this text's perception that a Jewish woman marrying out is a serious indignity would cast a negative light on Jael. If *T. Moses* is referring to Jewish women taken by the enemy during war, the relevance for Jael is even more pronounced, since *L.A.B.* 31 has Sisera plotting to abduct women, in particular Jael, as concubines. There are also the Psalms of Solomon, most likely dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E.<sup>550</sup> Psalms of Solomon 16:7-8 decries the temptation of the wicked woman who "transgresses the law."<sup>551</sup> While the woman who sins could be a Jew, I would suggest that she may be instead a foreigner, like the "strange woman" of Proverbs.<sup>552</sup>

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version of the story, the Midianite women are specifically exhorted to lead Israel's men to idolatry through sex (*Virt.* 36-40, *Mos.* 1.295). Josephus, who wrote in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E., also elaborates on the biblical story of the Midianite woman, using it to inveigh against intermarriage (*A.J.* 4.129-144). *Ibid.*, 286-287. Josephus also uses the marriage of a Jerusalem high priest's brother to a Samaritan woman as an object lesson in how intermarriage can lead to improper religious observance, since that union evidently results in the building of the Samaritan temple (*A.J.* 11). *Ibid.*, 301. Second Baruch, generally dated to the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., condemns those who have "mingled themselves with the seed of the mingled nations," which Loader reads as a statement against intermarriage (*2 Bar* 42:4). Similarly, *2 Baruch* 48:23 praises those who do not mix with the nations. A.F.J. Klijn, "2 (Syriac Apocalypse Of) Baruch," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 616. Loader, *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality*, 98, 100-101. The Testament of Moses, dating to the late 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E. or early 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E., refers to the Jews' wives being "given to the gods of the nations" (*T. Moses* 8:3), which could be a reference to intermarriage, "sacred prostitution," or war captivity. J. Priest, "Testament of Moses," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 920-921, 931. Loader, *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality*, 111, 114.

<sup>550</sup> R.B. Wright, "Psalms of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 631. Loader, *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality*, 343-343.

<sup>551</sup> Loader, *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality*, 357.

<sup>552</sup> A notable exception to the negative depictions of foreigners in general and foreign women in particular in literature of this period is *Joseph and Asenath*. The date and provenance of this text is hotly disputed, but it probably dates between the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E. and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 187-188. Loader, *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality*, 300-301. Even if it is Christian in origin or contains Christian layers, early Christianity was not rigidly separable from contemporary Judaism. See Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). The character of Asenath, daughter of an Egyptian priest, is lovely and virtuous, if a bit petulant, even though she is a foreign woman. Of course, Asenath ultimately converts and is "the model proselyte." Loader, *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality*, 310. Thus, she should not be seen at the beginning of the story as a foreign woman, but as a Jew-to-be. In any event, the story's concern with an intermarriage between Joseph and Asenath, before the latter converts, speaks to the suspicion surrounding foreign women and their capacity to corrupt Jewish men.



Implicit in the story of Jael in *L.A.B.* is that the character does not have children. This is perhaps even more the case here than it is in Judges; Pseudo-Philo's version of the story is longer and contains several additional elements that seem incompatible with children at home. First, the element of seduction in *L.A.B.* is more obvious than it was in Judges: Jael is said to be very beautiful and, unlike her counterpart in Judges 4, adorns herself before going out to meet Sisera. Furthermore, she scatters rose petals on the bed before Sisera comes in, and he is apparently taken enough with her that he wants her as a wife or concubine. It seems unlikely that Jael would venture to seduce Sisera amid a passel of progeny; anyone who has been around children would also find it unlikely that they would be able to resist disturbing the rose petals. Second, the events of this story appear to play out over a longer period of time than the events of Judges 4-5. Sisera appears to sleep twice here, waking to drink. There is enough time while he slumbers for Jael to go out to her flock, milk it, and return. There is also enough time for her to pray, at length, twice. She also tells Sisera that he will hide with her until nightfall, apparently a significant period of time. If Jael were meant to be portrayed as a mother, it is unlikely that she would have such a large block of time uninterrupted by her children. It also seems illogical that Sisera would have been able to sleep soundly, twice, if there were children afoot. Finally, as is the case in Judges, it is difficult to imagine the bloody events of Jael's story transpiring in front of her children. It is one thing to murder a general in one's tent for (someone else's) God and country, but quite another to do the deed with a small, impressionable audience watching.

Evidence from outside *Biblical Antiquities* points to a society where women would have been expected to be mothers.<sup>553</sup> As Tal Ilan points out, Josephus wrote that the only purpose of marriage was reproduction (*CA* 2.199).<sup>554</sup> Some writers in early Judaism went a step farther,

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<sup>553</sup> DesCamp, "Why Are These Women Here?," 57.

<sup>554</sup> Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 105.

praising those who abstained from non-reproductive intercourse. Thus the *Testament of Issachar*, one of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, praises Rachel for abstaining from sex with Jacob and for marrying him only to produce children (*T Issa* 2).<sup>555</sup> The inability to produce children was a major problem that might occasion divorce or an appeal to miracles.<sup>556</sup> There were some sources of the period which valued sex for its own sake and not merely to produce offspring.<sup>557</sup> However, contemporary sources generally viewed children as an imperative and barrenness as a crisis.

Non-Jewish sources of the age also focus on women as mothers. The purpose of marriage in Rome was the conception and rearing of children.<sup>558</sup> Perhaps a century before Pseudo-Philo's age, during the reign of the Roman emperor Augustus, Rome passed laws encouraging marriage and parenthood by limiting the ability of the unmarried and childless to inherit. In addition, the laws encouraged women to have large families, since women could only be released from guardianship after birthing three or four children, depending on the class status of the woman.<sup>559</sup> Further, there were penalties for not being married and having children.<sup>560</sup> The laws were issued in about 18 B.C.E. and revised in 9 C.E.<sup>561</sup> In the same time period, we have a eulogy for a woman who was replete with virtues but could not have children with her husband; she saw this as her fault and proposed a divorce so that he might have children with another woman, though

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<sup>555</sup> Ibid., 108. The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, including the Testament of Issachar, are unfortunately notoriously difficult to date. Most scholars put them somewhere between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., with some characterizing them as purely Jewish texts and others seeing them as squarely early Christian. H.F.D. Sparks, "The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," in *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford Biblical Studies Online, 2013).

<sup>556</sup> Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 112–113.

<sup>557</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>558</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whore, Wives, and Slaves*, 166.

<sup>559</sup> Of course, such an intense state interest in matters of maternity implies that Roman women were having fewer children than their leaders thought appropriate or beneficial. Indeed, Fantham et al. remark that in this time period Roman society found itself engaged in a debate about sexuality, with the conclusion that at least for elites, it "must be contained within the framework of marriage and reproduction." Fantham, *Women in the Classical World*, 313.

<sup>560</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whore, Wives, and Slaves*, 166.

<sup>561</sup> Fantham, *Women in the Classical World*, 302–303.

he refused.<sup>562</sup> Roman authors excoriated women who avoided childbirth through abortion or contraception so as not to spoil their figures.<sup>563</sup> Thus, in this environment, Pseudo-Philo's Jael would have been a non-normative woman. For both her foreignness and childlessness, a character like this would not have been the ideal woman of the age.

### The Preparation

<sup>3</sup> When Sisera, on a horse, had fled to save his life, Jael the wife of the Kenite adorned herself in her finery and went out to meet him, and the woman was exceedingly beautiful. Seeing him, she said to him, "Come in and eat some food and sleep until evening; I will send my servants with you. For I know that you will remember me and repay me in kind." And entering, Sisera saw roses scattered on the bed, and he said, "If I will be safe, I will go to my mother, and Jael will be my woman."

<sup>4</sup> After this Sisera was parched and said to Jael, "Offer me a little water, because I am disjointed and my soul is burned by a devouring flame that I saw in the stars." Jael said to him, "Rest a little, and then you will drink."...

<sup>6</sup> When Jael returned and entered, Sisera roused and said to her, "Give me something to drink, because I am burning greatly and my soul is blazing." Jael took wine mixed with milk and gave it to him to drink. He drank it and fell asleep.

In the lead-up to the assassination of Sisera in *L.A.B.* 31, Jael uses a mixture of sexual and maternal elements to gain the general's trust. This is reminiscent of the text on which the chapter is based, Judges 4-5. However, while the maternal imagery is roughly equally prominent here and in Judges, the sexual element is far more pronounced in *Biblical Antiquities*.<sup>564</sup> Many scholars have seen this as the influence of the Book of Judith on Pseudo-Philo, which seems

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<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>563</sup> Suzanne Dixon, *Reading Roman Women: Sources, Genres and Real Life* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 56-57.

<sup>564</sup> Pieter W van der Horst, "Portraits of Biblical Women in Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, no. 5 (1989): 36 would agree. Oddly, Loader (Loader, *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality*, 279.) claims that the story of Jael and Sisera in Pseudo-Philo is *less* sexually loaded than the one in Judges. I am baffled by this statement.

probable.<sup>565</sup> Jael's performance of the gender "female" begins even before she and Sisera meet. Presumably knowing that he is fleeing in her direction, Jael "adorned herself in her finery and went out to meet him, and the woman was exceedingly beautiful" (*L.A.B.* 31:3). This is a different scenario than in Judges 4-5. First of all, in this version of the story, unlike in the earlier tale, Jael dresses up in preparation for Sisera. This is reminiscent of Judith getting dressed up to go into the Assyrian camp.<sup>566</sup> As a soldier might put on armor before going out to battle, both Judith and Pseudo-Philo's Jael put on feminine adornments before meeting their foes. Jael's dressing up adds a clearer sexual element to her meeting with Sisera. The position of the declaration of her beauty, after she has put on adornments, implies that whatever natural assets she has, her decision to do herself up in feminine finery has enhanced her appearance.

The "going out" scene is also different from its counterpart in Judges because here, we lack any information about Sisera's destination. In Judges 4:17, Sisera is explicitly said to flee toward Jael's tent; she steps outside, meets him, and flags him down. As I argued above, in Judges, Jael's "going out" in and of itself is sexually suggestive, as is her exhortation to Sisera to "turn aside, my Lord, turn aside to me." But, I would suggest, Jael's behavior in *L.A.B.* is even more sexually charged because Sisera was not necessarily already heading for her encampment. For a woman, going out to meet and beckon a man who is not already seeking her out is more sexually aggressive than going out to meet a man who is looking for shelter in the neighborhood. If Sisera is already fleeing toward Jael's tent,<sup>567</sup> her going to meet him is sexually suggestive, yes, but she is also giving him the shelter that he already is actively seeking. If Sisera is merely on the run, and not necessarily fleeing toward Jael's encampment, her stepping out to persuade

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<sup>565</sup> Burnette-Bletsch, "At the Hands of a Woman," 59.

<sup>566</sup> Brown, *No Longer Be Silent*, 52-53.

<sup>567</sup> In *L.A.B.*, Jael is never explicitly said to live in a tent, but it may be permissible to infer that she is meant to because of the text's close relationship to Judges 4-5.

him to hide with her rather than continuing on is far more salacious in its implication. In fact, perhaps this is one reason why Jael in Pseudo-Philo's story is said to adorn herself in finery: if a regular-looking woman, rather than this bombshell version of Jael, met Sisera and invited him in, perhaps he would not have stopped. Perhaps the fact that the woman who came to meet Sisera was "exceedingly beautiful" led him to believe he might receive more than a hiding place, a nap, and a drink from Jael.

Sisera's own words before he even meets Jael also lead the reader to see sexuality infusing every aspect of this story. Sisera's intentions are reported in the speech of Deborah to Barak: "I will go down to overcome Israel with my strong arm, and I will divide their spoil among my servants, and I will take the beautiful women for myself as concubines" (31:2). The author's purpose in putting such a statement in the mouth of Sisera appears to be to justify Sisera's murder by ascribing to him rapacious intentions. But it also has the effect of giving Sisera's interactions with Jael a sexual cast: we know that Sisera intends to take beautiful women as sexual captives, so when he encounters a woman who we are told is beautiful, we are primed to suppose that he will try to take her.

Jael's words to Sisera also encourage a sexual reading of the situation. Her invitation to "come in" is ambiguous, especially if there is a Hebrew *bô'* underlying the Latin *ingredere*. Furthermore, her statement, "I know that you will remember me and repay me in kind," can be read in several different ways, some of them sexual.<sup>568</sup> Is Jael implying that she will provide Sisera with sexual hospitality such that he will feel compelled to favor her at a later date? Is she suggesting that the food and shelter she gives him will lead to him "repaying" her, in his mind, by having sex with her? Is she anticipating Sisera's desire to "repay" her by making her his wife

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<sup>568</sup> Burnette-Bletsch, "At the Hands of a Woman," 60.

or concubine? In any case, it is unquestionably suggestive for a dressed-up woman to walk up to a man she does not know and invite him into her tent; and it is even more suggestive when she implies that they will soon have a lasting bond because he will be beholden to her.<sup>569</sup> Even from her first words and actions, Jael is carefully constructing a seductive feminine persona to entice Sisera.

What comes next cements the theory that Jael is performing the feminine to make Sisera vulnerable to her eventual attack. When he enters, he sees rose petals scattered on Jael's bed. It is a scene that would not be out of place in Hollywood,<sup>570</sup> but its seductive implications would have been clear to a 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. audience as well.<sup>571</sup> More to the point, the implications of the rose petals on the bed are clear to Sisera. It is only after he sees the petals that he is overcome with the desire to marry Jael, because the petals tell him that she is a sexual creature who is willing to have sex with him. This reads to me as a comic element: Sisera resolves to marry a woman he has just met on the basis of, ultimately, a handful of flower petals scattered rather unsubtly on her bed. If the rose-petal trope would have been transparent to readers, its comedic value would have been as well. Sisera loses his head over what, even then, may have been viewed as a silly, over-the-top "romantic" gesture. Jael intends the petals to stir Sisera's passion, and they do—to humorous heights.

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<sup>569</sup> Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible*, 141.

<sup>570</sup> For a small sampling of the use of the rose-petal trope in popular culture, see Graeme Clifford, *Frances* (Universal, 1983), Pamela Fryman, "Tick Tick Tick," *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, November 14, 2011), Julie Anne Robinson, "Beat Your Heart Out," *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, February 5, 2009), and Bon Jovi, *Bed of Roses*, CD single, *Keep the Faith* (Mercury, 1993). The trope is so recognizable that its use in recent movies and television shows is often played for humor or irony. See for example Sam Mendes, *American Beauty*, Drama, 1999, Robby Benson, "The One Where Monica and Richard Are Just Friends," *Friends* (NBC, January 30, 1997), and Michael Gershman, "Passion," *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, February 24, 1998).

<sup>571</sup> Jacobson, *A commentary*, 849. Jacobson cites R.G.M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, who write that the bed-of-roses motif was common and came from Greek erotic literature. R. G. M. (Robin George Murdoch) Nisbet, *A Commentary on Horace Odes, Book 1* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 74.

Also common in Greek romances, Jacobson points out, was the theme of a man resolving that if he escapes safely, he will marry.<sup>572</sup> Because this plot point, too, likely would have been a known romantic element for an audience of the time, it, too, contributes to the erotic charge of the scene. It also adds a comedic element, because anyone familiar with the story of Jael in Judges or the story of Judith knows that all the romance in Pseudo-Philo is intended to mislead Sisera to his death. He is making plans for a future that will never come. Instead of returning to his mother, head held high, with a beautiful new woman on his arm, only Sisera's severed head will make the trip home.

Sexual innuendo is prominent in Pseudo-Philo's retelling of Jael's story, but the maternal element cannot be denied either. From Jael's first words to Sisera, she promises to mother him: she invites him in and tells him that he may eat and then sleep until the evening. She offers him shelter, warmth, and nourishment, just as a mother would. Sisera's invocation of his own biological mother is also significant. After he sees the rose petals, he does not simply declare that he will take Jael; he says that, if he survives, he will go to his mother and make Jael his "woman" (31:3). The effect of this mention of Sisera's mother is to create a parallel for the reader: Sisera longs to go to his own mother, but for now, Jael will play that role for him. He does not mention his father; home, safety, and marriage are associated with his mother, not his father.<sup>573</sup> If and when he escapes, he will go back to his real mother and Jael will transition from his surrogate mother to his "woman," whether that means wife, concubine, or something else. As Cheryl

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<sup>572</sup> Jacobson, *A commentary*, 849.

<sup>573</sup> Jacobson takes Jael's statement to Sisera in *L.A.B.* 31:7 that he should boast to "your father in hell" that he has been killed by a woman as indicating that Sisera's father is dead. *Ibid.*, 855. This is a reasonable inference considering that, in both Judges and *L.A.B.*, only his mother is mentioned. However, there is another possibility: Jael could be heaping a further insult on Sisera by suggesting that he is the son of the devil. Certainly by the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the devil or Satan was an integral part of some Jewish theology, as evidenced by the many New Testament references to the devil. These include references to people being the devil's offspring, such as John 8:44, Acts 13:10, and 1 John 3:10. All of these texts fall roughly in the same time period as Pseudo-Philo.

Exum posits with regard to Judges 4-5,<sup>574</sup> the author of the *Biblical Antiquities* also juxtaposes multiple kinds of mothers. Sisera has a loyal but vile mother, Themech, waiting for him at home, and he is led to believe that Jael is similarly loyal.

Jael's *faux*-mothering of Sisera continues once he is ensconced in her tent. He asks for water because he is parched, but she firmly tells him, "Rest a little, and then you will drink" (31:4). He listens, taking a nap instead of repeating his demand for water (31:5). Jael is playing the concerned mother role to the hilt.<sup>575</sup> Like any good mother, she does not always give her "child" exactly what he asks for. She knows better than he does, and she will give him what he needs, not necessarily what he wants. This scene also establishes for the reader that Jael, not Sisera, is in charge.<sup>576</sup> As in the version of the story in Judges, the mighty general has been reduced to a little boy, subject to his "mother's" orders.

Jael's mother-act continues in 31:5, where, as Sisera sleeps, she goes out to her flock of sheep. Just as in Judges, Jael plans to ply Sisera with milk, but here, we actually see her obtaining the milk. Consequently, in *L.A.B.* the milk is more closely connected with the female animal that provides it, and hence with maternity. This is not quite the rabbinic reading that Jael nourishes Sisera with milk from her own breast (*b. Nid.* 55b), but it is not far off. There is also some interesting gender play in this scene. While Jael is milking, she says to God that God has made Israel like no animal except "the ram who goes before and leads the flock," *arietem precedentem et ducatorem gregis* (31:5).<sup>577</sup> She then connects the ram, representing Israel, to the milk she is obtaining: "And look, I will take some of the milk of that flock, which you have

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<sup>574</sup> Exum, "Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?," 31–32.

<sup>575</sup> Burnette-Bletsch, "At the Hands of a Woman," 60. She writes, "Having lured him into her tent using her sexuality, Jael now manipulates the man in a maternal manner. Through all of this, she acts within her appropriate societal roles as lover and mother pretending to fulfil every expectation of a woman in her society."

<sup>576</sup> Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible*, 141.

<sup>577</sup> "This high estimation of Israel comes from a pious outsider, Jael, who is more capable of recognizing Israel's true destiny than is Israel itself." *Ibid.*, 142.



made your people like, and I will go and give it to him to drink” (31:5).<sup>578</sup> Of course, it is not from a ram but from a ewe that Jael is getting the milk.<sup>579</sup> The strong leader animal, a male, is not precisely the same as the milk-providing animal, a female, but Jael conflates them. I would read this as a subtle play on Jael’s role as the hero of the story. It is not a ram’s strength but a ewe’s mothering capability that gives Jael what she needs to lull Sisera into an ill-fated sleep, and it is not a male soldier with his weapons of war but a female tent-dweller with her weapons of overplayed femininity who brings Sisera down.<sup>580</sup> Jael speaks of the ram but acts like the ewe.

Once Sisera wakes up, Jael mothers him further. He is still thirsty and asks again for something to drink—not water this time, just an unspecified beverage—and now, she obliges. She gives him wine mixed with milk, and he falls asleep again (31:6). Again, the explicit connection between flock and milk makes the motherhood symbolism especially apparent here. As in Judges, Jael gives her “little boy” his milk and puts him to bed. Here, though, she adds wine, which even more than milk is a soporific. She wants to ensure that the childlike man whom she is mothering will sleep soundly, not because, like a good parent, she wants him to be well-rested, but because she wants him to be too exhausted to notice her preparing to kill him.<sup>581</sup> This section of the story can also be read as a mother caring for her sick child. Sisera repeatedly describes his thirst as a “burning” or “blazing,” descriptors reminiscent of a fever. In this light, Jael can be seen as making sure her sick charge sleeps, giving him something to quash the

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<sup>578</sup> Mary Therese DesCamp argues that Jael’s seemingly contradictory metaphors about flocks are an attempt to show both her outsider status (as a foreign woman, she is not among God’s flock) and her desire to be aligned with the Israelites. Mary Therese DesCamp, *Metaphor and Ideology: Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum and Literary Methods through a Cognitive Lens* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 230.

<sup>579</sup> Jacobson, *A commentary*, 852.

<sup>580</sup> As Cheryl Anne Brown writes, “The milk is a crucial weapon in Jael’s arsenal. It will weaken Sisera so that she will effortlessly overcome him and slay him.” Brown also proposes that, for Pseudo-Philo, “milk” represents Torah or Wisdom, meaning that Jael uses the power of Torah/Wisdom to slay Sisera. Brown, *No Longer Be Silent*, 54.

<sup>581</sup> There may also be a nod to the Book of Judith, where Holofernes passes out from too much wine. Jacobson, *A commentary*, 853.

“burning,” then allowing him to sleep again. Sisera is also repeatedly described as being “disjointed,” “dissolved,” or “out of sorts” from the battle and the bad omens he senses in the stars; Jael gives him the impression that, like a good mother, she will put him back together.

Throughout the lead-up to the assassination of Sisera, Pseudo-Philo uses language associated with male and female, masculinity and femininity. This starts in the first sentence of Chapter 31, where Deborah says to Barak, “Rise and gird your loins like a man” (31:1). Here, Deborah makes explicit what is implicit in her order to Barak in Judg 4:6-7, when she tells him to attack Sisera’s troops. In Judges, Deborah only questions Barak’s “manhood” when he refuses to fight without her, but in the *Biblical Antiquities*, Deborah’s first words to Barak are a challenge. In effect, she is saying to him, “Act like a man would act. You *are* a man, aren’t you?”<sup>582</sup> As Pieter van der Horst points out, “Gird your loins like a man” is a quote from Job.<sup>583</sup> The context is Job 38:3 and 40:7, during God’s “answer” to Job about his undeserved suffering. God tells Job, both times, to gird his loins like a man and contemplate God’s infinite superiority and infallibility. In this context, “gird your loins like a man” is an aggressive statement designed to put Job in his place. These same words, spoken by a female military leader to a man, raise questions about what it means to act like a man or a woman. This appropriately sets the stage for the chapter’s engagement with and challenging of gender norms.

Some of the gendered language in the chapter is not apparent in English translation, though it is obvious in the Latin. For example, when Deborah quotes Sisera’s statement of his intentions toward Israel, she says, “I will go down to overcome Israel with my strong arm”

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<sup>582</sup> Burnette-Bletsch notes that Pseudo-Philo “omits Barak’s hesitancy to lead the attack.” Burnette-Bletsch, “At the Hands of a Woman,” 56. Similarly, DesCamp argues that *L.A.B.* completely omits the theme of Barak’s shame. DesCamp, “Why Are These Women Here?,” 68. It is true that in *L.A.B.*, Barak does not ask Deborah to go with him. However, Deborah’s preemptive, “Rise and gird your loins like a man” seems perhaps even more damning than Barak’s hesitancy in Judges 4.

<sup>583</sup> Horst, “Portraits of Biblical Women in Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*,” 35.

(31:1). In Latin, the adjective “strong” is *virtutis*, which also carries the sense of manhood, manliness, or vigor.<sup>584</sup> The speech continues with further declarations of manliness: Sisera says that he will divide the spoil between himself and his “attendants” or “servants”; the Latin word is *pueris meis*, literally “my boys.” The “boys,” though, will not get everything; the beautiful women, *speciosa mulieres*, will be his. Sisera is perfectly playing his masculine role here: his words are exactly what we would expect to hear from a general. He is a man’s man with a manly arm who plans to go with his boys to plunder Israel, taking the beautiful women as concubines, as any red-blooded man would. The effect of all this male language is multifaceted. First, it is comically over-the-top and may make the reader wonder why Sisera’s speech is so loaded down with manliness. What could be coming later in the story to justify all of this manly talk? Second, it highlights the text’s engagement with gender, making the reader think about how the rest of the characters perform gender. Sisera’s ultra-manliness at the beginning of the story calls to mind Jael’s over-the-top femininity two verses later. Finally, these are supposed to be the words of Sisera, that manly general, but they are actually spoken in the story by the female military leader Deborah. The words, laden with masculine overtones, take on new connotations if we imagine them uttered by a woman.

The next sentence is, by contrast, loaded with feminine language: “Because of this the Lord said of him that the arm of a weak woman would overcome him, and girls would seize his spoil, and also he himself would fall by the hand of a woman” (31:1). All of Sisera’s over-the-top manliness and braggadocio is now countered with a female-heavy retort. Sisera said, via Deborah, that his strong/manly/vigorous arm would overcome Israel; instead, *brachium infirme mulieris*, the arm of a weak woman, will overcome him. Sisera planned to divide the spoil among

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<sup>584</sup> E. A. (Ethan Allen) Andrews, *Harper’s Latin Dictionary. A New Latin Dictionary Founded on the Translation of Freund’s Latin-German Lexicon* (New York: American Book Company, 1907).

his “boys”; instead, *puelle*, “girls,” will seize the spoil. He planned to keep the beautiful women for himself as concubines; instead, he himself will be killed by a woman. The parallels are artfully rendered and further alert the reader that this story will deal repeatedly with masculinity and femininity.

God’s words to Deborah and Barak on the eve of battle also play with ideas of masculinity. God tells them, “Hurry and go, for your enemies are falling upon you, and disquiet their arms, and may you destroy the strength of their heart (*virtutem cordis eorum*), because I came so that my people would prevail.” God is saying, in effect, destroy the manly vigor of the troops. By vanquishing the opposing army, Israel will be “unmanning” it. This is even more the case for Sisera himself, who will be transformed from a tough soldier into a little boy under the care of his “mother,” and then into a headless corpse.

The repeated use of gendered language continues once Sisera meets Jael. The text does not say that “Jael” was exceedingly beautiful, but that “the woman” was exceedingly beautiful (31:3). She tells Sisera that when she sends him on his way, her “servants”—again, the Latin is *pueros*, “boys”—will go with him. Upon seeing the bed of roses, Sisera immediately has two thoughts: “mother” and “woman.” That is, he wants to go home to his mother and make Jael his woman.<sup>585</sup> The text repeatedly emphasizes the womanhood of Jael, since it is through her stunning performance of that womanhood that she will take down Sisera.

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<sup>585</sup> Burnette-Bletsch flags Sisera’s “crude” statement that Jael will be his “woman,” *femina*, in contrast to her earlier identification as “wife,” *uxor*, of a Kenite. Burnette-Bletsch, “At the Hands of a Woman,” 60. Though *femina* is usually translated as “wife,” Burnette-Bletsch is correct that this is not what Sisera says. The only caveat to translating “woman” in 31:3 is that underlying both *femina* and *uxor* may be the Hebrew *’iššâ*. If Pseudo-Philo wrote in Hebrew, he would not have had available separate words for “woman” and “wife,” so the separate Latin words used in *L.A.B.* 31 may have been interpretation on the part of the translator rather than authorial intent.

## The Act

<sup>7</sup> Jael took a stake in her left hand and approached him, saying, “If the Lord does this sign for me, I know that Sisera will fall by my hand. Look, I will throw him onto the ground from the bed on which he is sleeping, and if he does not realize, I will know that he is handed over.” And Jael pushed Sisera onto the ground from the bed. But that man did not realize, because he was much dissolved. Jael said, “Strengthen, my Lord today, my arm for your sake and for the sake of your people and for the sake of those who believe in you.” And Jael took the stake and put it above his temple and struck it with a mallet. While he was dying, Sisera said to Jael, “Look, pain has me, and I am dying like a woman.” And Jael said to him, “Go to brag to your father in hell and say that you have fallen by the hand of a woman.” And doing this, she slew him and positioned his body until Barak returned.

Jael approaches Sisera, weapon in hand, but before she can strike the killing blow, she prays again. In this version of the story, she needs to know that he is indeed defenseless before she can hit him, so she asks God for a sign: if Sisera does not wake when she pushes him off the bed, she will “know that he is handed over” (31:7). This is reminiscent of the Book of Judith, where the heroine pushes Holofernes’ headless corpse off of the bed, though here, Sisera is still alive.<sup>586</sup> This gives the text a comedic element: it seems unlikely that anyone, no matter how battle-weary and milk-and-wine-sated, could stay asleep after being rolled from the bed to the floor. Sisera’s improbably deep slumber can be read as divine confirmation of the rightness of Jael’s plan: she has asked God to send her a specific sign, and God does, even though the sign she asks for is ridiculous. But Sisera staying asleep can also be seen as a testament to the success of Jael’s fulfillment of the mothering role: she has tucked him in and lulled him to sleep so well that he does not wake up even when shoved onto the floor! This scene brings to mind those who praise a parent for his or her infant’s ability to sleep through anything. Like the mother whose

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<sup>586</sup> Jacobson, *A commentary*, 854.

child slumbers through shopping trips and airplane rides, Jael can be read as hyper-effective in her motherhood role because her “son” sleeps soundly in her care.

Jael’s womanhood and its role in Sisera’s death are emphasized in his final scene. While in Judges, the death scene is executed wordlessly, in the *Biblical Antiquities* Sisera gets to utter dying words, and Jael counters them with a verbal sucker-punch.<sup>587</sup> Both parts of the exchange stress the gendered nature of the interaction between the two characters. First, Sisera complains that he is in pain and dying “like a woman,” that is, not in battle but ingloriously and without fighting back.<sup>588</sup> It is noteworthy that, even as he is dying from a wound inflicted by Jael, he appeals to her for sympathy. This reinforces Jael’s success in playing the role of Sisera’s mother: even when she is the one who has delivered the killing blow, she is also the one he turns to for help and comfort. After Sisera speaks, Jael responds unsympathetically, gloating that she, a woman, has killed the mighty Sisera. Far from comforting Sisera, she rubs it in. The text’s emphasis that a woman killed Sisera serves both as fulfillment of Deborah’s prophecy in 31:1 and as reinforcement that it is only someone perfectly playing the role of “woman” who could have slain the general. Jael’s suggestion that Sisera “go to brag to your father in hell” is also noteworthy. All along, the text has invoked motherhood, both Jael’s and Sisera’s actual mother’s, but here, having delivered the fatal blow, Jael can finally stop appealing to maternity. With Sisera’s last breath, he appeals to his surrogate mother, and she tells him, in effect, “I don’t care. Go complain to your father.”<sup>589</sup>

When Jael kills Sisera, she “positions” his body so that she may show it to Barak. Like the similar scene in Judges, this is reminiscent of maternity, with the woman laboring in the

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<sup>587</sup> Jacobson writes that a soldier uttering dying words is “a literary staple going back to Homer.” *Ibid.*, 855.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>589</sup> Jacobson also notes that this scene has a parallel in the *Aeneid*, where Pyrrhus, about to kill Priam, tells him to report to Achilles in the underworld about Pyrrhus’s degeneracy. *Ibid.*

privacy of her tent and then inviting the man to look approvingly on her creation. Jael has “taken care of” this man-child, and now she is welcoming the man, Barak, to see what she has “created.”

Just as the lead-up to Jael’s murder of Sisera is laden with both masculine and feminine language, so the description of the act itself is as well. When Jael is readying to strike, she prays to God, “Strengthen (*virtutifica*), my Lord, today, my arm...” (31:7) She prays for manly vigor, though she is a woman. At the same time, we cannot say that Jael is trying to act like a man, because both she and Sisera make much of her femaleness while he is dying. Sisera complains that he is dying like a woman; Jael invokes Sisera’s father and affirms that yes, Sisera has fallen “by the hand of a woman.” Though Jael prays for an arm strengthened by manliness, she makes clear to Sisera that it was not her manly arm but her womanly hand that killed him. That hand offered him kindness but delivered death.

### The Aftermath

<sup>8</sup> Now Sisera’s mother was called Themech. She sent to her friends, saying, “Come and we will go out together to meet my son, and we will see the daughters of the Hebrews whom my son will bring with him as concubines.”

<sup>9</sup> Now Barak returned from pursuing Sisera very saddened because he had not found him. Jael went out to meet him and said, “Come and enter, blessed one of God, and I will hand over to you your enemy whom you pursued but did not find.” And Barak, having entered, found Sisera dead and said, “Blessed be the Lord, who sent your spirit and said, ‘Sisera will be handed over into the hand of a woman.’” And having said this he took away Sisera’s head and sent the thing to his mother, and delivered it to her, saying, “Take your son who you hoped would come with spoil.”

In the *Biblical Antiquities*, the mother of Sisera has a name, Themech.<sup>590</sup> Just as in Judges, she is portrayed unfavorably and serves as a foil for Sisera's death-dealing surrogate mother, Jael. As in Judges, we meet Sisera's mother, waiting for her son, after Sisera has already died. In Judges, Sisera's mother wonders why her son has not returned and reassures herself—or is reassured by her companions, the text is not clear—that he is gathering the human and material spoil. Here, though, Themech does not worry about Sisera's delay and concentrates only on one kind of spoil, women who will serve as her son's concubines. As Halpern-Amaru notes, she is confident that her son will return triumphant, not nervous that he is overdue.<sup>591</sup> It is an unattractive portrayal of Themech; we imagine her waiting eagerly to see the women her son will rape, perhaps hoping that she herself can use some of the war captives as domestic slave labor. This very unmaternal mother-figure serves as a contrast to Jael. Sisera, fleeing from battle, apparently craves mothering, and he finds it not in his cruelly-drawn mother but in Jael. Themech's presence in the story emphasizes Jael's maternal actions toward Sisera. Halpern-Amaru presents the intriguing hypothesis that throughout *Biblical Antiquities*, Pseudo-Philo links the destiny of the mother and the son: "For Pseudo-Philo the connection between mothers and destiny is direct evidence of the hand of God," she writes.<sup>592</sup> In other words, Themech's hateful words serve as an *ex post facto* justification of the death of Sisera.<sup>593</sup> This is particularly the case because the text portrays the mother and son as having a close relationship, as evidenced by

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<sup>590</sup> Betsy Halpern-Amaru suggests that the name Themech, which Pseudo-Philo also gives to the wife of Cain/mother of the negatively-portrayed Lamech in his retelling of Genesis, can be translated as "she shall be wiped out." Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Women," 94.

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>593</sup> Roman literature, too, often painted an unfavorable picture of the mothers of bad men. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whore, Wives, and Slaves*, 170.



Sisera's wish to go home to his mother.<sup>594</sup> Sisera must have been truly awful, the reasoning goes, with a mother like that.

Themech's role in the story also serves as an extra insult to Sisera. In another aspect of *L.A.B.* 31 that seems to come from the Book of Judith, Barak cuts off the head of Sisera's corpse and uses it as propaganda. In Judith, Holofernes' head is hung on the city wall to frighten the Assyrians away from attacking Israel; that the severed head also further shames its former owner is a bonus. In the *Biblical Antiquities*, by contrast, the battle is already won, so the head serves no military purpose. Rather, the head serves to bring further humiliation upon Sisera and further grief to his terrible mother.<sup>595</sup>

The conclusion of Chapter 31 also continues the motif of gendered words. When Themech speaks to her companions, she uses the word "son" twice, "daughters" once, and "concubines" once. In Themech's speech, "son" is supposed to be parallel to "daughters" and "concubines"; that is, Themech's son will bring daughters, and they will be concubines to Themech's son. The gendered words do, in fact, relate to one another, but not in the way Themech's mother assumes: a woman who would have been a concubine to Themech's son, instead brings the son low. Instead of taking her intended place as Sisera's sexual prey, Jael uses her femininity, the very source of her weakness, to make Sisera her prey.

The gendered language is also present in the final scene of the story. Jael shows Barak Sisera's body, and Barak repeats the story's motif again: "Blessed be the Lord, who sent your spirit and said, 'Sisera will be handed over into the hand of a woman.'" Barak acknowledges Deborah's prophecy and echoes Jael's words to Sisera. His words also serve to stress that what

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<sup>594</sup> Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Women," 98.

<sup>595</sup> Jacobson points out, "Tormenting a mother with the decapitated head of her son is not uncommon in classical literature. Most famous is the end of Euripides' *Bacchae*. Jacobson, *A commentary*, 857–858.

brought Sisera down was Jael's expertly executed femininity. Seeing the body in her tent, Barak must surmise that Jael did not chase Sisera into the tent at sword-point, then physically overpower and kill him. Barak must know that this woman instead tricked him into coming into her tent and letting his guard down, and he would likely guess that she managed to do it by means of seduction and motherliness.

### Pseudo-Philo's Jael through the Lens of Queer Theory

Many scholars have noted that when the *Biblical Antiquities* retells stories from the Bible, women get a larger role than they did in the biblical texts. Because of this, some have even proposed that Pseudo-Philo was a woman.<sup>596</sup> Some have seen *L.A.B.* as proto-feminist because it names previously nameless biblical women and greatly expands the roles of female characters, but others are skeptical. As Halpern-Amaru argues, Pseudo-Philo is preoccupied with motherhood and femininity. Where the nature of a female character does not permit the expansion of her maternal role, Pseudo-Philo diminishes her autonomy and makes her dependent on someone else, she argues.<sup>597</sup> Specifically regarding Jael, Halpern-Amaru writes, "The overall impact of the creatively restructured narrative is the transformation of the independent biblical heroine into a clever, but less autonomous, instrument of divine vengeance."<sup>598</sup> In this view, God, not Jael herself, is the star of the show, because Jael prays before each step she takes, asking for omens and strength from above.

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<sup>596</sup> DesCamp, "Why Are These Women Here?"

<sup>597</sup> Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Women," 105.

<sup>598</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

The issue of whether Pseudo-Philo's preoccupation with motherhood diminishes Jael's status as heroine is more complicated than Halpern-Amaru makes it out to be. If we examine the story through a queer-theory lens, it is apparent that Jael as a literary character is more powerful—and subversive—than Halpern-Amaru supposes. For example, it is true that the *Biblical Antiquities* plays up the maternal roles of many of its female characters. But in the case of Jael, who is not, as far as the reader can tell, an actual mother, the fact that she is “putting on” the role is especially apparent. As Judith Butler has argued and I have addressed earlier, all gender can be seen as a performance, a set of repeated and stylized acts that produces the ideas of “male” and “female” for society. The conscious parodying of societal ideas of gender, such as through drag, neo-burlesque, and butch/femme performance, can destabilize the traditional gender binary. This is what Jael in the *Biblical Antiquities* does through her performance as a surrogate mother for Sisera.

Jael does not just perform the role of mother, however; she portrays both surrogate mother and potential lover for Sisera. These two sides of her character together form a portrait of a woman who encapsulates the feminine stereotype of the time: she is deferentially sexual and fawningly maternal toward Sisera. Jael consciously “puts on” elements of both sexuality and maternity in order to trap the enemy general. She intuits that Sisera, who bragged of how he would take beautiful Israelite women as concubines, might desire carnal comforts even in his defeat. Consequently, she adorns herself to enhance her already “exceedingly beautiful” appearance. She “goes out” to meet a general who apparently has no intention of coming into her tent, but beckons him to come inside anyway with promises of comfort, including a slyly seductive suggestion that Sisera will remember her kindness in the future. She spreads rose petals on the bed to give him the idea that after he naps, she will join him in bed for less restful

pursuits. Similarly, she suggests more wholesome, motherly comforts by inviting Sisera in for food, drink, and rest—presumably just what he would have sought from Themech. Jael firmly tells Sisera what to do—sleep now, then drink—even when he begs for water, asserting a mystically powerful thirst. This is humorous: Jael has lured Sisera inside with the promise of something to drink, but when he pleads for something to quench his burning thirst, she primly rebuffs him. Jael-the-mother, not Sisera-the-man-child, will call the shots in this tent. She puts him down for a nap, then obtains milk for him, the ultimate mother-to-child drink, even though he had specifically asked for water. When she lulls him to sleep a second time, aided by wine mixed with milk, he sleeps so well under her watchful eye that he does not even wake when she pushes him to the floor. This, too, is comically over-the-top; Jael is such a good mother that her child can sleep through anything! Then, when Sisera cries out to Jael in pain from the blow she has struck, she tells him to complain not to her, his would-be mother, but to his father instead. Jael’s use of hyper-sexual and hyper-maternal tropes to entice and disarm Sisera is, I argue, a form of drag performance. Like Jael in Judges and like Judith, Jael in the *Biblical Antiquities* puts on aspects of the gender “female” in order to approach the enemy general.

Like a faux queen, Jael carefully constructs an image of femininity that is not necessarily her own, and she performs it well. As is the case with her counterparts in Judges and Judith, she has an ambivalent relationship with the trappings of femininity that prevailed in her time.<sup>599</sup> Pseudo-Philo’s Jael is a foreign woman in an age when Jewish writers treated foreign women as evil temptresses, and she is a non-mother when both Jewish and Greco-Roman writers prize motherhood above all else for married women. When she needs to kill Sisera, she takes on the evil temptress role that Jewish literature has already ascribed to her, a foreign female, and the

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<sup>599</sup> By “her time,” I mean the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E., when *Biblical Antiquities* was likely written, and not the late 2<sup>nd</sup>-early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C.E., when the story is set.

maternal role that she should be fulfilling but isn't. She plays with what is expected of her as a woman, using stereotyped ideas of femininity to nab her target.

Like her counterpart in Judges, Jael here embodies the concepts of “realness” and “passing” discussed above. Like the biological man dressed as a woman in the 1980s New York ball scene, who needs to be “real” enough to navigate the streets and subways in one piece, Jael’s performance is a matter of survival. She has taken the dangerous step of inviting a strange general into her tent. What is more, Sisera intends to take women captive as the spoils of war. Even if we cannot assume that Jael knows of Sisera’s words as conveyed by Deborah, surely she knows what can happen to a woman, especially a beautiful one, in the hands of a military leader. Thus, Jael’s safety relies on the success of her performance.<sup>600</sup> She must carefully calibrate every detail of her interactions with Sisera to balance titillation and relaxation; one false move and she puts herself in danger. If she is not sufficiently convincing in her performance as a seductive woman, Sisera might disregard her or simply kill her as an obstacle on his way to freedom. If she is not convincing enough as a maternal figure, Sisera might not feel comfortable enough to sleep in her presence. Somehow, Jael has to be the Angelina Jolie of the *Biblical Antiquities*: sexy enough to hold a man’s attention but motherly enough to make him trust her, too. As Butler argues, all gender performance is indeed a matter of survival.<sup>601</sup>

Again, I wish to clarify that I do not propose that Pseudo-Philo thought of Jael’s “gender performance” or “realness” quotient when writing the character. Certainly no Roman period writer would consciously think, “How can I write a character who destabilizes the gender binary by parodying the feminine through femme performance?” I do not suggest such anachronism.

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<sup>600</sup> I do not mean to “blame the victim” by implying that a woman who is raped in wartime is simply not crafty enough to avoid the attack.

<sup>601</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 52.

However, we can use queer theoretical frameworks just as we would more established hermeneutics, such as form or rhetorical criticism, as a new way to think about an old text. In this case, queer and gender theory seem especially apt for analyzing a text where a female character amps up the “feminine” aspects of her presentation toward a specific end.

Contra Halpern-Amaru, Pseudo-Philo’s heavy dose of divine guidance in *L.A.B.* 31 does not necessarily diminish the status of Jael as a heroine. Were Jael’s initiative co-opted by a male character, such as Barak, perhaps the case would be stronger. However, Jael is subordinated not to Barak but to God. As Halpern-Amaru acknowledges, Pseudo-Philo has a clear theological agenda: to make clear that God controls Israel’s history.<sup>602</sup> I would argue that Jael’s prayers and request for divine omens would not have been a sign of weakness to the author of the *Biblical Antiquities*. To him, consulting God before acting is a sign of virtue and provides no commentary on the character’s independence or lack thereof. Jael in the *Biblical Antiquities* is not made to consult God because she is a weak woman but because she is a pious individual. As Jacobson points out, she is not the only biblical character to ask for multiple signs from God before acting. Two male characters in the Bible, Moses (Exod 4:1-9) and Gideon (Judg 6:36-40) both request and receive more than one sign from God.<sup>603</sup> In addition, Halpern-Amaru’s thesis that Pseudo-Philo *either* stresses female characters’ maternal characteristics *or* portrays them as “ineffective or dependent” is belied by Jael. Jael is portrayed as both maternal *and* dependent upon God. It is not that the *Biblical Antiquities* diminishes the role of any woman who is not fit for maternal characterization, exalting those who are motherly and underplaying those who are not. Jael is not a mother but still gets portrayed with maternal characteristics in *L.A.B.* I would argue that

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<sup>602</sup> Halpern-Amaru, “Portraits of Women,” 105–106.

<sup>603</sup> Howard Jacobson, “Pseudo-Philo, Book of Biblical Antiquities,” in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture*, vol. 1, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 548.

Pseudo-Philo diminishes the role, relative to God, of *all* human characters. Jael is not portrayed as dependent upon God because she is a childless woman; she is portrayed as dependent upon God because, to Pseudo-Philo, everything in the Bible happens because God wills and directs it.

### Contributions to the Field

The three narratives I have examined in-depth in this project have received renewed attention in recent decades from scholars using feminist reading strategies. Scholars have just begun, however, to apply to these texts methodologies derived from queer theory. Though their efforts so far have been productive, some are limited by inadequate engagement with the text of the stories or by a monolithic conception of biblical theology. While some have used the insights of Judith Butler to look at Judges 4-5 and the Book of Judith, the work of the other theorists I have discussed in the chapters above, particularly Lee Edelman, have been absent from the scholarly conversation. Additionally, as part of a lesser-studied pseudepigraphical text, the Jael material in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* has received scant attention from feminist critics and none from scholars working in queer criticism. What is more, until this project, no work of scholarship has examined the three "lethal woman" stories as a unit using insights from queer theory.

This project contributes to the body of secondary literature on the three stories as well as to the corpus of queer theory-influenced approaches to the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish literature. My readings offer new insights into the female characters who are the center of these stories, showing how ideas of gender, sex, and violence interact in the three tales. I complicate previous portrayals of gender in the stories of Judith and the two versions of Jael, showing how notions of "liminality," "androgyny," and "gender reversal" are oversimplifications of the gender dynamics at play. Further, I offer readings that allow the female characters more agency than do previous interpretations. I do not argue that these characters or their creators would have named



what they were doing as “gender performance,” “drag,” or resistance to “reproductive futurism,” but that, within the stories, the women’s actions in appropriating and playing with aspects of femininity are nonetheless conscious and deliberate. These readings open up the possibility of reading as empowered and empowering characters who have been previously derided by some feminist scholars as poor role models and dupes of the patriarchy.

In addition to its contributions to the body of scholarship on the stories of Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and *Biblical Antiquities* 31, this study adds to the repertoire of queer approaches to ancient literature. My work expands the possibilities for doing gender-critical work on the Bible and other early Jewish literature, incorporating Judith Butler, Gayle Rubin, and *Paris Is Burning* but also Sue-Ellen Case, Judith (Jack) Halberstam, and Lee Edelman. In particular, I believe my work putting these diverse theorists in conversation with one another and with the biblical and post-biblical texts is unique, and uniquely productive.

## Women in Drag

### **Jael in the Book of Judges: Mother, Seductress, Killer**

The biblical Jael is a non-Israelite woman, presented as childless, and allied by marriage to Israel’s enemy. The land has turned into a battlefield, a perilous situation for all, especially a civilian woman. Jael does not wait to see who will emerge victorious, how the new political situation will affect her, or whether either of the armies will prey sexually on the women of the land. She takes matters into her own hands, concocting a plan to kill the powerful but battle-chastened general Sisera. Inviting a powerful general, even one who is battle-weary, into one’s tent is a dangerous move for a woman alone, but Jael does not enter the situation unarmed. The use of female-gendered behavior is Jael’s chief weapon against Sisera, even more than the tent

peg she uses to penetrate his head. She deftly intuits what such a man in such a situation will want and even expect—a combination of comforting mother and coquettish seductress—and puts on these personae. The roles of mother and illicit lover may not be “her,” but, like a burlesque performer, a drag queen, or a faux queen, Jael dons them nonetheless. Because her situation is perilous, how well Jael performs these roles—her “realness” quotient; how well she “passes”—is of utmost importance. Gender performance, as Judith Butler argues, is always a strategy for survival within compulsory systems, and that holds true for Jael.<sup>604</sup> In order to survive within a societal system where women are valued primarily for their sexuality and childbearing capacity, where men are dominant, and where rape is a weapon of war, she must undertake a performance—conscious or not. The major advantage of Jael’s gender performance is that it is a covert weapon, undetectable as dangerous to its target.

While some scholars disagree that there are sexual implications to Jael’s interactions with Sisera, I argue that the seductive undertones are present from the moment they meet. Jael “goes out” to meet Sisera, a sexually loaded phrase when applied to biblical women. In her first words to him, “turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me,” (4:18) she is alluringly obsequious, calling Sisera *’ădōnî*, a term of respect used by biblical women to stroke the ego of powerful men, often in pairings that are or will shortly become sexual. “Turn aside to me” is also a sexually charged phrase; like Lady Folly in Prov 9:16, Jael is prompting the simple man to think of the pleasures he might experience by turning off his path to her. The verb *swr*, “turn aside,” is used twice by Jael, and then again by the narrator to describe Sisera’s actions; he “turned to her.” Jael’s next imprecation, “do not be afraid,” is less seductive than maternal in tone; having carefully

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<sup>604</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 139.

introduced hints of sex into her interaction with Sisera, Jael now promises what a mother offers a child: security.

In her tent, Jael turns up the volume on her maternal routine, tucking this grown man in under a blanket or rug. In turn, Sisera shows that he is responding to her performance, asking her, like a child, for water to satisfy his thirst. She one-ups him, instead giving him milk or curds and perhaps covering him a second time. The nourishment Jael gives Sisera is not merely something “better” than what he requested; it is a substance with a stronger connection to motherhood, a fact that both Pseudo-Philo and the rabbis pick up on. According to the poetic account, Jael serves Sisera this milk or curd in a bowl fit for his stature as an important man, which, under the circumstances, reads as a mix of infantilizing and mocking. Sisera unknowingly underlines his own pitiful situation when he orders Jael to stand at the entrance to the tent and, if anyone should ask if there is, literally, “a man” there, to say, “none.” Though some scholars read this statement as symbolic of the “unmanning” of Sisera at the hands of a woman, it can also be read as commentary on his regression to childhood, being fed his milk, tucked in, and lulled to sleep by Jael. Like a *Paris Is Burning* drag ball performer who conjures his or her persona well enough not only to win a ball contest but to get home in one piece in 1980s New York, Jael mothers and seduces Sisera effectively enough to reverse the power dynamic between them. The fierce general is now a child, asleep at Jael’s feet.

The description of Jael’s assassination of Sisera in Judges 4 and, even more so, in Judges 5, is strongly sexual. Though I do not argue that the text intends us to understand that the two have had sexual intercourse, the language used to detail the murder is strikingly reminiscent of a sex act. Jael, who, had things been different for Sisera, could have served as the female spoil

Sisera's mother invokes, instead penetrates him with the tent-peg. In the poetic account, he lays, kneels, and falls between her feet, like a lover—or a newborn emerging from the womb.

In the aftermath of the murder, Jael flags down Barak and welcomes him into her tent to see Sisera's corpse (4:22), a scene that may be interpreted as reminiscent of both the sexual undercurrent to Jael and Sisera's interactions and her maternal treatment of the general. Jael displaying Sisera's "destroyed" or "despoiled" (5:27: *šādūd*) body can easily be read as showing off her sexual conquest: she brags to her comrade about the man she has "done" to death in her tent. According to his own mother's words in 5:30, Sisera would have taken women as spoils of war (and eventual rape victims). Instead, he has been symbolically raped by a woman. Jael's display of Sisera's body also harks back to her mothering of him a few verses earlier: Sisera fallen between her feet like a baby emerging from her womb, Jael can now show the man Barak what she has wrought. Barak sees not a swaddled newborn, though, but a grown man, infantilized in the last moments of his life, dead of a head wound inflicted by his mother-figure.

The idea of Jael as Sisera's surrogate mother is reinforced at the end of chapter 5 with the introduction of Sisera's actual mother into the story. This woman who waits eagerly to see what spoils of war, including human spoils, her son will bring home, serves as a clear foil to Jael. We see what Sisera was probably hoping for when he fled the battlefield: the comforts of home and mother, which Jael deftly approximates for him. Jael is Sisera's "acting mother" in two senses. First, she serves as a mother-figure to him while his own mother, miles away and unaware of her son's impending doom, is unavailable. Second, Jael is acting like Sisera's mother, in the sense that her maternal behavior toward him is a conscious performance. She acts like his mother, she acts like his protector, and she acts like she cares—but she is merely acting.

Jael in Judges 4-5 is in part an “erotic assassin,” a term coined by Susan Ackerman.<sup>605</sup> Though Ackerman uses this phrase to describe Jael, Judith, and the Canaanite goddess Anat, I argued in chapter 2 that interpretations of Anat as an erotic figure in the Baal Cycle and the Aqhat epic are products of scholars’ presuppositions about goddesses and female behavior, not of Anat’s actual character or behavior. While Jael plays with notions of femininity to get in position to kill, Anat kills openly—and with relish—in her role as warrior. More relevant to Jael’s status as erotic assassin is the figure of Paghit from the Aqhat story. Though Paghit’s part of the tale is fragmentary, it appears that she, like Jael, endeavors to kill a powerful warrior by leading him to believe she is sexually available. We find another example of this motif in the Hittite goddess Shaushka as described in the Kumarbi Cycle. Though Shaushka is far more sexually forward than Jael—the goddess thrusts her nude body before opponents she wishes to defeat—she is a useful analogue for the performative use of female sexuality as a weapon. The Greek character Clytemnestra, too, particularly as she is described in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, is an erotic assassin instructive for studying Jael. Though Clytemnestra is on the whole not portrayed favorably in the text, both she and Jael prepare their warrior prey for the slaughter with honeyed words and implied promises of sexual comfort.

Jael’s non-reproductive “motherhood” is also a key aspect of her character and a driving force in the plot of Judges 4 and 5. She is not described as having children, but she is a symbolic mother to Sisera. Just like Jael’s seductive woman persona, the maternal role she assumes for Sisera is an example of performed femininity. In this respect, the Greek goddess Athena is instructive for understanding Jael. Athena never has biological children, but she takes on the surrogate motherhood of Erichthonius. Though the goals of Jael’s and Athena’s non-reproductive

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<sup>605</sup> Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 60.

motherhood are different, both characters exercise symbolic motherhood for political purposes. Also connected to Jael's non-biological motherhood, the goddess Artemis is relevant. Artemis, a virgin and non-mother, is nonetheless the patron of childbearing women. Jael, an evident non-mother, nonetheless becomes famous by mothering Sisera to death. Artemis and Jael divert attention from their failure to fulfill expectations that women bear children by establishing non-biological connections to motherhood.

Though some have argued that Jael's use of motherhood and sexuality to entrap Sisera are regressive with regard to the cause of gender equality, I have argued here that the lens of queer theory allows us to view her actions very differently. In reading Jael as executing an over-the-top performance of expected femininity, we can see this literary character as parodying these very expectations. For the modern reader, Jael's performance of two things she evidently is not—a mother and a seductress—serves to expose how these traits are constructed and performed by biblical characters more broadly, and even by real people. Just as dragsters and burlesque performers reveal the artifice of all gender through their exaggerated depictions of “woman” or “man,” Jael shows how we all, consciously or not, put on gender through the thousand little things we do with our hair, voice, words, or walk.

### **Judith: How to Get a Head Using High-Femme Drag**

When we first meet Judith, she is giving an over-the-top performance in her role as widow: remaining unmarried and celibate, wearing sackcloth around her loins, fasting more than can possibly be healthy, and living in a tent on the roof rather than in her well-appointed house. In her prayer to God on behalf of her people, she repeatedly invokes her status as a widow, reinforcing that widowhood is a role she plays to the hilt. When she steps in to save her people,

she effects a stunning transformation, taking off the physical, attitudinal, and verbal accoutrements of her widowhood and putting on the persona of a seductive, sexually available woman. Her suitability to save her people by taking down Holofernes does not come merely from the fact that she is a woman, but from her ability to perform so skillfully a particular type of male fantasy, while never losing herself in the role. Just as her performance of widowhood is exaggerated, so is her embodiment of this new role; she bathes at a time when her city has no water, she puts on her best clothes, she dons all of her jewelry at once, and even fastens a tiara in her hair. This is high-femme drag at its best. The reaction Judith's transformation provokes is similarly over-the-top; the local leaders are practically slack-jawed when she approaches, the Assyrian soldiers gawk shamelessly at her and designate 100 men to escort her to the general, and Holofernes himself is captivated.

Judith's gender performance is not all about her appearance, though the change from sackcloth to festive attire nicely symbolizes the transition she makes in preparation for her mission. Her speech, pious and militant when she addresses God and the Bethulian leaders, becomes gentler before the Assyrians. Speaking to Holofernes, she is deferential and seductive, promising the general both sexual satisfaction and a great military victory. Even as she speaks in double entendres that are evident to the audience but not to Holofernes, Judith appears to be flattering the general shamelessly. She repeatedly uses the phrase "my lord," which she means to refer to God but Holofernes undoubtedly interprets as addressed to him. She bows deeply before him, an action which, I argue in chapter 4, has sexual connotations. She also repeatedly calls herself "your slave" and "your maidservant." Judith praises Holofernes' military acumen, a bit of dramatic irony given his imminent tactical blunder of epic proportions, but she correctly calculates that it will be just what he wants to hear.

Far from her ascetic performance as a widow in earlier chapters, Judith in the Assyrian camp acts the part of a woman who is quite prepared to “become today like one of the Assyrian women who serve in the house of Nebuchadnezzar” (12:13). Of course, she continues to dress and adorn herself beautifully, and the text tells us explicitly that she re-ups her look in preparation for entering Holofernes’ tent (12:15). She bathes regularly in or just outside the camp, in what I argue above is part of her seduction routine. While once she fasted more often than not, now she joins Holofernes for a drinking party, reclining on lambskins and indulging with him in food and wine.

Judith’s performed sexuality is the centerpiece of her story, her chief weapon against Holofernes. It is fitting, then, that even at the moment of the murder we are reminded of sex. Judith kills Holofernes as he lies across his bed, the same place that he had evidently hoped to consummate their relationship. Instead of Holofernes standing over a possibly non-consenting Judith, we get Judith standing over a passed-out Holofernes. In lieu of Judith metaphorically being left less of a woman by what a sexual encounter with Holofernes would do to her chastity and virtue, Holofernes literally is left less of a man through his decapitation.<sup>606</sup> Judith uses a phallic instrument, Holofernes’ sword, to accomplish the murder. She takes a trophy from the murder, the canopy off of Holofernes’ bed, which, as proof that she has “done” him, serves a purpose similar to the *bētûlîm* in Deuteronomy 22.

When Judith returns to her own town after the murder, Holofernes’ head in her food bag, the tone of her speech changes again. She now sounds not at all like the obsequious woman she was in the Assyrian camp but like the pious and forthright widow she was before her mission.

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<sup>606</sup> I do not contend that Holofernes’ beheading is a symbolic castration; in fact, in chapter 4 I argue against this viewpoint at some length. Rather, I mean that a headless Holofernes is, necessarily, diminished in size from what he was.



She again invokes God repeatedly (13:11, 14-16), not in the covert way she did when speaking to Holofernes, but openly. Though apparently she still wears her finery, Judith is already casting off the other elements of her performative feminine seduction, even as she reminds her people that it is this womanhood which brought down Holofernes (13:15). The role of performed femininity is further emphasized by the role of the Bethulian women in celebrating Judith's victory; the women truly take the lead in honoring Judith through singing and dancing. The victory hymn Judith sings, too, stresses how a woman with the weapons of femininity, and not "young men," "sons of Titans," or "giants" was responsible for this great victory (16:6).

In chapter 2, I noted several instructive comparisons for Judith in other ancient Mediterranean literature. As detailed above with respect to Jael, the Canaanite goddess Anat is a poor comparison for Judith in terms of the characters' sexuality, as Anat is erotic in the eyes of interpreters but not in the Ugaritic texts themselves. However, Anat is instructive for Judith in that the goddess' lack of marriage attachment evidently gives her the ability to move freely and act independently. Judith, too, is able to execute her plan expressly because of her widowhood and its accompanying celibacy. As with Jael, an even better Canaanite comparison for Judith is not Anat but Paghit. Like Paghit, Judith is a mortal woman who enters the enemy's camp, goes into his tent, and uses wine and femininity as weapons against him. The Hittite Shaushka is also a good comparison for Judith, notably in the Kumarbi Cycle's long descriptions of the beauty preparations she undertakes for her seduction mission. There are obvious similarities here to Judith's pre-voyage toilette. Both characters also flatter their prey shamelessly. Again, as with Jael, Clytemnestra is also instructive, given her entrapment of Agamemnon through promises of sexual availability.

The Amazons of Greek art and literature are also instructive for Judith, albeit in the limited sense of their lack of engagement with men. The Amazons' rejection of men may be partial or total depending on the source, but in any event, their separation from male society enables their tremendous power and independence. Similarly, Judith's insistence on remaining a celibate widow enables her to live independently and to engage in an act of startling violence. Were she a married woman, or even a widow on the market for a new husband, she would not be able to act out the combination of outward sexuality and inward chastity that allow her to become an effective assassin. Similarly, the goddess Athena, in her virginity, provides an analogue for Judith in cognate literature. Athena functions as a champion of men in a man's world, symbolizing wisdom and power, roles that are only possible for her because she is asexual. Judith's chastity bears another comparison, to the goddess Artemis. Artemis is militantly chaste; one of her frequent roles in Greek literature is as zealous guardian of her own chastity and that of other women. Here we can see an analogy to Judith's defense of her own celibacy; her invocation of the biblical Simeon, who kills in revenge for the defilement of a virgin; and indeed in Judith's defense of the city of Bethulia, or "Virgin."

As I have discussed, many scholars have wondered whether Judith is really a liberatory figure for women. Through the lens of Butlerian queer theory, reading Judith as a positive role model becomes possible. Judith subjects societal expectations about women and sexuality to ridicule through extreme parody, which actually disturbs the rigid gender binary. Like the butch/femme lesbian pair, who, as Sue-Ellen Case argues, unmoor gender roles from biological sex, the sexually chaste Judith breaks the tie between feminine seductiveness and the idea of sex with men. Judith is a celibate widow, and it is clear throughout her story she intends to stay that way. Though she convinces Holofernes otherwise, she is never sexually available. All along, she

merely plays with the signifiers of gender and sexuality, knowing that her sexuality is off-limits. Her celibate widowhood, like Halberstam's stone butch and her refusal to be sexually stimulated, is its own sexual orientation, one defined by lack. Through her celibacy, Judith distances herself from the system of sexual exchange and, consequently, the patriarchy itself.

Judith also takes us outside the patriarchy through her lack of focus on children. Though the men in her book make frequent reference to the plight of their biological offspring and to how a particular response to the Assyrian siege will affect those offspring, Judith has next to nothing to do with children. She does not have any of her own at the time of the story; nor does she appear to want any, since she assiduously refuses all offers of remarriage and goes to her grave as Manasseh's chaste widow. Her refusal to consider the possibility of something beyond her current state, celibate widowhood, frees her to perform femininity unmoored from any possibility of sexual availability. Additionally, almost all of Judith's references to children in the book are metaphorical, in the "children of Israel" sense. Judith alone, of all the Israelite leaders and potential leaders in the book, is focused on the present, not on the future. She discourages the male leaders from giving up the present, represented by Israel's independence, for the sake of the future, in the form of security for generations to come. Just as Judith's performed femininity combined with her chastity offer an alternative model for the empowered biblical woman, so her lack of attention to motherhood and children offers an innovative vision of biblical heroism. Judith, unlike biblical heroes whose focus is self-perpetuation through reproduction and covenantal obedience, is engaged with the here-and-now to a remarkable extent. Particularly for a biblical woman, whose narrative functions are so often tied to the creation of the next generation, this is startling—and potentially liberatory.

## The Second Jael: Motherhood and Sex, Made Explicit

The retelling of Jael's story in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* chapter 31 combines the outlines of the Judges story with elements taken from the Book of Judith. The text here is far more explicit than the Judges version in its treatment of the sexual element of Jael's plan: in *L.A.B.*, Jael, like Judith, adorns herself before going out to meet Sisera, and the reader is told that Jael is exceedingly beautiful (31.3). Like in Judges, Jael "goes out" to meet Sisera, but here we are not told that he was heading for her tent, increasing the brazenness of her excursion to intercept him. Here, Jael also speaks to Sisera in ambiguous flattery (31.3), like Judith with Holofernes but unlike Jael in Judges 4 and 5. Additionally, in Judges, Sisera's intention to take women as spoils of war is left implicit for most of the story, and only at the end of chapter 5 is put into the mouth of his mother. In *L.A.B.*, by contrast, Sisera states, as reported by Deborah, that he wants to take the enemy's women as concubines. He also explicitly states, after meeting Jael and seeing the rose petals she has scattered on her bed, that he wishes to take her home with him (31.3). Knowing that Sisera is in the market for sex gives the dealings between him and Jael an additional erotic cast. All of these sexual elements combine to make it even more obvious than in Judges that Jael is planning to kill Sisera by appealing to his lust. She puts on a seductive persona, complete with dress-up and rose petals on the bed, to get there. Jael is performing the part of the sexually loose woman, something Jewish literature of the Greco-Roman period evidently already expects of her as a foreigner.

As shown in chapter 5, Pseudo-Philo's retelling of the Jael-Sisera story is replete not only with eroticism but with obvious maternal imagery; Jael plays the mother for Sisera in order to convince him to let down his guard. The repeated mentions of Sisera's mother Themech serve to reinforce the parallel between Themech and Jael; Sisera wants his own mother, but in her

absence, Jael will serve as surrogate. Jael's words and actions, too, paint her as a mother-figure. From their first meeting, even as she flirts with Sisera, she promises him the comforts of home and mother: rest, food, and shelter (31.3). In her tent, she rebuffs his initial request for a drink, instead telling him to take his nap first, showing that she is in charge (31.4). When she does give him a drink, it is milk (mixed with wine) obtained directly from her flock, reinforcing the drink's connection to a mother nursing her young (31.5). Like an expert mother, Jael lulls Sisera to sleep so effectively that he does not wake even when pushed off the bed (31.7). As in Judges 4, Jael welcoming Barak into her tent to see Sisera's body is reminiscent of childbirth, the woman laboring in her own quarters and then, when the task is done, inviting the man to see what she has produced. That Jael is not, to the best of our knowledge as readers, a biological mother makes her performance something of a parody and, to that end, rather subversive.

In addition to explicit connections to sex and maternity, the text of *L.A.B.* makes several allusions to Jael's embodiment of a version of womanhood through its constant use of words relating to womanhood, manhood, femininity, and masculinity. Sisera is initially portrayed in the chapter as so manly it's comical, but his declarations of masculinity are answered by a statement by Deborah that repeatedly uses the words "woman" and "girls" to describe his impending downfall. When Jael and Sisera meet, the gendered language continues, with references to "woman," "mother," and "boys" (31.3). Surrounding Jael's murder of Sisera, Jael prays for "strength" or "vigor," which in Latin shares a root with the word "man" (31.7). After Jael strikes him, Sisera complains to her that he is dying "like a woman," and she gloats that he has fallen "by the hand of a woman" (31.7). Themech, too, uses gendered language, with references to "son," "daughters," and "concubines" (31.8). Finally, when Barak sees Sisera's body, he repeats the words of Deborah's prophecy about Sisera falling "by the hand of a woman" (31.9). The

heavy use of language pertaining to male and female throughout the chapter emphasizes that the meeting of Jael and Sisera is a clash of woman versus man and supports the interpretation that Jael's performance of the gender "female" is key to understanding the story.

We may find a comparison for Pseudo-Philo's Jael in Shaushka. This is even more the case for the Jael of *L.A.B.* than for the one in Judges, given the more overt eroticism in the later retelling and that character's use of wine as a soporific for her target. As with the earlier version of Jael, this one may be compared to Paghit and Clytemnestra with respect to the erotic element of her performance, and to Athena and Artemis with respect to her non-reproductive maternity.

Artemis' defense of her own and other women's chastity has a special resonance for this iteration of Jael. While Judith and the prior version of Jael may by their actions implicitly save other women from wartime rape, with Pseudo-Philo's Jael, the connection is explicit. Sisera says outright in *L.A.B.* that he wants to take the enemy's beautiful women for himself as concubines, and he thinks to himself that Jael, who is already married, would make a great "woman" for him. Jael's killing of Sisera protects the sexual integrity of herself and other women, analogous to Artemis killing or attacking men who threaten her own chastity or the chastity of others.

As with the female characters in the other two stories discussed in this dissertation, Pseudo-Philo's Jael faces serious danger. There is a war on; that fact by itself carries attendant perils for the civilian population. Women in particular face capture, rape, and enslavement. Beyond the general dangers of war, Jael takes on additional hazard by inviting a general into her tent. In this situation, "realness" and "passing" are matters of life and death. Jael must be utterly convincing in her performance of womanhood, or she risks Sisera discovering her true intentions and acting accordingly. In the end, she nails it.

## Future Research Directions

Queer-theoretical interpretations of the Bible have gained steam over the past two decades, with more and more scholars applying queer hermeneutics to an ever-growing variety of texts. I hope that my work here will contribute significantly to this body of scholarship, in content as well as methodology. I see several directions for future study. For example, I believe Edelman's work can be used productively to examine a variety of biblical texts dealing with reproduction and childlessness, such as the tales of the matriarchs in Genesis, the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11, and the plight of Sarah in the Book of Tobit. Even beyond issues surrounding the presence or absence of childbearing and children in biblical stories, Edelman's work on futurism might be used more broadly to address biblical texts' engagement with the present versus preoccupation with the future. For example, what might theories of resistance to futurism have to say to apocalyptic texts? Where else in the Bible, other than the Book of Judith, might we find characters who decline to engage with some ideal future?

I believe that the methodology I have developed in this dissertation, engaged with the work of diverse theorists and deeply attentive to the text, could also bring new light to other biblical stories. In particular, I propose the Susanna additions to Daniel, the figure of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs, and the Esther/Ahasuerus/Haman relationship in the Book of Esther as fertile ground for future exploration. Additionally, though this project has focused on the female characters in Judges 4-5, the Book of Judith, and *Biblical Antiquities* 31, there is room for future exploration of the role of gender and performance in the construction of the male characters.

I also see opportunities for methodological essays on some of the points raised in the preceding chapters. For instance, I would like to see a broader critique than space permitted here of the concept of liminality as applied to biblical women. Such a critique would build on the

work of Deryn Guest but also engage deeply with Ancient Near Eastern studies; the work of Kathleen McCaffrey on gender in Assyria might be especially helpful here. I would further suggest a queer theory-based critique of the practice of “gendering” texts masculine or feminine, exemplified by the work of Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen van Dijk Hemmes. The queer/gender critic’s recognition that gender is not a strict binary undermines the idea that it is possible to determine what kind of voice, M or F, produced a particular part of the Bible.

There is much more work to be done in the field of queer interpretation of the Bible. These new readings of the stories of three striking women of the Bible and other early Jewish literature demonstrate the wealth of gender and sexuality angles still to be explored in ancient texts.



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