

Jael's Gender: A Story of Appropriation

A defeated general flees from battle. A woman offers him shelter, which he accepts without hesitation. She gives him refreshment, then, when he least expects it, she kills him, using tools that come easily to hand. The story of the Canaanite commander Sisera's death at the hands of Jael is a short one, relatively free of narrative complication. The version recounted in Judges 4 takes a mere six verses to tell (out of the total twenty-four in the chapter), and that of Judges 5 is told even more compactly, in four verses (of thirty-one).

Though the story is given more than once, the two versions, one prose and the other poetry, don't seem to actively contradict one another. Jael's story in Judges 5 consists of only three actions and a result: She gives milk to Sisera (Judges 5:25), she takes up a tent peg and mallet, and she kills Sisera by pounding the peg into his head (Judges 5:26). Afterwards, Sisera lies dead (Judges 5:27). The same tale in Judges 4 includes all of these details, the milk (Judges 4:19), the tent peg and hammer, the killing (Judges 4:21), and Sisera lying dead after the deed has been done (Judges 4:22).

But though Jael's repeating story is not problematic in the same way that, for example, the two contradictory creation narratives in Genesis are, and though it is not an overly complex tale, commentators tend to view it with a certain level of unease. This discomfort, as Johanna W. H. Bos notes, in "Out of the Shadows: Genesis 28, Judges 4:17-22, Ruth 3," often takes the form of "varying degrees of condemnation" of Jael's behavior or character (56).

Indeed, while the narrator of Judges 4 seems to approve of Jael's actions (in that they are not condemned, if they are not actively praised), and Deborah and Barak, singing a victory song in Judges 5, certainly do, calling Jael "most blessed of women" (Judges 5:24), later commentators often do not. Both the biblical narrator(s) and the commentators can agree that the end result – Sisera's utter defeat – is desirable, but readers of Jael's story are often highly disturbed by the means used to achieve that end.

Explanations for the discomfort and unease brought about by Jael's behavior are as numerous as the commentators themselves. One particularly popular reason for condemnation of her behavior is that Jael "is said to have violated customs of hospitality while pretending to keep them" (Bos 56), which seems, on the surface at least, to be a reasonable objection. Others are more spurious. Freema Gottlieb, trying to pinpoint what it is about Jael's behavior that is "so repellent" to "the modern reader" (199) suggests that Jael not only "breaks the sacred Bedouin bond of hospitality" (200), but that there is something unsettling in the way she carries out the killing itself – the way she holds the murder weapon! Gottlieb reports that "the normal procedure would have been for her to hold the tent-peg in her left hand and the hammer in her right, and the fact that she reverses this order indicates that there is something in her action that is completely opposed to nature" (199).

A feminist reader, however, may be unsatisfied with these justifications for Jael's condemnation. The issue of which hand holds the peg and which the mallet, in particular, is easy to brush aside as specious – my copy of the NRSV translation specifies that Jael *does* hold the hammer in her right hand (Judges 5:26), in accordance with the so-called "normal procedure" described by Gottlieb (that there is evidence of functional left-

handedness in Judges 3, casting doubt on the notion that all people hold tools the same way, doesn't seem to be an issue for commentators that are determined to see opposition to nature in Jael's actions). Jael's story is contained within the history of the only female judge, and Jael herself is one of only a handful of women who engage in physical violence in the Hebrew Bible. If her story inspires discomfort, it seems likely to the feminist reader that this unease is based on matters of gender roles and their transgression, not hospitality or handedness.

One approach to a gender-conscious, feminist-theory-inflected reading of the story of Jael is taken by Susan Niditch in "Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael." Niditch argues convincingly for Jael's killing of Sisera as, linguistically, a reversed rape scene: "Jael becomes not the object of sexual advances...but herself is the aggressor, the despoiler" (Niditch 311). Niditch discusses the "visceral sexual quality of the imagery" used in the poetic account of Jael's killing of Sisera in Judges 5, reporting that the "language is charged with sexuality, sexual submission intertwined, doubling with language of defeat and death" (Niditch 308). As an illustration, she offers several translations of Judges 5:27, including her own:

Between her legs he knelt, he fell, he lay
Between her legs he knelt, he fell
Where he knelt, there he fell, despoiled. (308)

This translation makes the sexual imagery used to describe Sisera's death throes quite clear.

In her analysis, Niditch chooses to focus primarily on just the one verse from the poetic rendering of the Jael story. Though she gestures briefly at the "aggressively phallic" method that Jael employs in the murder/rape (Niditch 307), Niditch does not

discuss this aspect of the Jael story in detail. Discomfort on the part of a phallogentric reader of the story is caused, according to Niditch, by “a man’s fear of death and his own sexuality” (311) as evoked by the “powerful portrait” of the reversed rape, the woman who does “the womanizing, the man despoiled just as he is in a position of sexual seducer himself” (312).

Bos, who suggests “that Genesis 38, Judges 4:17-22, and Ruth offer “counter-type-scenes” to the betrothal type-scene” (Bos 39) also picks up on the reversed rape imagery in Jael’s story: “It is a warrior/rapist whom Yael invites to “turn” to her, to whom she offers refreshment; it is the spoiler of women whom she spoils” (Bos 57). Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, too, in their article, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 and 5,” explore the trope of the reversed rape. The idea of reversal itself is particularly important to Fewell and Gunn, who write that “[i]n a world where females on the losing side of the war can expect to be victims of sexual violence we meet suddenly this powerful image of reversed rape” (394), pointing out that “[r]ather than proving virility, Sisera loses virility between a woman’s legs” (404). The world of Jael’s story is “a world turned upside down” (404), where a man can be raped by a woman, a turn of events presumably very upsetting to a phallogentric reader, perhaps upsetting enough to provoke the superficial condemnations of Jael’s behavior that appear in the works of many commentators.

But as we hunt for the root of phallogentric unease, does a simple (and complete) reversal of the positions of aggressor and victim in a heterosexual rape really explain the knee-jerk reactions of condemnation towards Jael? We are speaking, generally, of modern commentators, and so it makes sense that we are dealing, also, with modern

conceptions of rape. But it may be worthwhile, nonetheless, to consider that those conceptions *are* modern impositions on the biblical text.

In *The Intercourse of Knowledge and Desire: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible*, Athalya Brenner reminds us that modern conceptions of rape as concerned with “the right to choose, the human right denied to the attacked by the attacker” (Brenner 136) don’t necessarily apply to biblical texts. Markedly unlike our current conceptions of who is injured by rape, in a typical biblical rape – of a woman by a man – “the ‘rapist’ of a female injures not the female object of the sexual violation but, first and foremost and almost exclusively, the relational male legally responsible for her” (Brenner 137).

Applying this information to the idea of Jael’s killing of Sisera as simply a reversed rape, we can examine the soundness of the assumption that that is what is going on in the Jael story. If Jael is reversing the rape Sisera would perform upon her, as indicated by the eroticized imagery of Sisera’s death throes between Jael’s legs in Judges 5, then we might expect certain things that the text does not quite deliver. Rather than injuring Sisera, Jael’s attack might be expected to be directed at the person legally responsible for Sisera, as Sisera’s attack on Jael would be understood to be an attack on her husband, if he were the rapist. In the “world turned upside down” which we are attempting to construct out of Judges 4 and 5, perhaps the injured party in the rape of Sisera would be not a male relative, but a female one.

Conveniently, there is such a relative, mentioned immediately after the rape of Sisera in Judges 5 – his mother (Judges 5:28). We can attempt to draw a link between the typical position of the wronged father/authoritative male relative in a rape narrative and

Sisera's mother, continuing the theme of a rape scene which has been fully reversed along gendered lines. But this interpretation, however interesting, feels tenuous and unsteady. Yes, Sisera's mother is present in the text, but is she even aware of her son's fate? Is Jael's rape of Sisera constructed in any way within the text as an attack on Sisera's mother? By killing Sisera, Jael has indeed deprived Sisera's mother of not only her son, but also the spoils of war which Sisera's mother has been expecting to receive (Judges 5:30). But is Jael raping Sisera in an attempt to injure his mother, or challenge her authority, the way a male rapist might use a female victim to challenge her father (Brenner 138)? It seems unlikely.

The idea that Jael's killing of Sisera is a simple reversal of rape – a straight-across swap of the roles of attacked and attacker – seems somewhat lacking, after we try to follow it through. But while the injured party in biblical texts involving male-female (or female-male?) rape is the relative of the attacked, the dynamic of a male-male rape is very different. When a man is threatened with rape by another man in a biblical text, he (not his father or other relative) is threatened with symbolic humiliation and a direct challenge to his authority as a man (Brenner 138).

We must now return to the aspect of Jael's sexualized attack on Sisera that Niditch ignores:

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground – he was lying fast asleep from weariness – and he died. (Judges 4:21)

Or, in the poetic celebratory song:

She put her hand to the tent peg
and her right hand to the
workmen's mallet;
she struck Sisera a blow

she crushed his head,
she shattered and pierced his temple. (Judges 5:26)

If Jael is raping Sisera, she is doing it through phallic penetration. According to Fewell and Gunn, “[t]he picture is vivid. Patriarchal expectation is turned upside down as the warrior’s mouth is penetrated by an unmistakably phallic tent peg” (394).

If Jael is in possession of a penetrating phallus, however symbolic, the question now becomes: Is she still a woman? And it is through that question that we begin to finally uncover the root of the phallogocentric discomfort occasioned by Judges 4 and 5. It is not simply the reversed rape that makes Jael’s such a powerful portrait – it is the gender confusion, the not *reversal*, so much as complete re-ordering, that is made possible by that rape, and cyclically, that makes the rape possible in the first place.

In “By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4,” Gale A. Yee argues that the figure of the woman warrior is a liminal one, a person without a firmly constructed gender identity. “The woman warrior,” writes Yee, “is neither female nor male as these are customarily defined, although she shares qualities of each...She takes on the attributes, roles, and accompanying prestige that are usually reserved for the male, but still remains female” (105). By being a woman who intends to take on a warrior role – the role of killing Sisera – Jael begins to take on some of the attributes of maleness.

One indicator of this shift into a liminal gender role on Jael’s part could be the way she is described by the narrator semantically. Brenner notes that, when it comes to descriptions of love or sex in the Hebrew Bible, “males are designated agents and subjects...Women are designated mostly as...objects or recipients” (29). The general

rule in the Hebrew Bible regarding interactions between the genders is that men are active and women are passive, and the language conforms to this pattern.

Interestingly, the language used to describe Jael, according to Bos, doesn't follow the pattern a reader might expect, even before the sexualized interaction between Jael and Sisera begins. "After her elaborate identification, Yael becomes the subject of a verb and stays active throughout", whereas Sisera "moves to passivity" (Bos 54). Jael seems to be already shifting towards the liminal gender space described by Yee. Her appropriation of the phallus in the murder of Sisera only finishes the work she has already begun – Jael is merely assuming a physical marker of the liminal, fluid gender role she already inhabits.

And it is this fluidity of gender that is so profoundly disturbing to a phallogocentric reader. It is no wonder that commentators consistently attempt to devalue Jael's achievement. She may have removed a great threat to Israel, but in so doing she has become a creature so upsetting to a patriarchal worldview that she must be shunned. As Alice Bach explains in *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*, Jael has become one of Freud's peculiar bugbears – "[i]n psychoanalytic terms, she is the phallic mother, a fantasmatic caricature" (Bach 207).

We will return to the matter of the phallus momentarily. First, we will address the issue of motherhood. How can Jael be constructed as a mother, phallic or otherwise, when she is not designated as such in the text of Judges 4 or 5? Indeed, Jael is so far from being a literal mother that many commentators cast doubt on whether she is even a married woman (see Ackerman 38, Bos 52, for examples). Bach would suggest that Jael is maternal when she gives Sisera milk: "The expected connection between women and feeding, so-called women's work, defined woman as maternal" (204).

Fewell and Gunn would go further, saying that Judges 4 is filled with imagery that is not only sexual, but also maternal (392). Sisera sleeps in Jael's tent "like a child in a womb" while Jael moves around quietly, "[m]aternally, as a mother to a sleeping child" (393). Susan Ackerman, in "What if Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?," makes similar assertions about Jael's motherliness. Underlying the erotic imagery of the Jael story, Ackerman writes, "are intimations...of motherhood and the womb" (39).

Ackerman also makes reference to the milk Jael gives Sisera, and notes that "[t]here is in fact a rabbinic midrash that envisions that the milk Jael gives to Sisera was suckled by him from her breast" (40). There may be a general trend towards exaggerating Jael's motherly traits in extra-biblical literature. In "At the Hands of a Woman: Rewriting Jael in Pseudo-Philo," Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch notes that in a retelling of the story dating between the 11th and 15th centuries, C.E., Jael is portrayed "telling the warrior what he should do as a mother would instruct her child" (60).

But however exaggerated her motherly qualities might become in midrashic retellings of her story, Jael is still a violent woman warrior, with all of the liminal gender that that entails. This is what creates her construction as the terrifying phallic mother. She is a woman who first displays hospitality, or motherliness, and then kills a man through forceful penetration of his head with a phallic object in a highly eroticized scene. One hardly needs Freud's mathematical equation in "Medusa's Head" to add up the symbolism – "To decapitate = to castrate" (Freud 202).

For it is not just Jael's gender that is fluid and liminal. She adopts certain masculine traits through her identity as a warrior woman, and then uses these traits to force Sisera to adopt corresponding feminine traits. When Jael takes up her symbolic

phallus, the tent peg, she deprives Sisera of his own phallus through a kind of penetrative decapitation. Freud would claim that any attack to the head is an attack on the genitals, and Brenner might note that there is a biblical connection between a man's reproductive abilities and his ability to "know" (Brenner 29). Mieke Bal, too, argues in her essay, "The Rape of Narrative and the Narrative of Rape: Speech Acts and Body Language in Judges," that "the impotence or potency is situated not in the male member but in the male head, the site of knowledge" (Bal 25). In any case, the penetration of a man by another person – be she a phallic mother or a woman warrior – is clearly a violation of the "comprehension of females as receptive/passive and of males as penetrating/active agents" (Brenner 142). By destabilizing her gender, Jael destabilizes Sisera's, as well.

Bal indicates that, like Jael's, Sisera's gender begins to shift even before the penetrative act occurs, from Jael's perspective. She discusses Sisera's command to Jael in Judges 4:20:

Sisera's circumstances do not give him the authority required for ordering. The failed order embeds a question of identity that assimilates it to the riddle. The question is not, this time, *who* the man will be, but *what* he is: a man, or not a man?...For Sisera, the answer was obviously meant to deny his presence; it was an order to lie. For Yael, the speech act was a riddle, and riddles have perfect truth-value. Hence, the answer meant to her: no man. (Bal 13, emphasis in original)

This emasculation of the enemy commander is part of the point of the story, in some ways. Yee writes that woman warriors often serve within narratives to induce shame in men, and that this function is active in Jael's story (115). Both Barak and Sisera experience emasculating shame and "[i]t is through the hand of Jael that both Sisera's and Barak's dishonor is realized" (Yee 116).

Sisera's shame, like Jael's motherly qualities, is increased in some later retellings of the Jael story. In the Pseudo-Philo, Sisera is "humiliated and feminized" (Bletsch 64),

saying to Jael as he dies, “Behold, the pain has taken me, Jael, and I die like a woman.” To which Jael responds: “Go and boast before your father in hell and tell him that you have fallen at the hands of a woman” (Bletsch 57).

This seems a natural enough outgrowth from the original, in which Deborah taunts Barak with the knowledge that “the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (Judges 4:9). As Yee points out, this is not meant to serve as a glorification of the woman who kills Sisera, but rather as a way of shaming Barak (Yee 115). It is clear to Yee that the author of Judges 4

uses the covert activity of women in war as a strategic entitlement to reinforce negative stereotypes of women in general. Instead of a warrior defending her people and her household, Jael becomes at the hands of the male author a temptress, deceiver, and ultimately a castrator. (Yee 117)

But by making Jael a woman warrior, a character with a liminal and fluid gender identity, and by following that through to its inevitable consequence – that Jael begins to destabilize the genders of those around her – the author has accomplished much more than the humiliation of Sisera and Barak. Jael has been created as the specter of the phallic mother, of the masculine woman, of the castrating vagina dentate. She is threatening to the very desire for patriarchal reinforcement that, according to Yee, created her. Jael is almost the personification of gender blur, that force most threatening to the hierarchical structure of patriarchy. If you can’t tell for sure which people are men, and which are women, how can power structures based on gender inequality be maintained?

This, then, is the source of the phallogocentric reader’s unease about the character of Jael. The problem is not that she breaks with laws of hospitality, or even that she is a rapist, quite. The problem is that in doing those things, and in order to do those things, she destabilizes both her own gender construction and the gendered identities of others.

The feminist reader can see her strength as Jael appropriates the power of the phallus for herself, denying it to Sisera, placing them both into liminal gender roles. The phallogocentric reader sees, instead, the disturbing imagery of his own methods turned against him, appropriated by Jael much as I will now appropriate Freud's words to put into her mouth – "I am not afraid of you," Jael seems to say to the reader who wants desperately to reduce her threat by failing to acknowledge it. "I defy you. I have a penis" (Freud 203).

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