

# 'Midrashic Wishful Thinking'

## Constructions of *Esther* in Twenty-First Century Novels

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### Abstract

This paper uses tools from feminist literary theory to analyse three twenty-first century novels: *Esther: Royal Beauty* by Angela Hunt (2015); *Esther: A Novel* by Rebecca Kanner (2015) and *The Gilded Chamber* by Rebecca Kohn (2004). The novels are all creative retellings of the Book of Esther, and the paper situates them in the context of a textual reception history which has been characterised by rich and varied 'aggadic interpretation and a tendency to creatively rewrite, rather than translate, the problematically subversive canonical version. Working from the premise posited by structuralist Gérard Genette, that whenever a text is creatively retold, it is "transvalued" (the derivative text replaces aspects of the target text with the values of its own context), it considers which cultural values are being imputed into twenty-first century retellings of the story. Using Meir Sternberg's narratological criticism as a framework, which posits that the ways in which readers fill in the "gaps" in texts can either be valid or constitute "misreading", and drawing upon Daniel Boyarin's supposition that readers fill in textual gaps with whatever is most culturally contingent, the paper identifies some key "gaps" in the story and analyses how the novels (that is, the "hypotexts") have filled them. It focuses especially on the characterisation of the main female characters, Esther and Vashti, and the relationship between them. The paper identifies some troubling misogynistic motifs which persist, and are even intensified, in the twenty-first century novels. It also concludes that the detailed characterisation of the characters in the novels, in keeping with the expectations of the novel genre, ultimately constitutes a "misreading", destabilising the balance of the hypertext.



## Introduction

The structuralist Gérard Genette claimed that every time a narrative is rewritten, the text is transvalued. This transformational process, for example extending, redacting or parodying a text, involves the replacement of the value systems of the “hypotext” (the target text) with those of the “hypertext” (the derivative text).<sup>1</sup> To put it another way: aspects of the story are repeated, but the new version is imbued with the ideology of its own context. The aim of this article is to ask: what transvaluation has occurred in three recent transformations of *Esther*?

The “hypertexts” in question are three twenty-first century novels: *Esther: Royal Beauty* by Angela Hunt; *Esther: a Novel* by Rebecca Kanner and *The Gilded Chamber* by Rebecca Kohn.<sup>2</sup> There is no definitive “hypotext” in this case: as David Clines explores in *The Esther Scroll*, the MT and LXX textual witnesses have a complex literary prehistory which can only ever be hypothetically reconstructed. However, the apocryphal and ‘aggadic additions to the Megillah in the Talmud, Midrashim and Septuagint attest to an enduring tendency to creatively reinterpret aspects of the story. This is, as I shall proceed to explore, arguably testament to *Esther*’s slippery resistance to ideological or theological categorisation, and to its tantalising lacunae. This article will focus on the construction of Esther, the eponymous protagonist, and the extent to which the three twenty-first century “hypertexts” have “transvalued” the character. I shall be using tools from feminist literary criticism in order to shape my approach. Drawing upon the “mad woman in the attic” theory propounded by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, I shall particularly consider the ways in which the anti-heroine, Vashti, functions as a doppelgänger to the protagonist and the extent to which the various writers foreshadow and develop the slippage between them. This comparison will enable an analysis of how elements of monstrosity emerge in the depiction of the female characters, a phenomenon which, following feminist literary thinkers such as Savannah Woodworth, I treat as a litmus test for identifying nuances of cultural change.<sup>3</sup>

*Esther* is problematic and subversive. Not only is the Hebrew text famously lacking in any direct references to the tetragrammaton, but from a Torah perspective, Esther’s behaviour at King Ahasuerus’s palace is questionable. There is no indication in the text that she observes food laws or prays during her time at the palace, and her marriage to a gentile king apparently contradicts the much stricter marriage ethic in the similarly post-exilic Ezra-Nehemiah.<sup>4</sup> Contra Elsie Stern, it probably originated outside of the land and partly functions to legitimise a festival which is not

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<sup>1</sup> Gérard Genette, Channa Newman, Claude Doubinsky and Gerald Prince, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Angela Hunt, *Esther: Royal Beauty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2015); Rebecca Kanner, *Esther: A Novel* (New York: Howard Books, 2015); Rebecca Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber* (London: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Savannah Woodworth, “Monstrous Silhouette: The Development of the Female Monster in British Literature” (Huntsville, TX: Sam Houston State University, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Martien Halvorson-Taylor, “Displacement and Diaspora in Biblical Narrative,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Fewell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

featured in the Pentateuch.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as Alice Bach observes, the seductive and sensual Esther arguably has more in common with infamous biblical femme fatales such as Jezebel and Delilah than paradigmatically virtuous Jewish heroines.<sup>6</sup> It is one of only two books of the Tanakh to bear the name of a female protagonist. The depiction of violent retaliations against the pogroms in the denouement of the story has also caused problems, particularly in the Christian tradition: Luther said of *Esther*, "I am so hostile to this book that I wish it did not exist".<sup>7</sup>

The anomalous nature of the text is evident in its historically unstable canonical status. Frederick Bush states that, in the Christian tradition, there is "little evidence for its canonicity before the end of the second century".<sup>8</sup> In the Jewish tradition it was not immediately or easily accepted as canonical scripture. Lee Martin McDonald states that, from the second to the fifth centuries CE, there was "so much discussion [...] about whether books like *Ezekiel*, *Ruth*, *Esther*, *Ecclesiastes* and *Sirach* 'defile the hands'".<sup>9</sup> *Esther* has also not been found at Qumran.<sup>10</sup> Crawford White argues that the Megillah's connection to Purim is probably the reason it is included in the Jewish canon "unlike the very similar book of *Judith*".<sup>11</sup> W. Lee Humphreys describes it as a "barely tolerated stepchild".<sup>12</sup>

Concomitant with the book's precarious canonicity and subversive content has been a tendency to treat the story more freely than more central and indisputably canonical texts. Writing in the introduction to the BHQ translation of the MT, Magne Sæbo notes that "the textual history of the Book of Esther shows considerable fluidity"; he draws the reader's attention to "major variants and differences" and a "broad and variegated tradition history".<sup>13</sup> The Septuagint is, in the words of Crawford White, a "distinctly different literary piece from the MT".<sup>14</sup> Carey Moore describes it as "more or less worthless as a critical witness to the original Hebrew".<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the Targums are, according to Sæbo, "remarkably expansive and paraphrastic".<sup>16</sup> White describes them as "more like midrashic free renderings than strict translations".<sup>17</sup> The midrashim also contain a

<sup>5</sup> Elsie Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora', *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 100, no. 1 (2010), 25-53.

<sup>6</sup> Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, cited by Sidnie Crawford White, "Esther," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 3, ed. Leander Keck, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 869.

<sup>8</sup> Frederic Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ruth, Esther*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1996), 274.

<sup>9</sup> Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders. *The Canon Debate*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 56.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Abegg Jr, Peter Flint and Eugene Ulrich eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: Translated and with Commentary*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 630.

<sup>11</sup> Crawford White, "Esther," 859.

<sup>12</sup> W. Lee Humphreys in Coats, George W. *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature* (Sheffield: JSOT 159, 1985) 99.

<sup>13</sup> Magne Sæbo, "Esther" in *Torah, Nevi'im u-Ketuvim: Biblia Hebraica quinta editione cum apparatu critico novis curis elaborato* ed. Schenker, Adrian (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Crawford White, "Esther," 861.

<sup>15</sup> Carey Moore, cited in Bush, *World Biblical Commentary*, 278.

<sup>16</sup> Sæbo, "Esther," 22.

<sup>17</sup> Crawford White, "Esther," 861.

plethora of ‘aggadic interpretations and addendums; an interpretative tradition alongside which the modern novels investigated in this article stand in intertextual dialogue. The protean nature of the versions of the Esther story—we cannot call them translations—is arguably related to its suspect status and subversion. When stumbling upon some of the aforementioned problems in the story’s subject matter, the tendency has been to harmonise, sanitise and theologise the text, particularly in relation to the titular character.<sup>18</sup>

This tendency to add creative details to *Esther*, particularly those which function to “transvalue” the story by harmonising it with the recipient community’s ideology, can be explained with reference to Meir Sternberg’s narratological theory. Sternberg argues that texts contain “gaps”: lacunae not explicitly addressed by the narrator. These omissions can be because the ambiguity is more compelling than the closure of interpretative options, because all narrative—especially plot-driven narrative—is necessarily selective and these details were not prioritised, or possibly as a type of self-censorship to avoid offence. According to Sternberg, the reader is the agent of “gap-filling”. He defines “gap-filling” as “restoring the continuity that the narrator broke”.<sup>19</sup> Some gaps, Sternberg suggests, are more interesting than others. For example, in biblical narrative, “violation of biblical norms draws attention to gaps”.<sup>20</sup> *Esther* is guilty of “violating” several “biblical norms”, some of which the narrator euphemistically skips over.<sup>21</sup>

Sternberg also recognises that the way readers fill in gaps is culturally contingent. He suggests that the reader “tends to ‘adjust’ the narrated world, as far as possible” to premises and models from his or her own culture. He writes, “the hypothesis that is most conventional in terms of his own culture also yields the simplest and certainly the least demanding answers and linkages”.<sup>22</sup> Daniel Boyarin phrases the phenomena thus: “the text of the Torah is gapped and dialogical, and into the gaps the reader slips, interpreting and completing the text in accordance with the codes of his or her culture”.<sup>23</sup> For both Sternberg and Boyarin, then, the resources for “gap-filling” are typically provided through recourse to what is most culturally conventional for the reader. We see that in

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<sup>18</sup> For example, the Septuagint additions include Esther’s prayer, which transforms the character into a more pious figure. The midrashim use creative devices to circumvent Esther’s questionable morality: for example, describing an angel taking her place in the king’s bed to preserve her modesty. Several add details that typify Esther with Sarah, such as attributing her with a very old age. Others state that she subscribed to Mosaic food laws during her time in the palace.

<sup>19</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 235.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>21</sup> For example, the concise statement in 2:14 “in the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back to the second harem”. The compound sentence, echoing the liturgical repetition of God’s creative pattern in Genesis 1, illustrates Sternberg’s example of a gap contrived by “temporal displacement”. The details of the young women’s nights spent with the king are brusquely passed over, either to avoid offence or because it is more tantalising to leave the details to the reader’s imagination.

<sup>22</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 189.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 14. *Esther* is not in the Torah, but the point stands.

the reception history of *Esther* as in all biblical narrative.<sup>24</sup> *Esther: Royal Beauty*, *Esther: A Novel* and *The Gilded Chamber* can all be situated within this tradition of creative revisions that seek to address the Megillah's troubling lacunae. They should be considered, if not as midrash proper, as part of the same phenomena which seeks to grapple with the subversion of a problematic text; evidence of the continued attempt to control and close down troubling "gaps" by making hermeneutical choices. I am interested to ask: what "gaps" have been filled in the construction of *Esther* in the modern novels and, most importantly, what have they been filled *with*? Is their transvaluation of *Esther* in continuity with the conservatising tendencies of the text's interpretative tradition or, alternatively, can they be said to constitute a break from it?

There is a critical precedent for approaching *Esther* scholarship from imaginative angles, particularly in feminist biblical criticism. Danna Fewell, Bea Wyler and Diane Wolkstein all offer their own creative rewritings of the story as a way of commenting on the text.<sup>25</sup> Alice Bach speaks of the need to approach the text "playfully" and take a "kaleidoscopic approach".<sup>26</sup> Scholars including Mieke Bal, Alice Bach and Zefira Gitay have all used the arts to explore *Esther's* reception history.<sup>27</sup> Partly, I think, scholars respond to *Esther* by creatively rewriting the story because it is so problematic from a feminist perspective that they succumb to what Wyler describes as "midrashic wishful thinking".<sup>28</sup> However, it is also more radical than that. It is a response to what Esther Fuchs describes as the need for a feminist epistemology which is "revisionist" and "transformational".<sup>29</sup> Peggy Day sums up the phenomena thus:

When feminist theologians reshape biblical traditions and retell biblical stories in a way that assigns importance and imports dignity to female characters, or affirms gender equality, or deplores the denigration of women, they are doing what the theological tradition has always done, which is to

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<sup>24</sup> For example, as Barry Wolfish explores in the essay "Esther in Medieval Garb", Jewish interpretation of *Esther* in the Middle Ages was filtered through medieval cultural and intellectual life. Johannes Serwouters' play *Hester*, first performed in 1659, imagined the potential genocide in the story with inspiration from the contemporary pogroms in Eastern Europe. And in Rembrandt's painting *Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther*, the characters wear clothes typical of the Renaissance court.

<sup>25</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell, "Nice Girls Do" in *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 133-196; Bea Wyler, "Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen" and Diane Wolkstein, "Esther's Story", both in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, Ruth and Susannah* ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 111-134 and 198-207.

<sup>26</sup> Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal*; Mieke Bal, "Lots of Writing" in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion* ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 212-238; Zefira Gitay, "Esther and the Queen's Throne" in *Feminist Companion to the Bible: Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 136-148.

<sup>27</sup> Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Wyler, "Esther," 134.

<sup>29</sup> Esther Fuchs, "Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women: The Neoliberal Turn in Contemporary Feminist Scholarship," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24 (2008), 64.

read and retell the story in light of contemporary experience and as an affirmation of their values and worldview.<sup>30</sup>

The key questions I will be asking are: with the details Hunt, Kanner and Kohn use to delineate and embellish the character of Esther, in what “light” are they retelling the story? To what extent can these literary recreations of *Esther* be considered “revisionist” and “transformational”, in addition to being rooted in and in dialogue with the reception history of the text? Do their transvaluations of the character spiritualise and theologise her, and attempt to harmonise her subversive sexuality and authority to biblical norms? Or are they doing something quite different?

There is a plethora of fictional versions of *Esther*, in the mediums of film, theatre, visual art and literature.<sup>31</sup> Due to the spatial limits of this project and to allow for some depth of interpretation, I have chosen to focus on just three novels. Although any generic overlap between the novels and a post-exilic *Diasporanovelle* should not be overstated, I chose novels partly because, as written texts, they share a formal proximity to the biblical text and to the Targums and Midrashim that other mediums, such as visual arts, do not. I chose these specific novels because they are recent (published in 2015 and 2004), they are written in English, they focus specifically and entirely on Esther, and they are written in prose. Beyond that, I selected the novels for their circulation statistics, and by the size and distribution scope of their publishing companies. The aim was not to attempt a scientific mode of data sampling and I do not make any universalistic claims about my findings: I merely wish to interrogate three twenty-first century creative reconstructions of the character of Esther and consider what they might be implying about the cultural milieu of the hypertexts’ thought-world.

### I. Esther: Subject or Object?

In *The Second Sex*, first published in France in 1949, de Beauvoir argued that “woman” is typically conceptualised in dualistic opposition to “man”, with man as “subject” and woman as an objectified “other”. She wrote:

She is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called “the sex,” meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Peggy Day ed., *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 2.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Jo Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008) and Anne Stewart, “Esther (Book and Person)” in *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and its Reception* eds. Allison C. Dale et al (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* trans. Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Random House, 2010), 26.

The postmodern distrust of binaries has problematised de Beauvoir's categories of man = subject, woman = other. Almost seventy years later, critical theory is less comfortable with essentialist constructions of gender, and more conscious of the multi-layered intersectionality that underpins power dynamics and social identity. This development serves to accentuate the rendering of Esther as "other": not only is she a woman in a patriarchal society, but also ethnically other: a threatened minority in a totalitarian Persian court, a "Jew" in the first biblical text to understand that term as signifying socio-ethnic and religious, rather than geographical, identity. As such, Esther epitomises "other"; Timothy Beal, Joshua Berman, Anne-Mareike Wetter, Angeline Song and Daniel Smith-Christopher all examine this intersectional otherness in recent essays. Late to mid-twentieth century feminist biblical scholarship tended to deride Esther for her passivity and submission to objective status, taking what Fuchs labels as a "gynocritic approach".<sup>33</sup> However, in contrast to this, more recent criticism has recognised her submission as a survival tactic, personifying the compromises demanded for the survival of the Jewish nation in a Diaspora existence.

Broadly speaking, we might expect the twenty-first century novels to reflect the feminist trajectory of the Western cultural consciousness, dignifying the character of Esther with more subjectivity than the ancient texts and 'aggadic commentaries, or possibly highlighting and deconstructing her multi-layered otherness. Not only are they written by women (in so far as we wish to accept that as an essentialist category), but they are more closely aligned to the protagonist's perspective: *Esther: A Novel* and *Gilded Chamber* are entirely written from the first-person narrative perspective of Esther, and *Royal Beauty* utilises a split narrative perspective, oscillating between Esther and the eunuch Harbonah. In contrast to this, Bush argues that the MT is most closely aligned to King Ahasureus' and Haman's perspective; Beal also notes that the text "never explicitly conceives of the inner lives of its Jewish heroine Esther, its Jewish hero Mordecai, or [...] Vashti" but "only those of King Ahasureus and Haman".<sup>34</sup> For Beal it is these two powerful men who are the subjects of the story, albeit with "a highly insecure subjectivity that is never fully in possession of itself".<sup>35</sup>

Is it the case, then, that these novels reconstruct *Esther* by shifting the eponymous protagonist from object to subject? The answer is not that straightforward. Some critics have characterised Esther in the biblical story as a passive object, passed from the ownership and control of one man to another, with very little autonomy or control over her fate.<sup>36</sup> However, she is also the eponymous protagonist of the story; Brenner suggests that the text "makes a female character visible" in contrast to the invisibility of women in the vast majority of historical or historiographical

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<sup>33</sup> Fuchs, "Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women," 53.

<sup>34</sup> Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 315; Timothy Beal, "Who Filled His Heart to do this': Conceptual Metaphors of the Self in the Book of Esther," *JSOT* 40.1 (2015), 106.

<sup>35</sup> Beal, "Conceptual Metaphors of the Self," 98.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Angeline Song, "Heartless Bimbo or Subversive Role Model?: A Narrative (Self) Critical Reading of the Character of Esther". *Dialog* 49 (2010), pp. 56–69.

records.<sup>37</sup> It is, to use a trite and clichéd pun, a *herstory*, as opposed to a history (although the scholarly consensus is that the text has very few connections to specific historical events).

Some critics identify a progression in Esther's character throughout the biblical story: a development in confidence and autonomy as she adopts the role of queen and takes responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people. Bush sums up this character progression by stating that "she begins as a nonentity, valued in the courtly world only for her good looks and body" but "becomes a force to be reckoned with" and "the main agent in effecting [the Jewish people's] deliverance".<sup>38</sup>

Several scholars identify a peripety in the narrative concerning Esther's character in Chapter Four, during which the power shifts from Mordecai to her and she arguably takes control of events.<sup>39</sup> Bush describes Esther's acceptance of Mordecai's "challenge" to use her position as queen for the good of her people as the "decisive moment" in the story.<sup>40</sup> Rivkah Lubitch writes, "at a certain point in the story [...] she 'snaps' out of the dream world she has been in and assumes a role which is good enough for any feminist".<sup>41</sup> Fox describes the change as "abrupt"; the OBC describes it as "the turning point of the tale".<sup>42</sup> This difference is specifically pinpointed as occurring between 4:8 and 4:15. In verse 8, we read that Mordecai sends Esther a command via an envoi: לְצוּת עֲלֶיהָ ("to declare it to her").<sup>43</sup> However, by verse 15 it is Esther who has taken control: וְתֹאמַר אֶסְתֵּר לָךְ וְהַשִּׁיב אֶל-מֵרְדֳכָי ("Esther told them in reply to Mordecai, 'Go...']").

The 3fs waw consecutive imperfect *tō'mer* identifies Esther as the subject of an action and affords her direct speech for the first time in the Megillah. Moreover, the 2ms imperative *lēk*, unequivocally identifiable as an imperative by the weak verb losing its final *Hē*, renders Esther fully in control of the discourse. Her command that Mordecai should "go" even evokes YHWH's call to Abraham in Genesis 12. Moreover, the repetition of two morphological variants of the *Piel* צוה ("command", "charge", "instruct", "enjoin")<sup>44</sup> in 4:8 and 4:17 emphasises that it is now Esther who is issuing commands and Mordecai who is obeying them:

<sup>37</sup> Klara Butting, "Esther: a New Perspective of the Joseph Story in the Fight against Anti-Semitism and Sexism" in Athalya Brenner ed. *Ruth and Esther: a Feminist Companion to the Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999. pp. 239-248.

<sup>38</sup> Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 321.

<sup>39</sup> I am aware that biblical chapters are a paratextual addition dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, but I refer to them for ease of identification.

<sup>40</sup> Bush, *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Rivkah Lubitch, "A Feminist's Look at Esther", *Judaism* 42, no. 4 (1993), 438.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 28.

<sup>43</sup> All translations are my own.

<sup>44</sup> David Clines ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 376.



ויעבר מרדכי ויעש ככל אשר-צותה עליו אסתר ("And Mordecai went away and did everything that Esther had commanded"). The OBC remarks: "Esther has her own voice now and is now acting in her own right, no longer under her mentor's direction".<sup>45</sup>

It could be argued, then, that although Esther is first introduced in the story as a patriarchal object: הנערה ("the girl") in 2:9 and אסתר בת-אביהיל ("Esther, daughter of Abihail") in 2:15, by 2:22 she is אסתר המלכה ("Queen Esther"); a new title to accompany significant—but limited—new power and status. Critics debate the extent to which Esther is afforded any real power or autonomy in the biblical text. For example, Song describes her as "a complex character who started out being passive, but who develops as the narrative progresses".<sup>46</sup> Fuchs, on the other hand, claims that both Ruth and Esther are "agents rather than free actants" who "obey rather than initiate".<sup>47</sup> Beal insists on a translation of המלכה as "the king's wife" because "queen" "implies an autonomous authority that Esther never displays".<sup>48</sup>

Even if the character of Esther does undergo a significant shift in the direction of autonomy and subjectivity in the biblical story, it could be argued that this change is only temporary, and only born of the un-ideal circumstances of Diaspora existence, in which the normal rules of "the land" do not apply. It is also possible that the ending of the text functions to re-subsume the character of Esther into an orthodox, patriarchal/androcentric schema by rendering her abject: having served the function of securing a reversal of the threatened pogroms, she is ultimately punished for transgressing the acceptable sphere of Jewish morality and female behaviour by being banished from the narrative. Esther is not featured at all in Chapter 10 of the biblical text, effectively disappearing with no indication about her ultimate fate, and it is Mordecai who is credited with גדלת ("high honour", "greatness") and רצוי ("popularity", "esteem") as well as being משנה ("second") to King Ahasuerus.

Several scholars, including Clines, argue that Chapter 10 has a "different literary prehistory" from the rest of the text and demonstrates evidence of redactional layers.<sup>49</sup> It as if an MT redactor felt compelled to add to a proto-Esther, which Clines suggests was similar to the A-Text in the LXX, in order to render it more acceptable or canonically justifiable. Conservative, conventional endings are famously effective at counterbalancing more radical features in a narrative proper and reassuring reactionary readers: for example, *Jane Eyre* concludes with a biblical quotation, as if to reassure readers who were unsettled by the more progressive "Reader, I married him".<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> "Commentary on Esther." In *The Oxford Bible Commentary. Oxford Biblical Studies Online.*

<sup>46</sup> Angeline Song, "Heartless Bimbo or Subversive Role Model?: A Narrative (Self) Critical Reading of the Character of Esther," *Dialog* 49 (2010), 62.

<sup>47</sup> Fuchs cited in Song, "A Narrative (Self) Critical Reading of Esther," 62.

<sup>48</sup> Beal, "Conceptual Metaphors of the Self," 650.

<sup>49</sup> David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1984), 49. Also Bush, 293.

<sup>50</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin, 1992), 618.

Perhaps, then, it is possible to trace a conservative impulse in the reception history of Esther, in which a remarkably autonomous female character is gradually shifted to a more peripheral position. The reference in 2 Maccabees 15:26 to “Mordecai’s Day” is certainly in keeping with this theory.

However, the ‘aggadic material in both the Talmuds and the Midrashim tell a much more complicated story. For example, Talmud B. Meg. 7a presents an assertive Esther who demands to be written into history:

Esther sent to the Wise Men saying, “Commemorate me for generations!” They sent back to her, “You will awaken the envy of the nations against us.” She sent back to them, “I am already recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia”.<sup>51</sup>

She is presented here as a strong figure, arguing for inclusion in the Tanakh on the grounds that she is already recorded in the Persian chronicles (MT 10:22). Talmudic thought is by no means monolithic. Bernard Grossman notes that “the Targums were translated at different times, and most probably for varying purposes, and have more than one interpretative approach to the Hebrew Bible”.<sup>52</sup>

Leila Bronner also traces some key trends in rabbinic constructions of Esther in her essay “Esther Revisited: An Aggadic Approach”. Firstly, she notes that the rabbis did not criticise or challenge Esther’s leadership qualities to the extent that they did with Deborah. Secondly, she highlights the tendency for the Midrash and Talmuds to imbue Esther with prophetic powers; she writes, “The rabbis saw in Esther a spirit of prophecy, which strengthened her and enabled her to wield power to save her people”.<sup>53</sup> Lubitch agrees, stating that the rabbis attributed Esther with “amazing courage and authority” in the midrashim.<sup>54</sup> However, this celebration of Esther as a powerful, assertive prophet did not equate to ascribing the character with augmented subjectivity or autonomy; in fact, the inverse is the case. Bronner states that, “Rabbinic literature, by emphasizing God’s constant assistance, in a way diminishes Esther’s personal strength and independence of action; but it also increases her spirituality, which was, after all, where rabbinic interest lay”.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Esther functions as a sort of conduit for God’s power in the rabbinic hypertexts; a way of asserting God’s presence in a story from which it was otherwise problematically absent. The foregrounding of Esther’s strength and piety in the text, therefore, is a symptom of the rabbi’s theological schema rather a project in itself.

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<sup>51</sup> Talmud B. Meg. 7a, cited in Judith Z. Abrams, *The Talmud for Beginners Volume II* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), 25.

<sup>52</sup> Bernard Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark: 1991), vii.

<sup>53</sup> Leila Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994), 193.

<sup>54</sup> Lubitch, “A Feminist’s Look at Esther,” 446.

<sup>55</sup> Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, 197.

I shall now turn to the three twenty-first century novels, and their constructions of the character of Esther. To what extent do they depict her as an autonomous agent in the texts? Do they ascribe her with subjectivity in a way that the biblical story does not? Firstly, all three novels are significantly longer than the canonical version of the story in the Hebrew Bible. Naturally, this gives them more space to embellish the plot with imagined details, and we should therefore expect the character to be more delineated, and to develop more subtly and along a wider narrative arc, than in the biblical version.

Both *Royal Beauty* and *Esther: A Novel* imagine some degree of character development for the eponymous protagonist. Hunt initially expositus Esther as a silly, wistful thirteen year old who "dreamed of visiting the palace", who has a crush on her Persian friend Parysatis's "handsome brother" and who pushes the boundaries by sneaking out to meet her friends at the market place.<sup>56</sup> After first believing herself to be in love with Ahasuerus when she is chosen to be his queen at the palace, she ultimately realises that "clearly, the king cared more for his honour than for me or my people".<sup>57</sup> The novel ends on an anti-climactic note after the dramatic reversal of the Jews' fortune: Esther realises that her husband's eyes are "as wide and blank as windows" because "the soul they harboured had long since flown away" but resolves to continue in her duty to "respect him, honour him, and obey him. And through it all, to love him".<sup>58</sup> The split-narrative perspective ends in Harbonah's voice for the final two chapters, as he fills in the imagined detail that, "After the king's death, my beloved friend Queen Esther and her maids left the queen's palace and retired to quiet rooms in the harem".<sup>59</sup>

Thus, in a notably similar way to the MT, Esther disappears at the end of *Royal Beauty*. In Hunt's case, this may be as a result of her incorporation of extra-biblical ancient sources into the account. Hunt draws on Herodotus's *The Histories* to fill in some of the gaps in the biblical text: equating Amestris with the Biblical Vashti, she refers to the fact that it was Amestris' three sons who were in line to the throne after Xerxes (Ahasuerus). It may be, therefore, that she banishes Esther to a "quiet" life at the end of her novel, and emphasises her childlessness, in order to correlate the story with the details in the Greek Chronicle. Hunt is writing from a "Christian perspective"<sup>60</sup>, and of the three modern novels takes by far the most maximalist approach to the biblical text. She states that she "never knowingly contradicts the biblical account" and asserts that Herodotus "did not mention a queen called Esther, but just because he didn't mention her doesn't mean she didn't exist".<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Hunt, *Esther*, 28; 27; 30.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

This hermeneutical framework also shapes the arc of the titular character's development: Hunt describes *Esther* as a "story of how God worked within a pagan culture to sustain His people... and drew the heart of a distracted daughter back to himself".<sup>62</sup> We therefore trace a character who begins as frivolous and charmed by the worldly delights of Persian culture, to end as more pious and spiritual. However, unlike the powerful female prophet figure imagined in the 'aggadic imagination, by the end of Hunt's novel, Esther epitomises the complementarian perspective of conservative, Reformed Protestant Christianity: her final words at the end of the text, in which she resolves to "respect" and "obey" her husband and do her "duty", echo the marriage vows of traditional Christian liturgy. Hunt's Esther has more agency and subjectivity than the Esther imagined by the rabbis, and—by the end of the novel—uses her free will to voluntarily subject herself to the submissive role in a marriage which originated in capture. It is, perhaps, the Stockholm Syndrome of a woman who by that time has spent more than half her life effectively imprisoned in a palace, or the consummate female construct of reactionary fantasy.

Despite notably similar tropes throughout the story, which I shall explore further in due course, Kanner's ending is very different. Kanner departs from the biblical ending to imagine that, eight years after the biblical narrative closes, Esther elopes from the palace with Erez, a soldier in Ahasuerus's court and a clandestine Jew. She writes:

I had not been outside the palace for fifteen years. Half my life. When I fled, my crown would not go with me. I unpinned it without my servant's help and stood feeling its weight upon my head one last time. I thought of all I had done to get it, how hard I had struggled to keep it, and the many people who had helped me.

*Am I ready for another journey?*

My hands were steady as I took off the crown and set it on a table beside the bed. *Yes, I am ready.*<sup>63</sup>

If Hunt's ending is Revelation 22:20, Kanner's is "Reader, I married him". The proliferation of active verbs in the closing paragraphs ("I fled", "I thought", "I unpinned") strongly imbues the character with autonomy and agency, and is reminiscent of MT Esther's turnaround in Chapter Four. This version, however, is no less problematic from a feminist standpoint: Kanner's Esther first encounters Erez as the soldier who kidnapped her from her village at the beginning of the novel. Like Hunt, Kanner draws upon detail from Herodotus, describing Erez and his fellow soldiers as "Immortals". Unlike Hunt, there is no exposition of the Persian setting or establishment of Esther's character at the beginning of the novel. The story begins *in media res* with Esther's kidnap. The reader first encounters Erez on the second page of the novel, in the following sentence: "He pulled me from my straw mattress, threw me over his shoulder, and began walking. My head fell against

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 345.

<sup>63</sup> Kanner *Esther: A Novel*, 376.

his armour".<sup>64</sup> The ending is a stark grammatical reversal of this sentence: Esther begins the novel as object, and ends as active subject, indicating a development that, unlike the MT and Hunt's re-creation, is not curtailed or lessened by a more conservative ending. However, the *Beauty and the Beast*-esque denouement of captive falling in love with captor is still unsettling, and is no way alluded to in either the MT or any of the 'aggadic traditions.

In contrast to *Royal Beauty* and *Esther: A Novel, Gilded Chamber* constructs an Esther who is notably less different at the end of the novel than she is at the beginning. Drawing upon midrashic sources which understood Esther to be married to her cousin Mordecai, Kohn establishes a situation in which Esther and Mordecai are betrothed. Kohn writes:

I was still an infant when Mordechai [sic] came into full beard. But our parents wanted to preserve and strengthen the family by uniting their children in marriage. Mordechai agreed to the match and so we were betrothed. I, Hadassah daughter of Avihail son of Shemei, was two years old. Mordechai son of Yair son of Shemei, was twenty.<sup>65</sup>

Kohn imagines an Esther who feels positive about the match, and clings onto its prospect throughout her time in the harem. In this version of the story, Mordecai is presented as a sinister character who fails to adequately protect Esther when she is captured:

I told myself that Mordechai did not fight because he did not have a soldier's strength and had no chance of succeeding against them. He did not argue because the king's edict was issued with no provision for exceptions. He did not bribe the soldiers by mention of his wealth and influence in the king's court because he knew the disobedient would be subject to cruel punishment.<sup>66</sup>

Kohn invites the reader to disagree with Esther's excusal of her guardian and interpret Mordecai as a suspect figure. However, unlike Hunt and Kanner's versions, which portray Esther reaching a greater level of self-awareness by the end of the novel, Kohn's Esther ends as naïve and deluded as she was at the beginning. The novel ends with the following two sentences:

Each morning I wake filled with hope that this is the day I will be reunited with my beloved cousin. Each night I pray that he will find me worthy of his love.<sup>67</sup>

Unlike the MT and *Royal Beauty*, the narrative ends in Esther's voice. However, unlike the self-assurance and self-actualisation conveyed in Kanner's story, the reader is left doubting that Esther's subjectivity is rooted in reality, or that it is accompanied by any autonomy. She is more like Haman in Chapter Six of the MT, whose perception is recognised as erroneous by the reader through

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>65</sup> Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 353.

the device of dramatic irony. However, whilst Haman's delusion is accompanied by a sense of poetic justice, here there is only pathos.

It would seem like a reasonable hypothesis that we could trace a progressive line of increasingly feminist tendencies in the reception history of *Esther*, and that imaginative rewritings of the text, particularly some two generations after Simone de Beauvoir, would shift the character from object to subject when retelling the story from her perspective. So far, a brief survey of some of the text's creative revisions indicates that this is by no means straightforwardly the case. Whilst MT *Esther* is not unequivocally the subject of the text, we cannot rightly label her a mere object, either: there is some degree of agency and autonomy evidenced in her character at points in the story, although this is not sustained all the way to the closure of the narrative. The rabbinic interpretations of the text appear to both strengthen and weaken the character's subjective status, in an idiosyncratic and theologically-driven way. The twenty-first century texts are by no means monolithic, and shifting the narrative perspective to first person does not automatically increase the character's agency or autonomy. The feminist trend to rewrite history as *herstory* is problematic with regard to *Esther*, because to some extent the text defied the generally androcentric ideology in the Hebrew Bible and has therefore arguably always been her story. In considering the filling in of "gaps" in the text, already we see that not all gaps are created equal, and that beginnings, endings and critical junctures in the text are by far the strongest indicators of the re-imagined story's ideology.

## II. *Esther* and Vashti

"Take an *Esther*, let *Vashti* go!" *Luther: The Estate of Marriage*, 1522<sup>68</sup>

A significant aspect of the construction of *Esther* as a character, both in the "hypotexts" of the MT and LXX and the "hypertexts" by Kanner, Kohn and Hunt, is the way in which *Esther* and *Vashti* function as foils of each other. In this section, I will use the feminist literary criticism of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to consider whether the contrast between the only two named female characters in the text is simply an antithetical dichotomy between a virtuous and villainous woman, or whether the dynamic is more complex. Do the twenty-first century recreations demonstrate the capacity to construct a conceptual framework in which women are more than just vacuous victims of the patriarchy or manipulative misandrists? Does their "gap-filling" strategy reinforce or challenge female literary archetypes?

Gilbert and Gubar posit that, across literary genres, women are characterised according to "the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster'".<sup>69</sup> The "angel" constitutes the perfect, passive, virginal

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<sup>68</sup> Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry Wiesner-Hanks Ed. *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 105.

<sup>69</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 17.

woman who is so ethereal that she “simultaneously inhabits both this world and the next”.<sup>70</sup> In contrast to this, the monster is a “representative of otherness; she incarnates the damning otherness of the flesh, rather than the inspiring otherness of the Spirit”.<sup>71</sup> Drawing upon the work of de Beauvoir, to which I referred in the previous section, they argue that:

[T]he female monster is a striking illustration of Simone de Beauvoir’s thesis that woman has been made to represent all of man’s ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death. As the Other, woman comes to represent the contingency of life, life that is made to be destroyed.<sup>72</sup>

Crucial to the relationship between the “angel” and “monster” women in the text is an anxiety that the dichotomy is unstable, and that there is a precarious slippage between them. The “angel” is constantly threatened by the “monster”, who may destroy or usurp her at any time. Hence there is “always a wicked stepmother trying to chase the virgin” and “the monster may not only be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within”.<sup>73</sup>

Whilst Gilbert and Gubar focus their thesis on nineteenth century literature, most famously on the “mad woman in the attic” in *Jane Eyre*, they argue that the phenomenon is evidenced throughout a much longer period of literary history. They suggest it can be found “descending from Patristic misogynists like Tertullian and St Augustine through Renaissance and Restoration literature”.<sup>74</sup> Might it be possible to identify the trope as far back as Esther and Vashti in the Hebrew Bible? And if not, where might we begin to see its influence creeping into literary recreations of the story?

The reader of the Hebrew Bible first meets Vashti in 1:9. Unlike Esther, we meet her as an active agent as the subject of the verb (עשתה *‘āsētāh*: 3 fs. *Qal*), and we discover that she gave (literally “did”, “executed” or “performed”) a banquet.<sup>75</sup> Wolkstein notes that “Vashti is the first acting subject in the narrative other than the king”.<sup>76</sup> However, the next reference to her in 1:11 indicates that Vashti is very much an object; not only grammatically (as indicated by the object marker), but thematically. The inebriated king calls the seven eunuchs to bring his wife before him in order to להראות (*Hiphil*: “to display”, “to let see”, “to cause to see”, “to show”) her beauty.<sup>77</sup>

Whereas I explored in the previous section how Esther’s subject/object status is ambiguous and shifts throughout the story, Vashti categorically refuses to submit to being treated as an object.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 28; 29.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>75</sup> Clines ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 326.

<sup>76</sup> Wolkstein, “Esther’s Story,” 105.

<sup>77</sup> Clines ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 409.

We are told that she **תמאן** (“refused”: **מאן** always takes the *Piel*) to come at the king’s **דבר** “word” (“command” arguably works better in this context, given the wide semantic range of Biblical Hebrew lexemes).

Some critics have postulated that her refusal may have been as a result of the king treating her like a concubine, rather than his queen, by calling her to appear at the men’s banquet after the dinner had finished—a space which only lower status females such as dancers would typically have occupied.<sup>78</sup> Regardless of her motivation, the text makes it clear that Vashti’s behaviour is interpreted as monstrous by the Persian court. The ramifications of her action are explored in 2:16-19 in a semantic field of hyperbolically negative language. Vashti has **עושה** (*Hiphil*: “done wrong”, “committed iniquity”, “transgressed”, “been deceptive”, “been treacherous”, “brought ruin”, “subverted”, “falsified”). Her insubordination threatens to destabilise the hierarchical order of the Persian system. The conduct of the queen will “go out” (**יצא**) and cause the women to despise (**להבזות**: appears here in the *Hiphil* for the only time in the HB) their husbands. Of **בזיון** (“disrespect”, “despising”, “contempt”) and **קצף** (“anger”, “frustration”, “wrath”, “judgement”, “punishment”, “resentment”) there will be “no end” (**כדי**).<sup>79</sup> In other words, Vashti’s monstrosity is contagious: it has the potential to infect the other women in a limitless epidemic of monstrosity. The Persian court’s histrionic fear is arguably satirical here, but the trope is still evidenced nonetheless.

As a result of Vashti’s noncompliance, she is banished from the presence of the king (1:19) and also from the text. There is no indication of what happens to the character after her deposal; she simply disappears. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror* is helpful for explaining the court’s exaggerated knee-jerk reaction here. Kristeva suggests that anything that threatens the distinction between subject and object, inhabiting the liminal space between them, threatens the symbolic order and disturbs conventional cultural concepts. It is thus rendered “abject” and has to be expunged.<sup>80</sup> The monstrosity of Vashti is that she is an object who behaves like a subject, and the cognitive dissonance provoked by such confusing, paradigm-destabilising behaviour means that she has to go. Or, to use the starker words of Mary Gendler: “she lives in eternal exile; the ultimate bitch; the woman who said no!”<sup>81</sup>

Except that Vashti refuses to disappear. Vashti lingers in the text after she has been banished, by haunting the memory of the king. We are told in 2:1 that King Ahasuerus “remembered” (**זכר** *Qal* 3ms perfect: “called to mind”, “recalled experience”, “was mindful of”) Vashti and what she did

<sup>78</sup> André LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel’s Tradition*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 55.

<sup>79</sup> All definitions are from Clines ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*.

<sup>80</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 11.

<sup>81</sup> Mary Gendler, “The Restoration of Vashti” in Elizabeth Koltun ed. *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 244.



(ואת אשר-עשתה). Bush suggests that what Vashti “did” could be construed in a sexual sense.<sup>82</sup> The point, though, is that Vashti remains in the text after she is supposed to have left. Her irrepressible invincibility is further evidence of her monstrosity: Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the “monster” also represents “the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained ‘place’ and thus generates a story that ‘gets away’ from its author”.<sup>83</sup>

The rabbis were fascinated with Vashti: her charismatic presence dominates the Targums and the Midrashim, threatening to overshadow the eponymous protagonist. They add copious details to delineate her character. Some serve to accentuate her monstrosity, for example the bestial language “raven” and “she-wolf” employed in *Esther Rabbah One*.<sup>84</sup> The *Bavli Megillah* includes the detail that Vashti grew a tail.<sup>85</sup> The *Targum Rishnon* refers to the “wicked Vashti” and “the sinful Vashti”, and credits her with halting the rebuilding of the temple.<sup>86</sup> It also states that she made Israelite girls work naked and made them beat wool and flax on the Sabbath.<sup>87</sup> The sense of the infectiousness of the monstrous is implied in the detail in the *Bavli Megillah* that she refused to appear for the king on account of having leprosy.<sup>88</sup> The *Targum Sheni* describes how, at the banquet, she poured the women large glasses of wine, then took them to the king’s bedroom and “told them everything; whatever the women wanted to know”.<sup>89</sup> The scene is reminiscent of a raucous hen party.

There is an ambivalence in the rabbis’ characterisation of Vashti. Some emphasise her subjectivity and augment her high status. The *Targum Rishon* traces her lineage to Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>90</sup> In *Esther Rabbah I*, sugyot 1:9 states, “four women took over the government in the world. [...] Jezebel and Athaliah in Israel, Semiramis and Vashti among the nations”.<sup>91</sup> The *Targum Sheni* also gives her a lengthy monologue in direct speech. It begins: “This is disgraceful! Go tell your foolish master that you are also fools like him. I am a queen, the daughter of kings [...] I am Queen Vashti...”.<sup>92</sup>

However, in contrast to this increased subjectivity, in other places she is emphatically an object. In *Esther Rabbah I*, the king refers to her as “the utensil that I use”.<sup>93</sup> There is also a tradition, prevalent across the Targums and the Midrashim, that the king demanded Vashti appear before him and his

<sup>82</sup> Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 357.

<sup>83</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 28.

<sup>84</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 90, 86.

<sup>85</sup> Undwin, Rav Shmuel. *Talmud Bavli Tractate Megillah*. (Brooklyn, NY: Menucha, 2014), 103.

<sup>86</sup> Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 28, 34.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>88</sup> Undwin, *Talmud Bavli Tractate Megillah*, 103.

<sup>89</sup> Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 127.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>91</sup> Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I*, 83.

<sup>92</sup> Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 129.

<sup>93</sup> Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I*, 94.

courtiers naked.<sup>94</sup> In Neusner's translation of *Esther Rabbah I*, we find the detail that "she wanted to come in wearing at least a bikini, like a whore, but they wouldn't allow it".<sup>95</sup>

Across the Palestinian Targums and the Midrashim there is the consensus that Vashti was executed, with the *Targum Rishon* adding the detail that her head was removed.<sup>96</sup> Perhaps that was assumed given the context of a totalitarian power structure governed by an erratic and wrathful monarch. Perhaps this detail served to emphasise the danger of Esther's situation and consequently her bravery. An alternate explanation is that the expulsion of the "monster" was deemed too ambiguous in the biblical text, and the rabbis needed to be sure that her presence, and contagious influence, was really gone. Either way, Vashti was not gone: she continues to be regenerated and further elaborated upon in literary recreations of the text.

This identification of Vashti as a "monster" is crucial for understanding the construction of Esther as a character in the biblical text. Esther functions in opposition to Vashti, but is also infected with some of her monstrous characteristics as the narrative progresses.

Vashti's deposal provides the catalyst for Esther's arrival in the narrative, and as such, the former queen predominantly functions as a plot device to explain why the king needs a new queen (although the reception history suggests that Vashti far transcends that peripheral role in the reader's imagination). 1:19 states that the king wishes to give Vashti's "royal position" (מלכותה) to "a contemporary" of her (לרעותה); one who is "better than her" (הטובה ממנה). Holmstedt and Srenock translate this as "someone like her who is better than her" and note that the adjective טוב has already been used in the text to describe Vashti.<sup>97</sup> Thus, Esther's selection as the new queen is in response to, and in dialogue with, the characteristics and behaviour of the previous queen. In 2:17 we read: ימליכה תחת ושתי ("he made her queen instead of Vashti").

Esther is made queen תחת: "instead of", "in place of", "as a substitute for", "in exchange for", "in replacement of", "in succession to", "on account of" Vashti.<sup>98</sup> By 2:22, she has usurped Vashti's appositional title: she has become אסתר המלכה and stepped into the space formally occupied by the previous queen. Holmes and Srenock state, "Esther, the antitype to Vashti, now occupies that role".<sup>99</sup> Even the detail in 2:17 that the king sets the royal crown on Esther's head "recalls that he wanted Vashti to wear the crown".<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 28.

<sup>97</sup> Robert Holmstedt and John Srenock. *Esther: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 68.

<sup>98</sup> Clines ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 486.

<sup>99</sup> Holmstedt and Srenock, *Esther: A Handbook*, 101.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

Thus, Esther is Vashti's more compliant and submissive replacement, but in emphasising the differences between them, the text also underlines their similarities. Indeed, there is arguably an uncanny slippage between the two queens. Esther only secures the salvation of the Jewish people by directly, publicly disobeying the king, just as Vashti did. However, her disobedience is the opposite of Vashti's. Vashti refused to appear when she was summoned, whereas Esther took the initiative of appearing when she was not summoned, an action the text emphasises was illegal. Bal states:

Against many commentators who emphasize Esther's obedience, it must be stressed that she is more like Vashti than they care to admit. Each is guilty of disobedience in terms of approaching the king, hence taking control over her relationship with her husband.<sup>101</sup>

Holmstedt and Screnock note the lexical and grammatical parallels between the text's descriptions of the two women. Both give banquets; Vashti in 1:9 and Esther in 5:5 and 6:14. The language is very similar: in 1:9 we read that "Vashti the queen prepared a banquet": *וַשְׁתִּי הַמַּלְכָה עָשְׂתָה מִשְׁתֶּה*. In 5:12 we read about "the banquet which she [Esther] prepared": *הַמִּשְׁתֶּה אֲשֶׁר-עָשְׂתָה*. The dramatic, suspenseful moment in 5:2 when the king sees Esther at the banquet and he is pleased functions like a rerun of the moment when Vashti refused to appear, and he was filled with rage (1:12). It is as if Esther has learnt from Vashti's mistake. Whereas Vashti was directly disobedient, Esther plans a more subtle, gradual approach, building up to her request over the course of two banquets.

Both Butting and Beal recognise that Esther learns from Vashti and is, to some extent, haunted by the disappearance of her predecessor. Butting writes:

For Esther, Vashti's story becomes a living source from which she takes directives for her own resistance. [...] Esther's plan would not be conceivable without Vashti's refusal. [...] There is public power hidden in Vashti's broken-off story that is available to Esther.<sup>102</sup>

Beal states:

Esther fills the space from which Vashti was erased—but not entirely. Vashti is the supplement that Esther requires. Her erasure marks on Esther's character remember the extremes to which this ridiculous patriarchy will go to in order to maintain itself.<sup>103</sup>

For both Beal and Butting, it is learning from Vashti's example which gives Esther the resources to challenge the apparently insurmountable patriarchal strictures in the court. Whilst Vashti's blatant

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<sup>101</sup> Bal, "Lots of Writing," 227.

<sup>102</sup> Klara Butting, "Esther: a New Perspective of the Joseph Story in the Fight against Anti-Semitism and Sexism" in Athalya Brenner ed. *Ruth and Esther: a Feminist Companion to the Bible*. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 246.

<sup>103</sup> Beal, "Conceptual Metaphors of the Self," 105.

insistence on subjectivity was too stark, too overtly monstrous, for the context in which she should conform to being an object and an “other”, Esther shifts from object to subject more covertly.

However, by the end of the text Esther has indubitably adopted some of Vashti’s more monstrous characteristics. Most notably, she demands Haman’s ten sons should be “hanged on the gallows” (9:13). The demand, an intertextual, prophetic reversal of Saul’s failure to destroy the Agag in 1 Samuel 15, casts Esther as the ultimate monster: a child-killer. The child killer, epitomised in the monstrous female characters of Medea and Lady Macbeth, is the anti-female, the consummate dangerous threat.

Esther, then, is partly constructed as Vashti’s doppelgänger in the text. She is the antithetical “angel” to Vashti’s “monster”, but is also infected by Vashti’s monstrous assertiveness, subjectivity and violence.

If the “angel/monster” motif is already demonstratively present in the biblical version of the story, the trend is considerably further developed in the twenty-first century novels. In *Esther: Royal Beauty*, Hunt departs from the rabbinic tradition—which assumes Vashti was killed for her disobedience—to imagine that she retained a prominent position in the court as “mother of the crown prince”; a detail she gleaned from Herodotus. This interpretation means that Vashti remains throughout the text, not just as a symbolic or remembered presence as she does in the midrashim, but as a real, physical presence.

Hunt describes Vashti as a combination of monstrosity and beauty. She is an “icy beauty” and “a majestic column pivoting in one graceful movement, leaving a trail of awe in her wake”.<sup>104</sup> The association between a beautiful woman and a pillar recalls Psalm 144:12. Like the Targums, Hunt’s Vashti is associated with animalistic imagery. Hunt describes her having a “tongue as sharp as a serpent’s tooth”.<sup>105</sup> Serpents, of course, are particularly associated with “monstrous” women. Both Eve in Genesis 2 and Medusa in Hellenistic mythology. She also described as “the queen of cunning”<sup>106</sup> and as a woman with a “thirst for blood”<sup>107</sup>. Vashti is repeatedly associated with violence in the text and presents a real, genuine threat to Esther’s safety at the court. The story includes an account of Vashti seeking revenge on Artayana, the king’s daughter in law, by mutilating her mother, Parmys. The narrator states:

The beautiful Vashti took the sword and began to mutilate an innocent woman, choosing to strike at Artaynta through her precious mother.

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<sup>104</sup> Hunt, *Esther*, 216.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

When Maistes's wife had lost her breasts, ears, lips, nose and tongue, Vashti calmly asked for a carriage to send the wounded woman home.

Parmys died a few hours later.<sup>108</sup>

The description closely parallels a similar description in *The Histories*.

*Royal Beauty* also includes an incident in which Vashti sacrifices a child in order to petition Ahura Mazda that Esther will miscarry her foetus. The story imagines Esther losing her baby in the next chapter, but does not directly attribute Vashti's curse as the cause of the miscarriage, rather leaving the reader with the sense that it is a chilling, ambiguous coincidence.

The physical presence of Vashti throughout the narrative serves to intensify the story's suspense and drama, as the protagonist is forced to grapple with a fierce, unpredictable and highly dangerous antagonist. It also directly impacts the characterisation of Esther. Her status is diminished by Vashti's power and prominence in the text, and she is frequently described as anxious, insecure and lacking in confidence. For example, Harbonah the Eunuch comments: "This one had not entered the great hall like Vashti, with an uplifted chin and mincing step. This girl would never stiffen her spine in defiance of the king."<sup>109</sup>

The first-person narrative perspective gives the reader an insight into Esther's insecurity. For example, she confesses:

Though I had lived in the former queen's chambers for some months, I still felt her presence in those rooms. She had slept in the columned bed, walked through the private garden, and run her hands along the tiled walls [...] Vashti's voice seemed to echo in the high-ceilinged rooms.<sup>110</sup>

She comments: "I'm not sure why my stomach knotted at any mention of the former queen" and "I slept and woke in the queen's palace like an imposter who expects to be unmasked and evicted at any moment. My anxiety grew from a niggling apprehension to a near constant dread."<sup>111</sup>

The creative decision that Vashti remained in the palace allows Hunt to imagine an encounter between the former and current queens. Esther describes:

A shadow fell across the law, forcing me to look up. Vashti waited on the portico, still far more regal and lovely than I could ever hope to be. She stood at least a hand's width taller than me, and though she had borne three children, she remained slender through the waist and richly endowed above.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 216.

She adds, “I resisted the urge to bow before her”.<sup>113</sup>

Thus, the “monster” trope in the characterisation of Vashti has been further developed and delineated, with more imagined details of horror, and it has also been extended so that the character presents a real threat throughout the text. The result is an eponymous protagonist who weakens in comparison: one referred to by the king as “my little queen”. Esther, characterised in opposition to Vashti’s confidence, remains fearful and threatened throughout Hunt’s story. There is less of a sense that the character is infected by the monstrosity. Her request at the end of the story that “Haman’s ten dead sons [be] impaled for all to see” emphasises that they are already dead. The narrator comments that this response demonstrates “wisdom” and will prevent the Jews from further attacks: a preventative measure against violence, rather than an act of monstrosity.<sup>114</sup>

*Esther: A Novel*, depicts a darker, more sinister Persian court as the setting, in which the harem women are brought to the palace in what is essentially a death march, and cope with the trauma of being imprisoned there by spending their time high on opium or drunk on wine. A sense of danger pervades the novel: frequent murder plots emerge both within the court and the harem, adding to the murder plot foiled by Mordecai in the Hebrew Bible (2:21). Threats include the king’s pet lions which roam the palace and even when Esther is queen, she is constantly in danger from disloyal soldiers and rival factions in the court.

In this setting, a meaner, stronger Esther emerges whose behaviour could be construed as monstrous at certain points in the narrative, and is also explicitly modelled on the example of Vashti. In Kanner’s version of the story, Vashti disappears after she is deposed from the court. Rumours circle surrounding her ambiguous disappearance, with some servants suspecting she committed suicide.<sup>115</sup>

However, whilst Vashti is physically absent, the servants and women believe that “Vashti’s spirit flies over the harem”.<sup>116</sup> In addition to this, the female “monster” is personified in Kanner’s imagined additional character Halannah, the king’s favourite concubine. Halannah presents a real, physical threat to Esther and the other women in the harem. At one point she physically attacks Esther:

Halannah let go of the blade, grabbed my hair and yanked my head back. Her other hand drew into a claw. I could see that her nails were filed into sharp points and that she was going to rake them over my face.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>115</sup> Kanner, *Esther: A Novel*, 82.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

Like Vashti, Halannah is described with recourse to animalistic imagery, including the above reference to her "claw". She is a "demoness", who even tries to "ruin" the girls before they have a chance to be with the king by attacking them in the night. In a similar motif to the aforementioned one in Hunt's *Royal Beauty*, Halannah arranges for Esther to be poisoned by substituting her mint tea for penny royal when she is pregnant, causing Esther to miscarry her child.

However, whereas Hunt's Esther was intimidated by the threat of the female "monster", Kanner's Esther is emboldened and quickly learns to fight back and hold her own. After Halannah attacks her, she comments: "It seemed that my childhood was leaving me through that cut, that Halannah had opened me to what I could become. I felt strong".<sup>118</sup> Esther rises to the challenge of Halannah's bullying, retorting to being threatened and called a "peasant", with: "You will never be queen, Halannah. [...] Xerxes may like you beneath him, but he does not want you beside him."<sup>119</sup>

Esther, taking advice from Hegei the eunuch, also consciously constructs her image and behaviour on Vashti's in order to win the king's favour. Hegei advises her: "All the other girls seemed conquered even before he took them—all but Vashti. Be bold and meek in turns. Be a puzzle he wishes to solve".<sup>120</sup> Kanner draws heavily upon the Targums and Midrashim to fill the gaps in her version of the story. As in *Targum Sheni* and *Targum Rishon*, Vashti is banished from the court for refusing to obey the king's request to appear at the banquet naked.<sup>121</sup> Esther exploits her knowledge of this to win the king's favour. When she approaches the king to petition for mercy for the Jewish people, she reverses Vashti's disobedience by appearing naked before the king and his courtiers. Esther explains her unorthodox appearance by telling the king: "I wanted to be naked but for your love and the crown you placed upon my head".<sup>122</sup> It is both a manipulative ploy and a form of protest against the unjust treatment of the Jewish people.

Kanner's version is arguably more similar to the biblical story than *Royal Beauty* in the way that Esther learns from Vashti in order to consciously become the beta version of the former queen: just as strong and ruthless, but even more calculating.

Finally, in *The Gilded Chamber*, the angel/monster motif is played out in Kohn's construction of a dichotomy between two women at the court: Vashti and Freni. Vashti has been banished from the court before the novel opens but her presence continues to haunt the court. When Esther is moved into the former queen's chambers, she comments: "The queen's quarters had stood empty for four years. But all was spotless and unspoilt, as if Vashti has been absent only an hour. [...] I knew Vashti was watching".<sup>123</sup> Kohn also conveys the ubiquity and inescapability of Vashti's

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>123</sup> Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 155.

presence in the evocative, Brontë-esque sentence, “I could feel in my bones, in the wind that blew over the marshes and across the wide plain from Chaldea to Susa, that the rage of Vashti never slept”.<sup>124</sup> Esther discovers that Vashti has left manic, scratched markings on the wall of the chamber, all the more frightening because she is illiterate and cannot decode them. The first-person narrator states, “I could not close my eyes without imagining those lines and triangles floating down from the wall and encircling me with deep and everlasting sleep. The writing seemed to me to be the work of a demon”.<sup>125</sup> The most obvious symbol of Vashti’s presence, though, is the “life-sized sculpture” of her in the king’s chamber.<sup>126</sup> During Esther’s first night with the king, she is confronted with the statue and finds it disconcerting:

I stared for a moment at Vashti, the queen of cruelty, blessed with more beauty than any woman known to the king. Her face was a perfect flower, yet cold as the marble from which it was carved. And though her eyes were almond empty, they flashed at me in defiance and I felt her hot, poisoned breath upon my cheek. [...] *Your blood shall drain like a slaughtered bird.*<sup>127</sup>

Kohn later describes how the king destroys the statue of Vashti when he has settled on Esther as his queen.<sup>128</sup> The image of the king keeping an icon or statue of Vashti in his chamber is one which commonly occurs in the midrashim, some of which suggest the icon smashed supernaturally on the king’s first night with Esther.

However, Kohn’s novel is unique in its construction of a third female “type”: Freni. Freni, captured and taken to the harem at the same time as Esther, is the epitome of the perfect Jewish girl. Kohn describes how she wastes away in the harem because she refuses to eat any unclean food. Her unhealthy, unattractive thinness leads to threats that she will be “given” to the soldiers in the barracks, or even fed to the lions.<sup>129</sup> Freni is the consummate “angel”. In comparing herself to Freni, Esther notes: “her innocence was more delicate, her spirit more fragile”. She is repeatedly described as “weeping” and at one point she is “as pale as a corpse”.<sup>130</sup>

The text makes it clear that Freni will not survive in the harem, and is at serious, immediate risk. However, Esther also envies Freni’s more overt Jewishness, commenting, “In my heart I envied her. They were my people too, yet I was no longer one of them”.<sup>131</sup> Freni’s overt fidelity to the

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 75.



Jewish faith causes Esther to feel “shame”.<sup>132</sup> Interestingly, Esther also channels Freni on her first night with the king, imagining, “that I had all Freni’s grace and charm”.<sup>133</sup>

Even more interestingly, on the same night that the king smashes his statue of Vashti, Esther persuades him to set Freni free. She escapes from the harem, with her virginity intact, to a life of relative poverty on the outskirts of the city, later getting married to a Jewish man and having a child. The chronological proximity between the incidents, which happen in the same episode in the narrative, indicate that the “monster” is destroyed at the same time the “angel” is set free: the two, antithetical women disappear from the text almost concurrently. Where do they go? I would argue that both are channelled into Esther, who in Kohn’s novel finds a *via media* between the “angel” and “monster” in order to survive. Vashti’s obstinance led to her banishment, and Freni’s attempt to continue living as the perfect Jewish woman in the sinister world of the court almost killed her. Esther incorporates both of those types. The complexity of the character and the compromises she learns to make represents the precariousness of Diaspora existence and its confusion, blurriness and subtlety.

In conclusion, the “angel/monster” motif is already present in the biblical story of *Esther*, but it becomes further developed in the twenty-first century novels, which explore it in diverse and contrasting ways, as well as rendering it more explicitly. Foils, or doppelgängers, are more than just opposites. As Gilbert and Gubar explore, they are interconnected and there is an uncanny slippage between them. In both the biblical story and its twenty-first century creative rewritings the “monster” is irrepressible and indestructible: her presence lurks in the text, always waiting to infect the angel with her monstrosity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Esther* is a text perforated with unsettling gaps and ambiguities. From the earliest days of the Megillah’s existence, the problematic nature of the “gaps” has unsettled the reader; the temptation to impose order and control by filling its troubling silences has often proved to be irresistible. The compulsion to creatively re-tell the story persists in the form of twenty-first century Western novels, which demonstrate considerable variations in their characterisation of the eponymous protagonist.

As a whole, though, there was little indication that these novels had departed from some of the more patriarchal tropes which are present in the Hebrew Bible version of the story, or that a line of development could be traced from the conservatism of rabbinic midrash to a more progressive characterisation of Esther in the modern novels. Rather, it appeared to me that creative retellings of *Esther* are analogous to a snowball rolling down a hill—the porous nature of the text means

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 142.

that it seems to gather cultural baggage as it is regenerated throughout history, but finds it much harder to drop outdated tropes. Thus, tropes such as the “angel/monster” motif which are embryonic in earlier versions of the story, germinate and become more detailed and developed in the later reception history of the text. If there is a modern novel which self-consciously deconstructs or interrogates these tropes, then I did not manage to find it within the course of this research. Angela Hunt’s *Royal Beauty*, constructed from an evangelical Christian hermeneutical framework, was the most ideologically conservative. Rebecca Kanner’s *Esther: a Novel*, which emerged from a Jewish cultural context, created the most assertive and self-defining Esther, but I would argue that the novel still depended upon some troubling patriarchal motifs to achieve its denouement. A creative retelling of the story which was in closer dialogue with recent, intersectional *Esther* scholarship, incorporating ideas posited by Angeline Song, Timothy Beal and Daniel Smith-Christopher, would arguably be a valuable contribution to this ongoing process of transvaluation. A hypotext which self-consciously critiqued the patriarchal overtones in the story would demonstrate the continuing potential of the plot and protagonist to speak to the concerns of the twenty-first century reader and signal that the creative chain of retellings has not run its course.

Or perhaps the “gaps” in *Esther* are fundamental to the character of the text. The spaces between the words are as important as the words, and we should leave them alone. Despite their attempts to add details which subsumed *Esther* into their theocentric, Torah-focused ideology, the rabbinic authors of the midrashim and the Talmud also recognised that the gaps in *Esther* are deliberate, and that they constitute a type of strength. Like many modern scholars, the rabbis recognised that the name *Esther*, in addition to a cognate of *Ishtar*, may be a play on the Hebrew “hidden” or “concealed”. As Timothy Beal explores in *The Book of Hiding*, Esther’s refusal to reveal her inner life in the text is a Diaspora survival strategy. In a world in which the God of Israel is ostensibly absent, but also ontologically necessarily present, Esther learns, partly by the anti-example of Vashti, to be both present and absent, to be hidden in plain sight. Thus, imposing psychological realism on the protagonist, and retelling the story from her perspective, is arguably a type of symbolic violence: a voyeuristic invasion, a systematic dismantling of her absent presence, her enigmatic, impenetrable character.

An eponymous protagonist devoid of inner life is difficult to decode in the modern novel, which developed as a direct result of Protestant individualism, and typically demands that principle characters be three-dimensional and delineated. However, this approach is fundamentally incompatible with the broad brush strokes and “flat” characterisation of the version in the MT, and destabilises the chiasmic balance the story. Esther and Mordecai are representative types of the Diaspora Jew: they function as blueprints for survival. Any attempt to fill in the “gaps” in the story, particularly in relation to the characterisation of Esther, is therefore not just “midrashic wishful thinking”, but constitutes what Sternberg refers to as a fundamental “misreading” of the

text. If there is a “correct” way to read *Esther*, it is, as the text itself demands: as a complete, uninterrupted entity, on the fourteenth day of Adar and on the evening of the thirteenth day. It is a text to be performed at Purim as a defiant symbol of survival in a violent and uncertain world, with its nihilistic lacunae gaping open.

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