

SEX *and* SLAUGHTER  
*in the* TENT *of* J A E L



*A Cultural History of a Biblical Story*

COLLEEN M. CONWAY

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*To Hendrikus Boers and Carol Newsom  
With deep appreciation*



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January 2016

*Sex and Slaughter in the Tent of Jael*



# I

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## *Introduction*

### A CULTURAL HISTORY OF Jael AND SISERA

THIS BOOK WAS prompted by a story, a picture, and a phrase. The story is about death. A woman named Jael invites a man named Sisera into her tent. After giving the man a drink, she drives a tent peg through his head. It is an old story found in two different versions in the biblical book of Judges. The picture is a sixteenth-century rendition of this deadly encounter drawn by a Dutch artist, Martin van Heemskerck, and etched by Dirk Coornhert (see Figure 4.7). The phrase, which I first saw printed under this same image, is “Moral Examples/From the Power of Women (1551).”

I first encountered this Dutch print and its accompanying phrase while searching for an image of Judges 4–5 to capture my students’ attention. I wanted to pique their interest in these biblical chapters, as well as in the early history of Israel. That may have happened. What I *know* happened was that this picture of an impressively chiseled Jael captured me. So also did the caption underneath the muscle-bound woman. Why “The *Power of Women*” in 1551? To the twenty-first-century feminist ear that sounds quite celebratory, but what did it mean in 1551? And what “moral example” was offered by this scene of a warrior woman engaged in a grisly killing of a sleeping man? And to whom?

At this point, it is tempting to speak of how my encounter with this Dutch print sent me on a journey, and to speak of my travels with Jael and Sisera “through the centuries.” Indeed, the journey metaphor has

proved useful to more than one scholar who has followed a biblical figure or story into diverse byways through the history of the Western world.<sup>1</sup> And it is true that for the past several years, I have sought Jael and Sisera far beyond the book of Judges. Still, rather than a time-traveling tourist, I have more often felt like an audience member watching the characters of Jael and Sisera enacting this story of sex (sometimes) and violence (always) by means of a wide range of creative adaptations. Or in the same vein, I have studied a series of directors from different times and places stage the drama of Jael and Sisera in different ways.

In biblical scholarship, writing an account of this sort of journeying/spectating is typically referred to as doing “reception history.” Not long ago, such an admission might have been offered innocently enough and received with little more than a disinterested nod from one’s colleagues. Reception historical projects were an anomalous curiosity in biblical studies and could be easily relegated to a remote corner of the guild. However, with increasing numbers of biblical scholars leaving traditional biblical scholarship to take trips through the centuries, their departures are gaining attention. One hears grumblings about “biblical studies on holiday” drifting from the hallways of historical biblical critics.<sup>2</sup> Biblical reception historians are also drawing comment from some biblical scholars who may be sympathetic to certain aspects of their work, but nevertheless see the need to move beyond it, rename it, or put an end to it altogether.<sup>3</sup> Yet from another corner of the biblical studies guild, one hears anxious calls to hurry the reception historical project along from those who see in it a potential life-saving transfusion to an otherwise dying field of biblical studies.<sup>4</sup>

All of this makes for a lively and entertaining debate which I will not fully detail here.<sup>5</sup> Instead, to help situate the approach I take in this book, I will outline the major questions and critiques put to biblical reception history. As will become clear, I also have questions about some current ways of doing reception historical work, so much so that I opt not to use the term for my project. In fact, a major aim of this book is to demonstrate one way to study the use of biblical traditions across time that goes beyond taking a sightseeing tour through the centuries. That said, I should say at the outset that I consider my approach as one among many. I am sure there are benefits to maintaining different ways of doing what is typically labeled “biblical reception history.”

## *What Exactly Is “Received” in Reception History? Problems with Origins*

One problem with the “reception” aspect of reception history is the question of what is being received. A biblical “reception” history suggests a passive receiving of an already established original text or tradition. A similar notion is implied with the word “afterlives” as it is used to refer to the post-biblical appearance of biblical figures or traditions.<sup>6</sup> Here again, we might ask, after *what*, precisely? The implication is that later readers are receiving some “original” biblical tradition and using it at a time and place that comes after its “original” appearance in the “original” text of the Bible. However (as the scare quotes are intended to indicate!) identifying such origins is problematic from several angles. In his programmatic essay pointing to a “beyond” for reception history, Timothy Beal sees difficulty in thinking about “the Bible” as though it were singular object that can be transmitted intact from one cultural setting to another. As he puts it, “The Bible is not a thing, but an idea, or rather a constellation of often competing heterogeneous ideas, more or less related to a wide variety of material biblical things.”<sup>7</sup> Brennan Breed, who has written an extensive methodological proposal for reception history sees the “origins” problem through a text-critical lens. He takes issue with the operative assumption of an *Urtext*, which enables a border to be drawn between text and reception.<sup>8</sup> From his perspective, doing reception history means nothing at all if it requires “studying that which comes after the original” since there is nothing that exists in the original in the first place.<sup>9</sup>

From a different angle, the problem of origins extends to the definition of biblical scholarship. Roland Boer points out how “real” biblical criticism is often understood as scholarship focused on the so-called original text, while work done on secondary texts (anything that comes after the original) is considered less serious critical scholarship.<sup>10</sup> But, as he and others have pointed out, traditional historical-critical work is just a *different* way of interacting with an ancient text or tradition, not the *real* or more serious way. Indeed, historical criticism, say source criticism for example, is simply a different way of receiving a text, one that studies perceived fissures in its composition and attempts to reconstruct the process of composition of what is (after all) an already received text.

Once we point to these questions of origins—both of an original Bible, and an original historical-critical approach—the reception historical

approach itself begins to lose definition. This seems to be the case, for example, in James Crossley's explanation of reception criticism in his introduction to contemporary approaches to the New Testament. He identifies three ways of doing biblical reception history: 1) a "church-inspired" reception historical approach that traces the use of a tradition in sermons, biblical commentaries, and theological treatises, 2) an approach that lifts up uses of the biblical tradition as an aid to "correct interpretation," and 3) and "anything goes" approach.<sup>11</sup> By "anything goes" Crossley includes studies that examine the appearance of the Bible in all sorts of cultural media—advertising, films, popular fiction, and so on. But if anything goes, we are left with the idea that reception is simply, as Breed puts it, "people taking a text and doing something with it." If this is the case, he argues, reception history appears to be studying a history of "everything" done with a text.<sup>12</sup> For Breed, the solution to what he sees as reception history's "nothing and everything" problem is to articulate a particular mandate and method for doing biblical reception historical work. He draws on the philosophical theory of Gilles Deleuze to suggest that the task of a reception historian is "to ask what a text can do." Breed argues that such an approach should demonstrate the full range of a text's capacities to do different things in different contexts. While I do not fully incorporate his suggestions, my own approach resonates with many of his ideas, to which I will return below.

But the problem with doing biblical reception history may be larger than simply choosing the right approach. Indeed, rather than focusing on method, Beal calls for a more radical rethinking of the theoretical underpinnings of reception history. From his perspective, the problem is not so much with how it is done, or even what is included, but more fundamentally with how the project is conceived in the first place. While philosopher Hans Gadamer's concept *Wirkungsgeschichte* is regularly evoked as a theoretical foundation for biblical reception history, Beal argues that biblical scholars have regularly misconstrued the term. Especially if *Wirkungsgeschichte* is translated as "history of effects," the term "invites biblical scholars to offer historical narratives of the effects or impacts or influences of biblical texts through time."<sup>13</sup> Beal argues that term is better translated as "effective history" insofar as Gadamer intended it as a response to and critique of the idea of historical objectivity. History is "effective" in Gadamer's sense to the degree that it shapes who we are,

“our culture, our language, our questions and our worldview.”<sup>14</sup> So, as Beal puts it,

[Gadamer’s] effective history is not a historical narrative but a conception of subjective history. There is no effective history of something. It’s all *Wirkungsgeschichte* all the way down. That is certainly true of the Bible, which is not only *received* through the centuries in different cultural contexts but is also variously *made* and *remade* within these contexts, driven as much by more or less conscious ideological struggles as by commercial competition.<sup>15</sup>

Beal’s article is meant as an intervention in the biblical reception project, or at least, an encouragement to shift to what he calls the cultural history of scripture. It is a move from thinking about how biblical texts are received to one that considers how the Bible and the biblical are culturally produced as discursive objects, that is “from hermeneutical reception to cultural production.” The model for his approach comes from the work of Michel Foucault. Just as Foucault argued that subjects of historical research, such as medicine or the State, are not self-evident objects of study, but rather “discursive objects” that are continuously reconstructed in different cultural moments, so, too is the Bible continuously reconstructed across time and space.<sup>16</sup>

### *Writing a Cultural History of Jael and Sisera*

This book draws on the idea of cultural production, but takes it in a different direction. Whereas Beal suggests doing a “cultural history of scripture,” I am interested in a cultural history of biblical traditions once they stray from their scriptural origins. In other words, what happens to biblical/scriptural texts when they are no longer “scriptural,” but nevertheless play a role in cultural conversations outside of theological contexts? To put it yet another way, Beal urges a study of culture, especially religious culture, by way of its production of scripture. I examine the use of a cultural tradition, transmitted at an early stage by way of the Bible as it becomes ever more distant from a religious culture.

Taking a cue from Beal, I do not consider the stories of Jael and Sisera in Judges 4–5 to be stable traditions handed on from the past, traditions that have an impact or “effect” on later readers. Rather, I suggest that the

many iterations of these two biblical figures that I will explore in the following chapters offer new and different cultural productions of meaning. That said, throughout this study I often refer to these new renditions as cultural “performances” rather than productions. I use the phrase to highlight the way that any re-presentation of a biblical tradition in literature and visual art is shaped by and further shapes the particular cultural moment of its production. We have no problem recognizing this phenomenon, for example, in the ongoing cultural performances of Shakespeare’s plays. Every summer thousands of people take in dramatic renditions of a play that they have seen many times before. They see the plays again both because they already know the story and because they have never seen this *particular* version of the play in the context of the particular set of cultural conversations taking place at that moment. The plays converse with the audience about the present—about sex, power, politics, love, war—by way of familiar cultural traditions that are born anew and become something different, and mean something different in their new setting. If this is true with Shakespeare, all the more so with the Bible and the biblical as it has been produced and performed across centuries of particular cultural moments.

I also use “performance” rather than “production” because I am not attempting a thoroughgoing analysis of the economic factors contributing to different artistic versions of the tradition, as the Marxist connotations of the term production might suggest. Although that would be another quite fascinating study, and I do touch on some of these factors in chapter 4, I am more interested in other cultural forces that influence the performances of the tradition across time.

So how should one go about writing a history of these cultural performances? There is certainly no set method for writing a reception history of the Bible. Should we assume with Crossley that, to some extent, anything goes? Or perhaps we should take heed of a cautionary flag that is frequently waved before the would-be reception historian, namely, to avoid simply being descriptive. One must do more than offer a museum of curiosities, or an anthology of interesting readings, the critics warn. By all means, don’t just show and tell! I admit that a part of me asks, why not? I, for one, always enjoyed show-and-tell time, and I have found interesting uses of biblical traditions to be, well, interesting. Who doesn’t enjoy looking at a collection of curiosities from time to time? There is also a sense of pure wonder that I have experienced as I have encountered the creativity of artists interacting with Jael and Sisera’s deadly encounter, and wonder can be a nice space in which to dwell for a while.

Nevertheless, my aim here is to do more than catalogue, or curate, a collection of uses of Jael and Sisera, interesting though that may be. Rather, as suggested by Breed's approach, I want to ascertain the capacities of this particular story to do or mean certain things at different moments in history.<sup>17</sup> More particularly, I want to learn what this text does in relation to cultural conversations about gender and violence. In other words, even as I point out the "new and different" meanings of the Jael-Sisera traditions across the pages of this book, it will soon become clear that certain ideas associated with the figures of Jael and Sisera persist or recur over time.<sup>18</sup>

The ability of certain biblical traditions to both do something new and maintain continuity over centuries of these new uses is one reason for the wonder that results in doing a study such as this one. In fact, more than once as I encountered some new cultural performance of the Jael and Sisera tale, I thought of Jael as a biblical "Elastigirl." Elastigirl is a lead character in Pixar's animated film *The Incredibles*, whose superpower is flexibility. She is able to stretch and mold her body into multiple shapes and sizes so she can move into unexpected spaces and perform heroic feats. I thought this a quite clever analogy for the way Jael is stretched into different cultural renditions until I happened on Breed's description of an admittedly more sophisticated analogy for this phenomenon. Drawing on Deleuze for his understanding of textual processes, Breed points to the mathematical concept of topology which "studies the properties in an object that are preserved when an object is deformed, as if by stretching."<sup>19</sup> While I remain partial to Elastigirl, the point of both analogies is to recognize how traditions participate in a continuous process of new readings and new performances, while still maintaining a relationship with earlier renditions of the tradition.<sup>20</sup>

### *Gender, Sex, and Violence in Cultural Performances of Jael and Sisera*

To perhaps state the obvious, one way that new versions of Jael and Sisera maintain a relationship with older ones is by reiterating what makes the story distinctive in the first place—a surprising act of violence from a female character against a male figure. But the recurrence of this central idea is also what enables links between the biblical figures and larger, ever-shifting cultural conversations concerning violence in relation to sexuality, gender, and power. This complex of ideas will be the focus for my study of cultural performances of Jael and Sisera. My primary interest will be exploring how various renditions of this story of violent encounter

between a woman and a man reflect and speak to cultural anxieties about sex and gender.

On this last point, it is worth pausing a moment over the work of Ken Stone. While he has not written about reception history, his interest in gender and queer theory in relation to conceptions about the Bible are relevant to this project. Like others, Stone challenges the substantive, essential nature of the Bible but does so with the help of gender theorist Judith Butler (who is strongly influenced by Foucault). Butler's performative theory of gender is by now well-known and I will not rehearse it here.<sup>21</sup> Worth pausing over, however, is the way Stone applies Butler's notion of gender performance to the ideas of the Bible and biblical interpretation. He suggests that in the same way gender is culturally produced and performed (as Butler contends), so also is "Bible." To make his point, Stone quotes Butler but, substitutes "Bible" for her references to "gender."

... [T]he substantive effect of Bible is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of Bible performance. . . . Bible is always a doing. There is no Bible identity behind the expressions of Bible; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas Butler argues for gender always being a performance, or something constructed in the very expression of "maleness" or "femaleness," Stone suggests that "Bible" comes into being through a series of iterations and citations. I extend the point a bit further, suggesting that, in most cases, such iterations and citations are of particular biblical traditions, like the Jael and Sisera story. I am interested in the ways artists and authors draw on these traditions, in this case, the Jael and Sisera story, to "do" something else, whether it is a bit of nervous fretting about the "Woman Question" or full frontal attacks on male chauvinism. In short, the types of things that the Jael-Sisera traditions do in relation to gender, violence, and power are the subject of this book.

Defining the project in relation to gender and power helps alleviate another concern about reception historical approaches—the issue of what to include. Indeed, another frequent admonition about writing a biblical reception history is that one's selection of material should be justified. In keeping with my overall approach, I can stay unapologetically that I do not attempt a comprehensive cataloguing of instantiations of Jael-Sisera traditions across time. Even if I could achieve this, the results would be tedious. Instead, I provide a focused analysis of certain depictions of these

traditions that intersect with cultural conversations about gender, sex, and violence. My selections are guided by how the depictions of Jael and Sisera say or do something interesting with respect to these themes, well aware that pleading my case on the basis of “interesting” may again raise eyebrows about the “show-and-tell” nature of my enterprise. But beyond showing something interesting, my aim in choosing particular selections over others is to illustrate how this biblical story is shaped in quite different ways to participate in cultural conversations about gender and power relationships.

In selecting the literary representations that I examine in the book, I focused my attention primarily on examples that do more than simply provide a passing allusion to Jael and Sisera. While at times I give such allusions brief attention, my detailed discussions are reserved for sustained retellings of the story, or sustained use of the figures of Jael and Sisera in an entirely new setting. These literary selections represent several different genres: ancient retellings in a genre frequently referred to as “rewritten Bible,” poems, a play, several novels, and a short story. In terms of the visual arts, again, my choice is representative rather than comprehensive, both with respect to the prints I discuss in chapter 4, and the paintings I include in chapter 5.

### *The Preview*

Throughout the book, I refer to the cultural performances of the “Jael-Sisera tradition” rather than of Judges 4–5. The two figures, Jael and Sisera, are the topic of my study, rather than the biblical chapters, because I do not locate their origins in the written biblical text. Nevertheless, the book begins with a discussion of the biblical versions. Not only are they the oldest written accounts of the story, the traditions in Judges 4–5 already point to how the stories are both “received” and creatively reproduced in different ways. For this reason, the next chapter walks through both the poetic and prose versions of the story, offering a close look at the details of the two accounts, as well as an overview of the main ways biblical scholars have interpreted the traditions.

Chapter 3 brings us to the earliest attempts to address potential problems inherent in the biblical versions. Already in these early post-biblical retellings of the story, we see attempts to resolve implicit questions about Jael’s sexual conduct as well as potential concerns about her foreign identity. Chapters 4 and 5 introduce visual productions of the tradition. Chapter 4 focuses primarily on illustrated manuscripts, woodcuts, and

prints from the medieval and early Renaissance periods. It traces the shifts in representation of Jael and Sisera as their tale moves from the confines of theological interpretation into the broader public sphere of secular representations. Chapter 5 concentrates mostly on Italian paintings of Jael and Sisera from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Here I diverge from recent trends in biblical reception history that focus on the artist as exegete of the written text. Instead, I situate the paintings in their cultural context and explore what they may convey about women, men, power, and violence. The next three chapters, 6 through 8, focus on selected literary representations of Jael and Sisera from the eighteenth century through the twenty-first. Only at this point do we begin to see women writers shaping versions of the tradition. In fact, by the time we get to the twentieth century, men no longer seem as interested in the tradition, perhaps because of the power it wields in the hands of women. But that brings us to the end of the book. For now, we begin with the book of Judges, chapters 4–5.

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## *Ancient Stories of Jael and Sisera*

### THE BIBLICAL VERSIONS

IN A. S. BYATT'S short story "Jael," the first-person narrator, Jess, tells the story of Jael and Sisera to her colleague over lunch. The story unfolds through scattered recollections—a childhood illustration of the killing, her mother's regular recitation of "here is the butter in a lordly dish," passages from the King James Version that she has always known "by heart." As we begin this chapter on the biblical versions of the Jael and Sisera tradition, Jess's exchange with her colleague offers a cautionary illustration. In recalling the story of Jael and Sisera, Jess does not consult a written bible, but instead shares impressions from her different experiences of the tradition. And even though biblical scholars (like me) typically place a great deal of importance on the surviving textual evidence of the Bible, the cultural reproduction of biblical traditions regularly occurs through just such a haphazard collection of memories and transmissions of cultural accretions that grow around biblical traditions. In short, though I will spend this chapter talking about the text, I do so with Jess in mind.

If most of the rest of the book focuses on productions that will *show* the audience the story, this chapter will include some examples of *telling* about the tradition. That is, in addition to a careful walking through of each version, I also include a summary of the main lines of contemporary scholarly commentary on the text. These summaries help tease out more subtle or symbolic elements of the story that others will also see in the tradition, but will express through their artistic renderings, both visual and literary, rather than through commentary.

*More Problems with Origins: The Earliest  
Accounts of Jael and Sisera*

Given the discussion in the last chapter regarding “original” texts and reception history, it seems fitting that an attempt to find the “original” Jael and Sisera tradition would already be stymied upon opening the Bible to the book of Judges. There one finds not one, but two versions of Jael and Sisera’s deadly meeting. Their story is recounted in prose in Judges 4:1–24 (esp. 11–22) and poetically in Judges 5:1–31 (esp. 24–31). Both versions tell of a battle between Israel and the Canaanites and in both cases the encounter between Jael and Sisera comes late in the account. But the details of the poetic and prose traditions are significant enough to trouble any clear understanding of their relationship. Most notably, as we will see, the poem in Judges 5 paints a stunning image of Sisera collapsing dramatically in slow motion, dying on the ground between the legs of Jael. Meanwhile, the narrative of Judge 4 portrays Jael creeping up stealthily to a sleeping, exhausted Sisera, then pounding a tent peg through his head into the ground. So, scholars have asked, which is the “original” version and which is an elaboration or comment on the original? Given my reservations about such questions, I review this scholarly debate only in broad strokes. As we will see, how one views the relationship between Judges 4 and 5 provides insights regarding the earliest retellings of these ancient traditions.

Many scholars assume that the poem in Judges 5 is earlier than the prose version because it features archaic Hebrew words and because battle victory songs are thought to reflect ancient oral traditions. In fact, many consider the poem to be one of the oldest written Hebrew traditions.<sup>1</sup>

For the sake of argument, let’s say that the poem is older. The next question is whether the prose version of chapter 4 depends on the poetic version. On this point, opinion is more divided. Some see chapter 4 as an elaboration on the more archaic poem of Judges 5.<sup>2</sup> Others argue that the two traditions are independent, stemming from different oral traditions.<sup>3</sup> Either possibility has interesting implications for the story of Jael and Sisera. If the narrative is dependent on the poem, it would mean that Judges 4 is the earliest recorded *reshaping* of the Jael and Sisera tradition. And, depending on how one understands the exchange between Deborah and Barak in 4:6–9, it could mean that this new narrative version accentuated a conflict between the male and female characters in the story. On the other hand, if the two traditions are independent of one another, it would

point to the existence of several, perhaps many, different oral versions of the story circulating at the same time. However one reads the evidence, having two versions of the story present in the Bible suggests that from very early on, this story was being told and retold in different versions.

To complicate matters further, evidence of multiple versions continues even after the both stories were written down in the book of Judges. There are two Greek translations of the Hebrew book of Judges which differ from each other and, in some cases, from the Hebrew text.<sup>4</sup> There are also several existing fragments of Judges from Qumran that add to the collection of textual variations.<sup>5</sup> Scholars have differing positions about these multiple manuscript traditions. Some argue that the various written traditions all stem from an original text, while others claim that an even greater number of textual traditions was homogenized over time and are reflected now in a much smaller number of variations. What seems most likely, as Susan Niditch suggests, is that multiple versions of the book existed alongside each other, as did multiple versions of oral traditions in both oral and written form.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, this evidence for multiple ancient versions of the story, both oral and written, reinforces the point that it would be a mistake to fixate too strongly on one version of the story as the generator of all that follows. And, in any case, outside of the academic study of the Bible, generations of readers have read prose and poem together as a cohesive unit, with Judges 4 telling the story of the battle and Sisera's demise, and Judges 5 celebrating that same demise in poetic form. Many later renditions of the story simply blend the two versions, much like readers easily combine the different infancy narratives of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, in my discussion of the two biblical versions, I focus on them separately in order to highlight their differences. I view these two biblical versions as our earliest surviving example of how storytellers shaped the Jael-Sisera tradition in different ways to express different ideas about gender and power. In this sense, while the Bible does not offer us the original version, it does chart a course for enlisting Jael and Sisera in cultural conversations about gender.

### *The Poetic Account: Judges 5:1–31*

In Judges 5, the scene between Jael and Sisera occurs in the context of a longer poem, known as the Song of Deborah, which celebrates Israel's victorious battle against the Canaanites. In its biblical form, the poem

appears to be part victory celebration, part epic, and part tribal rallying cry, with the description of the battle happening only briefly at vv. 19–22. This description offers a view of a battle that is fought on both an earthly and a cosmic level. The stars themselves fight against Sisera and the river Kishon sweeps the enemy chariots away (5:20–21).

Although the encounter between Jael and Sisera comes late in the poem, there is an early reference to Jael in v. 6, where the setting of the battle is described with the phrase “in the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael. . . .”<sup>8</sup> This early reference to Jael before she appears as a character in the poem in v. 24 suggests she is already known to the audience. When the poet evokes her name to set the scene for the battle poem, the audience could anticipate “savouring all the grim details” of a new version of a familiar story.<sup>9</sup>

Jael enters the poem as a character in 5:24, immediately after a curse on the otherwise unknown Meroz, “who did not come to the aid of Yahweh” (5:23). This curse of Meroz contrasts with the blessing of Jael which follows. The combination of curse and blessing is matched by a concluding curse and blessing in 5:31, creating a literary frame around the Jael-Sisera episode.

As I examine the Jael-Sisera section of the poem in detail, I will use Susan Niditch’s translation. Her efforts to reproduce the Hebrew word order and register bring us closer to the ancient version albeit in English.<sup>10</sup>

- 24 *More blessed than women is Jael,  
the wife of Heber, the Kenite,  
more than tent-dwelling women is she blessed.*
- 25 *Water he asked for,  
milk she gave,  
in a basin fit for chieftains,  
she brought near curds of cream.*

From the opening line of praise of Jael, the poem moves immediately to her deadly meeting with Sisera. In the poem, many of the details are assumed. For instance, there is no indication of why or how Sisera and Jael are together, or even where they are, apart from the description of Jael as a tent-dwelling woman. Even the name “Sisera” does not appear until v. 26, at the moment when Jael “hammers” him. In the same way, the audience is expected to know Jael, so they should know the identity of her victim. The account of their interaction before Jael kills him is limited to

a report in v. 25 of his request for water and Jael's exaggerated response. The rich cream Jael offers in an ornate basin may signal an extraordinary act of hospitality. But, if so, her hospitality is immediately and crushingly reversed.

- 26 *Her hand she sent for the tent stake,  
her right hand for the workman's hammer,  
and she hammered Sisera.  
She destroyed his head.  
She shattered, she pierced his temple.*
- 27 *Between her legs, he knelt, he fell, he lay.  
Between her legs, he knelt, he fell.  
Where he knelt, there he fell, despoiled.*

Overall, the poem puts its primary focus of the Jael's act of violence and on the image of the falling and fallen Sisera, as well as the juxtaposition of two women—the heroine Jael and the mother of the enemy Sisera. To accomplish this focus, the action unfolds in a manner that Robert Alter calls consequentiality. That is, the poem moves incrementally from cause to effect, each parallel line building on the other to create a sense of narrativity, if not an actual narrative. Alter notes how verbs drive the poem, creating a series of images almost like screenshots for the audience to “see.”<sup>11</sup> As Niditch translates, after grasping the tent stake, Jael, hammered, destroyed, shattered, and pierced the head of Sisera. A similar staccato of repetitive verbs describes the reaction of Sisera. Having no chance against Jael's onslaught, he knelt, fell, lay, knelt, fell, knelt, fell between her legs—dead or “despoiled” (vv. 26–27). As mentioned earlier, here is a place where these dramatic verbs paint a different picture than the prose version of chapter 4. In this case, from a standing position, Sisera collapses to his knees and then falls dead on the floor between the legs of Jael. That Jael manages to strike such a deadly blow against the Canaanite general constitutes a remarkable feat—one worth celebrating in a battle song.

Then, just as the poem prompts the audience to gaze on Sisera's fallen body, the text moves rapidly to another woman. We shift our eyes from the gruesomely effective work of a tent-dwelling woman, to her victim's mother, who gazes out of latticed windows, waiting for her son's victorious return.

- 28 *Through the window she looked down.  
Wail did the mother of Sisera from behind the latticework.  
“Why does his chariotry delay to come?  
Why tarry the clatterings of his chariots?”*
- 29 *The wise women among her ladies answer.  
Yea, she returns her words to herself.*
- 30 *“Are they not finding, dividing spoil?  
A wench, two wenches for each man.  
Spoil of dyed stuff for Sisera,  
    spoil of dyed stuff,  
        embroidered dyestuff,  
        doubly embroidered stuff  
        for my neck, spoil.”*

Sisera’s mother, who will eventually be given a name in later traditions, is here given the only instance of direct speech. She asks her ladies about her son’s delay and then answers her own question. Any momentary feelings of pity for Sisera’s mother that might be evoked by her initial questions are brutally challenged by her seeming pleasure at the thought of the post-battle raping and pillaging by her son and his men, along with her singular focus on the embroidered cloth he will bring her. The last word we hear from her is “spoil.” With this, the scene abruptly ends. The only thing left is for the poet to address Yahweh, wishing a similar death to all his enemies, and a blessing on his followers, along with a report that the land was quiet for forty years (5:31).

- 31 *Thus may perish all your enemies, Yhwh,  
and those who love him, like the going forth of the sun in his strength.  
And quiet was the land for forty years.<sup>12</sup>*

If a film were to end in such a stunning way, it would generate hours of conversation about what just took place on the screen. So it is with the poem. Scholars have much to say about the dramatic depiction of Sisera’s demise and its sharp juxtaposition with the scene at the lattice-windowed home of his mother. In what follows, I focus especially on what recent commentators have said about this poem in relation to sex, gender, and Jael’s violent act.

*On Slaughter, Sex, Milk,  
and Mothers in Judges 5*

A scene that features a male victim falling between the legs of a female perpetrator who has just penetrated his head with a tent peg is erotically tinged, if not teeming with sexual symbolism. This is what Susan Niditch argues in her influential 1989 essay, "Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael."<sup>13</sup> Niditch was not the first to see the mix of "sex and slaughter" in Judges 5, but she is the first to argue that "double meanings of violent death and sexuality emerge in every line."<sup>14</sup> To be sure, these double meanings are more evident in Hebrew than in most English translations. Niditch focuses especially on 5:27. The Hebrew phrase *ben ragleha* is often translated as "at the feet," but it can also mean "between the legs." In either case, whether translated "legs" or "feet," the word *raglayim* is frequently used euphemistically for genitals in biblical Hebrew. Likewise, the Hebrew verbs for "kneel" and "lay" may have sexual connotations. Niditch notes the sexual use of the word in reference to Job's wife upon whom others will "kneel" (Job 31:10), and the many references to both licit and illicit sex using the verb *sakub*, including David laying with his wife Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:24), sex between Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:32, 34–35), and the rapes of Dinah and Tamar (Gen. 34:2, 7; 2 Sam. 13:11).<sup>15</sup> Even the word for Sisera's demise, *shadud*, which indicates death or destruction, can also be used to indicate sexual despoilment as in Jeremiah 4:30.<sup>16</sup>

Niditch concludes that Judges 5 generally draws on a common literary motif in which "the defeated enemy becomes the woman who is raped, the victor her rapist."<sup>17</sup> Of course, in the case of Judges 5, the typical roles of male rapist and female victim are reversed. This interpretation is reinforced by v. 30 where Sisera's mother callously imagines the capturing and raping of women. The Hebrew *raham* is used in a derogatory sense, more literally "womb, two wombs" for every man (5:30).<sup>18</sup> For Robert Alter, the evocation of this scene helps cast Jael's killing of Sisera as "a hideous parody of soldierly sexual assault on the women of a defeated foe."<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps even more hideous from the perspective of some interpreters, is the presence of maternal imagery alongside the sexual connotations in the passage. Several scholars point to the poem's reference to milk as suggestive of Jael's perverse maternal role, where she nurtures Sisera, only to murder him.<sup>20</sup> Others see the image of Sisera falling between Jael's legs contributing to this maternal imagery, this time by way of a perverse birth,

where Sisera falls stillborn at her feet.<sup>21</sup> And, of course, there is the presence of a “real” mother in the text. Is the turn to Sisera’s anxious mother at the poem’s conclusion another way of pointing to the deviant maternal gestures (if that’s what they are) of Jael?

Overall, what might the poem’s gendered imagery mean for the presentation of Jael? From Niditch’s perspective, the poem’s combination of sex with death replicates the double evocation of eroticism and death common to the epic battle context. What distinguishes Judges 4–5 is that a woman plays the role of victor/rapist who accomplishes a “womanization” of her male victim. As such, she is a “guerilla warrior and archetype seducer-killer.”<sup>22</sup> Danna Fewell and David Gunn also see the poet depicting a militant Jael, noting the emphasis on Jael’s courageous violence. If the poem in some way feminizes Sisera, they suggest that it also “masculinizes the event,” depicting Jael in a manly single combat against her (standing) enemy.<sup>23</sup> Different still is Mieke Bal’s claim that the poem is written from a female perspective, one that not only celebrates battle victory over an Israelite enemy but also a victory of a strong woman over a once strong man.<sup>24</sup>

Some interpreters downplay a focus on Jael altogether in favor of a gendered reading of Sisera. They argue that the combination of sex and violence in Judges 5 was intended to highlight the humiliation of Sisera more than the courage of Jael. Support for this reading comes in Judges 9:53–54, where Abimelech’s head is crushed by a millstone dropped by a woman. The warrior immediately urges his armor bearer to pierce him with a sword so that people will not say “a woman killed him.” The poem assumes what this story explicitly identifies—dying at the hand of a woman was a shameful way to go. Unlike Abimelech, the enemy Sisera has no possibility of escape from his humiliating death.

Much more could be said of the poem’s interpretive potential. As we will see, later productions of the story will pick up on many of the same aspects that have concerned these scholars, but also take the story in quite different directions. For now, I turn to the other biblical version of the story, and the way scholars have read the gendered aspects of this narrative rendition of the ancient tradition.

### *The Narrative Account: Judges 4:1–24*

In the prose version of the tradition, Jael’s violent act is set in the context of a pre-battle encounter between Barak and Deborah. The narrative opens with a continuation of a pattern established earlier in the book of Judges

where God hands over a disobedient Israel to the enemy, only to be moved by pity and raise up a “judge” to save them (see Judg. 2:15–18; 3:1–15). In the case of Judges 4, God sells wayward Israel to a Canaanite king, Jabin, and especially to his general Sisera. When the Israelites cry out to Yahweh for relief from Sisera’s nine hundred chariots of iron (4:1–3), the reader can anticipate that God will raise up a judge to save them in spite of their waywardness.

Verses 4–5 fulfill that expectation, but with a twist. Unlike earlier judges such as Othniel (3:9) or Ehud (3:15), Deborah is a woman. Her gender identity is not offered as a passing fact. Instead, as Trent Butler observes, “the writer does everything the Hebrew language allows to emphasize that this is a female, not a male.”<sup>25</sup> Deborah’s introduction includes two occurrences of the noun for “woman” (*ishah*), the use of female form of the noun for “prophet,” (*nebi’ah*) and two occurrences of the independent female pronoun (*hi*). In this way, gender becomes a prominent theme from the opening lines of the prose version.

This theme becomes even more prominent in what follows. In vv. 6–7, Deborah summons Barak, informing him of Yahweh’s command to gather an army of ten thousand men to meet Sisera in battle at Mount Tabor. Again, the narrative takes an unexpected turn, as Barak responds with a conditional statement to Deborah, “If you go with me, I will go, and if you will not go with me, I will not go” (v. 8). The consequences of Barak’s cautious reply are immediately evident. While Deborah agrees to accompany him, she asserts that now Yahweh will give the glory of Sisera’s defeat to a woman (v. 9). This is a decisive shift from Yahweh’s earlier promise to Barak in v. 7, “I will give him [Sisera] into your hand.”

At this point, the narrative moves to the battle scene with a primary focus on the men, Barak and Sisera. D. F. Murray teases out the wordplay and parallelism in this section that shows both the contrast between the two generals, and their shared experience of being cut down by a woman.<sup>26</sup> Although Barak is the military underdog because Yahweh is working on behalf of Israel, when he “comes down” (*yarad*) from Mt. Tabor, it is to an Israelite victory (v. 14). In contrast, when Sisera “comes down” (*yarad*), it is to dismount from his chariot and flee on foot while his warriors are annihilated by Sisera’s forces (v. 15). The narrator here emphasizes that not one of the whole company remained (v. 16). But, the audience knows that, in fact, one does remain—the fleeing Sisera. In this way, the story prepares for the final scene. In this last episode, Sisera will fall even further and Barak will confront his own coming down.

Verses 17–22 relate the deadly meeting of Sisera with Jael. Here, and in the biblical verses that follow, I again rely on Niditch’s more literal translation of their encounter.

- 17 *And Sisera fled on foot  
to the tent of Jael,  
the wife of Heber the Kenite,  
because peace there was between Jabin, king of Hazor,  
and between the house of Heber the Kenite.*
- 18 *And out came Jael to meet Sisera,  
and she said to him,  
“Turn aside, my lord,  
turn aside to me.  
Be not afraid.”  
So he turned aside to her, to the tent,  
and she hid him with a covering.*
- 19 *And he said to her, “Give me to drink, I pray you, a bit of water  
for I am thirsty.”  
And she opened a skin bottle of milk,  
and gave him to drink,  
and she hid him.*

In the narrative account, Jael takes the initiative, acting and speaking before Sisera. She comes out to meet him and urges him to enter her tent saying “Be not afraid” (4:18). In other biblical uses, this Hebrew phrase, “*al-tira*,” is often used by Yahweh to reassure someone of a coming battle victory that he will bring about, or as assurance of protection (e.g., Num. 21:34; Deut. 1:21, 3:2; Josh. 8:1, 10:8, 11:6; 1 Sam. 22:23, 23:17; 2 Kgs 19:6). Given this, Jael’s use of the phrase is chillingly ironic, and heightens the tension of the scene. The audience knows that Sisera should, in fact, be very afraid.

But the general’s response is simply to go into the tent and allow Jael to cover (*ksh*) or, as Niditch translates, hide him with a *semikah*. The meaning of the Hebrew text is unclear at this point. The verb *ksh* can be rendered several ways, opening the way for divergent interpretations, as we will see. As in the poem, Sisera’s request, or rather his command to Jael to give him water is met with an offering of milk, though in a skin rather than a fancy bowl. Then comes a second “covering” or hiding (*ksh*) (v. 19). Sisera’s final

words (spoken from his hiding place?) again appear to be deeply ironic from a gender critical perspective.

20 *And he said to her,  
 “Stand at the opening of the tent,  
 and let it be if a person comes,  
 and asks you and says,  
 ‘Is there here a man?’  
 you say,  
 ‘there is not.’”*

In the Hebrew text, Sisera directs Jael to answer any man (Heb. *im ish*, “if a man”) who comes looking for him with just one word, *‘ayn* (4:20). The word means no, or more literally—nothing, absence. Alonso-Schökel, an early observer of the literary aspects of the story, captures well the diminishment of Sisera at this point. The once powerful general is now simply “a man,” but even this is denied.<sup>27</sup> There is more irony in the fact that the one who comes is, of course, Barak. In arriving on the scene and finding “nothing” Barak, too, will be diminished. But before that there is the death scene.

21 *And take, did Jael, the wife of Heber, a tent stake,  
 and she put the hammer into her hand,  
 and she came to him softly,  
 and drove the stake into his temple,  
 and pounded it into the ground.  
 He had been sleeping,  
 he was tired,  
 and he died.*

In contrast to the dramatic (and, as one might imagine, noisy) collapsing of Sisera in the Judges 5 poem, all is accomplished in stealth and quiet in the Judges 4 prose account. Jael comes to Sisera “softly” (*balla’t*), recalling another biblical woman who comes to a man in this way, Ruth to a sleeping Boaz (Ruth 3:7). But as the audience knows, unlike Ruth, Jael is not seeking a marriage union. Instead, Jael takes weapons in hand and hammers Sisera through his *rakka*. This word indicates some part of the head, but beyond that, its meaning is uncertain. Most translators, like Niditch, assume that the reference is to the temple. Others suggest the reference is to the throat or neck, or perhaps even mouth.

Whatever part of the head Jael strikes, her blows are effective. While the prose narrative lacks the torrent of verbs that hits the reader in the poem, it depicts Jael as driving the peg through Sisera's head seemingly into the ground. "Seemingly," because the Hebrew text here uses only a feminine pronoun for the subject of the verb that grammatically could refer to Jael. That is, rather than the peg "going down" into the ground, it could be Jael who goes down, or rather dismounts from straddling Sisera.<sup>28</sup> Sisera does not collapse and fall from a standing position, but instead is killed while he lies asleep with exhaustion. The emphasis in Judges 4 on Sisera's utter fatigue lends an air of vulnerability to his character, perhaps even evoking sympathy.

From the single phrase, "and he died," the narrative moves immediately to "Behold, Barak!" The prose account has set up this final scene from its beginning—Barak will not be given the glory. The audience knows this, but it remains for Barak to know it as well.

22 *And behold, Barak was following after Sisera,  
and out went Jael to meet him,  
and she said to him,  
"Come and I will show you the man whom you seek,"  
and he came with her,  
and behold, Sisera was fallen, dead,  
and the stake was in his temple.*

23 *And God humbled on that day Jabin, king of Canaan,  
Before the descendants of Israel.  
And the hand of the descendants of Israel went,  
Going harder and harder upon Jabin, king of Canaan,  
Until they cut off Jabin, king of Canaan.*<sup>29</sup>

A parallel between Sisera and Barak is here drawn for a second time. Whereas the narrative earlier had both men "going down," now Barak, like Sisera, is met by Jael who for the second time invites a man into her tent. The audience then "beholds" through the eyes of Barak the already-slain body of Sisera (v. 22). There is no further response from Barak or from Jael, or, for that matter, from Yahweh. In fact, since the initial calling to battle in vv. 6–7, Yahweh has been absent from the story and remains so now. The narrative ends with the audience's gaze fixed on the slain body of the enemy general, and we are left to draw our own conclusions about the

meaning of the scene. The final epilogue in vv. 23–24 does not offer much help as it returns to the mention of Jabin, a character who also has had no part in the narrative.

This longer narrative version of the tradition provides more insight into its characters than does the poem, but more is revealed about Sisera than Jael. The narrator explains why Sisera flees toward Jael's tent (he can expect safe harbor given the peace between their clans, 4:17). Sisera discloses that he is thirsty and that he wants his location kept secret (4:19–20). The narrator also indicates that Sisera was asleep due to exhaustion (4:21), and of course, that he died. To this extent, the audience has access to Sisera's motivations as well as his physical condition. Far less is conveyed about Jael. Together, her speech and actions show her to be both duplicitous and deadly, but the narrator never explains why this is so. Jael's ethnic identity also remains unclear, though it seems unlikely that she is an Israelite. Such an important detail and ready explanation for her violent act would surely have been made explicit if it was part of the tradition. But in both the prose version and the poetic one, only Heber's Kenite identity is specified. The lack of insight into Jael's inner life and motivations make her a particularly enigmatic biblical character who invites speculation. Not surprisingly, much of this speculation focuses on her sexuality and how she uses it against her opponent. This is true of biblical scholars, and it will certainly be true of later artists and authors who offer new versions of the story.

### *Judges 4 as a Battle of the Sexes*

Given the opening interaction between Deborah and Barak, many commentators contend that, different from the poem, the narrative account makes gender conflict a central theme. Murray's literary analysis of the narrative goes farthest in making the case. In his view, the narrator is not concerned with a historical report of any kind but rather "to narrate a story which appeared to him to comment with telling irony on the roles of two men and two women, and thus on the relationship of men and women in general."<sup>30</sup> According to Murray, the narrative structure of the chapter unites Barak and Sisera in a tragic fate, "ignominious subjection to the effective power of women."<sup>31</sup> Bal, too, sees that the shaming of men is a major theme in the story, arguing that the story of a national war is subsumed by "a war between the sexes, or rather, the struggle of one sex against the other."<sup>32</sup>

Not all scholars see male humiliation in the story, at least with respect to the humiliation of Barak. Niditich contends that Barak is wise in wanting the presence of “God’s favorite” to help assure victory. From her perspective, the point of his request is to *elevate* his status.<sup>33</sup> In favor of her reading is the fact that Barak gets an honorable mention in Samuel’s recitation of God’s saving deeds (1 Sam. 12:11). Much later the author of Hebrews includes Barak in his list of faithful ancestors (Heb. 11:32). In other words, if the humiliation of Barak is suggested by Judges 4, it was either not apparent or ignored by later biblical authors. Notably, both LXXa and LXXb add a line that softens Barak’s conditional response to Deborah, “for I do not know the day that the angel of the Lord will go before me” (LXX Judg. 4:8b).

There is little disagreement among commentators about Jael’s seductive actions as depicted in the prose tradition. The fact that she takes the initiative by coming out to meet Sisera and then invites him into her tent signals her sexual intentions. Fewell and Gunn compare her actions to those of Leah, who in Genesis 30:16 “goes out” to meet Jacob and tells him she has hired him to “come in to her.” They note that in biblical literature more generally “a man seldom enters a woman’s tent for purposes other than sexual intercourse.”<sup>34</sup> Pamela Tamarkin Reis has been the most thoroughgoing in her argument that the story in Judges 4 “smolders with sex.”<sup>35</sup> For Reis, the major evidence for this lies with the mysterious word *semikah*. She notes that with a slight textual emendation, the word could mean “to lean, lay, rest one’s weight upon” so that the covering Jael does in v. 18 is with her own body. If this is case, Jael “assumes the masculine sexual position” and they copulate.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Reis assumes quite a bit of copulating takes place in the story, including between Jael and Barak when he arrives.<sup>37</sup> From her perspective, the whole ribald story is designed to entertain the audience with the “bawdy ridicule” of Sisera. Ancient Israelite storytellers would have been unreserved in showing Jael in this way both because she is a non-Israelite and because the Bible regularly features unlikely heroes.

### *Beyond the Seductress: Alternative Readings of Jael*

While recent scholarship focuses on the gendered and sexual aspects of the story (as do most artistic renditions of the story), this is not the only interpretive option. The emphasis on seduction in Judges 4 does not preclude scholars

from also seeing maternal imagery in the prose version. Alter suggests that while Jael seems to seduce Sisera into entering her tent, any potential erotic undertones are quickly replaced by maternal associations as Jael tucks Sisera in like a child and gives him milk to drink.<sup>38</sup> Fewell and Gunn agree, and further suggest that Jael comes to him softly as to a sleeping child.<sup>39</sup>

Another line of biblical interpretation reads Jael in relation to Near Eastern goddess traditions, or alternatively, to cult sanctuaries. While this may seem like an entirely scholarly pursuit, later in the book, we will see several literary renditions present Jael as a goddess or priestess figure. The biblical scholarship on cultic associations in Judges 4–5 link both Deborah and Jael to the Mesopotamian goddesses of war and sexuality, Anat and Astarte.<sup>40</sup> In her study of women in Judges, Susan Ackerman draws on this work to argue that Jael should be understood as a cult functionary whose tent represents a sanctuary and thus safe haven for Sisera.<sup>41</sup> Readings such as these provide an answer to why Sisera fled to Jael's tent in particular, and why a woman might have her own tent seemingly apart from her husband. In some cases, they also provide an alternative to the erotic interpretation of the story, moving the scene from profane to sacred space. Of course, if Jael is linked with the goddess of love, the scene remains erotically charged, as will be evident in one twentieth-century play we will see later.

### *Morally Revolting or Morally Justified?*

Finally, the matter of Jael's moral culpability is a frequent theme in biblical commentaries and sermons in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; however, I will not detail these examples here.<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton's comments on the story provide an apt summary of many similar opinions.

The deception and cruelty practiced on Sisera by Jael under the guise of hospitality is revolting under our code of morality. To decoy the luckless general fleeing before his enemy into her tent, pleading him safety, and with seeming tenderness minister to his wants, and which such words of sympathy and consolation lulling him to sleep and then in cold blood driving a nail through his temples, seems more like the work of a fiend than of a woman.<sup>43</sup>

Stanton goes on to comment that the generals did not forget to honor Jael for what they "thought" was a deed of heroism, and that Jael "imagined

herself” to be specially called by God for this duty. In short, in spite of Stanton’s interest in recovering the Bible for women in her famous *Woman’s Bible*, she does not find a model in Jael. Note that it is not necessarily the assassination of an enemy general that is questionable, as much as the deceptive means by which Jael undertook her deadly task. To provide hospitality to Sisera, to reassure him of safety, and then to murder him in his sleep was beyond the pale for many readers, even if she worked on behalf of the Israelites.

Notably, some readers do defend Jael, seeing her act as justified under the circumstances of Israelite oppression, or the potential threat to her safety. For instance, Victor Matthews has reversed the argument about Jael’s violation of ancient codes of hospitality. He suggests that it is Sisera who violated the code in making particular demands on Jael to give him water and guard the door. In so doing, he freed Jael of any obligation to honor traditional hospitality codes.<sup>44</sup> Others have suggested that Jael needed to defend herself against what would have certainly been a violent encounter with Sisera, or perhaps the pursuing Israelite army if she was found harboring the enemy.

In the paintings, poems, plays, and novels that I examine in the following chapters, the morality of Jael is also a frequent theme. Perhaps not surprisingly, the more positive assessments of Jael typically come from representations of Jael by female authors and artists. In other words, as the rest of the book will show, in some cases, the “battle of the sexes” between Jael and her male opponents spills over into a struggle between male and female artists regarding the representation of her character.

The next chapter moves beyond these biblical accounts in Judges 4 and 5 to look at other ancient representations of the Jael-Sisera tradition. Neither Jael nor Deborah is ever mentioned again in the Hebrew Bible or New Testament. As mentioned earlier, Barak is briefly recalled twice more, in 1 Samuel 12:11 and Hebrews 11:32. It is left to later authors to remember and retell the story of Jael and Sisera. When they do, it is with great variety and creativity and certainly with differing opinions about the motivations and aspirations of both characters.

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## *Problem Solving in Ancient Retellings of Jael and Sisera*

AFTER THEIR STARRING roles in Judges 4–5, the Bible leaves Jael and Sisera behind. But several ancient writers do not. And like so many contemporary interpreters of the story, these ancient writers were drawn to, and apparently concerned by, the scene’s provocative sexual connotations. With this, we come to our first new cultural performances of the story and our first illustrations of how concerns about sex and gender are reflected in these new presentations.

There are arguably three new versions of the story all written sometime between the second century BCE and first century CE. I say “arguably” because I count the book of Judith among them. The story of Judith has such strong overlaps with the tradition in Judges that I treat it as one type of reproduction of the Jael and Sisera story. More straightforward is Josephus’s version of the story in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, where he displays his characteristic lack of interest in female characters. I include Josephus as a contrast to the far more elaborate version offered in the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (LAB), often known as “Pseudo-Philo.” In their own ways, each of these ancient retellings treats potential problems raised by the biblical accounts. That these problems concern sex, gender, and power makes clear that these themes were on readers’ minds at an early point in the long history of cultural productions of the story.

### *New and Improved: Judith, the Israelite Jael*

“By the deceit of my lips strike down the slave with the prince and the prince with his servant; crush their arrogance by the hand of a woman.”

(Jdt. 9:10 NRS). So prays Judith before embarking on her murderous mission to kill the Assyrian general Holofernes. Written sometime in the first or second century BCE, the book of Judith tells the story of a Jewish widow who, through guile and deceit, ingratiates herself to an enemy general and then cuts off his head with a sword. If this sounds familiar, it is for good reason. The basic plot of the stories of Jael and Judith are so similar that artists, storytellers, and even scholars often confuse one with the other, or merge the two figures into one.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this confusion overlooks the ways that Judith is distinct from Jael. While the similarities between the two figures invite close comparison, it is their differences that point to what an ancient audience might have found problematic about Jael.

Sidnie White Crawford has presented the most detailed account of the structural and conceptual parallels between the two versions of the Jael-Sisera story (Judg. 4–5) and the book of Judith.<sup>2</sup> She argues that the later Judith tradition was deliberately modeled after the stories of Deborah and Jael in Judges 4–5, which the author read as a single unit. Crawford notes how both traditions begin with a struggle between Israel and a foreign power. In Judges, the Canaanites have been oppressing Israel for twenty years. In the book of Judith, the Judean village of Bethulia is under siege by the Assyrian army. With their water supply cut off, the beleaguered townspeople urge the town elders to surrender. The elders agree that they will, if God does not provide help within in five days (Jdt. 7:20–31).

Since the book of Judith takes seven chapters to establish the story's setting, Judith, like Jael, comes later to the action. She is not introduced until chapter 8, halfway through the book. Once she enters the narrative, the rest of the book relates the unfolding of her deadly plot against Holofernes. Just as Judges 4 and 5 climax with a deadly encounter between a woman and an enemy general, so too does the book of Judith. Each of the traditions features a victory song (Judg. 5; Jdt. 16:1–17). Besides these structural similarities in the accounts, Crawford also notes how Judith and Jael both act independently, with their husbands named, but absent from the story. Both of their male victims die with attacks to their heads, which occur after they have drunk and fallen asleep (or passed out, in the case of Holofernes). Also, the motif of a woman's hand runs through both narratives (Judg. 4:9, 21, 5:26; Jdt. 8:33, 9:10, 13:14).<sup>3</sup>

If we consider Judith as a type of retelling of the Jael-Sisera tradition, the differences between Judith and Jael become particularly interesting. For example, one obvious difference concerns ethnic identity. While Jael's tribal affiliation is uncertain, she is seemingly non-Israelite. In contrast,

Judith is quite explicitly an Israelite, or more particularly, a Judean, as her name indicates. Thus, any concerns about an Israelite alliance with a foreign woman that might be raised by Judges 4–5 are irrelevant for the lethal heroine, Judith.

Even more interesting, when Judith is read as a reworked version of Jael, the questions of both Jael's deceit and seductive behavior are also resolved, yet in a surprising way. Rather than making Judith an honest woman, the narrative makes her deliberate deceitfulness a central theme of the narrative. Indeed, Judith repeatedly acknowledges her use of deceit before God, praying that God will use it to accomplish his will and save his people, as we saw in the quotation that opened this section (Jdt. 9:10; see also 9:13). It is as though by openly acknowledging this strategy, Judith seeks approval not only of God, but also of the audience.

In the same way that it focuses on Judith's guile, the book of Judith makes abundantly clear that her plan involves seduction. Whereas biblical scholars must read between the lines for sexual allusions in the stories of Jael and Sisera, the book of Judith makes clear the protagonist's beauty and includes a detailed description of her bathing, dressing, and adorning herself for the meeting with Holofernes (Jdt. 10:3–4).<sup>4</sup> As Judith prepares for and embarks on her calculated mission of seduction, all the men she encounters are easily bent to her will (Jdt. 10:7, 14–19).

Paradoxically, by bringing seduction, deception, and sex to the surface of the story, the story also absolves Judith of any sexual misconduct.<sup>5</sup> Because the entire seduction scene is narrated in detail (Jdt. 11–13:10), there is no need to speculate about whether sex occurred. And just to be sure Judith's character is above reproach, the narrative includes a declaration to that effect. When she returns to Bethulia (a name suggestively close to *bethula*, Heb. for virgin), Judith swears before the townspeople, "As the Lord lives, who has protected me in the way I went, I swear that it was my face that seduced him to his destruction, and that he committed no sin with me, to defile and shame me" (Jdt. 13:16 NRS). In short, the explicit use of seduction by Judith alongside her adamant claims of chaste conduct becomes a way of "cleaning up" the Judges tradition.

One complicating point is that Judith opens her prayer by invoking her ancestor Simeon, to whom God "gave a sword to take revenge on those strangers who had torn off a virgin's clothing to defile her, and exposed her thighs to put her to shame and polluted her womb to disgrace her . . ." (Jdt. 9:2 NRS). By evoking this memory before taking sword in hand herself, Judith depicts her own killing of Holofernes as revenge for a sexual

misdeed. Perhaps this also distantly echoes the Jael tradition, since Judith's own violation is definitely not at issue. This would fit with the interpretations of Jael's violence as an act of self-defense against sexual violation.<sup>6</sup> More likely, however, is that Israel's own oppression under Assyria is viewed in terms of sexual exploitation by a stronger power, whose arrogance will soon be crushed by the hand of a woman (9:10).

Finally, in terms of offering a "new, improved" version of Jael, the book of Judith recasts any potential violations of hospitality so that Judith cannot be considered morally suspect. First, the action takes place in Holofernes's tent instead of her own so that she is guest, rather than host. More to the point, when Holofernes offers her food and drink, Judith explains, "I cannot partake of them, or it will be an offense; but I will have enough with the things I brought with me" (Jdt. 12:2 NRS). As with most of Judith's conversation with Holofernes, her words are filled with irony. On the surface, she brings her own dishes and eats her own food to keep purity regulations and thus not offend God. But by not partaking in the food and drink provided by her host, Holofernes, she cannot be accused of killing the hand that fed her.

In sum, the character Judith meticulously avoids bringing shame on herself throughout the encounter with Holofernes. Instead, the book reserves all the shame for her male enemy. Not only does Judith mutilate and kill Holofernes, she brings back his head in a bag to show to the residents of Bethulia. "See here, the head of Holofernes, the commander of the Assyrian army, and here is the canopy beneath which he lay in his drunken stupor. The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman" (Jdt. 13:15). Both the public display of the assassinated general (or part of him!) and the reference to the "hand of a woman" strongly echo the Jael-Sisera story.<sup>7</sup> Another echo of that story is heard in the blessing given to Judith by the town magistrate after her deadly work, "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth . . ." (Jdt. 13:18 NRS). Meanwhile, back in the enemy camp, Holofernes's steward describes the shame brought on by the general's assassination. Upon discovering Holofernes's headless body, he cries, "The slaves have tricked us! One Hebrew woman has brought disgrace on the house of King Nebuchadnezzar. Look, Holofernes is lying on the ground, and his head is missing!" (Jdt. 14:18 NRS).

In these ways, the character of Judith, while closely paralleling Jael, is not simply a more developed version of her predecessor in the tradition. Instead, this retold version of the older story resolves the problematic

aspects of Jael. Judith is clearly an Israelite and not a foreign woman. She is obviously pious, prayerfully seeking God's endorsement of her murderous plan. She is unequivocally chaste, even if she uses her beauty to seduce and deceive Holofernes. She is, in short, a less suspect version of Jael.<sup>8</sup>

### *Omissions and Additions: Judges 4 in Josephus's Antiquities of the Jews*

We move now from the book of Judith's corrective interplay with Jael's story to another ancient version. Josephus's account is both an explicit retelling of the story and also a far more truncated version. Although he prefaces his *Antiquities of the Jews* with a historian's promise to accurately describe the records of the Jews without adding or subtracting anything, Josephus actually does both types of editing quite freely (*Ant.* Preface, 3). His work is an example of a genre designated among scholars as "rewritten Bible." While there is ongoing discussion regarding the meaning of this term, it seems an apt description of Josephus's *Antiquities*, if one assumes that such "rewriting" involves creative adaptation of biblical accounts including substantial expansions, substitutions, and omissions.<sup>9</sup> When Josephus comes to the story of Jael, he mostly omits material. There is nothing resembling the celebratory Song of Deborah for instance, and also very little of the encounter between Jael and Sisera.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, there are additions to the story that both heighten the tension between Deborah and Barak and also restore Barak to a place of prominence.

Similar to Judges 4, the appearance of Jael in *Antiquities* occurs in the story after a tense encounter with Deborah and Barak. In Josephus's account, God appoints Barak as a general in response to the prayer of the oppressed Israelites. Nevertheless, when Deborah then commands Barak to battle, as in Judges 4, Barak refuses to go. At this point, Josephus appears to side with those who read Barak's reticence in Judges 4:8 as a sign of weakness. When Barak insists not only that Deborah accompany him, but also that she go as a "co-general" (*systratēgousēs*) with him, Deborah is irritated and chastises Barak for rejecting his God-given authority. "You resign to a woman a rank that God has given to you! Nevertheless, I do not reject it!" (*Ant.* 5.203). By having Deborah explicitly identify Barak's reluctance as a shirking of gender roles, Josephus heightens the gender conflict from Judges 4. He then accentuates Barak's cowardice by having him look for a retreat at the sight of Sisera's army. Only at Deborah's insistence do they stay and fight (*Ant.* 5.204).<sup>11</sup> Still, Barak's reluctance to go to battle

with the 10,000 men God commanded him to raise is understandable given Josephus's exaggerated account of the size of Sisera's army. Where Judges 4 asserts that Sisera led army with 900 iron chariots (Judg. 4:13) Josephus's account claims the more intimidating figures of 300,000 soldiers, 10,000 horses, and 3,000 chariots. Josephus' point may simply be to emphasize the power of God against a mighty enemy. If Josephus does mean to highlight Barak's humiliating response, by the end of his version of the story, he will decisively restore Barak's honor.

When Jael is introduced, Josephus is quite clear about her foreign status—she is “a woman of the Kenites named Jael” (*Ant.* 5.205). Heber is not mentioned, nor any treaty between the Kenites and Jabin. As in the biblical accounts, we learn little else about Jael, nor can we ascertain what her Kenite identity means for Josephus. He also reports her encounter with Sisera quite tersely, giving neither Jael nor Sisera any occasion for direct speech. Moreover, in this brief account, there is nothing about the presentation of Jael that implies seduction or an erotic encounter. This is notable given Josephus's tendency elsewhere to enhance the erotic aspects of a text.<sup>12</sup> But in his version of this story, Jael neither initiates a conversation with Sisera nor invites him into her tent. She only responds to his request for concealment.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the mention of sour milk (as Josephus refers to it) does little to suggest maternal, or sexual imagery. Instead, Josephus, like many commentators, assumes the detail about the milk explains why Sisera fell soundly asleep—because he drank a lot of it (*Ant.* 5.208). Still, one does not get the sense that Josephus downplays the sexual aspects of the story to preserve the reputation of Jael. Josephus seems little interested in Jael as a character in her own right, given the lack of detail he offers about Jael and his omission of any praise for her deadly deed once it occurs.

Compared to the biblical accounts and certainly compared to *LAB*, to which we will soon turn, Josephus's report of Jael's assassination of the general is quite cursory, if gruesome. Nearly in the same breath, he reports Jael's driving the tent peg through Sisera's mouth and jaw (*kata stomatos kai tou chelyniou*) into the ground, and the arrival of Barak's company to see the body (*Ant.* 5.208). While Josephus likely assumes the inclusion of Barak in this scene, his choice of phrasing (*tois peri ton Barakon*) distances the Israelite general from the sight of Sisera vanquished at the hand of a woman instead of his own.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this is an initial indication of Josephus's interest in restoring Barak's honor, which he will do in the final lines of the story. While the historian does, at this point, refer to Deborah's

prediction in Judges 4:9, he very quickly gives Barak his own victory. At the conclusion of Judges 4, God and the Israelites work to destroy Jabin (Judg. 4:23–24). In Josephus version, Barak himself kills Jabin and razes the city of Asor. Then, skipping Deborah’s song of praise, Josephus moves to the concluding mention of forty years of rest (Judg. 5:31), but gives Barak the command over the Israelites for forty years. In Josephus’s retelling of this tradition, then, Jael fulfills Deborah’s prophecy, but nothing else. She is neither celebrated nor downplayed. Hers is an entirely functional role. If there is any gender conflict created by her violent act, it is resolved in favor of Barak.

### *Expansion and Ambiguity: Judges 4–5 in LAB*

Josephus’s truncated account of the story contrasts sharply with the elaborated account offered by the anonymous author of *LAB*. Whereas Josephus appears uninterested in Jael’s motivations, the author of this “rewritten bible” provides explanation for her actions. Not only that, in this expanded account of Judges 4, Jael becomes a beautiful, seductive, yet chaste heroine, much like Judith.

*LAB* presents a narrative of Israelite history beginning with the genealogy of Adam and ending with the death of Saul, with the book of Judges holding a prominent place. The point of the work, as Howard Jacobson suggests, seems to be “biblical education,” that is, filling out biblical stories to make them more compelling, answering questions raised by biblical narratives, and resolving apparent problems or contradictions in the scriptural traditions.<sup>15</sup> The text has survived only in Latin manuscripts which were translated from a Greek version which, in turn, was based on an original Hebrew text.<sup>16</sup> *LAB* was likely written in Palestine during the first or second century CE, with less certainty about whether the work was written pre- or post-70 CE.<sup>17</sup> In either case, *LAB* was composed during a time of Jewish subjugation under Rome and its major theme—God’s ultimate plan of salvation for the Jewish people in spite of repeated catastrophes—speaks to that situation.<sup>18</sup> The author’s special interest in the period of Judges is perhaps because Roman occupation presented a condition analogous to ancient Israel’s ongoing domination by foreigners within the promised land.<sup>19</sup>

As for the story of Jael and Sisera, a subtheme running through the work is a profound distrust of foreigners, especially foreign women. *LAB* repeatedly makes the point that interaction with foreigners typically leads

to idolatry, which in turn, leads to punishment from God.<sup>20</sup> While the themes of sin, punishment, and hostility to foreigners are already prominent in the Deuteronomistic history, *LAB* heightens these ideas to an even greater extent.<sup>21</sup> For example, Samson is punished because, according to God, he “has mingled with the daughters of the Philistines and has not paid attention to Joseph my servant who was in a foreign land and became the crown of his brothers because he was not willing to profane his seed” (43.5). The Levite’s concubine is punished because she strayed from her husband and had sex with the Amalekites (45.3). David suggests that he will have victory over Goliath because David’s mother, Ruth, chose the God of Israel while Goliath is the son of Orpah who chose the gods of the Philistines (61.6). And Deborah is sent by God after he has punished the Israelites (through Jabin and Sisera) because they went “astray after the daughters of the Amorites and served their gods” (30.1).

In contrast to these negative examples of exchanges with foreign women, *LAB* features a number of positive depictions of Israelite women. For example, Tamar, “our mother,” is praised for her decision to have sex with her father-in-law so that she could avoid having intercourse with gentiles (9.5). Indeed, Tamar is just one of a number of Israelite women that are highlighted in the *LAB*, leading some critics to argue that the author was favorably disposed toward women, or perhaps even *was* a woman.<sup>22</sup>

Given all this, the story of Jael presents an interesting case. As a foreign woman, she might be regarded with suspicion by the author of *LAB*. Yet, she is also a woman who acts for the benefit of Israel. As we will see, the author manages to finesse a presentation that accounts for both of these aspects of Jael.

### *Jael and Sisera in LAB*

The story opens with Deborah’s summons to Barak and her command to “Gird your loins like a man, and go down and attack Sisera, because I see the stars moving in their course and preparing for battle on our side” (31.1). Her words echoes God’s stern words to Job (Job 38:3, 40:7) and are an early indication that *LAB*’s retelling of the Jael and Sisera story will draw on elements from several biblical traditions in addition to traditions from both Judges 4 and 5.<sup>23</sup> Those familiar with Judges 4 might also wonder whether the reference to Barak’s manhood anticipates a less than manly response from him to Deborah’s command. But if any hint of the gender critique of Judges 4–5 is intended, it seems only for the point of rejecting this

element of the biblical account. Not only is Barak's objection not included in *LAB*, but the narrative shifts the focus to Sisera. As Deborah continues to report her vision, the audience gains insight into the Canaanite general's motivations. She sees Sisera boasting, "I will go down to attack Israel with my mighty arm, and I will divide their spoils among my servants, and I will take for myself beautiful women as concubines" (31.1). Deborah also predicts a threefold punishment for Sisera that parallels his threefold boast. "On account of this, the Lord said about him that the arm of a weak woman would overcome him and girls would take his spoils and he himself would fall at the hands of a woman" (31.1).<sup>24</sup> In this way, *LAB* links the fate of Sisera to his own mistaken assertions of power. Meanwhile, Barak's masculinity goes unquestioned. For his part, Barak says nothing at all in response to Deborah's prediction but joins her and the people in going down to battle the enemies. This is the last mention of Barak until the end of the narrative, when he will speak for the first time and also be given the final words of the story.

Meanwhile, the battle ensues. Compared to Judges 5, the *LAB* makes the cosmic dimension of the battle even more explicit, with the stars burning 8,730,000 enemies of Israel in one hour. Josephus is apparently not the only one prone to exaggeration. But in spite of this massive destruction, Sisera is not destroyed, because of a command from God. Nevertheless, as we will see, the fiery stars do contribute to Sisera's thirst and fatigue, which will lead to his undoing.

Unlike both biblical accounts, in *LAB* Sisera flees from the battle and from his dying men on horseback rather than on foot, perhaps accentuating the cowardly nature of his desertion. He does not go specifically toward the tent of Jael. *LAB* makes no mention of a "peace" between her Kenite husband and the Canaanites as in Judges 4:17, so there is no apparent reason for Sisera to seek refuge there.<sup>25</sup> Still, Jael goes out to meet him. She is introduced only as the wife of "the Kenite," with no mention of the name Heber. While it is unclear why this detail would be omitted, perhaps the point is to depersonalize as much as possible Jael's links to the non-Israelite tribe.<sup>26</sup>

When Jael enters the narrative, the author turns to the traditions around Judith for inspiration. Before going out to meet Sisera, Jael adorns herself and is described as a very beautiful woman. Thus, we see a circular interplay between Judges, Judith, and *LAB*. The Jael of Judges inspires the character of Judith, who in turn becomes a model for *LAB*'s Jael. She is a woman with a plan in mind, one that involves seduction of the enemy.

What are only hints of erotic elements in Judges 4–5 are made more explicit in this version of the story. As in Judges, Jael out goes to meet Sisera, inviting him into her tent for food and sleep. She also promises the assistance of her servants, adding provocatively that she knows that Sisera “will remember and repay” her (31.3). Any remaining doubt about the seductive nature of Jael’s plan is removed when Sisera enters her tent and finds roses strewn on the bed.

At the same time, this erotic element produces a clear justification for Jael’s slaying of Sisera. On seeing the roses, Sisera decides, “If I will be saved, I will go to my mother, and Jael will be my wife” (31.3). The statement is an example of internal speech used regularly in the *LAB*, and there is no indication that Jael has overheard him. Still, Sisera’s disclosure of his plans provides the audience with a possible motive for Jael. In this way, the *LAB* responds to possible moral objections about Jael’s killing of Sisera. The addition here of Sisera’s reference to his mother both foreshadows her appearance at the end of the passage and also suggests that his father is dead. This latter point becomes relevant later in the story.

*LAB* expands the exchange between Sisera and Jael compared to the versions in Judges 4–5, allowing Jael time to appeal to God twice for signs before she undertakes her violent act. This happens first when Jael puts off Sisera’s initial request for water: “Give me a little water for I am exhausted and my soul burns from the flame that I saw in the stars” (31.4). She responds by urging him to rest before he drinks and he falls asleep. With this, the narrative creates space for Jael to go out of the tent to milk the flock, and more importantly, to speak to God. The scene provides an answer to why Jael provides milk rather than water—it symbolizes the people of Israel:

Behold now, remember, Lord when you distributed all the peoples and nations of the earth, did you not choose Israel alone and liken it to no animal except to the ram that goes before the flock? Look therefore and see that Sisera has made a plan and said, “I will go and destroy the flock of the Lord.” I will take from the milk of these animals to which you have likened your people, and I will go and give him to drink. When he has drunk, he will grow weary, and afterwards I will kill him. This will be the sign that you will perform for me Lord, that, when I enter while Sisera is asleep, if he on waking will ask me immediately, saying, “Give me water to drink,” then I know that my prayer has been heard. (31.5)

Jael calls her words a prayer, but as Erich Gruen notes, they are more advice to God than prayer, especially on what sign he is to provide to Jael. Gruen discusses Jael's desire for a sign in the context of other such requests in the *LAB*, such as from Cenaz (27.7) and Gideon (35.6–7). He suggests that these figures do not rely on faith and obedience alone, but ask for proof that God is working on their behalf.<sup>27</sup> While this is certainly true, there is a marked difference in how the narrative progresses with respect to the requests of the two male Israelite leaders, Cenaz and Gideon, compared to Jael. In the case of Cenaz, the reader is told that “the Spirit of the Lord clothed him” and that his sword shone so that the Amorites recognized him (27.6–8). When Gideon asks for a sign, the angel of the Lord immediately responds, “I will give you a sign” (35.6–7). But when it comes to Jael, no such divine confirmation of the sign occurs. In fact, as the scene unfolds we might wonder whether God has been listening or cooperating at all.

First, given Sisera's earlier statement about exhaustion and thirst, and Jael's reply that he should first rest and then drink, Jael's so-called “sign” is nothing more than exactly what one would expect Sisera to do upon waking, namely ask for a drink!<sup>28</sup> And, in fact, there is no narrative acknowledgement that Sisera's request is a sign, except that Jael proceeds with her plan. She mixes wine with the milk (the wine again recalling Judith and Holofernes) and gives it to Sisera to drink. When he again falls asleep, Jael then asks for *another* sign to be performed by God, one that will prove that Sisera will fall at her hands.

With this request even more ambiguity concerning Jael and her so-called signs emerges in the *LAB* account. Jael suggests to God that if Sisera does not wake when she throws him off the bed, she will know that God has given Sisera into her hand. Then, curiously, the narrator reports, “Jael took Sisera and pushed him to the ground from the bed. But he did not sense it, because he was very exhausted” (31.7). Not only is there (again) no confirmation of a sign, but the narrator provides an alternative explanation for Sisera's lack of response. He does not wake because he is so tired. So, is his non-responsiveness a sign from God or is Jael acting on her own? Assuming that Jael is a heroine, Burnette-Bletsch acknowledges God's lack of response but then assumes one anyway: “Although God is silent throughout Jael's narrative, the miraculous signs do provide a voice of divine approval of the heroine's actions.”<sup>29</sup> But Mary Therese DesCamp seems more on target when she suggests that this is an example of narrative undermining. In her words, “[Jael] may respect God. She may talk to

God. But she never hears from God. Jael may herself have been collaborating with God; whether God saw the same thing is unclear.”<sup>30</sup>

One possible reason for this narrative ambiguity is Jael’s foreign status. As mentioned at the outset, *LAB* shows a distrust of foreign women throughout the narrative. In this case, the biblical tradition lifts up a woman as heroine, but the *LAB* includes subtle hints that point to Jael’s outsider status, despite the fact that she comes to the aid of Israel. In her initial words to God, quoted above, she speaks as a non-Israelite, but as one who knows that Israel is chosen by God.

As the *LAB* account continues, it further highlights her foreign status. Jael proceeds with her plan, praying to God for strength before slaying Sisera. In doing so, her actions yet again recall Judith, who prays to God before slaying Holofernes. But there is a difference. Judith prays for God to strengthen her for the exaltation of Jerusalem and that she might “destroy the enemies that have risen up against us” (Jdt. 13:4–5). In contrast, Jael asks that God strengthens her arm “for your sake and the sake of your people and those who trust you” (31.7). The use of the phrase “your people” suggests a difference between Jael and God’s people, especially when compared to the first-person “us” in Judith’s prayer. In this way, Jael confirms her foreign status even as she articulates a category under which she might be included under God’s protection. But if the audience is to see her as one who trusts God, her repeated (and unanswered) requests for signs complicate this image.<sup>31</sup>

*LAB* also draws out the climax of the scene, with Jael and Sisera having a final exchange before his death. With the tent peg driven through his head, Sisera survives long enough to speak his shame: “Behold pain has seized me, Jael, and I die like a woman.” How is he dying “like a woman”? Perhaps by acknowledging and succumbing to pain, as well as dying defenseless, off the battlefield. Notably, *LAB*’s Jael reinforces Sisera’s humiliating death. She taunts the dying general, urging him to “Go, boast before your father in the underworld and tell him that you have fallen at the hands of a woman” (31.7).<sup>32</sup> With this, he dies and Jael waits for Barak’s return.

Before Barak arrives, however, *LAB* includes a brief scene with Sisera’s mother, and in keeping with unflattering portrait of foreign women, heightens the callousness already evident in Judges 5. The author gives her a name, Themech, which she shares with Cain’s wife in *LAB* (2.1). Themech shows no puzzlement or worry over Sisera’s delay as is apparent in Judges 5:28. Rather, she confidently speaks to her court and awaits the

return of her son with the women he has enslaved. “Come, let us go out together to meet my son, and you will see the daughters of the Hebrews whom my son will bring here for himself as concubines” (31.8). In this way, Sisera’s mother approves of the intentions of Sisera who had boasted of taking Israelite women as concubines, as well as Jael herself as his wife. This unflattering portrait prepares the reader for the fate that awaits Sisera’s mother as the story concludes.

While Jael certainly looks better compared to Themech, the conclusion of the narrative nevertheless undermines her status as the heroine in the story. Whereas Judges 4 shows the humiliation of Barak compared to Jael, and Judges 5 praises Jael for her act, *LAB* takes the victory from Jael and hands the final blow and final words of the story to Barak. Since the battle began, there has been no mention of Barak in the narrative. Nor has there been a clear sense of God’s role in the action. Now when Barak arrives back on the scene, there is also an acknowledgement of God’s hand in these events. To be sure, there is a recognition of Barak’s unsuccessful pursuit. He arrives at Jael’s tent “very disappointed” that he had not found Sisera. Jael reiterates this failure, but also assures him that she will hand over the enemy to him. Even more revealing, Jael calls him “you, blessed by God.” In this way, not only does she deliver the body of Sisera to Barak, she also hands over the blessing that in Judges 5 was given to her.

For his part, when Barak sees Sisera he responds by blessing, not Jael, but God for fulfilling his prophecy. In this way, the scene deflects attention from Barak’s failure to God’s success. And most telling of all in terms of the gender dynamics at work in *LAB*’s conclusion, Barak proceeds to cut off Sisera’s head and send it to his mother with the message, “Receive your son, who you hoped would come with spoils (31.9).” Thus, Barak acts as though he had been the one who slayed him after all. Indeed, by the end of the *LAB*’s rendition of the tradition, Barak not only usurps Jael’s victory and her blessing, he also takes on the heroic role of Judith, as he mutilates the body of Sisera and uses it for more public humiliation of the enemy.

### *Seductress and Heroine: The Rabbinic Perspective*

Before concluding, I briefly mention some additional ancient perspectives on Jael, that of the rabbis. In some ways, given the later dating of rabbinic literature, it would make sense to include them in the next chapter, but the rabbis focus on the sexual nature of the scene fits well as a conclusion to this

chapter. Of course the rabbis are commenting on the tradition, not offering an entirely new version of the Jael-Sisera tradition. Still, they illustrate the capacity of the story to make readers think about sex. In the rabbis' case, they appear to have thought quite a lot about sex between Jael and Sisera.<sup>33</sup> In an argument that appears several different times in the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbis claim that Sisera had sex with Jael seven times, based on the seven verbs that appear in Judges 5:27 (*b. Hor.* 10b, *b. Naz.* 23b; *b. Yeb.* 103a–b). This discussion comes in the context of an ethical debate about whether one can transgress for a good cause. Notably, although the rabbis call Sisera “evil” and say that *he* had sex with *her* seven times, the transgression to which they refer is Jael’s seduction of and intercourse with the general.

The rabbis are also preoccupied with the question of whether Jael enjoyed the sex she had with Sisera, concluding that she did not because pleasure does not come from evil. As one rabbi puts it, “The favors of the wicked are distasteful to the righteous” (*Naz.* 23b). One version of this rabbinic debate includes the question of whether sex with Sisera would have infused Jael with lust, as happened with Eve when she had sex with the serpent. Jael does seem to have escaped this fate in their eyes, although elsewhere Jael is said to have inspired lust with her voice (*Meg.* 15a). Needless to say, their discussion of the tradition is a very long way from concerns about the post-battle rape of women that contemporary interpreters such as Gunn and Fewell raise. Overall, the rabbis praise Jael for her valiant act and generously forgive her sexual transgression, especially since (as they also argue) she took no pleasure in it.

Not every rabbinic tradition agrees that Jael has sex with Sisera. In a midrash on Leviticus, Jael is commended along with Joseph and Paltiel (the husband of Micah) as one who successfully *resisted* sexual temptation (*Lev. Rab.* 23.10). Notably, the question of Jael’s foreign status does not appear to be a topic that interested the authors of rabbinic literature, although one much later tradition traces the genealogy of the Rabbi Akiva back to the union of Sisera and Jael. The point is that the beloved rabbi came not from noble Jewish lineage but from lowly origins.<sup>34</sup>

### *Problems Solved? Reflections on Ancient Reproductions of Jael and Sisera*

Taken together, these ancient perspectives show that although no sexual activity is ever mentioned in the story, it seems to be the most pressing “problem” that is on the minds of ancient authors when they retell the

story. In other words, it is not just contemporary biblical scholars that wonder (and worry) about sex in the scene. The provocative language of Judges 4–5 offered these ancient readers a problem to be solved—did Jael and Sisera have sex or not? Whether to show how Jael (or Judith) remained chaste in spite of the circumstances, or to fully embrace the idea that Sisera had sex with Jael (seven times!), ancient readers seem compelled to solve the problem raised by what the story does *not* say about this man and women alone in a tent.

The problem of Jael's foreign identity also plays a major role in shaping these later retellings. The book of Judith offers a solidly Israelite/Judean heroine and thereby leaves Jael's problematic tribal affiliation completely out of the picture. *LAB* offers suggestive evidence that Jael's foreign status made it difficult to fully embrace her as a heroine. Rather than offering an unambiguous sanction of her work as a pious heroine, it shifts the results of her efforts to the male figure, Barak, who is the one "blessed by God."

In contrast to the concern over sexuality and ethnic identity, these ancient authors seem less perturbed than later commentators by Jael's violation of hospitality. Perhaps the book of Judith comes the closest to addressing this potential problem by having Judith abstain from eating any food or drink from Holofernes.

These ancient retellings do pick up on the gender conflicts in the biblical traditions but treat them in different ways. In the book of Judith, the tradition of a female hero single-handedly slaying the enemy in the bedroom is told without the shaming of a male Israelite counterpart to Judith (similar to Barak in Judges). Only the enemy Holofernes is outdone by a woman. In this way, the story removes another potentially problematic aspect of Judges 4, where an Israelite general is portrayed as weak and dependent on a woman. Josephus's version of the tradition does include a belittlement of Barak, and in fact, makes his cowardice even more explicit than it is in Judges 4. But this image is then countered, both with a lack of any celebratory words for Jael, and by giving Barak the victory over Jabin and a forty-year command over the Israelites. Whatever humiliation there is for Barak, it is short-lived. In *LAB*, Barak suffers no humiliation. He says nothing about his unwillingness to go to battle without Deborah. And at the end, he inserts himself into the action, virtually taking responsibility for Sisera's death by sending his head to his mother. Meanwhile, whether intentionally or not, *LAB* also carries the ambiguity surrounding evaluation of Jael in Judges 4–5 into its retelling. On the one hand, it reinforces Jael's piety and chastity. Jael repeatedly prays to God and there is no hint

of actual sex, even though the roses strewn on the bed are meant to entice Sisera. On the other hand, the lack of any clear response from God in *LAB* is made even more noticeable by her prayers and appeals for a sign. Moreover, the fulfillment of these signs is undercut by the *LAB* narrator. The most obvious reason for this would be Jael's foreign identity. Even if she recognizes the God of Israel, she is a foreign woman and therefore only ambivalently and marginally endorsed.

Finally, despite the efforts of these ancient storytellers and commentators to answer questions about this tradition, later authors and artists continue to fill the gaps in the tradition in new and different ways. As we will see in the next chapter, once the story of Jael and Sisera moves from theological settings to secular ones, the perceived problems with both the tale and the proposed solutions begin to multiply.

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*From Allegory to Morality*

Jael and Sisera Go Public

SO FAR THE discussion of ancient retellings and rabbinical musings has concerned only ancient Israelite and Jewish perspectives. What did the earliest Christian writers have to say about Jael and Sisera? Not much. What little they did say suggests these writers were not preoccupied about hints of seduction or sex in the story. The allegorical method of biblical interpretation prominent in early Christian interpretation completely bypasses such concerns. The situation changes, however, with the emergence of a print culture, during which representations of Jael and Sisera (and, of course, many other biblical figures) find their way into more secular, moralizing publications. In this context, Jael and Sisera enter newly emerging gender debates. Of course, these two biblical figures are not unique in this way. They join the ranks of many other characters from the Bible, as well as from classical texts, who are deployed to make particular points about men and women. Nevertheless, as we will see, there are certain aspects of the story of Jael and Sisera that make their participation in these cultural debates less than straightforward.

In this chapter I begin with the allegorical representations of the church and move to the shifting fortunes of Jael and Sisera in the moralizing literature of the secular market. Here, for the first time, we encounter visual representations of Jael and Sisera. Being able to see Jael and Sisera in these visual productions of the tradition requires particular attention to the relationship between image and word. These didactic illustrations do not simply represent the “the biblical story.” On the surface, the images I discuss here are clearly meant to instruct—to shape their

viewers' understanding about the significance of Jael and Sisera in a particular direction. But images, like words, may carry a surplus of meaning making the ultimate lesson uncertain.

*Just as Mary Did: Allegorical Representations  
of Jael and Sisera in the Early  
and Medieval Church*

As mentioned, Jael did not capture the same attention that was given to other famous women of the Bible in patristic writings. But in the second century CE, Origen's *Homilies on Judges* provides a glimpse of what will become a prominent typological reading in the medieval period. Seeing Jael, Sisera, and Barak as "mystical types" Origen will describe their roles in God's plan of salvation. Notably, Jael's foreign identity becomes centrally important. Indeed, it is because she is a foreign woman that Jael represents the church, which comes from foreign nations, that is, the Gentiles. Origen also proposes that her name means "ascent," and one can only ascend to heaven by way of the church. On the other hand, Sisera means "vision of a horse," which points to his animal appetites. Sisera should be seen as the "king of vices." Although Jael gives him milk, which represents the teachings of the church, Sisera's drinking contributes to his demise because he did not receive the teachings in faith. "But that food that gives life and health to those indeed who have the intention of advancing toward the good, but to those to whom contrary things are pleasing, for whom there are in the heart extravagance, lust, greed and all the impieties a teaching of that kind offers death and destruction."<sup>1</sup>

One can probably see what's coming in this allegorical tale of Jael/church and Sisera/the devil. Origen explains: "Therefore [Jael] kills [Sisera] with a stake; that is she throws him to the ground with the sharp point and the wood of the cross."<sup>2</sup> Origen envisions a quite active slaying, calling to mind the warrior-type Jael rather than a seductive one. In an interesting turn, the theologian also argues that the wood pierces the jaws (not the temple) of Sisera, because it is the mouth which speaks carnal things and the philosophy that promotes pleasure in vices (namely Epicurean philosophy).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Barak, who missed out on the slaying of evil, represents the "first people," Israel, who were first in the pursuit of a law of righteousness, but did not find it. Jael is given the victory because the church is primary. Nevertheless, Barak is not completely excluded since, as Paul teaches, all of Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:25–26). That

is, despite the secondary position he attributes to Barak, Origen does his best to maintain the significance of Barak's "glorious action," assuring his readers that he will also share in the reward of victory, which "will be given both to the first and the last."

In the fourth century CE, Bishop Ambrose of Milan turns to Jael in his treatise on widows in the church. Reading in much the same way as Origen, he sees the foreign woman, Jael, as symbolizing the church rising from among the Gentiles, and her triumph is a victory over the powers opposed to the church. He is not as generous to the "sluggish" Barak, who again represents the Jewish people. As Ambrose puts it, "Unhappy, then, was that people which could not follow up by the virtue of faith the enemy, whom it had put to flight. And so by their fault salvation came to the Gentiles, by their sluggishness the victory was reserved for us" (8.47).<sup>4</sup>

Clearly these readings by Origen and Ambrose served the theological purposes of the church and in so doing, were only loosely connected to the events depicted in Judges 4–5. Although only a select few might have learned about Jael and Sisera through these two writers, by the medieval period this same sort of typological interpretation of Jael and Sisera was widely circulated. Illustrated manuscripts such as the bestseller *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* ("Mirror of Human Salvation," hereafter *SHS*), offered this same sort of typological reading of the Old Testament as a prefigurement for the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> Here Jael appears alongside two other manslayers, Judith and Tomyris, as a figure who typologically anticipates Mary's victory over the devil.<sup>6</sup> The following translation from a French version of *SHS* explains the link between Jael and Mary, found in the nail that pierced the head of Sisera.

This womanly victory was long ago prefigured by Jael, the wife of Heber. When she perceived and saw the wrongs which Sisera, a prince of the army of King Jabin, visited day after day upon the people and lineage of Israel in his desire to destroy, exile and do away with them, Jael began to reflect. She decided to make him suffer and take the severest possible revenge on him. Finding him in bed, asleep, she took a great nail, and suddenly without more ado, put it into position and placed it against his temples, then raised a heavy hammer, and, without further delay, hammered the nail into the head of Sisera, whom she murdered and killed, just as Mary, the mother of our Redeemer did with the nails with which her Son had been attached and crucified on the tree of the Cross on the hill of Calvary.<sup>7</sup>

Although the focus is on Jael as a type of Mary, the interpretation provides a motive for Jael that is missing in the biblical versions. She is shown to be a reflective woman, concerned about the welfare of the Israelites (though it is not clear that she is one of them). But what seems most crucial in this interpretation of Jael and Sisera is the nail and the killing. Indeed, Sisera is both “murdered and killed,” driving home the point, so to speak. This is also the emphasis in the accompanying illustrations of Jael and Sisera in the *SHS*. Given the many translations and copies of the text, there are many different illustrations of Jael and Sisera. All feature a sleeping or already-slain Sisera with a serene-looking Jael standing above him as she takes on her task “without more ado.” In one hand, she holds the nail, while her other arm is raised with mallet in hand. In the illustrations that show Sisera already dead, there is typically blood flowing from his wound. Jael’s violence becomes the focus of attention in these images because that is what connects her to Mary. They share “womanly victories” over evil by way of the nail.

This point is made even more strongly in the typological interpretation of Jael and Sisera found in the *Bible Moralisée*, a medieval picture bible illustrating the theological significance of particular biblical stories. The story and its interpretation are presented in four vertically stacked medallions. In the top medallion, Jael gives milk to Sisera and then slays him with the tent peg. Underneath, the allegorical illustration shows the church giving the milk of the gospel to many who are asleep in mortal sin.<sup>8</sup> In the third medallion, Jael shows Sisera’s murdered body to Barak and the Israelites. Underneath this literal illustration, the allegorical interpretation depicts Christians rejoicing that the devil has been slain by the nails from Christ’s crucifixion. In this fourth medallion, the slain body that was Sisera has morphed into a dark demonic figure lying before the spectators. Thus, in these medieval theological readings, Jael is a champion of the oppressed and slayer of evil. She is a type of Mary, the mother of Jesus, while Sisera becomes evil incarnate as the devil himself.

While this typological interpretation of Jael predominates during the medieval period, she also makes sporadic appearances in the courtly tradition of the female “worthies.” Like the nine male worthies, the female worthies provided examples of chivalric virtues. Traditionally, the nine worthies included three pagan, three Jewish, and three Christian exemplars.<sup>9</sup> In this context, Jael was sometimes featured as one of the “three good Jews.” For example, John Ferne’s prose work *The Blazon of Gentry* (1586) lists three Jewish women worthies including Jael, Deborah, and

Judith. Ferne obviously does not view Jael as a foreign woman. The work is written in the form of a dialogue between six interlocutors, one of which is the Ploughman. The Ploughman, who speaks for the landed gentry, objects to the choice of these female biblical exemplars. He suggests that more genteel and meek women should be used for examples rather than these “sturdy, manly” women.<sup>10</sup> While nothing is said about what exactly makes them “manly,” it seems likely that it is their association with violence, especially violence against men.

Jael also appears as one of the worthies in a print by German artist Hans Burghmair. In his rendering of the three women, Judith holds center place, flanked by Esther and Jael. In this case, all three women appear quite genteel and not particularly manly, unless the attributes they carry make them so. Queen Esther wears her crown, Judith carries her sword and the head of Holofernes, and Jael clasps her mallet and peg. The attributes help to identify the biblical women and also point to their particular achievements recounted in the biblical narrative. Nevertheless, by presenting the women together in this way, they are removed from their narrative contexts. In the case of Jael and Judith, this means they stand apart from their bloody scenes of violence.

In other words, when she is symbol of chivalric virtue, Jael’s violence is decorously tucked away from view. When she is an allegorical symbol of the church, however, Jael’s deadly deed is acceptably on display. The allegorical interpretations of Jael focus on her violent act because it recalls the nails of the crucifixion and the blood spilled in the defeat the devil. Meanwhile, the question of her sexual exploits is nowhere in view in either of these types of depiction. As we will soon see, this is not true of all representations of Jael from this period.

### *Moral Lessons with Jael and Sisera*

The allegorical readings of biblical figures like Jael and Sisera were designed to instruct the faithful about God’s salvific plan for the world. To that end, Jael could be read (oddly enough) as a symbol of the church. But with a growing middle class and a burgeoning market for books and prints, space opened for different ways of using biblical figures. Sidestepping the theological contentions of the Reformation, authors and artists turned to more secular instructional texts and prints. These writings were still didactic in nature, but now with an emphasis on humanistic virtues.

In this context, the medieval mirror again proved useful. If biblical figures mirrored God's plan for human salvation in theological writings of the church, in secular instructional literature and print illustrations, they mirrored human virtue, especially female virtue. This is not surprising given the humanist understanding of the effects of visual stimuli on the human condition, particularly on the female human condition.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, from this perspective, visual examples were important for women because their physical nature primed them for imitation. Because a woman was thought to be lower in temperature than man, she simply absorbed what she observed "without being able to 'combust it.'"<sup>12</sup> For this reason, she was more likely to be affected by what she observed and more inclined to imitation than a man would be.<sup>13</sup> This notion explains instructions such as those found in Juan Luis Vives's manual for Christian women. There Vives cautions pregnant women to avoid occasions "in which some ugly sight may come before their eyes" lest it have a negative effect on the child in their womb.<sup>14</sup> Given the dangers of ugly stimuli, it was critically important to hold before women positive models for them to see and imitate.

This understanding of women's impressionable minds accounts, at least in part, for the vast proliferation of instructional texts using biblical women as exempla, accompanied by illustrations.<sup>15</sup> That is, in both word and image, biblical women were held up to mirror female virtues. References to the hoped-for effect on female audiences who gazed into these "mirrors" abound, as do dedications of these works to particular young women. For example, the Dutch translator of Christine de Pizan's famous *Le livre de la cité des dames* (1404–1405) includes an epilogue stating, "It is a book full of honor, full of virtues and full of dignities, a mirror and example to all women" that the translator hopes will "edify or convert many women."<sup>16</sup> Another popular text, the *Book of the Knight of the Tower*, was written by the French nobleman Geoffrey IV de la Tour Landry for the instruction of his daughters in proper conduct. The work was translated twice into English, as well as into German (1495) and Dutch (1515). Vives's manual "The Education of Christian Women" (*De institutione feminae christianae*), was written for Catherine of Aragon for the instruction of her daughter and became one of the most frequently translated and printed treatises of the time.<sup>17</sup>

All of these popular texts used examples of women from the Bible, as well as classical traditions, to support their arguments for proper female conduct. Notably, in the works mentioned so far, Jael does *not* appear. Of course, there is no way to know why she was not chosen as an exemplar by

these authors, but it was not necessarily because of her violence. Consider, for example, Christine de Pizan, a court writer who is best known for her role in launching the *querelle des femmes*, a centuries-long debate about the nature of women.<sup>18</sup> In *Le livre de la cité des dames*, Pizan's famous defense of women against literary slander, she includes examples of women who kill—Judith is among her exemplars, as is Tomyris. She also includes a number of other biblical women such as Esther, Susanne, Sarah, Rebecca, and Ruth. But for some reason, Jael is overlooked. Similarly, both De la Tour Landry and Vives have no shortage of examples of biblical and classical women, but leave out Jael. Perhaps Vives offers a hint of what is at issue. In his section titled “On the Virtues of a Woman and the Examples She Should Imitate,” he notes that a woman “should be aware that the principal female virtue is chastity, and it is in itself the equal of all the others in moral worth. . . . (T)he inseparable companions of chastity are a sense of propriety and modest behavior” (116). Jael's violence might not exclude her from serving as example in this highly popular text, but worries about her chastity and propriety may well be the problem.

On the other hand, Jael does appear in another quite popular instructional text in the Netherlands, known as *Zielentroost*, which uses the typology of the Decalogue to focus on negative biblical exemplars.<sup>19</sup> When it comes to violators of the fifth commandment, “you shall not kill,” both Jael and Judith make the list.<sup>20</sup> In this case, it is not Jael's chastity that is the problem, but her facility with tent peg and mallet.

Although we can only speculate about the reasons for Jael's exclusion in the examples mentioned above, we can learn more from knowing that such omissions are not the whole story from this period. We already have seen that in the tradition of the women worthies, Jael is sometimes used as a positive model for virtuous female conduct. She is able also to make the cut for Hans Sachs's poem “Mirror of Honor Illumined through Twelve Old Testament Women” (*Der ehren-spiegel der zwölff durchleuchtigenn frawen dess Alten Testaments*) (1530).<sup>21</sup> True to his title, the German poet associates each of twelve biblical women with a particular virtue: Rebecca the obedient, Rachel the gracious, Leah the patient, and so on. In the case of Jael, Sachs identifies her as “die *redlich*,” a term that conveyed a range of meanings in sixteenth-century German, including valiant conduct in battle.<sup>22</sup> The verses on Jael conclude with the observation that “*redliche*” women should be honored because their “*redligkeyt erhelt leut und land*” (bravery saves people and country).<sup>23</sup> In this way, Sachs celebrates Jael much like Judges 5 does, as a woman who was a savior to the people of Israel.

But we should not too readily celebrate Jael along with Sachs, given Erhard Schön's accompanying illustration of the poem which introduces ambiguity to the positive portrayal of brave Jael.

Schön's woodcut is done across two large panels, clearly designed for a wall hanging (Figure 4.1).<sup>24</sup> Much like Burghmair's illustration of the women worthies, the biblical women in Schön's woodcut are celebrated as the personified virtue itself, rather than actual women engaged in virtuous conduct. In the case of Jael, the poem provides a brief review of Jael's actions while Schön's illustration narrows the focus to the figure of Jael with her attributes, the mallet and the tent peg. Still, his depiction of Jael communicates more than the fact of her weapons of choice. Schön's Jael is not only separated from her



FIGURE 4.1 Erhard Schön's woodcut series of The Twelve Exemplary Women of the Old Testament. *The Illustrated Bartsch*. Vol. 13. 120.

story, she also stands physically apart from the rest of the women. She is distanced even more from the other figures by way of her exotic and seductive dress that suggests a bare midriff, and exposed arms and knees. Her tunic is embroidered with a pattern that circles her breasts suggestively around the hint of a nipple. Apart from Eve, who appears to be clothed in animal skins, all of the other women in the woodcut are fully dressed in long full gowns and head covers. By comparison, Jael's clothing evokes an association with the East, perhaps suggesting that her excessive act of violence, courageous though it was, is linked to her foreignness. Although she stands with the other biblical women, and although the poem praises her valor as a virtue to be imitated, the visual image highlights her difference. This is not the last time we will see Jael clothed in seductive dress. Other illustrations will also combine ambivalent visual cues alongside positive acclaim of her virtue.

In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the tradition of presenting Old Testament women as exemplars of virtue for women continues, with the images growing into an increasingly monumental style. Jael, like other celebrated biblical women, begins to tower over landscapes. In contrast, Sisera appears only as a diminished fallen figure in the background. Sometimes Jael is poised over him, reminding viewers of her act, and sometimes he lies alone in her tent, already dead.<sup>25</sup> Many of these images are accompanied by Latin inscriptions that link the image to the biblical narrative through a brief summary of events, or simply highlight her courageous act and resulting renown.

There are a number of such monumental figures of Jael from this period, enough to expect that she would indeed be remembered for her great courage. But the effect of these images was tempered by another representation of Jael that portrayed her murder of Sisera not as a brave act but as a deceptive, treacherous one. This alternative portrayal of Jael will be examined in the next section, but as with Burgmair's woodcut, one can see hints of a negative view of Jael even in these heroic depictions.

Consider, for example, the inscription that surrounds a print by Nicolaas Braeu after a drawing by Hendrick Goltzius (ca. 1597) shown in Figure 4.2. A rather literal translation of the Latin reads, "When the sad fight was joined under an inauspicious omen, the treacherous Jael received Sisera, who was fleeing from the slaughter of his own men, with a nail having been driven through his temples."<sup>26</sup> Thus, while the artist has drawn a figure of the celebrated Jael, the inscription seems far more sympathetic to Sisera's perspective. Only from the defeated general's view could the battle



**FIGURE 4.2** Nicolaas Braeu after a drawing by Hendrick Goltzius, c. 1586—in or after c. 1600. *The Illustrated Bartsch* 115, part 1. Image courtesy of Rijks Museum: <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.collect.87188>.

be seen as sad and unlucky. Only for Sisera would Jael be treacherous rather than courageous. In the drawing, Jael's expression also contributes to the impression of deceitfulness. Her eyes look teasingly into the eyes of the viewer with lips slightly upturned, as though she knows something that we do not. Her face suggests slyness rather than noble heroism. Once again an ambivalence stirred by Jael's story resists a clear-cut rendering of her character.

The same is true of another illustration of the celebrated Jael. Philip Galle's print after a drawing by Maarten de Vos is part of a series depicting heroes and heroines of the Old Testament. The print overtly displays the seductive nature of Jael, showing her in provocative dress, looking demurely down at her ever-present tent peg (Figure 4.3). Although she is seated with her legs gracefully bent under her, her head, the direction of her gaze, and her left hand all parallel the murderous scene in the background depicting the moment that she slays Sisera. And is that Sisera's hat lying perched next to her, at the tip of the tent peg? In these ways, the celebrated Jael is visually linked in a more explicit way with her act of violence. The inscription under her figure refers to her daring action for which her name will flourish, but given this image, perhaps a more fitting translation is "for which her name will be notorious."<sup>27</sup>

Overall, if these monumental images were intended as mirrors of female virtue, and as models for women to imitate, the message seems mixed. In a culture that stressed the chastity of women above all, depicting Jael in coy or provocative poses introduced an ambivalent aspect of her character. Even in prints that were intended to celebrate Jael, we find a more or less subtle undercutting of this celebration.

### *Jael and Sisera and the Power of Women*

Meanwhile, at the same time that Jael was featured in various series celebrating women, or put on pedestals for her courage, she also appeared in a number of print series depicting the popular medieval *topos* known as the *Weibermacht*, or "Power of Women." This theme warned against the power of deceptive women over even the most famous of men, and the foolishness of men who succumbed to love or desire for a woman. The originating and most popular example of this theme was the legend of Aristotle and Phyllis, followed closely by the story of Virgil in a basket. Both are stories of famously wise men being tricked and humiliated by women. According to legend, Aristotle was seduced by Alexander's wife (or mistress, depending on the version), who convinced him to put on a bridle so she could ride him like an animal. From this legend, images of the "mounted Aristotle" proliferated. A similar story circulated about the humiliation of Virgil, who was promised by the Roman emperor's daughter that she would lift him in a basket to her bedroom. Instead, she left him dangling outside her wall, helpless and humiliated for all of Rome to see.



FIGURE 4.3 Maarten de Vos: Women of the Old Testament, Philip Galle © Trustees of the British Museum.

The Power of Women *topos* first came to the visual arts in mostly decorative pieces around the beginning of the fourteenth century focusing especially on these legends of Aristotle and Virgil.<sup>28</sup> About two hundred years later, Lucas van Leyden was among the first to bring the *topos* to the graphic arts in several different print series.<sup>29</sup> His first Power of Women series featured the two secular figures of Aristotle and Virgil along with four examples of biblical women deemed wily in their ways—Eve, Delilah, the pagan wives of Solomon, and Salome.<sup>30</sup> More relevant here is van Leyden's second series, known as his Small Power of Women. In this series, van Leyden replaced his secular examples with representations of Jael and Jezebel. His depiction of the Jael and Sisera story unfolds the story in different scenes (Figure 4.4). In the background, Jael invites Sisera into her home, offering him milk. In the foreground, the viewer witnesses front and center the violence about to take place. Sisera appears deep in sleep. Though he still holds his spear, his sword remains sheathed at his side and his crossed feet add an air of vulnerability to his pose. In the middle ground, Jael shows the fallen Sisera to Barak and other onlookers. Jael's pointing finger and the spear in Barak's hand converge on the deadly scene before the viewer. Especially the male viewer is meant to learn, along with the men in the doorway, what women are capable of doing to men.

Van Leyden's Small Power of Women series was popular enough to demand another run of the series. In the second run of the series, the prints were enclosed by an ornately drawn frame, topped with two fanged vipers looking down on the scene. If these venomous creatures were not suggestive enough, the framed print was also accompanied with Dutch and Latin inscriptions that made clear the intended lesson. The inscription included a brief account of the story and closed with a quote from Sirach 25:19: "All evil is small compared to the evil of a woman."

Whereas the "mirrors" of virtuous women were directed at female audiences, these Power of Women series were intended for a male audience. For example, the subtitle of *Dat Bedroch der Vrouwen* (The Deceit of Women), published in Antwerp around 1530, read "for the erudition and an example to all men, young and old, that they might know how deceitful and surly and how full of guile all woman are."<sup>31</sup> Notably, the title page for this work displayed a woodcut of Jael murdering Sisera.

Unlike the images of the virtuous Jael, where Sisera is either shown as a small, defeated figure in the background or is absent altogether, when Jael is used for the Power of Women *topos*, Sisera becomes a central feature of the illustration. For the lesson to be successfully conveyed,



**Hylara ende Jabel.**  
**J**abel die vrouwe ghinch Hylare te ghemoece en sprac tot hē here  
tochtij mij sond vrees en na dat zij hē geboegē en met eenen deede  
gedect hadde so sloech zij enen naghel met enē hamere doer zij hoofte  
en naghelde hē aē die aerde waer doer dat Hylara oē langen slaep  
slapēde werdt totter doot toe **A**lle quaetheit is sleyme in der ghe  
lijchenisse van der quaetheit van eender vrouwen. *Eccl. 2 5. ca.*

FIGURE 4.4 Lucas van Leyden, From *Small Power of Women*, ca. 1517. Rogers Fund, 1922, Metropolitan Museum of Art ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)). Accession Number: 22.10.6.

the prominent presence of the vanquished man is as important as showing the evil woman at work. For this reason, depictions of Jael and Sisera in the *Power of Women* print series invariably depict Jael in the act of murder with the body of Sisera on display in the foreground. One particularly striking example of this is a print by Jan Saenredam, after a drawing attributed to Lucas van Leyden (Figure 4.5). As in the van Leyden print discussed above, the artist includes multiple scenes to narrate the event. In the background, Sisera drinks from a bowl that Jael has filled with her pitcher. His hunched figure appears small and obsequious before Jael, who stands in the doorway. In the foreground, Sisera's dead body is stretched before the viewer. With his spiked club and helmet strewn uselessly in front of him, he lies exposed to the waist, with head dropped back and knees bent together. This vulnerable presentation of the male body evocatively recalls the crucified Christ of the *Pietà*. But needless to say, as one in a series illustrating the *Power of Women topos*, this drawing is not suggesting that Jael is a prefiguration of Mary!<sup>32</sup>

While it is probably going too far to see Sisera as a true Christ figure in Saenredam's print, this compelling representation of Sisera as victim does point to an alternative reading of his character. Whereas in early typological illustrations, Sisera was a ruthless enemy commander, and allegorically, the devil himself, in this new context he ranks alongside tragically victimized men like Solomon, Samson, Virgil, and Aristotle. In other words, when Jael becomes a treacherous and evil woman, Sisera is redeemed. He stands in as (or rather lies prostrate as) a tragic figure of a great man, who in spite of his strength and status was fatally tricked by a cunning woman. While the images of the mounted Aristotle and Virgil in a basket might evoke laughter at the foolishness of these great men, the dead body of Sisera would likely evoke a more sober response.

One fascinating aspect about such images of the dangerous Jael and the victimized Sisera is that they were produced at the same time that the virtuous Jael was providing a mirror for women. One representation of the Jael-Sisera tradition did not supplant the other. In fact, these varying uses of their figures could be produced by the same artist. Figures 4.6 and 4.7 show two prints made after drawings by Maarten van Heemskerck. One is a premier example of the monumental Jael standing victorious before a radiant sun (Figure 4.6). With thumb and two fingers, she lightly holds aloft a mallet that is bigger than her head. In the other hand, she clasps an especially imposing tent peg, while the tent cords draw the eye toward



**FIGURE 4.5** Jael en Sisera, printmaker Jan Saenredam after a drawing by Lucas van Leyden. *The Illustrated Bartsch*, Vol. 4. 107. <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.169468>.

more of these pegs seemingly at her disposal should she need them. This Jael is fully dressed, but only thinly so. We see through her gown to her midriff while she lifts her gown to expose her muscular legs. Sisera, as expected, appears only in the background. With his head down and face hidden, he is a diminished and defeated foe. Rather than the more typical subtle smile, Jael's furrowed brow perhaps represents her righteous anger



**FIGURE 4.6** Jael printmaker Philips Galle After a drawing by Maarten van Heemskerck, c. 1560—c. 1570. Digital Image Courtesy of Rijks Museum. <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.322875>.

against her enemies. Overall, the drawing clearly belongs to the positive renditions of Jael from this period.

It is just as clear that another drawing of Jael and Sisera by van Heemskerck should be sorted into the group of negative assessments of Jael. This second depiction is part of a Power of Women series printed by Dirck Coornhert in 1551 (Figure 4.7). Along with Jael, the series includes drawings of Eve, Lot's daughters, Delilah, Judith, and Solomon's foreign wives. Once again, in this context Sisera assumes a position to the front and center, his body taking up more than half of the frame. Likewise, rather than posing in a stately way for the audience, Jael is in active full swing, right arm extended just before the deadly blow. She stands, using the full force of her body in the effort. And what a body! Van Heemskerck's fascination with human musculature can be seen in both of these drawings of Jael.<sup>33</sup> But in this second drawing, the muscular physique unsettles the depiction of Jael. Her long hair and breasts indicate femaleness but what about the uplifted hand and arm, and the chiseled leg? Is this a masculine



**FIGURE 4.7** Dirck Volckertz Coornhert, Jael slaying Sisera. Etching, engraving (1522–1590). After a drawing by Maarten Heemskerck. *The Power of Women*, 1551. Bequeathed by the Rev. R. E. Kerrich 1872. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK/Art Resource, New York.

woman? A feminized man? Or something else altogether? Her Roman style armor parallels Sisera's, indicating her warrior status. Both also wear Medusas on their armor, the very symbol of ambiguous and frightening female power. Notably, while Sisera slumbers, the Medusa on his breastplate is wide awake and looking up in fright. Meanwhile, the Medusa on Jael's headpiece joins Jael in looking grimly down at her victim.

At one level, the drawing suggests that Jael's threat is located in her militant qualities. In this way, it steers the interpretation of Jael away from one that places power merely in her female seductive qualities. At a deeper level, what van Heemskerck's drawing suggests is that the power of Jael is not only (or primarily) located in her status as a warrior woman, but in her disruption of binary gender categories. Indeed, this particular image of Jael calls to mind what Judith Halberstam identifies as a cardinal rule of gender, namely that "one must be readable at a glance."<sup>34</sup> Van Heemskerck's Jael violates this rule; she is not readable at a glance. In this way, van Heemskerck unwittingly illustrates the very way that some much later readers will interpret Jael as a strike against patriarchy. For instance, when one twenty-first century reader, Robyn Fleming, observes that Jael is "almost the personification of gender blur, that force most threatening to the hierarchical structure of patriarchy," she is not looking at van Heemskerck's drawing, but she could be.<sup>35</sup> We will return to the queering of Jael later in the book, but it is worth noting that Jael's capacity to challenge gender categories is illustrated already in the Renaissance, even if threats to patriarchal power structures are not yet theorized.

*"This courage hath something of barbarous in it"*

The last example of teaching with Jael and Sisera through image and word comes from another widely popular book that circulated roughly a century later than the writings and illustrations discussed above. In 1640, the monumental tradition of women exemplars continued, as did the *querelles des femmes*, with Pierre Le Moynes's successful publication of the *Gallerie des Femmes Fortes*. The book moved quickly through several French editions and was translated into English in 1652 as *The Gallery of Heroick Women*. As the title indicates, Le Moynes structures his work around the popular seventeenth-century conceit of book as gallery. Now, rather than gazing into a mirror to see virtues reflected back to them, women become spectators in a gallery viewing a collection of powerful women. But the instructional intent remains the same, as seen in the preface to the English edition. Here the translator, the Marquesse of Winchester, addresses his imagined female audience as they eagerly approach the gallery: "To the Ladies of this Nation. Me thinks I see your curious Eyes advancing apace to behold this Noveltie, this fair Gallery of Heroick Women, first erected in France to the Honour and instruction of your Sex, and now translated to English upon the same Account."<sup>36</sup>

Le Moyne gathers twenty *femmes fortes* for his audience's edification—five each of Jews, barbarians, Romans, and Christians. Each woman is presented in a full-length illustration accompanied followed by a prose commentary, a sonnet, an “elogie” (that is, a brief biography with words of praise), a moral example, a moral question, and a contemporary example.<sup>37</sup> The prose commentary offers, in effect, a second painting. “Je fait une Peinture de chacune,” Le Moyne tells us (“I make a painting of each one”).<sup>38</sup> Derval Conroy argues that these “verbal paintings” should be understood in terms of the rhetorical practice of *ekphrasis*, the point of which is to stir the emotions of the reader through vivid descriptions of a scene.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Le Moyne implies that his “peintures” bring the reader more deeply into the scene by capturing the “interior and secret part,” of his subjects. He verbally draws the “pictures and colors of the soul” along with the “features and motion of the heart.”<sup>40</sup> Conroy sees the overall goal of this verbal painting as steering the readers toward an appropriate reception of the violent women on exhibit, paradoxically describing the scenes of violence as evidence of each woman's ever present seamliness (*bienséance*). This may well be true, but in the case of Jael, ambiguity surfaces yet again, both in Le Moyne's verbal painting and in the background drawing that he describes.

Le Moyne includes Jael in his selection of five “Gallant Jews,” along with Deborah, Judith, Salomone, and Mariamne. Thus, he is unconcerned about questions of her ethnic identity. The illustration is fairly typical of other monumental presentations of Jael (Figure 4.8). She stands in profile, looking into the distance with a slight up-curve of her lips. Her garments billow around her in flowing folds. Holding a tent peg aloft in one hand and lifting a mallet up in the other, Jael strides forward as if primed to hammer another head. Or, as Le Moyne suggests, she “seems willing to give the like blow even to the Ghost of the Canaanite King, whom her imagination has brought captive to her” (20). Le Moyne also notes that Jael is filled with joy at her success. Her eyes have a new luster; her face appears graceful and confident. So much for the heroic Jael. The moralist's “verbal painting” actually devotes more space to Sisera, who lies in the background, than it does to Jael.

In fact, Le Moyne says nothing at all about Jael's appearance in the dynamic background scene, mostly likely because he wants to move quickly to the bloody and dying general. But, it is worth noting that in contrast to the fully clothed monumental Jael, this smaller figure in the



**FIGURE 4.8** Jael, from Pierre Le Moynes, *Galier des Femmes Fortes*. Engraved by Abraham Bosse after Claude Vignon, 1647. From Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989. p. 169.

back wears armor similar to that worn by the “barbarian” *femme forte* who appears later, the Palmyrian Queen Zenobia. The skirt is cut short, exposing her legs. Deborah, who stands next to her, is also dressed as a warrior, wearing a helmet and armor. But in her case, she also wears a long skirt that covers her legs. Why the difference? Perhaps Jael’s more manly armor hints also at her barbarous nature, even if she is counted among the Jews. A more explicit comment about Jael’s appearance comes by way of Sisera. Apparently, she is beautiful even in her armor. While

Jael gestures toward the struggling Sisera on the ground before her, Le Moyne's description focuses on the man's perspective.

[Sisera's] eyes, which to him had been ill Advisers and unfaithful guards, and had suffered themselves to be surprised by beauty and sleep, bewail the moral error they committed and seem willing to cast forth with their blood and tears the pleasing poyson which they have taken in from the looks of Jahel. (20)

Barak is present in the scene as well, but appears to be hiding behind Jael. He peers low around her waist at Sisera so that only his helmeted head and shoulder show beneath her outstretched hand. Meanwhile, Deborah stands on Jael's other side, with hands raised up as if in alarm at the sight of the body. As for Sisera, he lies facing the ground, with palms pressing against the ground and elbows bent as if trying to hold himself up. His head is turned to the side and a flow of blood moves toward a very large mallet on the ground in front of him. The scene evokes many of the ambiguous elements of the Jael-Sisera tradition that troubles interpreters—Jael's eroticism, the gruesome nature of the killing, and perhaps also Barak's cowardice.

What more does Le Moyne have to say about the background scene? As mentioned, he is primarily concerned with verbally painting a picture of Sisera's bloody suffering and death. It is more Sisera's heart and soul that fascinates him than Jael's. He vividly describes to his audience how Sisera

wrastleth in vain against the Earth. At the same time he pushes with his arms as if it were to force her to give back. . . His heart strives within to succor the wounded part, and not being able to himself assist it with all the remainder of his force he conveyes thither Anger, Rage and Despair. (20)

As Le Moyne continues, he adds far more blood to the scene than is evident from the drawing. In addition to his bleeding eyes, we hear that Sisera's face is swollen with blood and red blood flows from his wound. He wants to cry out blasphemies against heaven and Jael, but "his voice is stifled with the press of his passions, and dies in his throat; There issueth forth of it nothing but froth, which is the blood of his inflamed rage" (21).

For their part, Deborah and Barak are silent before the bloody spectacle. Le Moyne sees them looking on Sisera with a "kind of Religious horror" (21).

They stand open mouthed, their out stretched hands saying what their tongues cannot express. In a quite startling turn, Le Moyne heightens the sense of spectacle with his claim that “if all the people should destroyed, If the ark it self were a captive, and if the Cherubim which guard it were prisoners there could not appear more Trouble in the mind of Barac, nor more motion on the face of Deborah” (21). Religious horror indeed! But why does Le Moyne portray their reaction as shocked horror? Perhaps because he anticipates his audience’s similar reaction to Jael’s violent act (as he will soon admit). For now, Le Moyne notes that after this moment of extreme distress, Barack and Deborah are quickly filled with joy.

Given what follows in Le Moyne’s moral instructions, one might ask why he chooses to portray such a bloody affair. He expresses his own concern about his female audience’s reaction. “I fear that if I present the Example of Jahel to gallant women, they will reject my proposition and abhor the blood and cruelty of this Precedent” (23). Is it simply a case of his own morbidity? Or is he catering to the tastes of his audience after all? Along this line, Jean DeJean suggests that it was precisely Le Moyne’s graphic depiction of female violence that made his work so successful.<sup>41</sup>

Of course, Le Moyne finds a way to tame the tradition for his moralizing purposes, by returning to the allegorical tendencies with which we began this chapter. But rather than fighting evil per se, women must do battle against the passions. In such a struggle, women need not worry about literally imitating Jael because there aren’t any more Canaanites or Siseras. They will not violate the laws of hospitality or “exasperate the mildness of their sex” by looking to Jael for inspiration. Moreover, to stay neutral when battling these passions would amount to treason and apostasy. If a woman should (in a moment of weakness?) give safe refuge to any “commanding and tragical Passions,” she is duty bound to betray it by “planting a nail of the cross in its head” (23). Likewise women must beware of an inclination to hide “Sisera” in their closet. “Above all if there is any woman who hath entertained Sisera in her Closet . . . who hath opened her heart and promised security onto some predominant Passion” or “afforded a place of retreat to some Sovereign Passion, to some Capital vice,” she is bound in betray it. She should be a Jael to this “Sisera” and “lull it to sleep with the blood of the Lamb, and plant a Nail of the Cross in the Head of it” (23).

Given these instructions, Le Moyne still must take on a moral question about Jael directly, namely “whether there was infidelity in the act of Jael?” (24). Of Jael’s violence, he admits that “there is deceit in this address; and this courage hath something barbarous in it” (24). But, he encourages his

readers to look past superficial appearances, and recall that the Holy Spirit sanctioned her deed. As for the potential treaty that her husband Heber had made, it was likely of the type made by people on the frontier who repel fire and sword with money. It was like an innocent charm against tyrants and oppressors, not something to which he was duty bound. In sum, women should not be concerned about Jael's treachery or treaty-breaking. The point is to rid themselves of any Siseras in their closets!

Le Moyne thus offers his readers quite a package with his use of the Jael-Sisera tradition. One is left wondering what and who interests him most. The bloody spectacle? The suffering man whose eyes deceived him? The gentle ladies whose imitation of Jael turns out to mean they should be on their best, seemly behavior? In a way, Le Moyne's verbal and visual gallery effectively brings together the Sisera of the Power of Women images (intended for men) with the monumental Jael (meant for women). His description of the still-dying Sisera includes horrific shock if not sympathy at his bloody demise, while the image of the courageous Jael, accompanied by moral instruction, makes the tradition safe and useful for women's viewing pleasure. In this way, Le Moyne's new cultural performance of the tradition appears to offer something for all tastes, and in the end, perhaps that is the point. It was, after all, a bestseller.

### *Gender Lessons with Jael and Sisera*

As depictions of Jael and Sisera moved from the allegorical uses of the medieval period to more secular productions of the Renaissance, assessments of the characters became more fluid. At a purely economic level, there was a market for reading Jael as both heroine and seductress. Likewise, Sisera could be a vanquished enemy, or foolishly (or pitifully) a duped man, depending on the intended audience. It is likely that the images of virtuous Old Testament women were produced primarily with elite and middle-class women in mind, sometimes dedicated to particular ruling women. Meanwhile, the long-established medieval tradition that warned men about the dangers of powerful women flourished throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Because Judges 4 and 5 depict Jael as both praiseworthy and deadly, it is not surprising to find her represented in both ways in these new cultural performances of the story. But it is interesting to see the way these traits split into different types of depictions. When Jael is virtuous, her deadly violence recedes into the background, recalled only in the distant form of the

fallen Sisera, or when he is absent altogether, only by her mallet and peg. As we have seen, rather than the killing itself, the focus of these works is on the stately Jael, standing tall after the success of her effort. On the other hand, when Jael serves as a warning to men, the man, Sisera, becomes a central focus in the image. Men are to gaze on his fallen body as they consider what might befall them should they fall prey to a woman such as Jael. That certain artists could show her in both modes suggests that they were not overly concerned with the single “right” reading of Jael-Sisera as much as useful and profitable readings of the story vis-à-vis their own moral universe and different markets for graphic art.

But as we have seen, these differing ways of depicting Jael are not always as distinct as we might expect. Aspects of the seductive and dangerous Jael spill into the heroic Jael intended as an exemplar, whether through ambiguous facial expressions, suggestive clothing, or in some cases, inscriptions that hint at notions treachery rather than heroism. In the other direction, images intended to warn men against women necessarily displayed the vulnerability and weakness of men, while showing the potential for women’s power. In some cases, depictions of Jael undercut the very gender binary on which the whole patriarchal culture was built. In other cases, specifically Le Moyne’s “gallery,” The bloody effects of Jael’s violence is gruesomely exhibited, only to have her murderous act undercut and tamed for everyday use. The possibility for the gender-blurring Jael to function as a positive model of resistance against oppressive patriarchal structures must wait for several more centuries to emerge in force. Nevertheless, the seeds of this potential may already be evident in the “Power of Women” images from the Renaissance.

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*Painting Jael and Sisera  
in the Renaissance*

*But you may observe that artists in all ages have sought for higher types of models in painting women who have been violent or criminal, than have sufficed for them in their portraitures of gentleness and virtue. Look at all the Judiths, and the Lucretias, and the Charlotte Cordays; how much finer the women are than the Madonnas and the Saint Cecilians.*

CONWAY DALRYMPLE<sup>1</sup>

IN ANTHONY TROLLOPE'S nineteenth-century novel *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, a poor young artist, Conway Dalrymple, successfully convinces Clara Van Siever to sit as Jael for his painting of the biblical scene. Given assurance that she will be counted as a "higher type" of model for posing as a violent woman, she puts aside her initial reluctance. Once Clara assents, the next issue to be settled is her costume. Mr. Dalrymple, Clara, and her companion Mrs. Broughton all agree that she should be dressed as a "Jewess" but are unclear about what that might mean. For instance, should she wear jewels or not? Mrs. Broughton is convinced that Clara should, having discovered from the Bible that Heber had family connections with Moses, and so likely had spoils from the Egyptians. With each donning of a particular costume, Clara is required to strike a pose. She must kneel down, take hammer in hand, and hold a pointed stick against the forehead of a dummy Sisera. Finally, the threesome decide on a white gown and no jewels. However, Clara does sport a colorful Roman silk scarf wound turban-style on her head and then draped over her shoulder. Throughout this whole process, only Clara raises questions about verisimilitude. Would Jael be in possession of such a Roman silk scarf, she wonders? (Whereupon she is assured that such things were definitely to

be found among the Egyptians.) When Clara protests that leaning as hard onto the nail as the artist wants her to “would have woken Sisera before she had struck a blow,” Dalrymple succinctly dismisses her objection. “Never mind that. Let us try it.”<sup>2</sup>

Although this chapter concerns Renaissance and Baroque art (mostly paintings), I begin with this scene from Trollope’s Victorian novel to illustrate the complexities of working with paintings as interpretations of biblical traditions. While there are multiple reasons that Conway Dalrymple wants to paint the Jael and Sisera scene, offering his carefully studied interpretation of the biblical text is not one of them.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the artist is far more intent on positioning his model in the by now well-established pose for his rendition of the scene. When the Bible is consulted, it is only for the purposes of determining Jael’s costume, and then in a quite uninformed way. Of course, I am not suggesting that the dynamics behind the Renaissance paintings are the same as this dryly humorous scene narrated by Trollope. After all, Trollope is writing his novel more than two hundred years later than the paintings I discuss in this chapter. Nevertheless, I suggest the scene offers a helpful corrective to a tendency in recent reception historical studies of the Bible to overemphasize an artist’s exegetical interests. Given the growing popularity of studying art as part of reception historical work, it is worth pausing to distinguish my approach from some other recent interpretive trends.

### *Artist as Exegete?*

In the burgeoning area of biblical reception history, Paolo Berdini’s concept of “visual exegesis” has been particularly influential.<sup>4</sup> Berdini makes a case for viewing religious artwork such as the work of Jacopo Bassano as a visualization of a *reading* of the text, rather than a depiction of a biblical scene. In this way, the painter is viewed as an exegete rather than a mere illustrator. Several scholars working at the intersection of biblical studies and art history have taken up this idea in their own work. Martin O’Kane, for example, aims to show how engagement with a visual representation of biblical scenes enriches one’s understanding of the biblical text.<sup>5</sup> Viewing several paintings of the same biblical scene becomes akin to comparing biblical commentaries.<sup>6</sup> In a similar way, Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu suggest that visual representations have the potential to reveal “textual tensions or problems or possibilities or depths not immediately apparent to readers.”<sup>7</sup> Overall, the general trend in biblical reception studies is to

imagine the artist as a careful reader and interpreter of the Bible, and to see the visual representation as an opportunity for an enhanced interpretation of the biblical text.<sup>8</sup> Another similar approach to art and biblical interpretation shares affinity with the formal approach to literature adopted by New Critics in the mid-twentieth century. The artist as exegete is not the focus as much as the visual image itself. In her study of minor characters in the book of Judith, for example, Andrea Shaeffer claims to be “less interested in the social and cultural influences on the artists than in what the art can reveal about the biblical text.” For her, “the image becomes an interpretive tool in the business of biblical criticism.”<sup>9</sup>

Using visual art as a tool for biblical interpretation has produced important and creative reconsiderations of biblical narratives, including the story of Jael and Sisera.<sup>10</sup> And it is certainly possible that some artists did read the Bible in order to produce visual interpretations of biblical narratives. Nevertheless, there are reasons to doubt that this was typically the case. Indeed, if we understand the artist as “reader” in a literal way, we soon run into difficulties. For example, it is questionable whether one artist I discuss below, Artemisia Gentileschi, could read or write. Court reports from her famous rape trial record her claim, “Io non so scrivere et poco leggere” (“I don’t write and only read a little”).<sup>11</sup> Art historian Ward Bissell points out that this level of illiteracy would not be unexpected for tradespeople, and especially not for women.<sup>12</sup> Although Artemisia may have achieved a certain level of literacy later in life, it is still hard to imagine her carefully perusing the *written* text to produce her own *reading* of the traditions. Far more likely is that Artemisia, like other studio artists, was familiar with other artistic renderings of the Jael and Sisera scene. It is true that basic instructions for Renaissance artists included the admonition that they were to know their “histories.”<sup>13</sup> But whether this knowledge extended beyond a basic cultural familiarity with the biblical narrative or classical myth they were painting is uncertain. Ann Sutherland Harris points out that in seventeenth-century Italy only about a third of the men were literate, and barely twelve percent of the women. Moreover, those who trained for a craft were more likely to learn mathematics and accounting than to gain literacy in Latin.<sup>14</sup> In short, as Mieke Bal also argues about this period, “we have no evidence that . . . any painter, actually studied texts before setting out to depict a story.”<sup>15</sup>

What this means in terms of interpreting paintings of biblical scenes, like paintings of Jael and Sisera, is that we should leave aside assumptions that careful study of the biblical text is the basis for the painting. To borrow

Bal's turn of phrase, this biblical "pre-text" may only be a pretext for the painting.<sup>16</sup> The real purpose, rather than exegeting the text, may be to demonstrate the skillful execution of a popular artistic style. Moreover, past artistic renditions of the scene would likely play a major factor in the composition of a painting, along with a patron's preferences about what the painting is intended to convey. Beyond all that, as we saw in the last chapter, an artist may be more motivated to express a particular cultural idea by means of the tradition than to carefully read and interpret the biblical text.

Nevertheless, as Bal also makes clear, "even if few people actually read the texts," both text (or pre-text, as she calls it) and image are "participating to a certain extent, in a common 'textual community,' " a community that would have recognized the authority of a given set of texts whether or not its individual members had ever read them.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this is just to state the obvious, but it means that paintings of biblical traditions, say for example, Jael killing Sisera, draw on a cultural assumption of the story's canonical authority while not necessarily paying close attention to the written text itself.

So if we do not assume that these visual representations of canonical traditions are based on a careful reading of the biblical text, but we *do* assume the text's canonical authority, how should we go about interpreting the paintings? Bal suggests a way forward that encourages a close reading of the painting apart from, or better, in juxtaposition with, its representation of a particular canonical tradition. That is, she contends that while it is important to recognize the painting's pre-text, indicated by certain familiar figures and attributes in the painting (its iconography), this is just a first step to interpreting the visual image.

Put simply, an iconographic approach proposes that we *read* art, make sense out of what the image is *not* rather than *viewing* it. Reading iconographically is interpreting visual representation by placing its elements in a tradition that gives them a meaning other than their "immediate" visual appearance suggests. A vase of flowers is not merely a vase of flowers; the little insect on the flowers, not merely insects. Instead, they become signs [of decay].<sup>18</sup>

Bal encourages a process of interpretation that puts in conversation this type of iconographical reading with the "visual narrative" offered by the work. She suggests that visual representations tell alternative stories that should be viewed alongside what is read through the "pre-text"

for the painting. In fact, from Bal's perspective, using *only* an iconographic approach (for example, identifying what textual source the painting represents) is a way of warding off threatening interpretations by fitting a visual image into "reassuring tradition."<sup>19</sup> An iconographic reading tends to "obliterate" other potential narratives that are told by the painting. That does not mean, Bal insists, that one should *ignore* the canonical story "in favor of some 'fresh or direct' visual narrative."<sup>20</sup> Instead, she suggests that the juxtaposition of the canonical story with the story of the visual work allows the tension between the two stories to produce new meanings.<sup>21</sup>

In some ways, this talk of tension is similar to the approach of Exum and Nutu mentioned above. Where it differs is that Bal is not proposing that the point of approaching visual art in this way is to say something more, or different, about the canonical text. Rather the point is to discover what new meanings are created in the interaction between text and painting. As she explains,

. . . [T]he painting re-presents the culturally available story, the doxa, and proposes its own story as a response to it. The response partially reaffirms, partially denies, or revises the tradition; counters it polemically and undermines it. To the extent that no re-production of a story can completely duplicate its "sources," the cultural life of the legend is always active, always transforming the cultural view of the fictitious "source" to which each work contributes.<sup>22</sup>

This notion of the ongoing transformation of cultural stories through visual re-presentation is in keeping with my overall approach in this book. But here I should clarify where I differ from Bal's approach. Her readings are deeply immersed in psychoanalytic perspectives and sometimes move in directions that I find problematic and unconvincing. Nevertheless, I am fully interested in tracing the ways that visual representations from the Renaissance and Baroque periods use the figures of Jael and Sisera to do something other than simply illustrate or exegete a canonical tradition.

Mr. Dalrymple was concerned to get his model's pose just right, even at the expense of waking up his sleeping general. Taking a cue from Trollope, I look more closely at this notion of posing, asking about the significance of positioning Jael and Sisera in certain ways. Following suggestions from Bal, I ask what happens when the visual stories told by these images are

juxtaposed with the verbal pre-text, that is, the story of female violence that is at the heart of the Jael-Sisera tradition.

### *Was It a Dream? Visual Stories of Sisera's Resistance*

In the only article I know of that focuses on paintings of Jael and Sisera, Babette Bohn argues that in late-sixteenth-century Italy, two different ways of depicting Jael and Sisera emerged on canvas.<sup>23</sup> The first “active type,” she suggests, is a scene of “manifest violence” in which Sisera struggles against a forceful Jael. The second type, far more common than the first in the early modern period in Italy, features a sleeping Sisera and “an unemotional Jael calmly hammering a tent peg” into his temple.<sup>24</sup> This is a helpful starting point, but looking across the artistic traditions in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, there is more to be seen. If we begin to sort paintings of Jael and Sisera’s fatal encounter into quiet scenes where Sisera sleeps and active ones where he resists, we soon run into trouble.

Let’s begin with the active pose. Bohn identifies a painting from the late 1500s by an artist known as either Camillo Procaccini or Girolamo Siciolante as the earliest example of this type. It’s a depiction that recalls the monumental illustrations of Jael discussed in the previous chapter. But now, rather than standing alone on a pedestal with a diminished Sisera in the distant background, Jael’s large body looms over a much smaller Sisera, filling the canvas in a diagonal pose from lower left to upper right. Her left knee pins him down, her right arm stretches upward holding the mallet high. Sisera raises his left arm, palm open toward the viewer. Bohn describes the military general as awake and struggling, thus her description of the painting as the “active” type. She argues that the Procaccini/Siciolante painting, and others like it, are modeled after similar depictions of Virtue triumphing over Vice. For this reason, they offer a morally unambiguous portrayal of the imminent victory of the virtuous Jael.<sup>25</sup> If this is the case, the pre-text of these paintings is not only, or primarily, the Jael and Sisera story, but instead, the medieval *topos* of virtue’s defeat of vice.

All this is fine as far as it goes, but as Bal would say, such an analysis stays at the level of identifying iconographically the pre-text(s) for the painting. I suggest there is another story told by a number of these “active” paintings, narrated especially through the ambiguous combination of Sisera’s ineffectually raised arms with his seemingly somnolent state. Is

he actively fighting back, or asleep, or both? Even in Bohn's earliest example, the Procaccini/Siciolante painting, it is not at all clear that Sisera is awake. One of his eyes is hidden from view and is it difficult to tell whether the other one is open. If his eyes are closed, is he actually resisting? What does such a depiction say about the relationship of these two figures?

Consider a later seventeenth-century watercolor attributed to the school of Domenico Zampieri (Figure 5.1).<sup>26</sup> In this painting, a woman holds a strong arm aloft, ready to strike a tent peg gripped by another firm hand that holds it against a man's temple. These tell-tale attributes mark the woman as Jael and the man as Sisera. But here the artist has included another woman in the scene. This is an element that is not part of either biblical tradition, although the additional woman's action, either covering or uncovering Sisera with a cloth, is part of many versions of the tradition.<sup>27</sup> By introducing an assistant for Jael, the artist collapses two different actions of Jael into one scene—the covering and the killing. Perhaps there is also a collapsing of different traditions of violent women—perhaps Deborah is in mind, or Judith with her slave. In any



**FIGURE 5.1** Domenichino (Domenico Zampieri) (follower of), Italian, 1581–1641. *Jael and Tisseran*, 17th century. Brown ink wash and opaque watercolor over graphite. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, 1963.24.210.

case, the act of covering adds to the impression that Sisera is asleep, an impression reinforced by the man's closed eyes.

Yes, like Bohn's early example of the active type, this Sisera raises his arms with palms open as if to resist the women. The key words are "as if." The painting hints at a struggling Sisera without actually showing one. The slumbering man hardly appears active nor does he truly fight, unless it is against the blanket. His gesture seems futile at best—like a man who resists in a dream. The palms gesture toward action, but without any real commitment to the cause. For her part, Jael, too, appears strangely detached from her action. Her eyes gaze ahead toward the blanket and her female companion, rather than at her target. So then, a viewer might wonder whether any genuine threat is actually depicted in the painting. And perhaps at some level, that is the point. Although the iconography of the painting gestures to a tradition of a violent woman brutally slaying an army general, the actual painting, with its dreamlike state of resistance and the introduction of a third figure who captures Jael's attention more than her tent peg does, removes a sense of true danger from the scene. This "violent Jael" seems not very violent as dreamy Sisera responds to a not very convincing threat. In short, the three figures seem merely to be posing. In so doing, they undermine the cultural tradition of a violent woman with a visual proposition that the tradition should not to be taken too seriously.

Or, perhaps the dreamlike quality of the painting introduces the story of another type of threat altogether. If the Sisera of Zampieri's watercolor has not yet awoken, what might he find if he did? Consider these lines from another nineteenth-century novel:

The cruel ferocity of some young women is awful. Judith, Jael, Delilah and Athaliah were not mythical. Is there a man who has not wakened from his dreams, to find the woman he trusted has stolen his strength or is about to hammer the great nail home through his head?<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps *this* is the alternative story told by the painting. In this case, using the iconography of Jael-Sisera tradition, the painting may tell the story of a deep male suspicion of the "trusted" woman. If this is the case, the painting that may convey the triumph of virtue over vice also offers the specter of a treacherous lover. Or, to put it another way, this painting of a dreaming/resistant Sisera visually

narrates a male nightmare of female betrayal that challenges a straightforward reading of a virtuous Jael. In this way, the Power of Women *topos* resurfaces.

Another painting identified with the circle of the Venetian artist Jacopo Amigoni makes this interpretation of the almost-but-not-quite-resistant type of painting even more plausible.<sup>29</sup> In it, Sisera again raises his arms in seeming resistance to Jael. This Sisera is definitely awake, turning his head away from Jael as she holds a tent peg against his temple and prepares to strike. In this case, Sisera's arms and hands actually make contact with Jael, but not in a clearly resistant way. Rather, his left hand holds her hip in a way more suggestive of a lover drawing her near than a man resisting a dangerous threat. Similarly, his right hand reaches out as if pushing her away, but also suggestively lifts her tunic with his thumb as his hand approaches her breast. Neither of the man's arms shows muscles taught with resistance. Apart from the mallet and tent peg, it would be easy to imagine that these arms are embracing a lover. On the other hand, the man is clearly in distress, shown by his furrowed brow and open mouth. He seems to have awoken not *from* a nightmare, but *to* one in which the lover he would embrace is about to kill him. Meanwhile, Jael's face betrays nothing. She is certainly not struggling, in spite of the raised arms of Sisera. He has not shifted her balance or her composure. Rather, Jael looks down without emotion, focused on her task.

So much for variations in representations on this active type of Baroque painting. Letting these images tell their own stories rather than only illustrate or exegete a biblical text, exposes the cultural fear that courses through performances of the tradition. One way to deal with this fear is to downplay as much as possible any sense of genuine threat from a real woman. Another way is to bring boldly before the viewer's eyes the grim prospect of a treacherous lover as in these paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of a resistant (or seemingly resistant) Sisera. So what stories are told by the more prominent "quieter" type of depiction of Jael and Sisera?

### *Stripping Jael of Violence—The Quiet Pose*

As Bohn points out, the more common approach in Renaissance Italy was to paint Sisera lying fast asleep. Sometimes he lies face up and sometimes face down but in either case soundly asleep with relaxed limbs and peaceful appearance. Meanwhile, in this type, Jael is poised above him ready to strike with a disconcertingly calm expression on her face. It is not that

she is emotionless, but rather than she appears beatific in her murderous pose. Not only Jael's pacific expression but also Sisera's peaceful sleep makes it hard to believe that what follows will be a shattered skull. In painting after painting, this Sisera lies oblivious to his impending doom, seemingly so exhausted that he does not feel the pointed weight of the tent peg against his temple (in spite of Clara's concern).

Bohn argues that this "quieter," more passive version of the tradition results in a morally ambiguous depiction of Jael. This seems counterintuitive if the aim of this beatific Jael is to link her to the earlier medieval association of Jael with Mary. As is often noted, the Council of Trent brought a renewed interest in the cult of the Virgin, and perhaps Jael once again assumes her role as the prefigurement of Mary in these quiet renditions of her violent act. If this is true, her look of peaceful contentment signals God's favor.

Nevertheless, even if this is the iconographic tradition these paintings recall (not so much Jael slaying Sisera, but Mary slaying the devil), the painting also tells a story about men, women, and violence. Artists repeatedly choose this raised-arm pose as the "baroque moment" of the story, the dramatic highpoint, or the "make or break moment of the story."<sup>30</sup> But in showing a sleeping Sisera and a calm, peaceful-looking Jael, they also work to defuse it. These women poised over sleeping men do not look menacing, in spite of their mallets and pegs. Indeed, in many examples of this type of rendering, Jael tends to hold her mallet "like a girl," with fist poised over Sisera's head in a position that could hardly result in a deadly blow. Likewise, her fingers often hold the tent peg ever so delicately near Sisera's head. In this way, even her weapons seem largely devoid of threat and the viewer is met again with the sense of figures who are simply posing as Jael and Sisera.

The painting shown in Figure 5.2, this one by Jacopo Amigoni himself, illustrates the type nicely. Here one can see the very typical way that Jael wields the mallet in the "quiet pose", with knuckles and thumb facing forward, compromising her potential for violence. Note how Amigoni's Jael gazes with eyes downcast, brow slightly raised, and a gentle uplift to her lips. With such a sweet expression she could be looking down on a sleeping child. As for Sisera, he has not moved from his slumber, although it seems that the tip of the tent peg has drawn blood already. As it trickles down his face, he does not wake.

What does such a painting narrate apart from its iconographic associations? Despite the bit of blood, there is little tension in the scene between



**FIGURE 5.2** Jacopo Amigoni, *Jael and Sisera*, 1789. 2015 © Photo Archive—Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.

the man and woman. In fact, both figures appear so detached from the actual murder there seems to be no genuine conflict. To put it another way, in showing a peaceful Jael with weapons in hand above a sleeping Sisera, the painting asks that we read it, as Bal puts it, against its pre-text. That is, the tradition of Jael and Sisera is about a woman killing a man. But the orchestrated pose in this painting (and many others like it) implies that a beatific Jael such as this is not dangerous to men after all. She might as well be Dalrymple's Clara without the Roman head scarf. Of course, such "posing" can be explained as artistic style, but that does not lessen the incongruity of a female figure shown simultaneously as assassin and saint.

Which brings us to other interpretive options. We could consider an alternative narrative suggested by the scene, but doing so takes us ever more in the direction of Bal's psychoanalytic readings. If we do not allow for the figure to be Mary smiting evil with the nails of her son's cross, or not simply a beautiful woman posing as Jael, that is, if we take the figures more literally as characters in a representation of the Jael-Sisera tradition, then a more disturbing possibility presents itself. If Jael is so calmly

committing this grotesque act of murder then we must assume this figure is psychopathically unbalanced. This is a telling of the story, by the way, that we will soon encounter in later cultural performances of the tradition. And if this woman smiles as if over a child, we might also recall the maternal allusions that both ancient and modern readers have seen in the story. The fact that Jael appears motherly in this and other paintings in the quiet mode, only highlights how disturbing such maternal allusions in the tradition are given what takes place in the story. In this case, the quiet renditions do not strip Jael of her violence, but twist it to make it even more disturbing to contemplate (and visualize!).

While we are exploring types of visual representations that may (or may not) strip Jael of her violence, we should mention that another major option for stripping during this period was of the more literal type. Many paintings of Jael present her in various stages of undress. Sometimes just one breast is exposed, as if her gown slipped down accidentally in her efforts. In other cases, both breasts are exposed either because her dress actually cuts below the breasts, or because she is simply undressed.<sup>31</sup> But in all of these instances, the female body of Jael becomes the focal point of the painting and her attributes now include more than a mallet and tent peg. Often these paintings show Jael in her serene mode, though in some she appears to exert some effort in her act. It is tempting to read representations that expose Jael's breasts as a way of eroticizing her figure, thereby presenting her as the dangerous seductress. Some Renaissance paintings do fit in this category. But others may simply be reflections of aristocratic women's fashion during this period which included necklines that fully exposed the breasts. Elite women did commission portraits of themselves as biblical heroines, including Jael. It is also possible that in some cases, the singly exposed breast is another allusion to Jael's link with Mary.<sup>32</sup> In other words, painting women with exposed breasts during this period was quite popular and could indicate a range of meanings. Suffice it to say that stripping Jael in this more literal way brings her into the company of many, many other women on canvas during this period.

### *From the Hand of a Woman: Artemisia Gentileschi's Jael and Sisera*

Under the category of a quiet Jael, we also find the only surviving example of a Baroque painting of Jael and Sisera by a female artist.<sup>33</sup> I include it here, not necessarily because of its distinctiveness, but because of the

way her life as an artist and her paintings of biblical women, including her painting of Jael, have been caught up in contemporary debates about women's agency, sexual violence, and feminist criticism.

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653) grew up in Rome under the tutelage of her father, the artist Orazio Gentileschi. The story of her rape by Agostino Tassi and the trial proceedings that followed from her father's charge have been told many times, in scholarly works, as well as in novels and films.<sup>34</sup> Tassi was apparently a less than savory character who was hired by her father to instruct Artemisia in lessons on perspective in painting. According to the trial records, Tassi raped Artemisia when she was left unchaperoned. Afterward, the two continued to have sex over a period of several months because of a promise of marriage from Tassi. When Artemisia's father determined that no marriage was actually going to take place, he brought a case against Tassi. The surviving records of the trial offer a fascinating glimpse into the dynamics surrounding ideas of rape, sexuality, and marriage in Italy during this period.<sup>35</sup>

Here our focus is on her painting of Jael and Sisera (Figure 5.3). For anyone familiar with the artist's far more famous painting of *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* (1620), her *Jael and Sisera* (1620) may disappoint,



**FIGURE 5.3** Artemisia Gentileschi, *Jael and Sisera* © Szépművészeti Múzeum/Museum of Fine Arts.

at least in terms of its dramatic presentation. On this canvas, we find no wildly spurting blood, no grimacing or determined faces, indeed, no sense of drama at all. Rather, Artemisia's painting clearly partakes of the quiet strand of visual depictions of the scene. Jael kneels at the right of the canvas with her left hand lifted over a sleeping Sisera. He lies curled on his side, head suggestively nestled between her knees and supported on folded arms. Jael gazes serenely down on him, with untroubled brow and a slight upward curve of her lips. There is no tension in her hand as she holds the tent peg to his head. The colors of her pale yellow dress contrast sharply with Sisera's red and blue tunic as well as the nearly black background. The two figures form an L shape on the canvas, half framing a pillar that stands in the remaining dark space. Into the pillar is chiseled the following: ARTEMITIA.LOMI/FACIBAT/M.D.CXX.

Given its relatively dispassionate depiction of its subject, feminist art historians might be forgiven for largely ignoring this painting by Artemisia. On the surface, it does not serve them well. Even Mary Garrard, who has championed Artemisia as an artist who was deeply shaped by her female identity and personal experience, has very little to say about her *Jael and Sisera*. For instance, Garrard's groundbreaking work on Artemisia's painting of the "female hero," never references the painting. In Garrard's view, Artemisia produces "an art of energy and drama. Not poetic mood and silence."<sup>36</sup> Clearly, the less dramatic painting of *Jael and Sisera* does not match her sense of the artist. Perhaps this is why she says nothing about it, even though Artemisia painted it the same year as the more famous 1620 *Judith Decapitating Holofernes*.

On the other hand, and not surprisingly, the painting *does* draw the attention of Ward Bissell, who has written an authoritative catalogue on Artemisia's art.<sup>37</sup> In it, he takes issue with Garrard's work, especially her emphasis on the uniquely feminine viewpoint that Artemisia brings to her work. In a chapter titled, "Myth, Misunderstandings and Musings," Bissell sets out to debunk the notion that the artist's feminist or proto-feminist leanings are reflected in her painting or personal correspondence. In support of his argument, Bissell turns to the painting of *Jael and Sisera*, using it as evidence *against* feminist readings of her work. As Bissell acknowledges, the signed pillar standing alongside Jael seems to bespeak the artist's personal investment in the scene. He notes:

Artemisia seems to stand with Jael at the moment of her triumph. But just as one is disposed to declare the painting a signboard of feminism, its lack of passion intervenes. Even as she sets up what

would appear to be an optimal situation for a rallying cry, she backs off—the reverse of “I shall not weary you any longer with this female chatter, but the works themselves will do the talking,” but to similar effect.<sup>38</sup>

The quoted material in this statement comes from a letter by Artemisia to her patron, and it is often cited to demonstrate the artist’s awareness of having to deal with gender bias. Garrard suggests that the artist intends to convey a playful self-deprecation to charm her patron. From her perspective, Artemisia is saying, “I am a mere woman . . . but my *works* partake of sex-blind universality.”<sup>39</sup> But again, Bissell uses this same phrase, together with the Jael and Sisera painting, to *undercut* theories of Artemisia’s feminist tendencies. As for his own analysis of Artemisia’s *Jael and Sisera*, Bissell has nothing positive to say. He notes a stiffness in Jael’s raised arm and the nonfunctional angle of the hammer. Describing the painting as “passionless, stilted, and derivative,” he deems it of minimal importance. “The Kenite woman sets about the bloody task of driving the tent stake into the Canaanites general’s skull without the least sign of feeling. . . .”<sup>40</sup> Bissell concludes by pointing to the overall reticence of the painting which, he contends, suggests that Artemisia’s personal investment with the subject went no deeper than the neutrality reflected in Jael’s expression. The observation is another swipe at feminist interpretations of Artemisia’s work and no doubt contributed to the conclusion drawn by one his reviewers (coincidentally enough named Yael) that Bissell’s approach is “conventional, patriarchal and at times anti-feminist.”<sup>41</sup> In spite of Bissell’s comment that the painting is derivative, he does not note that in depicting Jael’s neutral expression, the artist was adhering to a quite conventional way of rendering a quiet Jael. Whether this painting is more or less successful than other similar “quiet” approaches is open to question.

What is most interesting in all of this is the way this Baroque painting of Jael and Sisera is pulled into gender debates about feminist expression and consciousness. Because in recent times Artemisia has gained a reputation as a female artist whose paintings of women (especially Judith) reflect her personal experience of violation, her painting of Jael presents a puzzle. And in the same way that interpretations of the figure of Jael are pulled in differing directions, so now this *painting* of the story, or this particular representation of Jael, is caught in an interpretive fray with, interestingly enough, a man on one side and several women on the other.

I say “several women” because Bissell’s dismissiveness of the painting in his 1999 catalogue raisonné and of the idea of Artemisia’s proto-feminist consciousness in general did not end the debate. Other art historians have since weighed in with additional observations about *Jael and Sisera*. For example, Judith Mann argues that Artemisia’s boldly chiseled signature on the stone pillar is a none-too-subtle assertion of her female artistic identity. She notes the way the positions of the figures act as a framing device, directing the viewer toward the signature, and how the artist juxtaposed her chiseled name with Jael’s mallet. In fact, recalling Bissell’s problems with the mallet, Mann’s observation points to the way that the weapon, while wrongly angled to make effective contact with Sisera, is rightly angled to inscribe the stone pilaster. As Mann suggests, the arrangement forces the viewer “to think about the stonemason who would have fashioned such an identifying inscription.”<sup>42</sup> The large, centrally placed signature leaves no doubt about the gender identity of the artist and “certainly adds to the viewer’s experience of female power.”<sup>43</sup>

Going further still, Babette Bohn devotes her entire article to the critical recovery of this painting. She argues that it reflects an artist who is sensitive both to the biblical text and to the reputation of Jael in the artistic and cultural climate of her time. As Bohn puts it,

If we eliminate our sensationalist preconceptions about Artemisia Gentileschi to examine her *Jael and Sisera*, the painting can be understood, not as a rather unsatisfactory mirror of her personal life, but as a serious and original interpretation of the biblical story, seen through the lens of contemporary religious and political realities.<sup>44</sup>

A significant portion of Bohn’s argument is spent distinguishing Artemisia’s *Jael and Sisera* from a painting of the scene by Lodovico Cigoli (1595) that was very popular in Florence at the time.<sup>45</sup> She notes how the artist foregrounds Jael and juxtaposes her with Sisera to communicate their moral contrast to the viewer. The two figures are positioned at a 90-degree angle from one another, which for Bohn emphasizes their physical and spiritual separation. This same separation is evident, according to Bohn, in Jael’s pale yellow tunic compared to the deeper red and blue of Sisera’s clothing, and her lighter hair, compared to his dark head. Bohn asserts that there is “no question as to which of [Artemisia’s] two figures is more virtuous. Jael’s proximity, verticality, and distinctive visual

differences from Sisera clearly express her virtue and her imminent victory.”<sup>46</sup> Compared to Cigoli’s work, Artemisia paints a rendition of Jael that is “less sullied by the implications of secularity and eroticism,” and in a way that shows that “her actions are undertaken on God’s behalf.”<sup>47</sup> Bohn offers two different explanations for why Artemisia downplayed Jael’s violence. The artist was aware of Jael’s morally ambiguous position compared to Judith and she wanted to show her as a prefigurement of Mary. While the patron for this work is unknown, Bohn speculates that given its positive presentation of Jael, it was intended for the pious Grand Duchess of Tuscany, Maria Maddalena of Austria.<sup>48</sup>

So is this painting a less than satisfying derivative rendition of a traditional scene by an artist who “was not taking penetrating looks at reality”?<sup>49</sup> Or is it a “serious and original interpretation of the biblical story, seen through the lens of contemporary religious and political realities”?<sup>50</sup> It is clear that Artemisia’s rendition participates in a painterly tradition that effectively diminishes the threat of Jael’s violence. We also know from the artist’s *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* that she certainly had the capacity for depicting a far more dramatically violent scene of a woman killing a man. Still, there are a few subtle indications that Artemisia was making a distinct statement with her version of the tradition. Although Sisera does not *fall* between Jael’s legs, he nestles his head on her gown between her spread knees in a unique and suggestive fashion. In the same way that scholars have seen eroticism and birth imagery in the biblical traditions about Jael and Sisera, so too, does this arrangement of the figures introduce a touch of eroticism ambiguously blended with birth imagery.

Meanwhile, another small detail points to the artist’s mockery of the fallen general. On the handle of his sword is a monkeylike face that looks suspiciously like the sleeping general.<sup>51</sup> So while Artemisia most likely was following artistic precedent for her version of a quiet Jael, she appears also to use Jael to assert her authority as a female artist. Artemisia places her name at the center of the image in which a woman displays her power over an unsuspecting and foolish man. In this way, Artemisia becomes a precursor for later women who will use this tradition to assert the “power of woman” from a female perspective and in a positive sense. And perhaps she leaves out the blood because hers is not so much a warning to men about potential violence, as much as a powerful assertion to her audience (male and female) about of her own artistic ability through the figure of Jael.

*Military Battle or Battle between the Sexes?*

In this last section, we turn to a visual representation that does offer a convincingly violent Jael who is engaged with Sisera in a true death struggle. To do this, we move from Italy to the Netherlands and from paintings to a drawing by Rembrandt (Figure 5.4). There are actually two drawings of the scene attributed to Rembrandt. The later of the two (1657–1659) fits the pattern of the quiet Jael. She seems to hammer away unflustered on a sleeping, facedown Sisera.<sup>52</sup> But Rembrandt's earlier drawing (1648–1649) is a far more compelling version of the active way of depicting the scene.

Rembrandt has removed the characters from the battle setting of biblical tradition. There is no telltale helmet or sword strewn on the ground. It is not clear that the man wears armor. His youthful face does not evoke a battle-worn general but simply a young man being taken by surprise by a violent young woman. The two figures appear to be in a furnished room, rather than a tent. In fact, only Jael's tent peg and raised mallet explicitly link the figures to the Jael-Sisera tradition. Apart from these attributes, Rembrandt's drawing tells its own story. The bold lines create a dynamism accentuated by the artist's experimentation with the positioning of his subjects' limbs. Rather than assuming the final form of the



FIGURE 5.4 Rembrandt van Rijn, Jael and Sisera, [WA1950.51] © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

drawing settles the alignment of arms and hands, we can see in the shifting limbs an animated and deadly struggle. A man appears to have fallen back under the onslaught of an attacking woman. The furniture has collapsed beneath his weight. He flails. His right leg kicks over a chair while his left leg pushes futilely against the air. Meanwhile his arms are lifted against the woman, but he seems already weakened so that his hands are unable to gain purchase. And no wonder—a tent peg is already lodged in his skull. The man's face is turned away from the woman, wearing an open-mouthed grimace.

As for the woman, her face is one of determination with shown furrowed brows. Bold strokes draw attention to her set lips. She concentrates hard on her effort. She no longer holds the tent peg in place, given her already decisive, though apparently not final blow. Instead, her fist is lodged against the man's throat. In sharp contrast to the quiet paintings discussed above, the overall effect is a scene of chaotic struggle in which Jael has managed to come out on top. Indeed, if we put this drawing next to the images of the peaceful, serene Jael, it becomes even more evident just how far removed the quiet type of representation is from the action of the story.

In highlighting the falling Sisera, the scene appears to draw more closely on the Judges 5 poem, which, as we have seen, depicts a slowly collapsing Sisera. Although earlier I raised a number of questions about the degree to which artists consulted Bibles, several art historians are sure that the historical Rembrandt actually did. One of the few books listed by title in the 1656 inventory of his possessions was “een oude bijbel” (an old Bible) and according to Silve Seymour, “this must have been the volume he opened most frequently.”<sup>53</sup> Amy Golahny suggests that even if there is no written record of Rembrandt actually reading scripture, there is visual evidence of such reading. Indeed, Golahny argues that Rembrandt *did* record his Bible reading; he did so in his artwork.<sup>54</sup> I have no reason to doubt that Rembrandt read his Bible. But if he read it carefully for this scene, it is all the more notable that the artist leaves out any military references in his drawing. Rather than visually staging the episodes of one of the biblical versions, as for example, van Leyden does (Figure 4.4), Rembrandt focuses on the violent encounter between a woman and a man. In fact, the hint of curtain drawn overhead, the tipping chair, and the absence of armour and weapons suggests a private bedroom setting more than the biblical tent scene. If it were not for the hammer,

a viewer would not necessarily identify this as a Jael-Sisera tradition, but could not miss seeing a struggle between the sexes.

The dramatic drawing, with its depiction of anger and grim determination in the woman's expression, raises questions about Rembrandt's own view of women and gender relations. At least one scholar has seen the battle of the sexes as a frequent theme in Rembrandt's work.<sup>55</sup> Does he, in fact, move this biblical slaying from a military context to a bedroom battle between the sexes? If so, the famous Dutch artist takes the tradition in a direction that later artists and authors will also go.

This seems to be the case with the visual rendering of the Jael-Sisera tradition by the contemporary Dutch artist Marcelle Hanselaar. Hanselaar is an etcher and painter from Rotterdam, who lives and works in London. Notably, she reports being influenced by one of Rembrandt's drawings for her own version of Jael and Sisera.

Some time ago I saw Rembrandt's wonderful pen and ink drawing of Jael lustily hammering a nail through Sisera's left temple. Typically for Rembrandt, the focus was on Jael's very feminine way of concentrating not on the murder at hand but on hitting the nail on the head. I particularly liked the way the angularity of the pen and ink line emphasized the brutality of the subject matter.<sup>56</sup>

Hanselaar created two different etchings of the story (much like Rembrandt, or the school of Rembrandt), one with a sleeping Sisera and the one shown here, with a struggling, wide awake man (Figure 5.5).<sup>57</sup> Both of Hanselaar's etchings make the bedroom setting of the scene even more explicit than the drawing of Rembrandt shown above. Her work also distinctively blends the traditional iconography of the Jael and Sisera scene (woman armed with hammer and tent peg posed threateningly over man) with everyday objects (a hairbrush and comb lying on a dresser). To this, Hanselaar also adds contemporary and eclectic references. In *Jael and Sisera 1*, Sisera wears Dolce & Gabbana briefs, and a topless Jael wears a printed wrap around her waist and high heels. In *Jael and Sisera 2*, Jael's beads swing over her breasts, moving with her effort while a cat smiles from under the bed.

Much like Rembrandt, Hanselaar brings the violence of the Jael-Sisera tradition to life, with a thrashing, distorted Sisera and a determined Jael.



**FIGURE 5.5** *Jael and Sisera 2*, Marcelle Hanselaar 2008, print © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Notably, for Hanselaar the story of Jael also offers a mirror, but not of human salvation, or at least not in the Christian sense, nor reflecting an ideal virtue. As she puts it,

The legendary tales of the Old Testament are full of retributions and tribulations, murder and sexual mayhem enacted in the shadow of the Law. The liberating quality of these stories manifests itself the moment we realise how they in actual fact mirror our subconscious world. I like portraying these heroines as ordinary women whose conspiratorial *a girl has to do what a girl has to do*, places the scene resolutely in the present.<sup>58</sup>

For Hanselaar then, Jael is both heroine and ordinary woman, as perhaps are all women who have to do what they have to do. As she puts it, “The OT stories are so alive and relevant because they give, women especially, a great surge of belonging and justification. The women have to kill the army generals, as a sacrifice to balance their social world again.”<sup>59</sup> In terms of her contemporary rendition, Hanselaar affirms that “this is a battle of power

in gender.” But again, she understands the battle not so much motivated by revenge as by “a balancing out of positions.”<sup>60</sup> Although Hanselaar is attracted to the Jael-Sisera tradition precisely because the biblical version includes no motivation on the part of Jael, her contemporary rendition nevertheless plays with our imagination about *why* this woman has to do what she does. The half-clothed woman and the bedroom setting suggest a degree of intimacy between the two figures, alluding to many other cultural productions of the scene that introduce eroticism into the mix. But if the etching hints at an erotic encounter, it is not in a very serious way. As Hanselaar notes, there is certainly humor in the situation, “but perhaps that is from the female perspective only!”<sup>61</sup>

Of all of the visual images that I have discussed, only two of them—one ancient, one contemporary—have come from a female perspective. In the midst of serious cultural debates about the “Woman Question” which have ranged from misogynist attacks on women to full-throated endorsements of their virtue and intellectual capacities, these two visual presentations from female artists introduce hints of humor, albeit dark humor, into the gender struggle. Artemisia paints a monkey face on Sisera’s sword handle, poking fun at the fallen warrior, while inscribing her own name front and center in the work, as if erecting a monument to Sisera’s female creator. The smiling cat in Hanselaar’s *Jael and Sisera 2* lends a bit of lightness to the otherwise dark affair, and in her *Jael and Sisera 1*, another monkey makes an appearance. He stands behind Jael, pulling back a transparent curtain, as though to let the viewer in on the scene, showing them how sometimes “a girl has to do what a girl has to do.”

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*Motives for Murder  
in Nineteenth- and  
Early-Twentieth-Century Cultural  
Performances of Jael and Sisera*

SO WHY, EXACTLY, did Jael kill Sisera? Until the nineteenth century, Jael's reason for murder was treated in two ways. She killed because she was a God-inspired heroine and loyal to Israel or because she was, like all women, duplicitous and evil. As we have seen, these two reasons were not always kept neatly separated—Jael could be heroic and treacherous. But beyond this, consideration about her motives did not venture very far. In the nineteenth century, however, as women begin to challenge the limits of their societal roles, so also literary representations of Jael begin to push beyond a dualistic approach to her character. Imaginations stirred. Maybe Jael was in love. Maybe she was bored. Perhaps she was a deranged woman, obsessed with a notion of prophetic fulfillment. In short, Jael emerges in this century as complex character. Moreover, with the “Woman Question” focusing ever more acutely on the relationship between men and women, cultural performances of the Jael-Sisera tradition also turn to personal relationships between Jael, Sisera, and another man largely overlooked in the tradition up to this point, Jael's husband Heber.

Already around the middle of the nineteenth century, one sees Jael and Sisera beginning to take hold of Victorian literary fancy, with allusions to the tradition proliferating after the 1840s. As Peter Merchant argues, those who knew the story used it to “contemplate, and perceive either as thrilling or else as sinister, an emphatic inversion of gender roles. . . .”<sup>1</sup> So, for instance, Jael and Sisera find their way into novels by Charlotte

Brontë and George Eliot. In Brontë's *Villette* (1853), a distressed Lucy Snowe likens her deeply repressed emotions to Jael's hammering of Sisera. Any longing to transcend her dull and restricted existence must be soundly and repeatedly knocked on the head. Jael is the "stern woman" who holds Sisera captive. On the occasions when these longings-as-Sisera "turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench," Lucy's brain is "thrilled to the core."<sup>2</sup> Jael and Sisera thus represent two aspects of Lucy's identity—the restrained, passionless social self and her inner emotional self. Notably, she identifies with both perpetrator and victim.<sup>3</sup> Brontë's creative identification between her protagonist and both Sisera and Jael also involves a gender reversal but not one that simply elevates female over male. In fact, here the figures do not represent a male/female opposition at all, but rather a divided self—one part more emotionally expressive, surprisingly linked to the male figure, Sisera, the other part bent on keeping desire in check, figured by the female, Jael. One would typically expect to find self-restraint and mastery over the passions associated with the masculine figure. But perhaps equating the military general with Lucy's longings and desires is itself a comment on the gender dynamics on Brontë's time, where men had freedom to pursue their desires while women needed to hammer theirs into submission.

In Eliot's *A Mill on the Floss*, the young protagonist Maggie Tulliver keeps a large wooden doll in the attic which is now thoroughly "defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering."

Three nails driven into the head commemorated as many crises in Maggie's nine years of earthly struggle, that luxury of vengeance having been suggested to her by the picture of Jael destroying Sisera in the old Bible (79).

The reader first hears of this doll when Maggie retreats in frustration after not being allowed to accompany her father to pick up her brother from school. It is raining outside and her mother makes clear that little girls should not get their best bonnets wet.

In both novels, the allusions to the Jael and Sisera tradition are related to the restricted roles of the female characters in the narrative. Neither female novelist simply adopts the tradition at face value as a struggle between an individual man and woman. Rather, they use the tradition to express the emotional consequences of living in a culture with strictly regulated gender roles. The way these novelists draw on the Jael-Sisera story is strikingly different from the use of the tradition by another Victorian

novelist, Anthony Trollope. As mentioned in the last chapter, one of the subplots running through Trollope's *Last Chronicle of Barset* is the painting of Jael and Sisera by the aspiring artist, Conway Dalrymple. In this case, with a male novelist using the tradition in relation to his male character, the figures of Jael and Sisera represent traditional gender values. As the Trollope scholar Geoffrey Harvey argues, the author uses Dalrymple's painting of a woman dominating a man to symbolize the perversion of London, where female will dominates over male. Harvey suggests further that when Dalrymple eventually and dramatically tears up the finished painting, the artist thereby refuses a false life of wealth and prestige for the simplicity and honesty of his beloved Clara.<sup>4</sup> And, if Harvey is correct, he also rejects the inversion of traditional gender roles.

Together, these three examples show the beginnings of an emerging contrast between female authors who see in the Jael-Sisera tradition a link to their experience of restricted gender roles and male authors who perceive a threat to traditional gender identities. The latter, of course, was already evident in earlier *Power of Women* depictions of the scene. But use of Jael and Sisera by Brontë and Eliot indicate new possibilities for later female authors to build on.

In the rest of this chapter I look closely at three different literary works from this period that more fully develop a retelling of the Jael and Sisera tale. The first is a poem from the Victorian British nobleman Lord de Tabley. If earlier interpretations tended to split Jael two ways—heroine or femme fatale—de Tabley's dramatic monologue enables Jael to speak for herself in a way that complicates any easy judgment of her character. From there, I turn to American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Sisera" (1932). As the title of the poem suggests, Robinson provides a view from the enemy general's perspective, although Jael is also presented as subject in her own right. His complex portrait of the biblical figure depicts her as frighteningly unbalanced, even if she acted on behalf of Israel. Finally, these two works are juxtaposed with a 1914 play by Florence Kiper Frank, an American poet/playwright and avid supporter of the women's suffrage movement. In Frank's enactment of the story, Jael will not agitate for the right to vote, but she will speak boldly, act in her own interests, and challenge the norms of marriage and motherhood. On the one hand, Frank situates her play in the ancient biblical setting; on the other hand, aspects of her Jael sound much like the "New Woman" of the early twentieth century.

*Lord de Tabley's Victorian "Jael"*  
*Asks the Woman Question*

John Byrne Leicester Warren's poem "Jael" first appeared in an 1873 collection titled *Searching the Net* and was republished almost unchanged twenty years later in *Poems Dramatic and Lyrical*.<sup>5</sup> By this time, Warren had assumed the title of the Third Baron of Tabley. Although he has been consigned by history to the ranks of minor poet (a designation with which his biographer Hugh Walker takes issue), this particular collection of Lord de Tabley's was well received.<sup>6</sup> Among its strengths, according to Walker, is the republished "Jael," which he finds to be a masterpiece of dramatic monologue, "equally original in conception and admirable in execution."<sup>7</sup> Less favorably impressed is the anonymous reviewer of the *Spectator*. While the reviewer grants that "the picture drawn here is not without power," he takes issue with the poem's "nineteenth-century Jael," who "no longer appears in keeping with the facts of her story."<sup>8</sup> Yet it is precisely this nineteenth-century Jael who demonstrates once again how cultural debates about gender are articulated through this particular biblical figure.

De Tabley's Jael is indeed a nineteenth-century woman both in her emotional configuration and in the problems that plague her life. She is critically introspective and overwhelmed with moroseness, both qualities she shares with many subjects of Victorian poetry.<sup>9</sup> But this is not all she shares with certain of her nineteenth-century contemporaries. Although Jael expresses remorse, she also recounts her crime in a way that evokes sympathy by bringing the issue of women's oppression to the fore. This, too, is a theme common to nineteenth-century works of fiction that deal with women killers.

Virginia Morris's work on women who kill in nineteenth-century novels shows how tensions and conflict around culturally defined gender roles are used frequently as an explanation for their violent behavior.<sup>10</sup> While Victorian literature is filled with stories of crime, when it comes to women who murder, their crimes are typically portrayed as a reaction against men who oppress them. In this way, Morris argues, these murderous female characters become "part of a larger, legitimate gender battle—a power struggle between men and women—rather than simply individual examples of depravity or immorality."<sup>11</sup> While these fictional women are clearly guilty of murder, Morris shows how the novelists highlight the ambiguity of their guilt as well as the "daring of women who chose to act

for themselves.”<sup>12</sup> As we will see, de Tabley does something similar with his nineteenth-century Jael.

The poem works backward chronologically via Jael’s recollection. She takes the reader from the close of the post-battle celebration, with the victory song ended and the soldiers returning home at sundown, to the events at daybreak leading to Sisera’s demise. Structurally, the poem begins with four stanzas of monologue by Jael, followed by four stanzas voiced in the third person, returning to two stanzas of Jael’s first-person monologue. I follow these voice divisions to analyze the poem below. The final return to Jael’s first-person account details the steps that led her to the murder of Sisera. It is only at this point that Jael’s account evokes pity while also discouraging flights of fancy that would encourage gender deviance.

*“A curled crushed thing”*

The first section is an anguished expression of Jael’s feelings of guilt and remorse. De Tabley sets his poem at night, in Jael’s darkened tent, after the victory songs and feasting have ended. At this point Jael, in “her lonely home . . . begins to think it over” (43). These thoughts provide an initial glimpse of her motive that will be developed more fully as the poem continues. “O lying voice! Methought, I found a crown of glory, silvern: out I held my hand. And drew a burnished adder off her nest” (43). This “ill worm” named “Infamy” stings Jael. Thus, from early in the poem, Jael admits to being deluded by a desire for glory. What follows is a prolonged lament during which Jael expresses remorse over her action and an acute awareness of divine judgment. For Jael to be so judged, de Tabley must contend with the biblical praise of Jael. He does so in a number of ways, beginning with Jael’s dismissal of the praise she has received, juxtaposed with her stark description of God’s response to her act.

*“O blessed among women” –So they sang  
With brazen lips to God. But he knows more  
And with one great chain binds my heavy soul;  
I do not think that God will ever reach  
His finger down and ease it. He hates me . . . (44)*

Not only does God “know more” than those who (mistakenly) sing the praise of Jael, God also distinguishes her act from the sins of other

women. While God readily forgets their trivial acts, Jael's sin is written in his books "In plain red flaming letters that endure" (44). The first stanza closes with a self-description that forms one of the most dismal images of the poem.

*I am worn and wearied out;  
A mere weak woman, after all is said;  
Searching the intense dark with sleepless eyes,  
Huddled away by the main-pole in the midst,  
A curled crushed thing, a blurred white heap of robes.  
Moaning at times with wild arms reaching out.  
While on my canvas walls the rain-gush comes,  
And the ropes scream and tighten in the blast. (44-45)*

This dark image of an anguished Jael is then contrasted with an image of the celebratory Heber, and here the first hints of gender trouble surface. Heber is cast as a coward, accepting honor for Jael's dishonorable deed.

*And Heber sits at Barak's own right hand;  
Because I have risen against a sleeping man,  
and slain him, like a woman. No man slays  
after this sort. The craven deed is mine,  
Hold thou its honour, Heber; have thy wine,  
Among the captains claim the noblest seat;  
And revel, if thou has the heart, till dawn,  
Brave at the board and feeble in the field! (45)*

Jael will return to Heber's cowardice later. For now, the focus shifts to a recollection of her murderous act. Like the artists of the Dutch prints in the Power of Women series, de Tabley's Jael displays the body of Sisera before the audience. But rather than serving as a visual warning for men about the dangers of women, Sisera's body functions to further indict Jael and highlight her weak character. Sisera is "the noble bird slain by the ignoble hand." He has "lovely eyes," "bright curls," "silken skin," and is a "great, goodly man" (46-47). Despite his gruesome death, Sisera's countenance is maintained, and he sheds only a single reddish drop of blood. Jael imagines his "keen grey lips" conveying an indignant scorn "that a deed so mean,/Treason so petty, woman-guile so poor,/Should ever stifle

out their glorious breath" (47). In fact, she even hears Sisera's scornful lips condemning her to a life haunted by his face:

*Better to be as we are earth and dust  
Than to endure, as Jael shall live on,  
In self-contempt more bitter than the grave.  
Live on and pine in long remorseful years.  
Terrible tears are sequel to this deed;  
Beat on thy breast, have ashes in thy hair,  
Still shalt thou bear about in all thy dreams  
One image, one reproach, one face, one fear.  
Live, Jael, live. We shall be well revenged. (47)*

### *"The mother-snake"*

The move to third person in the central section of the poem reinforces Jael's self-condemnation while also representing the dominant cultural perspective that defined and conscripted nineteenth-century gender roles.<sup>13</sup> If this is a continuation of Jael's monologue (and the occasional use of "I" suggests that it is), she now adopts the persona of a contemptuous bystander, or perhaps, a prosecuting attorney who directly addresses the jury. The initial point of attack is to evoke Jael's maternal role with images of nursing a baby. De Tabley thus adds an infant to the biblical story, one who will play a role in Jael's tragic downfall. Here the point is that Jael should have learned pity from gazing on her child.

*This woman was a mother, think of that;  
A name which carries mercy in its sound,  
A pitiful meek title one can trust  
She gave her babe the breast like other wives,  
In cradle laid it, had her mother heed  
To give it suck and sleep. You would suppose  
She might learn pity in its helpless face . . . (48)*

But, you would be wrong, according to the speaker. Jael has no pity and no woman's heart but rather is "ambitious, hard/Vain, would become heroic; to nurse babes/And sit at home, why any common girl/Is good enough for that. She must have fame,/She shall be made a song of in the camp" (48).

Again, the presenting reason for Jael's killing of Sisera lies in her desire to make a name for herself, something that is appropriate for men, but not for mothers.

From maternal images, the poem turns to the picture of the conniving, two-faced femme fatale already familiar from the Power of Women *topos*. Jael may be a mother, but she is a "mother-snake" who fakes tears and speaks in a low gentle voice to Sisera while covertly fingering "the poniards edge hid near the breast where late her baby fed" (214). And, as Sisera drifts off to sleep, Jael commits her deadly act. Having been stung by the burnished adder herself, Jael now turns her own snake-like venom on Sisera.

*His fading sense felt her insidious arms  
Folding him warmly. Then he slept—she rose,  
Slid like a snake across the tent— struck twice—  
And stung him dead.*

God saw her up in Heaven. (49–50)

With the last line of the stanza, the narrator starkly confirms the certainty of divine judgment that runs through Jael's opening monologue. And once again, by calling attention to God's penetrating gaze, the poem undercuts the unequivocal praise that Jael receives in Judges 5.

Moreover, while earlier the biblical victory song was dismissed in light of God's judgment, now the speaker will also discredit the singer, Deborah, and her counterpart, Barak. With this, it becomes clear that there are no heroes in de Tabley's poetic rendition of Judges 4–5, except perhaps for Sisera. Deborah is cast as a raving, shrewing, old lean prophetess, who shrills "a song of death" that is an "insult on the slain (50–51)." Such a characterization would also discredit her prophecy that God would deliver Sisera into a woman's hands (Judg. 4:9), if in fact the prophecy were featured in the poem. It is not. The poet adds an infant to the story, but removes Deborah's prophecy. The omission is particularly notable because Barak's comment that precedes it (Judg. 4:8) is included in the poem, making far more explicit the biblical text's implied gender critique. De Tabley's Barak proclaims to Deborah, "Except thou goes with me I remain. I dare not face great Sisera alone, Unless some female fury hound me on" (51). Not only is Barak afraid before the battle, he remains so afterward as well. The poem shows him

joining Deborah's song while clinging to her skirt and darting his eyes about in fear.

*Then Israel's captain, holding by her skirt,  
Sang second to her raving with loud words  
And hare-like eyes that looked on either side,  
As if in dread dead Sisera should rise  
And drive him howling up the vale in fear  
With nimble heels. (51)*

For such conduct, the narrator deems Barak even viler than Jael, a "craven hound tied to an old wife's strings." By the end of this stanza, the audience might be forgiven for casting the whole miserable lot of characters aside and weeping for the heroic, noble Sisera. But the poem does not end here.

*"Content thee, drudge!"*

Up to this point in the poem, the reader knows only that Jael sought glory and this led to her downfall. But with the resumption of Jael's first-person monologue in the closing lines of the poem, she reveals more fully "by what insidious steps/The will to slay him ripened in my mood" (51). Unlike contemporary feminist interpreters who have seen Sisera as a potential threat to Jael, de Tabley's Jael suggests that it was her life of tedium and her weak husband that drove her to kill. Early in the poem, the anguished and guilt-ridden Jael shuts her eyes against the setting sun because it reminds her of "one round ripe blot of blood" (45-46). Now, as she relates the details of her crime, she recalls watching the sun rise at the end of a long night tending her restless baby. At first, she felt "wholly at peace" before the sun's rays, "ready to draw the glory in and make it mine" (52). But this glory at dawn suddenly casts a harsh light on her own dull existence.

*When suddenly a kind of weary mood  
At all my mother life and household days  
Clouded my soul and tainted her delight.  
It seemed such petty work, such wretched toil  
To tend a child and serve a husband's whims;  
Meek, if my lord returns with sullen eyes,  
Glad, if his heart rejoices; to watch his ways,  
Live in his eye, hoard his least careless smile*

*Chatter with other wives, mange and hoard,  
 Quarrel and make it up—and then the grave,  
 Like fifty thousand other nameless girls,  
 Who took their little scrap of love and sun  
 Contentedly and died. Was I as these?  
 My dream was glory and their aim delight;  
 Should I be herded with their nameless dust? (52)*

Here, as Merchant astutely notes, de Tabley enables Jael to identify “nothing less than the contemporary feminine condition. . . . [S]he could be any nineteenth-century woman—any one of ‘fifty thousand . . . nameless girls—trying to break the habits of subservience, silence and obscurity.’”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the way opens toward a more sympathetic view of Jael.

At the same time, Jael’s confession of her desire for glory rather than “delight” points to her difference from the typical “nameless” girl, a difference that amounts to gender deviance. As Merchant observes, Jael’s dream of glory unsexes her, “the iniquity of the intention strips her of her womanhood . . . ,” even while masculinity eludes her. As Jael has already admitted, no man kills as she did.<sup>15</sup>

Still, the moment passes and Jael recalls that as Heber returns, she hastily put the vision of glory aside.

*. . . My waking life resumed  
 Its fetter as he came.  
 Content thee, drudge,  
 Here is thy lot; fool not thy heart on dreams. (53)*

And that might have been the end of it. Moreover, many nineteenth-century readers might well have remained hardened against Jael at this point, assuming that she should indeed have been a content drudge, taking delight with her life as wife and mother. But Heber’s return strengthens Jael’s case and builds on the sympathetic turn the poem has taken toward her. As with Deborah and Barak, de Tabley casts Heber as a decidedly unattractive figure, a craven opportunist preparing to flee to the hills with his treasure before the battle begins. Although Jael urges him to fight on behalf of Israel whose cause is “the holy one,” Heber refuses, arguing that he will side with the winner once it is determined. At Jael’s scornful cry of “Begone, O feeble heart!” he departs laughing, leaving Jael and her baby in the tent to follow if she likes (55). Jael makes clear how she loathes

her husband for not joining the fight (as a man should), communicating the not-so-subtle message that this weak husband is partially responsible for her violent act.<sup>16</sup> In this way, along with Jael's gender deviance, the poem suggests that Heber's failed masculinity contributed to her demise.

Finally, it is at the sight of Sisera, "a goodly man and footsore, whom I knew," that Jael's early morning dream of glory rushes on her again:

*Saying, this man is weary, lure him in  
And slay him; and behold eternal flame  
Shall blare thy name up to the stars of God.  
I called him and he came. The rest is blood,  
and doom and desolation till I die! (55)*

Thus, de Tabley's "Jael" concludes, offering a complex portrait of the biblical figure that leaves unresolved whether the audience is to feel disgust at the "mother-snake," sympathy for the household drudge, or a mix of both.<sup>17</sup> What is clear is that the poem is shaped by gender debates, not only about the role of women, but also about the importance of a certain masculine deportment for the broader society. Although the central character is certainly Jael, the poem's portrayal of the minor characters suggests that failed masculinity is as much, if not more, to blame for Jael's fate as she herself is. This means that although some aspects of de Tabley's poem draw on typical representations of the femme fatale, when Jael shares her private experiences as wife to a craven husband, that image is undercut. Further, the poem resists the idea that Jael's murder undermines the masculinity of Sisera. Instead, through Jael's telling, the slain general remains glorious and dignified even in death. She has done nothing to humiliate or effeminate the mighty warrior. In this way, the slain Sisera provides a contrast to the weak and effeminate characters of Heber and Barak.

To be sure, Jael is hardly exonerated for her crime. Her relentless self-condemnation ensures that, like other Victorian women killers, Jael be regarded as twice guilty, both for her crime, and also for reaching beyond the bounds of conventional gender categories.<sup>18</sup> One could say that de Tabley's "Jael" is a poem about gender failure, both female and male. It leaves the impression that if men don't fulfill their own roles properly, the consequence both for their wives and "goodly men" may be devastating. If, as some scholars argue, the book of Judges depicts a gradual descent into chaos (including the mere fact of women being judges and warriors), de Tabley's rendering of the Jael and Sisera tradition offers a

nineteenth-century version of that chaos. When men are not men, women may not be women and everyone suffers.

*Edwin Arlington Robinson's  
Jael: All Women in One?*

In 1932, American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson mentioned one of his poems in a letter written to his longtime patron and friend, Mrs. Laura E. Richards. He notes, "I am pleased that you seem to like 'Sisera.' All the nice ladies who have read it seem to like it. There must be something in it that appeals to the feminine heart."<sup>19</sup> Robinson's comment showcases his facetiousness as he points to the "nice" ladies' enjoyment of this tale of female-on-male violence. More importantly, the comment also hints at the gender divide that runs through his poetic version of the story.

When "Sisera" was published in 1932, Robinson was one of the best-known poets in America. He was celebrated for his sympathetic treatment of human experience, especially human failure. Perhaps the best articulation of this view is found in Robinson's reply to the reviewer in *The Bookman*, who reviewed his first collection of poetry by highlighting Robinson's grim worldview, noting that "the world is not beautiful to him, but a prison-house." To this Robinson responded, "The world is not a prison-house but a spiritual kindergarten where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell god with the wrong blocks."<sup>20</sup> Robinson's later poetry shows a growing attention to the Bible, but his interest is more literary than theological. And, he apparently viewed it as rather dark literature. In a 1924 letter to Mrs. Richards, he reports that he is reading the Bible, and finds it "a most bloodthirsty and perilous book for the young" while "Jehovah is beyond a doubt the worst character in fiction."<sup>21</sup> If this was still Robinson's view eight years later, it calls for a nuanced reading of a poem where Jael claims "my hand was God's hand who held the nail" and "my way to serve him was magnificent" (1176).

"Sisera" was first published as part of a collection titled *Nicodemus*.<sup>22</sup> It is one of Robinson's medium-length poems, containing seventeen stanzas of varying length.<sup>23</sup> Following the chronology of the Judges 4 narrative, the poem progresses in three movements: Sisera's flight (Judg. 4:17), his deadly encounter with Jael (Judg. 4:18–21), and Barak's final meeting with Jael (Judg. 4:22). Whereas the biblical account of these three episodes offers only the sparest of details, Robinson adds vivid description and dialogue to develop all three characters.

### Sisera's Despair

Given the title of the poem, it is not surprising that the opening lines of the poem are written from Sisera's perspective.<sup>24</sup> The audience experiences Sisera's jump from his chariot, as from a "flying cage" and his "landing prone for a moment on hard earth . . . bruised and amazed to find himself unbroken." Robinson then provides a reason for Sisera's impending encounter with Jael, as the narrator describes an "insane" three-hour run to what Sisera hopes will be sanctuary in the tents of the neutral Heber the Kenite. Sisera knows both Heber and Jael because of their association with his king, Jabin. The first mention of Jael in the poem introduces an erotic element to her character.

*[Heber] was in Canaan frequently, moreover,  
King Jabin's guest and friend; and his wife Jael  
Was Jabin's adoration and desire,  
And Sisera's despair. She frightened men  
With her security, and she maddened them  
With dark hot beauty that was more than woman's,  
And yet all woman—or, as Jabin said  
To Heber, enviously, perhaps all women  
In one . . . (1170)*

Sisera's despair, then, is not his mad flight from the enemy, but the effect that Jael has had on him in the past. As a representative of "men," Sisera is shown to be both drawn to her beauty and unnerved by her self-confidence. There is also a suggestion of rivalry for Jael among Heber, Jabin, and Sisera.<sup>25</sup> For her part, Robinson's Jael paradoxically transcends the category of "woman" while also representing all of them. In this way, the biblical story of Jael and Sisera becomes again a story of gender relationships. Even though Robinson stays close to the biblical text by depicting Sisera's flight from battle, the military struggle soon gives way to a gender struggle as Jael is cast as the quintessentially tempting, yet frightening woman.

The narrator claims that there is "more of Israelite in Jael than Canaanite or Kenite" providing another rationale for Jael's impending violence. But this knowledge escapes the desperate Sisera as he thinks only of Jael's face. "Her smile that would save a captain, as her frown would blast a king if she but willed it so." Sisera's footrace concludes ominously as he collapses "helpless at the feet of Jael," because while she does "smile unseen" at him, in this case, "her smile would save no captains,/Or none today."

## Some Ravening Fiend of Israel

The poem now switches to Jael's perspective. At the sight of Sisera, she infers,

*"If this comes out of Canaan  
for me to save, then Israel must be free,"  
She thought; and a thought slowly filled her heart  
With music that she felt inflaming her  
Deliriously with Deborah's word fulfilled. (1171)*

This initial image of an inflamed and delirious Jael is an early hint of how Robinson will develop her character. The reality of her internal state is juxtaposed with Sisera's perception of Jael's cool fingers and warm breath as she washes his face. His erotic interest in Jael is again suggested as he opens his eyes to see her eyes shining over him, "with a protection in them that he feared/Was too much like a mother's" (1171). The dialogue that follows between Sisera and Jael is heavy with irony and foreshadowing. On the one hand, Robinson again carefully includes details from the biblical prose version—Sisera's thirst, the offered drink of milk, his instructions to Jael should someone come looking for him, and Jael's assurance that he should not fear (See Judg. 4:19–20). On the other hand, these details are spun out in ironic ways that evoke sympathy for Sisera while depicting Jael as a duplicitous dangerous woman. So, for example, Sisera whispers to Jael, "Let me drink, Or let me die. Let me die here with you,/If I must die" (1172). Meanwhile, Jael smiles at him "mysteriously," urging him to drink. "It is the milk of life you are drinking," she tells him. "It will make you leap like a new lion when you are awake." And when Sisera warns Jael that "There will come after me some ravening fiend of Israel to destroy me" the description fits Jael far more than Barak.

As Sisera drifts off to sleep, urging Jael to say to the Israelites, "No man was here . . . No man . . .," the narrator presents the figure of Jael as one thoroughly transformed by her violent plan. If she looked like a protective mother to Sisera, now she is depicted as an animal poised for attack.

*. . . She waited, crouching,  
And watched him with exalted eyes of triumph  
That were not any longer woman's eyes,  
But fixed and fierce and unimagined fires  
Of death alive in beauty and burning it. (1173)*

Jael repeats Sisera's words almost manically at various points in the stanza that follows: "... No, Sisera ... No man ... No Sisera ... No man ... no man ... no Sisera." Meanwhile, Robinson darkly twists the poem's maternal image, depicting Jael hunched over Sisera before she strikes and "crooning above his face like a mad mother" (1173).

Fire imagery appears throughout the poem to reinforce Jael's fervid state even while Robinson retains the biblical story by placing Jael's killing of Sisera in the context of Canaanite oppression of Israel. If her body is alive with fire, it is "A fire that healed in her the wrongs and sorrow of Israel sold in Canaan to a king who made a sport of his malignity,/ And Sisera's . . ." (1174–1175). Similarly, when she greets Barak "With arms aloft,/And eyes afire with triumph and thanksgiving" (1175), there is no question that Jael understands her act as a liberating one, performed with God's assistance and as a fulfillment of Deborah's prophecy. Nevertheless, Robinson's Jael is overly fixated on the impending celebration of Deborah. And when Barak arrives, his character functions to raise serious doubts not only about the legitimacy of Jael's act, but also about women's behavior in general.

### "Is this what women do?"

The last six stanzas of "Sisera" are devoted to dialogue between Barak and Jael, in which Jael appears ever more out of touch with reality and Barak ever more perplexed by women. Their encounter begins with Barak's admiration of Jael's (again) fire-filled eyes, coupled with his amused sexual taunt that if Sisera was in Jael's tent, she "must have promised him/More than a man may give to make him stop" (1175). This allusion to promised sex goes unanswered, but Barak's comment suggests he views Jael in the same erotic way that all the other male characters in the poem do. However, he abruptly shifts the subject to offer a version of Sisera's flight that radically challenges the point of Jael's "triumphant" killing. If Judges 4 gives the impression of Barak in hot pursuit of the escaped Sisera, in Robinson's poem Barak states matter-of-factly that he and his army could have caught him at any point if they wanted to.

*We might have seized him, if necessity  
Had said we must, and we might have him now  
To count with his lost thousands; but we knew  
That Heber's tent would hold him, if such running*

*As his might last until you took him in.  
 At first, and for some time, we only watched him;  
 And all the horses watched him. Never since man  
 Was born to run has there been such a running  
 As this of Sisera's here today in Canaan.  
 Children who are unborn will emulate it;  
 And aged men will rise up out of chairs,  
 Remembering Sisera, and sit down again. (1172–1173)*

Barak's account gives the impression that Jael's supposedly divinely inspired deed was completely unnecessary. It also implies a sharp contrast between Barak's view of his male counterpart and his eventual assessment of Jael. Granted, the picture of the Israelites and their horses simply watching Sisera's desperate retreat on foot paints a quite pathetic picture of the Canaanite general. Still, Barak's admiring report of Sisera's run suggests that even when utterly defeated and defenseless, Sisera found a way to impress Barak. On the other hand, he will not be impressed with Jael when she shows him what lies in her tent.

At Barak's request, "Well, where is he?" the narrator points to the distracted mental state of Jael "who had partly heard him." As she urges Barak to follow her, Jael claims that she will have the praise of Barak, of Israel, and of Jehovah for what she has done. Meanwhile, the poem offers no evidence of praise from anyone. In the biblical version, Deborah and Barak lead songs of praise. In Robinson's version, only Jael will sing of her own deed but not before she shares a memory that hints at her unstable psychological state.

*. . . Since I remember,  
 I have heard voices of high prophecy,  
 Telling me to fulfill myself with patience  
 And readiness against an untold hour.  
 Now is the hour. The chosen of the Lord  
 Are told, if they will hear; and when the Lord  
 Has need of them they serve him—as they must.  
 My way to serve him was magnificent,  
 And will be praised forever . . . See him, Barak!  
 Tell Deborah what you saw. Tell Deborah  
 That he is dead! Tell her that he is dead!  
 Tell her that everything that she foretold  
 Has come to pass. Tell her that he is dead! (1176)*

If one reads Jael's words at face value they may seem to simply reflect the biblical theme of prophetic fulfillment. But Robinson has added Jael's "memory" to the biblical tradition, a memory of a lifetime of hearing voices! He also uses repetition, together with Barak's response, to raise doubts about Jael's point of view. If the reader is disturbed by her frenetic lines, so is Barak. His rational approach to the violence of war contrasts with the fervid exclamations of Jael.

*Barak, abrupt in battle, and in slaughter  
Not subtle, till now had always made of war  
A man's work and of death attending it  
An item necessary for a total.  
So long as he should live, and live to fight  
For Israel and for glory of the Lord,  
Others would cease to live if they opposed him;  
For that was the Lord's way, and Israel's way.  
But this was not. (1176–1177)*

Nicholas Ayo, who wrote a dissertation on Robinson's use of the Bible, suggests that the poet was intrigued by the amoral quality of Jael, and juxtaposed it with the ethical point of view offered by Barak.<sup>26</sup> At this point in the poem, that ethical perspective is developed as Barak, on seeing the nail driven into Sisera's head, expresses uncertainty, fear, and distrust of Jael. He says nothing about prophetic fulfillment, but shakes his head at the sight of the dead man. He speculates inwardly that one who killed like this, "Might one day flout her fealty to Jehovah/and lust for Baal. She might do anything" (1177). Indications of gender-bending slip in, as Jael stands before Barak "taut and erect" and he is bewildered and astonished by her self-possession. Eventually, "he made as if to throw/His hands away . . ." (1177), turning then to speculation over women in general. As in the beginning of the poem, Jael again stands in for all women, this time in her dangerous unknowability.

*A world that holds so much for men to know  
Must have been long in making. The Lord pondered  
More than six days, I think, to make a woman.  
The book of woman that has troubled man  
So long in learning is all folly now.  
I shall go home tonight and make another.*

*The wisest man alive, wherever he is,  
Is not so wise that he has never wondered  
What women do when they are left together,  
or left alone.” (1178)*

The last words from Barak link Jael, and all women, to a tiger waiting to spring. Leaving his thought unspoken, Barak, “scowling and thoughtful” voices his own version of the “Woman Question.” “The tiger’s wife, we’re told . . . I’ve all to learn./Is this what women do?” (1178). While it is not clear what Barak or Robinson intends with the word “this” (murder sleeping men?) it is surely not a good thing that “women do.” Thus, the male voice exits the poem with a both an air of judgment and acknowledged ignorance about women in general, articulating a familiar cultural trope of the dark mysteriousness of women. At another level, the bewilderment of Robinson’s Sisera nicely captures the bewilderment of generations of readers who have wondered about this biblical figure’s actions.

However, Sisera’s words are not the final words of the poem. The last stanza is reserved for Jael, who speaks “as if answering a voice/Farther away than Barak’s” (1178). Again, Jael fixates on what should be told to Deborah. Six times across the stanza she instructs Barak on what to “Tell Deborah.” But her insistence that “This right hand of mine was God’s” and “my hand was God’s that held the nail” and “Jael and God together/Made Sisera what you see” (1178) remains noticeably lacking in corroboration from the narrator, or any other character. Jael’s final urging is for Barak to tell Deborah to sing. Here Robinson’s deft and ironic use of the Jael-Sisera tradition shines. His concluding stanza sounds much like biblical poetry, ringing with praise to God, and speaking of peace and a new day breaking. But coming after Barak’s rational assessment of Jael, her solo voice goes on too long. No less than ten references to singing build to an almost manic crescendo, which effectively invites readers to join Barak in shaking their heads at Jael.

*And say to Deborah, ‘Jael says, Sing to the Lord!’  
For now there shall be peace  
In Israel, and a sound of women singing  
A sound of children singing, and men singing—  
All singing to the Lord! There is no king  
In Canaan who is king of Israel now!*

*This day has ended—and there is no King  
 In Israel but the Lord! Sing to the Lord!  
 Let Israel see the dark of a day fading,  
 And sing!—praising a day that has an end. Let Israel  
     see the light of a day breaking,  
 And sing!—hailing a day that has a dawn.  
 Sing to the King of Israel her Thanksgiving!  
 Sing to the King of Glory! Sing to the Lord! (1178–1179)*

In his study of literary influences on Robinson, Edward Fussell similarly sees Jael's concluding song of triumph rising "in an ironic and intense representation of near hysteria." From his perspective, Jael's assumption that she is God's agent is "the most fanatical *hubris*."<sup>27</sup> To be clear, this latter observation is not a gender-specific trait from the poet's perspective. According to Ayo, Robinson had a lifelong preoccupation with the notion of prophecy and the psychology of the prophet. In particular, Robinson explores the "hazardous ambiguities of taking one's conscience as the ultimate criterion of the validity of religion experience."<sup>28</sup> His poem "Young Gideon," which appears with "Jael" in the same collection, is further evidence of this interest. As a character, however, Gideon is not depicted as manically unbalanced. Instead, he appears alternatively fearless and fearful about the legitimacy of the "Voice" he hears.<sup>29</sup> Compared to Gideon's fairly reasoned approach to his prophetic experience, Jael's delirious state is even more striking.

Finally, in spite of the ways that Robinson's poem differs from Judges 4 and the biblical assessment of Jael, her concluding call to praise has notable parallels with the end of the book of Judges. With her celebration of the demise of Sisera, she also celebrates the absence of a king ("This day has ended—and there is no King/In Israel but the Lord! Sing to the Lord!"). In the book of Judges, after many chapters of murder and mayhem, one finds this pointed conclusion: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. 21:25 NRS). To be sure, Robinson's Jael celebrates this lack of king as the end of foreign oppression. But the final editors of Judges see it another way. From their perspective, the absence of a king explains the chaos in Israel. Robinson's poetic revision of Judges 4–5 thus raises the question of whether Jael's murder of Sisera should be read, not as prophetic fulfillment, but as an example of someone acting on misguided notions of what is "right." If so, the example appears guided by and reinforces gender

stereotypes. Unlike de Tabley, Robinson nowhere explores the issue of a failed or problematic masculinity. Instead, the rational men in his poem contrast with the mysterious, irrational, and unethical Jael, who is “all women in one.”

### *Florence Kiper Frank's Feminist Jael*

Between the publications of these two poetic representations of Judges 4–5, Jael made her theatrical debut. Notably, she did so under the direction of a woman. On October 20, 1914, Florence Kiper Frank's *Jael—A Poetic Drama in One Act* was performed at the Chicago Little Theatre. A graduate of the University of Chicago, Kiper Frank was already an accomplished writer by the time she wrote *Jael*.<sup>30</sup> Her publications from this period reveal a keen interest in social issues, especially the feminist movement.<sup>31</sup> For instance, the poem “Song of the Women” is a forthright statement to “lordlings and masters” about a “distant vision” of social justice. Women are not beggars or “suers for favor,” Kiper Frank writes.

*We do not come pleading, O masters who in your  
might  
Set us our toil and our measure—the rhythm of your delight.  
Slave we have been, and plaything, and mother to bear  
you a son—  
But now is the plaything a woman and the toil of a slave is done.*<sup>32</sup>

Kiper Frank's interest in women's rights is also evident in her play titled *Cinderelline; or, The Little Red Slipper*, published a year earlier than *Jael* in 1913.<sup>33</sup> This comedic play is a parody of the fairy tale “Cinderella.” In Kiper Frank's version, Cinderelline's sisters mock her because she wants the vote and tells men about it, works and earns money, goes to college, and lectures in public places. In sum, “she's not womanly.”<sup>34</sup> Whereas her sisters both hope to marry, Cinderelline makes clear that she is not looking for a husband. In the end, she does marry the “prince,” a wealthy poet, but not for his money. She first confirms that aside from his devotion to her (which may prove tiresome), he also has “desires, dreams, aspirations, an eager interest in the teeming world of men and women, love of music and books.” He also must like children and come to her “pure in thought and pure in deed.”<sup>35</sup> This lead character's interest in a particular type of man

for a mate will be paralleled by Kiper Frank's rendition of Jael, who will also long for a certain type of lover and father for her child.

In the same year that *Jael* was performed, Kiper Frank wrote a lengthy review article that appeared in *Forum* that provides additional insight into her work. In "Some American Plays from the Feminist Viewpoint," she argues that with the possible exception of class-consciousness in the labor movement, the "woman movement" is "the one most important tendency of the century."<sup>36</sup> For this reason, she argues, playwrights should focus on the subject in the theater, wrestling with "the very fundamentals of society—the relation of the sexes and consequently the next generation."<sup>37</sup>

### *Jael, A Poetic Drama*

Given Kiper Frank's avid interest in women's rights, one might expect to find her Jael agitating for the right to vote. This is not the case. As the poet/playwright turns from the comedic and modern version of *Cinderelline* to the tragic *Jael*, she also turns from overt political statements. Kiper Frank's play maintains the ancient setting of the biblical poem, while her characters speak poetically in King James English. She interweaves biblical quotations from Judges 5 with biblical-sounding speech so that the lines between direct quotes, biblical allusions, and her own verses are blurred.<sup>38</sup> All of this lends an air of antiquity to the story. Nevertheless, the play does focus on the relation of the sexes, and in an oblique way, the role of women in determining their own fate. In this sense, one anonymous reviewer is on target when he notes that the play is "biblical in style, meter and subject, but altogether modern in treatment."<sup>39</sup> It is certainly no coincidence that Kiper Frank took an interest in Jael, independent and unconventional biblical woman that she is. The playwright will accentuate both of these traits in her recasting of the biblical tradition by introducing sexual desire into the story and portraying Jael as character who is vocal and active with respect to this desire.

*Jael* was part of a triple bill under the heading of "Sundry Lovers," which was featured on the opening night of the theater's second season. In the final page of the script, Kiper Frank's play is listed among the Chicago Little Theatre's publications as "Jael—a tragedy in one act, in verse."<sup>40</sup> That this story of Jael and Sisera is conceived as a tragedy is in keeping with both de Tabley's and Robinson's poetic renditions of the tradition. The play does not have a happy ending. Still, different from the male-authored poems, Kiper Frank's dramatic version of Jael does not condemn herself,

nor is she judged by other characters in the play. She is a self-assured woman who kills out of passionate love. When the curtain falls, the audience is left to draw their own conclusions about this strong, determined, and decidedly exotic woman.

“Art thou as a man?”

Kiper Frank's play opens with Jael conversing with her handmaiden Abigail, a character she adds to the biblical tradition. The women are in Jael's tent listening to the sounds of an approaching storm. Abigail is afraid, both of the coming storm and of the look of Jael. For her part, Jael admits that her heart is “terrible” within her, “as a dark storm it croucheth,/that has not yet burst/or disclosed its lightnings” (6). As for her handmaiden's fear, Jael suggests that Abigail has a “women's heart, meek, fearful, mild, with desire toward her husband,” as if such desire was a sign of weakness (7).

As the conversation continues, so do questions about Jael's view of marriage, as well as her ideas about motherhood. Like de Tabley's Jael, this Jael has nothing but scorn for her husband Heber. She explains to Abigail that Heber is a spy who has left to give news of the Israelite encampment to Jabin. The information has little effect on Abigail, who is more concerned about Jael's brooding. She cannot understand why Jael is not happy with her life. After all, Heber is rich with sheep and gives Jael jewels for her neck. Jael's tribe has favor with the Canaanites and Israelites alike. Children will come in the “Lord's time.” Overall, Abigail reasons with Jael, her life is very peaceful and pleasant.

Yet, just as Cinderelline would not be content with money alone, neither does this “sober” life as Jael calls it, appeal to her. As for children, Jael asks scornfully, “Thinkest thou that I am as the women of the Israelites/who cry out to their husbands,/“Lord, lord, give us children or we shall perish!” (9). This revealing line makes clear that in Kiper Frank's interpretation of the story, Jael is definitely not an Israelite. Moreover, she is not primarily interested in motherhood. Her comment so calls attention to Jael's gender deviance that Abigail asks her outright, “Hast thou no women's heart within thee?/Art though a man?/Hast thou no desire toward bearing and suckling,/And the pattering of little feet in the doorway?” (9). In spite of the archaic language, one can well imagine such questions being asked of the New Woman at the turn of the century.

It turns out that Jael does, in fact, want a child, but her description of her ideal child does not include the pattering of little feet. She tells Abigail

“with fierce feeling” that she wants a “warrior-child”—“Fierce and strong limbed/and the hair upon his head as the shadows of the cedars./He shall hurt me in suckling and I shall laugh at the pain of it/For that he is strong and willful.” She describes this dream son as having long dark lashes, blue eyes, and “lips as red as a pomegranate cut at the feast of Astarte” (9). With the reference to the Mesopotamian goddess, Kiper Frank highlights in another way Jael’s non-Israelite status. Later in the play, Jael will call on and identify herself with the foreign goddess. Thus, Kiper Frank’s version of the tradition aligns itself with the scholarly suggestions we saw in chapter 2 regarding goddess traditions underlying the figure of Jael.

This imagined son leads also to an expression of Jael’s low regard for her husband. When Abigail assures her that she’ll have a son by Heber, she angrily protests, “Heber the Kenite begets not such children!” (10). Similar to de Tabley, Kiper Frank situates Jael’s actions in the context of Heber’s failed masculinity. In Jael’s eyes, Heber is a weak and ineffective man who cannot satisfy his wife or produce the kind of child that she wants.

This desire for a son who is different from one her husband can beget may seem a strange addition to the Jael-Sisera tradition. But in the early twentieth century there was a great deal of discussion about the new “science” of eugenics, which emphasized proper breeding and the women’s role in regeneration. Kiper Frank raises the topic explicitly in *Cinderelline*. Her review essay mentioned earlier also includes discussion of a play on the topic that she describes as “a pretty analogy of plant and human breeding.”<sup>41</sup> So perhaps Jael’s longing for a warrior-child also reflects, either implicitly or unconsciously, this fascination with the theory of eugenics that in this period was so closely connected to women’s role as mothers.<sup>42</sup> At the very least, Jael is portrayed as a character who considers what type of man she needs to produce the son that she longs for. If Jael is to be a mother, she desires a man fit for the task of regeneration. Enter Sisera.

The conversation about childbearing is interrupted by the growing noise of the storm, which the women realize now includes the sounds of battle. Watching from the tent door, they see the Canaanite army fleeing from the host of Israel that “pursueth.” Abigail wonders whether “the mightiest man in all the land of Cannan” has also been vanquished. But Jael sees that “One alighteth from his chariot—/A mighty man—the mightiest!/Him they have not put to the edge of the sword,/For his arm is strongest in battle” (12). Here the stage directions instruct Jael to comprehend with “thrilling significance” that Sisera is heading her way. At this point, she literally pushes Abigail out of the tent and into the storm. “Out,

out, Abigail!/Hither cometh he to me, Jael,/who shall be blessed among women” (18). As will soon become clear, Jael does not attribute this blessedness to a prophetic call from God, or for the impending assassination of Sisera. She has something else in mind as Sisera approaches. Although Abigail cries in protest, “clinging to Jael’s knees in a frenzy of fear,” Jael is ruthless and shoves her out into the stormy night, claiming, “This is mine hour!” (14). The poor frightened handmaid is last heard wailing and moaning from offstage (and which point one wonders if the play is a farce after all).

“Who are thou? Thou strange woman!”

If de Tabley’s Jael seeks to transcend her tedious life by finding a moment of glory, Kiper Frank’s Jael hopes that the “the mightiest man in all of Canaan” will bring some action to hers. With Abigail removed from the scene, the playwright suggests that Jael now becomes a character, who, wearing a slight smile, “no longer reveals herself but is hiding things enigmatic.” These stage directions hint at the femme fatale of earlier artistic renditions of Jael, and the audience may fear for Sisera as she slips out of the tent, urging the approaching warrior to “Turn in to me. Fear not” (14). But as Kiper Frank’s version of the story develops, it appears that this Jael speaks without guile. She desires Sisera, she plans to seduce him, but she does not (yet) have murder in mind.

Kiper Frank shapes the initial encounter between Sisera and Jael in a way that highlights the fierceness of both characters, while also portraying them as lovers who are “undone by each other” as Judith Butler puts it. That is, Butler could well be describing the interaction between Jael and Sisera when she observes that in the case of desire, “One does not always stay intact,” but “one is undone by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch. . . .”<sup>43</sup> Of course, Sisera will eventually become more “undone” than Jael, but not before the senses of sight, touch, and smell are richly evoked through allusions to the Song of Songs.

Kiper Frank’s portrayal of Sisera communicates his fierce warrior status, while also taking into account the fact that he has just fled from battle. Thus, the exchange between Jael and the Canaanite general alternates between Jael’s claims that he is a mighty warrior and Sisera’s insistence that she is mocking him. Sisera speaks sarcastically of himself, brooding over the food and drink that Jael provides. His speech interweaves quotations from Judges 5:19–21 to recount the events of the battle before

concluding, "But I am fled away to the tent of a woman/And I feast/I feast as one who has conquered/Yea, I am a mighty man and valiant!/I feast and make merry/in the tent of a wanton woman" (17).

These last words prompt the first instance of violence between Sisera and Jael. She lashes at him with a dagger when he labels her "wanton." He, in turn, seizes her wrist while warning, "I could break thee with one hand./With my own arm I could crush thee and fling thee from me" (17). And he does fling her away, though this threat of violence does not elicit fear from Jael. In this way, she perhaps embodies the type of women Kiper Frank describes in her "Song of the Women," women who are "proud and fearless" and "right comrades of fearless men."<sup>44</sup> In any case, Jael responds to Sisera's violence by drawing an explicit contrast between Heber and Sisera. The stage directions have her approaching softly, clasping her arms around Sisera's neck and saying seductively, "Heber is not so mighty./Him I can conquer with soft words." Sisera reinforces this contrast: "I am not a man for soft words, Jael./I am not such as Heber the Kenite" (17–18). At which point Jael confesses, "Nay, thou art a man of battle, fierce and scornful, / Such as mine eyes have yearned for." Again, Sisera responds violently, "striking her roughly" for what he perceives as more mockery (18). And again, this does not induce fear or anger in Jael. There is no sense that she wishes to retaliate or defend herself from his violent treatment. This will *not* be the reason that she eventually kills him. On the contrary, Jael tells Sisera that this is what draws her to him. She speaks to him the language of the battlefield, describing her love with military metaphors, "Tis for thy hardness I love thee./Thy hardness has conquered me, Jael,/who have never until now been vanquished" (19). She implores Sisera to look into her eyes to experience the "fierce strength of desire."

*Look at me, Sisera!  
Are not my lips made for love,  
twin breasts for loving! (20)*

When Sisera protests, "Nay, I am giddy from the fight and have no man's heart within me," Jael corrects him.

*Yea, a man's heart hast thou!  
For the heart of a man is desire toward a woman  
And the desire thereof is as strong as death,  
And fierce as the lust for battle  
As the floods of Kishon it whirlleth and overwhelmeth  
It is like unto a burning fire. (21)*

One might expect this scene to progress along the lines of the *femme fatale* depiction of Jael where her seduction of Sisera is merely a plot. But Kiper Frank's Jael is earnest in her love for Sisera, even if it will eventually take a deadly turn.

And even at this point, there are hints of exotic danger in Jael's entreaties that Sisera questions, but is helpless to resist. As her seduction continues, she turns from battle metaphors to language of fertility and aphrodisiacs, contrasting the God of Israel with Sisera's fertility gods. The former is "a man of war" against whom none can stand. In contrast, Sisera's gods are gods of fertility and overwhelming desire.

*But thy gods are not like unto him Sisera  
Thy gods are the gods of the groves,  
And of the budding vineyards, (22)*

She goes on to describe an earth that "leapeth with joy," with "fountains of living water," flowing sap, flowering pomegranates, fragrant mandrakes and "all manner of sweet smelling spices" (22). Jael reminds Sisera of the youths of Baal and maidens of Astarte who laugh and sing in the temples.

*Now laugh thy gods of the groves—  
Even Baal and Astarte  
Now laugh the youths of Baal  
And the maidens of Astarte in the full of the moon  
at the doors of the Temples  
Madness cometh upon them—  
Such madness as though now knowest, Sisera,  
Who art overcome with love.  
And with the kisses of thy mouth shalt kiss me. (22)*

At this, the stage cues have Jael "abandoning herself to Sisera" while he "embraces her passionately" crying "Jael! Jael! Who art thou? Thou strange woman!" (22). While Jael's words evoke the love poetry of Song of Songs (1:2), Sisera's question recalls the biblical warnings against the strange woman of Proverbs 5:1–23. That is, the biblical allusions pull in two different directions. Jael voices the words of a female partner in a mutual (if forbidden) love relationship while Sisera raises the specter of the deceitful foreign woman whose lips drip honey but whose feet go down to death (Prov. 5:3, 5). If the audience is aware of the allusions, their sympathies too, might be pulled in two different directions.

The play, however, goes on to develop the allusions to the Song of Songs in more detail. First, Jael briefly identifies with the foreign goddess, but quickly turns to affirming that she is simply “woman.” Speaking “mystically,” she asks,

*Thinkest thou that I am Astarte, perchance—  
The secret one whose kisses the sun waketh in the springtime?  
Thinkest thou that I am she of the budding earth  
Whom Baal embraces with desire? . . .  
Yea! I am Astarte  
and there are secret things in my heart, Sisera.  
Yea! I am Astarte of the temples of love and of the  
flaming torches  
Of the secret thoughts of lovers and the longings thereof  
and the madness! (23)*

But when Sisera affirms her claim, “In truth thou art the goddess, Astarte, who has bewitched me!” Jael responds,

*Nay, Sisera, not Astarte, not the goddess—  
but Jael—and woman! (23)*

At this point, both characters are swept up in a reverie of passion. Allusions to the Song of Songs reappear with Sisera and Jael now speaking to each other like the lovers in the song.<sup>45</sup> In “dreamlike abandon” Sisera describes Jael’s arms, eyes, hair, lips, and breasts. Like the king in the Song of Songs, Jael notes that Sisera is tangled in the tresses of her hair (see Song 7:5). Finally, “overcome of love and wearied of battle” he falls asleep with promises from Jael that he will “wake to delights” (25). As she gazes on his sleeping face, it is Jael’s turn for description. Sisera has the same features as the warrior-child for which she longs—dark lashes, blue eyes, lips as red as a pomegranate. His hair is black as a raven, his arms are as pillars of marble (see Song 5:10–15). If Robinson’s Jael eyes burn with the fire of vengeance, Jael is consumed with fiery passion.

*As a consuming flame my desire came upon me:  
I am eaten with the fierce burning thereof  
and my heart is as ashes. (25)*

“Now art thou mine, my beloved, forever!”

So why does she kill the man for whom she burns with desire? In the final moments of the play, Jael imagines various scenarios that lie ahead of her. First she considers the mockery and stoning to which they both will be subjected should they be discovered by the Israelite tribes. To this she cries, “Rather would I slay thee as thou sleepest than they shall make mock of thee and scorn thee” (26). Stirred by a sudden wave of jealousy, she next imagines a dark-eyed virgin waiting for Sisera’s return alongside his mother. Here Kiper Frank quotes the biblical line “Why tarry the wheels of his chariot?” but puts it a different use. Jael asks the question “with malicious mimicry,” not quoting Sisera’s mother from Judges 5:28, but speaking instead as the imagined virgin in waiting. Jael then addresses this woman, “Yea, be thou fearful beloved of Sisera! / For if indeed thou waitest, / thou will wait long his coming!” Finally, convincing herself that Sisera did not know of desire or the love of a woman before her, Jael moves on to the last tragic scenario. They will be forced to part. Sisera will have to return to his own people and she to her husband. Faced with this reality, not unlike de Tabley’s Jael, this passionate Jael sees a life of desolation stretching before her.

*With longing shall I be scourged, with unappeased desire.  
Through the night shall I walk in the growing season.  
I shall call upon thee, Sisera,  
And the winds of the heavens shall answer.  
I shall call upon thee,  
While thou—  
In the far days  
Surely a woman waiteth.  
A woman of thine own people,  
Whom thou shall choose from the fairest—a virgin!  
A woman thou shalt kiss  
With the kisses I have taught thee! (29)*

With this, Kiper Frank fashions Jael’s murder of Sisera as a crime of passion. Randomly spotting the mallet and tent peg, Jael acts impulsively, driven by love, desire, and jealousy. Before the deadly blow, she calls again on Astarte. “Hear me, O Goddess, / And behold me! / See my deed, And unto thee sanctify me!” And thus she strikes with the cry, “Now art thou mine, my beloved, / Forever!” The play concludes with the sounds of

Barak and the Israelites approaching. Jael flings wide the tent door, “with arm upraised exultingly” (30).

What should we make of this Jael? Are we to throw up our arms and exalt along with her? On the one hand, it is easy to see the influence of feminist sensibilities in Kiper Frank’s Jael. She is a strong and independent female character who acts to get what she wants. On the other hand, there are aspects of this Jael that would make a contemporary feminist cringe. She wants to be loved by a “strong” man who exhibits his strength in violence against her. She scoffs at Abigail for having a woman’s heart and desire for her husband, yet she is overcome with her own desire for Sisera. She scorns her weak female counterparts who *depend* on children, yet dreams of bearing her own warrior-child. She speaks of her fierceness and wields a weapon to defend her honor, but also uses her sexual appeal to seduce her offender.

This mix of feminist agency with stereotypical gender relations might be explained by an essay that Kiper Frank wrote decades after the play. In 1950, she wrote an optimistic piece not on the “New Woman” per se, but what she termed the “Bisexual American Woman.” Of course, this phrase now has a much different connotation than what Frank meant in 1950. For her, a bisexual woman described the American woman who has appropriated all the privileges of the male sex, while maintaining all the prerogatives of her own.<sup>46</sup> As she puts it,

The critics of the softer sex have misunderstood her intensions. They have accused her of wanting to be a man. . . . But she has known right along that to a duplicate man’s sphere would furnish her poor pickings indeed. Why, when she can encompass the world of two sexes, should she be satisfied with only one?<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps there are some early vestiges of this “bisexual” woman in Jael. Like Kiper Frank’s bisexual woman, this Jael apparently wants to claim certain culturally defined male privileges like independence and strength, while maintaining female prerogatives, like the ability to seduce and bewitch men.

### *Why Jael Kills in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*

All three of the cultural performances of Jael and Sisera discussed in this chapter situate the Jael-Sisera tradition in its ancient setting. Yet all three introduce elements that bring the story into the present. De Tabley’s

Victorian Jael appears the most conflicted. The poet offers an anguished and remorseful Jael who elicits sympathy both for her situation and for God's clear condemnation of her act. His poem offers a tragic view of the event, trading the celebration in the biblical poem for a critique of failed gender roles. Robinson's poem is equally nuanced. Jael sings for the liberation of Israel and adamantly affirms the word and hand of God supporting her deed. She pays no heed to Barak's ethical line of questioning, opting for religious fervor over rational thought. In this way, Robinson's poem affirms the cause of liberation while subtly undermining the figure of Jael. On the one hand, one might see her as an example of Robinson's "bewildered infants trying to spell god with the wrong blocks," in which case she is simply being human, in his perspective. On the other hand, Robinson introduces gender difference to the poem. Sisera is clearly the rational, clear-sighted man in contrast to the crazed, fiery, perhaps hysterical woman. Though the two stand together and gaze at the body of Sisera, they are miles apart in comprehending one another. In contrast to both of these presentations of Jael, Kiper Frank offers a passionate, desiring, determined version of the female figure. Similar to de Tabley's poem, here too, a craven Heber haunts the background and the warrior Sisera maintains his manliness despite his death at Jael's hand. But in contrast to Robinson's remorseful protagonist, Kiper Frank's Jael has no regrets. And if there is any judgment of her deed, it is not encouraged by the play or its female playwright. To be sure, the play is listed as a tragedy, but this is no *Romeo and Juliet*. Kiper Frank allows Jael to stand in triumph as the curtain closes. In this way, her rendition is closest in mood to the biblical versions among these three poetic renditions. What Kiper Frank's representation of Jael means in light of the New Woman of the twentieth century, she does not make explicit. Nevertheless, Jael's eschewing of convention in the dramatic play invites contemplation of her links with twentieth-century women. Moreover, seen from the distance of the twenty-first century, this female poet's strikingly self-determined Jael stands in sharp contrast to both the pathetically remorseful and disturbingly fervid Jael's of the male poets.

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## *Jael Rides the Second Wave of Feminism*

IF Jael poked her toes in the waters of feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by the late twentieth century, she had taken the plunge. While first wave feminism was varied in its response to Jael, second wave feminism unequivocally saw her as an ally. This chapter will examine three different fictional appropriations of Jael written during the 1970s and 1980s, all by feminist authors. The first is Joanna Russ's 1975 novel *The Female Man*, the second, Aritha van Herk's 1981 novel *The Tent Peg*, and the third, Sara Maitland's 1978 novel *Daughter of Jerusalem*.<sup>1</sup>

Russ and van Herk offer contemporary figures of Jael. Their stories bring her out of the ancient world into the twentieth century (or beyond). Maitland retells the biblical story in its ancient context, but juxtaposes it with a contemporary narrative. All three of the authors enlist Jael in the battle against patriarchy, but once again Jael is pulled in different directions. This time she finds herself on two sides of a theoretical debate among feminists about female identity and political strategy. On one side, Jael represents the position of theorists who reject the idea of a biologically based gender identity in favor of the view that gender is always culturally constructed. On the other side, Jael demonstrates the idea of a universal female essence that all women share. The three novelists differ also in their treatment of the violent and erotic aspects of Jael, though all three authors find both elements to be an important part of their representations.

### *A Cyborg Is Born: Joanna Russ's Jael*

From 1969 to 1971, American science fiction author Joanna Russ wrote *The Female Man* (hereafter, *FM* in citations), though perhaps due to its provocative content, it was not published until in 1975.<sup>2</sup> Although the book has since garnered high accolades as “probably the most outstanding feminist science fiction novel of the decade,” at the time of its publication, many critics thought otherwise.<sup>3</sup> Russ’s novel is structurally challenging and intentionally vexing at times, including a section in which she takes a preemptive tongue-in-cheek strike against her critics’ negative reactions.<sup>4</sup> As Farah Mendelson aptly summarizes, “A novel like *The Female Man* dissects the world, the construction of fiction, the assumptions of science fiction, the responses of reviewers, and finally the responses of far future readers.”<sup>5</sup> The aspect of the world that is most critically dissected is cultural assumptions about gender identity, especially ideas about women and femininity.<sup>6</sup> For example, Russ displays both her sharp wit and her fundamental disagreement with the notion of an innate female essence when the character Joanna becomes “a woman with a woman’s brain.” Joanna’s description of the experience amounts to a sarcastic rejection of feminist celebrations of a “female nature.”

You will notice that even my diction is becoming feminine thus revealing my true nature; I am not saying “Damn” any more or “Blast”; I am putting in lots of qualifiers like “rather,” I am writing in these breathless little feminine tags, she threw herself down on the bed, I have no structure, (she thought), my thoughts seep out shapelessly like menstrual fluid, it is all very female and deep and full of essences, it is very primitive and full of “and’s,” it is called “run-on sentences.” (*FM* 137)

Because of its fragmented, nonlinear structure, it is impossible to provide a plot summary of *The Female Man*. The book has nine parts, which are divided into smaller numbered sections. Some of these sections are only a sentence long, as in “There are more whooping cranes in the United States of America than there are women in Congress” (*FM* 61), while others go on for several pages. Together these sections construct a picture of the lives of the novel’s four major characters: Jeannine, Joanna, Janet, and of course, Jael. The four women share the same genotype but live in parallel universes that represent not only different gender relations

but also different socioeconomic conditions.<sup>7</sup> Jeannine lives in the 1960s in a United States that never went to war and thus never came out of the Depression. In her world, marriage and children represent the ultimate achievement for women. Joanna lives in the United States in 1969, the same cultural moment in which Russ wrote. Janet lives in a parallel universe in the distant future in a place called Whileaway. It has long been inhabited only by women, the men having died off (supposedly) in a plague that occurred centuries ago.<sup>8</sup> Jael, who does not fully enter the novel until the eighth part, lives in a parallel universe in what might have been North America, but is now Womanland, a continent engaged in a long-standing cold war with Manland. While the women have developed a reproductive technology that makes childbearing without men possible, they lack the resources to completely overthrow Manland. Conversely, while the men are militarily stronger, they depend on the women to provide babies. Jael thus enters the novel on a recruitment mission, looking for assistance and resources from the women. Overall, the novel explores both the differing realities of the four women, and their encounters with one another's worlds made possible by the technological sophistication of Janet and Jael.<sup>9</sup>

While this may seem complicated enough, the novel is also written in a way that suggests that three of the Js, Jeannine, Janet, and Jael, are all part of Joanna's imagination (which of course, they are, if Joanna represents the author). This is evident, for example, in Joanna's repeated observations about how Janet entered her life. She remarks, "After I called up Janet, out of nothing, or she called up me (don't read between the lines; there's nothing there) I began to gain weight, my appetite improved, friends commented on my renewed zest for life . . ." (*FM* 29). Elsewhere she claims, "I made her up" and "I imagined her . . .," but does so in ambivalent ways, inviting alternative understandings. Moreover, while the characters have distinct identities, they are also depicted as internally overlapping and coexisting. At times, a disembodied presence of one character is able to observe and participate in another character's story. If this all sounds confusing, it is. Russ creates an unstable narrator and, as Jeanne Cortiel observes, "permanently shifting, multiple and—above all—contradictory identities, with no attempt to integrate them."<sup>10</sup> The effect is a fragmented reading experience that parallels the fractured identities of the four Js (as the narrator refers to them).<sup>11</sup> One is never sure who is who, what is "real," and what is imagined. Significantly, this means that the character Jael, while distinct, is also an inherent part of the other three characters.

## “I liked it!” Violence and the Cyborg Jael

Before the reader knows who or what Jael is, the character briefly enters the story at the beginning of part two. Seemingly out of nowhere, a disembodied voice asks, “Who am I? I know who I am, but what’s my brand name?” The unidentified voice continues:

Me with a new face, a puffy mask. Laid over the old one in strips of plastic, a blond Hallowe’en ghoul on top of the S.S. uniform. I was skinny as a beanpole underneath except for the hands, which were similarly treated, and that very impressive face. (*FM* 19)

This mysterious character, who goes on to include details of how her appearance frightens people, concludes by ominously assuring the reader, “You’ll meet me later.” But apart from this initial hint of a surgical treatment and some voiceover presence along the way, the reader and the other Js do not fully meet Jael until part eight.<sup>12</sup> When she does appear, she will easily qualify as the most hardened and violent of the post-biblical representations of Jael, but perhaps the most wounded and vulnerable as well.

Jael’s bodily entrance into the narrative is prefaced with the same disembodied words she utters earlier, “Who am I?” and “What is my brand name?” Her incorporeal aspect and the ability to frighten others are reinforced when all four of the Js finally come together. Seeing Jael for the first time, Joanna describes her as “really terrifying for she is invisible.” Joanna goes on,

Against the black curtains her head and hands float in sinister disconnection . . . there are spotlights in the ceiling which illuminate her gray hair, her lined face, her rather macabre grin, for her teeth seem to be one fused ribbon of steel. (*FM* 158)

With this representation of Jael, we are a very long way from the irresistibly beautiful Judith, or the Jael of Robinson’s poem who captivated every man who saw her. Adding to Jael’s frightening appearance is her “most unnatural” silver eyes and hair. The reader learns also that Jael is an employee of the Bureau of Comparative Ethnography and that she is a master of disguises.

Johanna goes to describe Jael’s “real” and “private” laugh. It sounds like “a hard, screeching yell that ends in gasps and rusty sobbing, as if

some mechanical vulture on a gigantic garbage heap on the surface of the moon were giving one forced shriek for the death of all organic life" (*FM* 159). Such a detailed description of this mechanistic laugh is a fitting prelude to the discovery that Jael is a cyborg. She is also a trained assassin, whose hands and fingers have been surgically altered so that, when activated by increased adrenalin, loose skin pulls back to reveal sharp talons. False teeth cover a ribbon of steel in her mouth. Hair-pinned shaped scars under her ears bear witness to the surgical treatment mentioned earlier. Eventually, the reader learns that the increase of adrenaline activates a "voluntary hysterical strength," putting Jael in a mental and physical state to kill (*FM* 179).

Needless to say, as a cyborg, Russ's Jael introduces a level of indeterminacy not yet seen in post-biblical representations of Jael. Here is a figure not fully human, nor fully machine. She is not clearly feminine or masculine. Her surgically enhanced, partly mechanical body provides her with masculine attributes of strength and mastery.<sup>13</sup> So also her training prepares her for jobs where she successfully poses as a man—first as a Manlander police officer in one of the underground communes in her own world, and then as a Manlander diplomat in a primitive patriarchy on an alternative Earth. Moreover, Jael scorns the women in her world who want to "win men over by Love," mocking them with the conventional image of a coquettish feline.<sup>14</sup> "There's a game called Pussycat that's great fun for the player; it goes like this: Meeow, I'm dead (lying on your back, all fours engagingly held in the air, playing helpless. . . ." Of herself, she admits, "It took me years to throw off the last of my Pussy-fetters, to stop being (however brutalized) vestigially Pussy-cat-ified, but at last I did and now I am the rosy, wholesome, single-minded assassin you see before you today" (*FM* 186–187). Ironically, while Jael boasts about overcoming her feline tendencies, her bodily modifications play on the flipside of feline flirtation. As March-Russell observes, her deadly claws suggest a "grotesque parody of the woman as catlike predator."<sup>15</sup>

Jael puts these claws to use in a key scene of violence in *The Female Man*. She arranges for Jeannine, Joanna, and Janet to accompany her on a business trip to Manland so they can see it for themselves. Jael intends to meet with her business contact, but his superior, "Boss-man," unexpectedly asks to see her. During their meeting, the conversation quickly progresses from the business at hand, to Boss-man's covert proposal for unification between the men and women, to a seduction-turned-rape scene. Through it all, Jael makes repeated reference to her part (or lack

thereof) in the proceedings by emphasizing the invisibility already associated with her character. As “Boss” talks and eventually rants away, Jael reports, “I sit on, perfectly invisible, a chalk sketch of a woman. An idea. A walking ear” (*FM* 176–177). Later, she is “Numb. Numb with boredom. Invisible. Chained” (*FM* 177). Meanwhile, “Boss” is portrayed as the epitome of the crude male chauvinist.

You want me. It doesn't matter what you say. You're a woman, aren't you? This is the crown of your life. This is what God made you for. I'm going to fuck you. I'm going to screw you until you can't stand up. You want it. You want to be mastered. (*FM* 181)

And so on. By this point in their encounter, the reader may well wonder why it is taking Jael so long to kill him.

When she finally does, the combination of sex and slaughter that scholars have seen in the biblical story, especially in the form of a reverse rape, is made explicit. “Boss was mumbling something angry about his erection,” Jael says, “so, angry enough for two, I produced my own. . . .” (*FM* 181). She activates her cat-like weapons against the male aggressor, and Russ activates the biblical text.

I raked him gaily on the neck and chin and when he embraced me in rage, sank my claws into his back . . . He fell on me and I reached around and scored him under the ear, letting him spray urgently into the rug; he will stagger to his feet and fall, fountainty to the ground; at her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down; at her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down dead. (*FM* 182)

The evocation of the biblical verse reminds the reader of the biblical inspiration for this trained assassin. Russ's narration of the scene also anticipates feminist biblical scholarship that sees in Jael's action a self-defense against rape. However, whereas the biblical poem shifts immediately to Sisera's mother after the line quoted above, Russ describes Jael in the immediate aftermath. “Jael. Clean and satisfied from head to foot. Boss is pumping his life out into the carpet” (*FM* 182). Later, when one of the Js asks whether the killing was necessary, Jael retorts, “I don't give a damn whether it was necessary or not . . . I liked it” (*FM* 184). If some commentators have been uncomfortable with Jael over the centuries (and they have), Russ's version of Jael would do little to reassure them. She kills out

of self-defense, but she also relishes the act. While the behavior of “Boss” in this scene may justify Jael’s use of violence, her response to the killing challenges the self-defense rationale. After all, Jael is an assassin and Boss is not her only victim. There is more to her violence than self-defense. As the novel continues, Jael provides a more nuanced explanation of her killings, one which exposes her own weakness and vulnerability.

### “Still flat on our backs”

Following the assassination, Jael has a “dream of guilt” that narrates the story of her own transformation from a girl much like Jeannine (one so embedded in her patriarchal world that she does not know it), to a murderer, not of just one man, but of multiple men. At this point, Russ’s Jael emerges as one of the more complex and introspective representations Jael, if also one of the more disturbing. De Tabley took us into the interior of Jael to find a character racked with guilt and regret over her violent grasp for a moment of glory. In reflecting on her murderous ways, Russ’s Jael will also speak of guilt, but in a paradoxical way, “I am not guilty because I murdered. *I murdered because I was guilty*” (FM 195). This guilt, she explains, was the “guilt of sheer existence.” She learned to be guilty as a young girl by absorbing the knowledge that women who were raped were at fault, wives who angered their husbands were at fault, and small girls beaten up on the playground were at fault. They were at fault simply because they *were*.

I knew it was not wrong to be a girl because Mommy said so; cunts were all right if they were neutralized, one by one, by being hooked on to a man, but this orthodox arrangement only partly redeems them and every biological possessor of one knows in her bones that radical inferiority which is only another name for Original Sin. (FM 194)

Given this guilty existence, or rather, guilt because of existence, Jael claims that murder is her “one way out.” Her “hard logic,” as Joanna will eventually call it, is that by violently asserting her existence she will gain restitution. Although the cyborg Jael lives in a parallel *future* space, Russ has said that she envisioned her as a “medieval personification of anger.”<sup>16</sup> That anger is at full force as Jael asserts her existence:

I am the force that is ripping out your guts; I, I, I, the hatred twisting your arm; I, I, I, the fury who has just put a bullet in your side.

It is I who cause this pain, not you. It is I who am doing it to you, not you. It is I who will be alive tomorrow, not you. Do you know? Can you guess? Are you catching on? It is I, who you will not admit exists. Look! Do you see me? I, I, I, Repeat it like magic. (*FM* 195)

While this tirade is directed at her victims, one has the sense that Jael repeats the “I” to convince *herself* of her agency. And yet, Russ’s Jael seems only able to define herself by asserting what she is not. “That is not me. I am not that. Luther crying out in the choir like one possessed; NON SUM, NON SUM, NON SUM!” (*FM* 195).<sup>17</sup> Tragically, for all of her anger, violence, and assertions of being an independent, “grown-up woman,” Jael fails to find the agency that she seeks. She is still invisible. Still chained. As she admits, “Still hurt, still able to be hurt by them! Amazing. You’d think my skin would get thicker, but it doesn’t. We’re all of us still flat on our backs” (*FM* 183). Ironically, this painful admission recalls the “pussy-cat” image, with Jael as much on her back as the other women that she so readily dismissed.

Another crucial scene in the book reveals that there is more to Jael than her role as a killing machine. Although the death scene does involve sexual language, Russ also shows Jael in an actual sex scene that is driven by Jael’s own sexual desire. In this case, Jael is definitely not on her back. She has sexual needs which she readily fulfills. And, even though Jael repeatedly claims that she “is an old-fashioned girl,” the sex scene suggests that she is far less conventional than she admits. True, Jael does not have love affairs with other women, as she points out, but neither does she have sex with men. Her partner is a machine, a “lovely limb” of her automated house in the form of a blond-haired, blue eyed, muscular, “beautiful” figure Jael calls “Davy.” Davy originated with germ-plasm from a chimpanzee, but all “his” behavior is controlled by computer (*FM* 199).

Jael narrates her sexual encounter with Davy in detail and she is the dominant partner throughout the scene. Unbeknownst to Jael, the Js witness sexual encounter, just as they witness the murder. As with Jael’s violence, Jeannine and Joanna are appalled by this bold display of her sexuality, and even more so when they learn what Davy is. At this, Jael remarks, “Alas! those who were shocked at my making love that way to a man are now shocked at my making love to a machine; you can’t win” (*FM* 200). More interesting is Janet’s bemused response. Observing Jael’s orgasm, the character from the all-women *Whileaway* summarily remarks, “Good

Lord! Is *that* all?" (FM 198). Whether this question refers to sex with male bodies, to sex in general, to Jael's own sexual performance, or something else altogether is uncertain.

In fact, Janet's comment and the sex scene itself elicits multiple interpretations as demonstrated by the varied response of readers. Writing in the mid-1980s, Judith Spector suggests that Jael's sex with Davy is an object lesson (so to speak) about the objectification of women's bodies. From her perspective, the scene makes clear that sexual objectification is only appropriate with robots. In this sense, Spector argues that Janet's comment implies that "sex between a person and a dehumanized object is not—and should not be regarded as being—highly significant."<sup>18</sup> In contrast, Valerie Broege argues that Jael's sexuality may illustrate that women (like men) have strong sexual desires and appetites, and also appreciate "unchallenging sexual companionships."<sup>19</sup> For her part, Russ has praised feminist utopias that convey "... an insistence that women are erotic integers and not fractions waiting for completion. Female sexuality is seen as native and initiatory, not (as in our traditionally sexist view) reactive, passive, or potential."<sup>20</sup> Jael certainly is initiatory in seeking out sex with her "boy-toy" and perhaps the point is to show Jael's desire and sexuality independent of "Boss-man's" distorted view of her. But none of these comments take into account Jael's own cyborg status. Jael is not simply a woman having sex with a machine—she is part machine herself. The more recent comments of Veronica Hollinger do take this into account as she sees in Jael as a useful figure for queer theory. Drawing on Judith Butler's idea of cultural intelligibility, Hollinger reads the sex scene with Davy as a challenge to normative heterosexuality.

This particular sexual activity—the female cyborg fucking her automated/subhuman lover—falls outside the Butlerian arena of cultural intelligibility. It cannot be categorized as straightforwardly heterosexual; but nor is it anything like homosexuality. Retrospectively, Jael's sexuality can most easily be located within the spacious non-category of queer.<sup>21</sup>

I return to Hollinger's work below as an example of the way Russ's cyborg Jael continues to influence theoretical discussions about identity and technology well into the twenty-first century.

### “The hateful hero with the broken heart”

One reason for Russ's particular representation of Jael, not just in the sex scene but as a character in general, may be found in an essay she wrote a few years after the novel's publication titled, "Amor Vincit Foeminam: The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction."<sup>22</sup> Examining this theme in ten twentieth-century science fiction novels, Russ excoriates their authors not only for terrible writing, but also for the predictable pattern that is played out in the novels' gender wars. According to Russ, each of the books tells a tale of women rebelling against men. The men inevitably persevere, but their victory is neither a military nor a political one. Rather, the women undergo a "quasi-religious conversion" and the men win naturally, simply as bearers of the phallus, or the "Sacred Object," as Russ dubs it. She observes, "So 'natural' is male victory that most of the stories cannot offer a plausible explanation for how the women could have rebelled in the first place."<sup>23</sup>

Russ offers something different with her portrayal of Jael. Jael's battle with "Boss-man" does include a phallic display, but it does not end with a "natural" male victory. Nor is there any hint of a female conversion. On the contrary, Jael is pointedly bored with the man's sexual advances. She bides her time until she can kill him and then is happy to do so. Moreover, although Jael is still working to gather support for her war at the novel's end, Russ leaves open the possibility of a Womanland victory. At least, Jael suggests to Janet that her own utopian world is the result of just such a victory. She tells Janet that her story of a plague that wiped out the men on Whileaway, is only that.

Whileaway's plague is a big lie. Your ancestors lied about it. It is I who gave you your "plague," my dear, about which you can now poetize and moralize to your heart's content: I, I, I, I am the plague . . . I and the war I fought built your world for you, I and those like me, we gave you a thousand years of peace and love and the Whileawayan flowers nourish themselves on the bones of the men we have slain.  
(*FM* 211)

Still, while Jael is eager to gather support for her cause and settle the war between the "Haves" and "Have-nots," one wonders what life she would have beyond it. Jael's only worldview is of Us versus Them. She cannot

think beyond the conventional categories of male/female. Maintaining this binary gives meaning to her existence, to her very embodiment. Paradoxically, while her sole mission is eliminating “them,” if she was fully successful, the cyborg assassin would no longer have a place in her world. As Hacker notes, “. . . Jael lives for The Man in just as consuming a way as Jeannine does. . . .”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, her murderous ways are slowly killing her. Each activation of her deadly force is a type of self-sacrifice. “Every time I do this,” she says, “I burn up a little life. I shorten my time” (*FM* 183). Thus, in the end, Jael is a monstrously dark fantasy, but a fantasy nonetheless. She offers no practical solution to the problem of women’s oppression. For this reason, perhaps, her methods are refused by both Joanna and Janet.

Nevertheless, the extent to which she is Joanna’s fantasy is evident at the close of the novel, as the four Js are saying their goodbyes. Here Joanna claims that she likes Jael best of all. She admits that she would like to *be* Jael, “twisted as she is on the rack of her own hard logic, triumphant in her extremity, the hateful hero with the broken heart” (*FM* 212). The last glimpse of Jael recalls the gargoyle image that Russ had in mind with her creation. Janet’s final audacious description of Jael reveals a wistfulness about the power that she, the personification of anger, represents.

She wears an expression that began perhaps twenty years ago as a tasting-something-sour look and has intensified with time into sheer bad-angelry, luminous with hate. She has cords in her neck. She could put out her captive’s claws and slash Schraff’s tablecloth into ten separate, parallel ribbons. That’s only one one-hundredth of what she can do. (*FM* 212)

### “How plastic is humankind!” Russ’s Jael as Forerunner to Third Wave Feminism

What else Russ’s Jael “can do” has been the subject of theoretical reflection well into the twenty-first century. Readers have continued to learn from her Jael, likely in ways that Russ did not foresee. The exclamation in the subheading above—“How plastic is humankind!”—is made by the cyborg Jael as she reflects on how different each of the Js are even though they share the same genotype. This observation about the plasticity of humankind, or to put it another way, the constructed nature of cultural identities,

is one of the many ways that Russ anticipates theoretical developments in feminist and gender theory. More specifically, as Cortiel observes, with the construction of characters like Jael, Russ participates in a discourse of gender indeterminacy that informs the development of gender theories such those of Donna Haraway and Judith Butler.<sup>25</sup>

In 1985, ten years after the publication of *The Female Man*, Donna Haraway wrote her groundbreaking essay, *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*.<sup>26</sup> The 1980s debates about Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (aka "Star Wars") and struggles within feminism about the idea of female essentialism formed the context for Haraway's essay. Like Russ, she rejects the essentialist position in second wave feminism along with its speculation about the golden days of primitive matriarchies and goddess worship. Haraway evokes the figure of the cyborg (part organism/part machine, part nature/part culture) as a metaphor for the type of boundary dissolutions that would make possible non-dualistic ways of thinking and living. She insists that cyborgs are not born in a garden, but are fraught entities, "illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism," and as such, useful figures for asserting the complicated and fractured identities of both women and men in a postmodern world.<sup>27</sup>

Of particular interest here is Haraway's discussion of what she terms "cyborg writing." Such writing is "about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other."<sup>28</sup> Central among these tools is storytelling. Cyborg writing, Haraway suggests, offers new versions of origin stories that subvert the central myths of Western culture. While Haraway does not explicitly mention Jael in this context, she does cite Joanna Russ, along with several other science fiction authors, as "theorists for cyborgs." She notes that in Russ's *The Female Man* "characters refuse the reader's search for innocent wholeness while granting the wish for heroic quests, exuberant eroticism, and serious politics."<sup>29</sup> The description of "exuberant eroticism" seems an overly optimistic reading of this dark (if darkly comic) and often troubling novel, but *The Female Man* does communicate serious politics. Moreover, Russ's representation of the biblical character of Jael certainly embodies the complicated and fraught entity that Haraway describes. She was not born in a garden. By the end of her essay, Haraway's appreciation for the type of figure Russ's Jael represents is manifestly clear as she concludes, ". . . I'd rather be a cyborg than a goddess." Joanna Russ would likely concur.

Beyond playing a role in Haraway's influential essay, Russ's cyborg Jael has also been read as prefiguring the emergence of queer theory. As already mentioned above, Veronica Hollinger suggests that Jael represents a queer subject, or as she puts it, "a transitional subjectivity pointing the reader toward a queer understanding of the social/cultural interpellations that shape bodies and desires."<sup>30</sup> In this sense, Jael's question, "What's my brand name?" is not actually a question, as much as a challenge to think outside the conventional categories that define gender and what it means to be human. Here Hollinger draws on Butler, hearing in Jael's question a refusal of easy categorization similar to queer theory's rejection of the "unwanted legislation of identity."<sup>31</sup>

Particularly interesting is the overlap between Hollinger's reading of Russ's Jael as a queer subject and recent interpretation of the biblical Jael in the same theoretical vein. In Deryn Guest's interpretation of Judges 4-5 she argues, "Jael is a figure who unsettles and destabilizes, whose performativity provides one of those unintelligible genders that give the lie to ideas of sex as abiding substance."<sup>32</sup> As we saw earlier, this same destabilizing aspect of Jael shows itself in van Heemskerck's sixteenth-century drawing discussed in chapter 4 (see Figure 4.7). In that case, it was expressed by way of a warrior figure that visually challenges the divide between male and female. In Russ's literary version, this gender unintelligibility comes by way of a cyborg. All of these cases suggest that a woman who commits an act of violence against a man confuses conventional gender binaries and such confusion is not restricted to one particular cultural moment. I will return to Russ's Jael at the end of the chapter. At this point, I turn to another twentieth century feminist author who finds in Jael the female essence that Russ and Haraway resolutely reject.

### *Jael Goes to the Wilderness: Aritha van Herk's The Tent Peg*

Published in 1981, Aritha van Herk's *The Tent Peg* (hereafter *TP* in citations) is a story about the interactions among nine men and one woman who spend an isolated summer working at a uranium prospecting camp deep in the Yukon. The Canadian author began her project as an homage to the country's "totally enormous and seemingly impenetrable" north.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, the men are modeled and named after Canada's famous explorers. The woman is intended as an ally to the wilderness, which van Herk understands as feminine, "as changeable and arbitrary as any stereotyped

woman.”<sup>34</sup> From the author’s perspective, “the demands on this [female] character are enormous; she needs to be androgynous enough to traverse both worlds successfully and she needs to be powerful enough to serve as a catalyst for the transformation of the men.”<sup>35</sup> And in fact, the transformation of men is actually what this book is about. For her androgynous, powerful female character, van Herk draws inspiration from the biblical Jael. The use of Jael is also a way of contributing to the second wave feminist project of reclaiming ancient stories of women. As van Herk argues, androcentric structures and traditions coerced women “into a spiritual and imaginative obedience.” To break the hold of these codified traditions, she believes “it is necessary for women to make new stories, and to revive old and often discredited stories that can give us a sense of experience from which to orient our faith.”<sup>36</sup> So she does with the story of Jael and Sisera.<sup>37</sup>

Van Herk’s research on the biblical Jael for *The Tent Peg* uncovered the sort of negative commentary on the figure of Jael that I discussed in chapter 2. The author was particularly troubled by the fact that not one of the commentators, many of whom were concerned about the violation of hospitality codes, noticed the outcome of Jael’s action: “And the land had rest for 40 years” (Judg. 5:31). Van Herk argues that “in effect, Jael’s violent action brought about a forty year period of peace which is rare indeed, especially in the bloody book of Judges.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, quite different from Russ’s cyborg, van Herk’s Jael, or “J.L.” as she is none-too-subtly named, is a peace-bringer. And because van Herk is intent on recreating old stories, her novel has more sustained allusion to the biblical story than *The Female Man*. For instance, J.L. writes letters to her friend at home, the singer Deborah. Similarly, the tent peg plays a large, if metaphorical, role in the story. Because of the structure of the book—a series of internal monologues by the novel’s characters—these allusions to the biblical story come by way of the characters themselves.<sup>39</sup>

### “She’s a queer one”

The story begins with an explicit gender performance and an emphasis on J.L.’s “queerness.” After withholding her gender identity on a job application for bush cook, she arrives in the Yukon disguised and passing, somewhat successfully, as a man. Her queerness is first noted by McKenzie, the camp chief. There is something wrong with J.L., the chief knows, but he can’t figure out what it is. “I’m beginning to think his problem is he’s queer,” he notes (*TP* 20). Although J.L. soon reveals that she is a woman,

her androgyny remains a type of queerness observed by the men in the camp. If Russ offers a queer body of Jael in the form of a terrifying cyborg, van Herk's J.L. is repeatedly described as "queer" because her body does not conform to clearly intelligible gender distinctions. "She's a queer one," one of the men observes, ". . . not exactly what you'd call attractive, hardly a curve on her" (*TP* 79). Another man opines, "She's flat as a board, a nice bum but no boobs at all . . . you can't even say she's sexy, let alone pretty" (*TP* 107). J.L. is variously described as black and tense, bitter and tight, brittle, unbending, and "not the way a girl should be." She is "hard and angry-like, instead of soft and still . . . all elbows and corners, with short spikey hair" (*TP* 80–82).

In van Herk's book, the wilderness setting creates space for an alternative reality where gender roles can be questioned and challenged. The effect of the wilderness on J.L. is apparent in a scene where she suddenly develops extraordinary shooting skills. Holding the rifle in her hands, she thinks,

It made me realize my own power, that I could turn a gun them and pull the trigger, that up here there are no rules, no set responses, everything is new and undefined, we are beyond, outside the rest of the world. There are no controls here. . . . Out here my anger is as real as theirs, can have as great an effect. (*TP* 86)

This description of the anarchy of the Canadian Yukon resonates with the pre-monarchal setting of Judges 4–5. While it is uncertain whether the editors of Judges looked favorably on the aberrant roles of Deborah or Jael or saw them as a sign of degenerate Israel, there is no doubt about van Herk's view. She uses the "no rules" space of her Yukon story world to legitimate the anger of J.L. and foreshadow the effect it will have later in the book. At the same time, the wilderness is a place that enables transformation, so that, unlike Russ's Jael, J.L.'s anger will not remain her defining characteristic. Instead, as the narrative progresses both the woman and the men in the camp undergo a change. From the men's perspective, J.L. gradually transforms from an angry young woman to a mysterious and compelling figure. For J.L., a change occurs after she accepts the advice of her friend Deborah to stay at the camp even though the men's attitude toward her is difficult to endure. (Incidentally, Deborah communicates with J.L. in the form of a she-bear. On this unusual event, see more below.) Here another point

of contact with the cyborg Jael emerges, the notion of self-sacrifice in the struggle for liberation. Just as Russ's Jael loses some of herself with each violent effort, so also J.L. anticipates what it will cost her to remain at the camp. "What am I, some kind of a sacrifice?" she asks Deborah/she-bear. The reply from Deborah affirms that this is the case, but also suggests that J.L. is not alone. "We all are," she says, "We all are already" (*TP* 111). Exactly who this sacrificial "we" includes is left open to the reader. Does it mean that all women are sacrifices? Or does "we" include everyone, women and men? The latter would suggest that patriarchy infects all people in negative ways and all must give up something of themselves to combat it.

In any case, after this scene the men begin to draw near to J.L. Initially, they had felt awkward and distant from her. But now she becomes the center of camp life and the bearer of a secret, transformative knowledge. One by one the men feel compelled to talk to her, to confess to her, to share their secret fears and anxieties. McKenzie responds particularly strongly to this experience.

Caught then, I feel that if she could only look into my eyes long enough, I would be transformed, transfixed by her sphere of knowledge. (*TP* 146)

Soon other characters feel her pull as well. Thompson observes,

[S]he has somehow become our center, we all orbit her. . . . We look to her for focus. And she stands quietly within our circle, unafraid to bend us back on ourselves.

We look to her as if she has the power to transform. Something makes you want to tell her everything, spill yourself for her. (*TP* 151)

So too, Franklin notes, "She's like a pillar in the middle of the camp. We all shuffle around her, matrixed. . . . J.L. mystery" (*TP* 168). Even Milton, an innocent young boy from a conservative Christian community, experiences the power of J.L.'s presence.

And that girl, that cook. She looks at me, she dares me. I never seen a girl's eyes like hers, just asking you to say something to her. She makes me feel all scratchy and bad, like I've done a sin just looking at her. (*TP* 148)

As the men draw closer to J.L., the nature of her “queerness” shifts. Now she is no longer androgynous, no longer simply mysterious. Instead, she is full of nurturing female essence. As Ivan explains,

She’s got to be the queerest girl I ever met in my life . . . at the beginning of the summer I thought she looked like a boy. Now she seems more female than most women I remember. (*TP* 93)

From the men’s point of view, J.L.’s body changes as well. They no longer remark on her angular flatness but rather on her porcelain skin. Now her “body is alight” and reflects “a heat and radiance.” It is “luminous glass, perfectly turned” (*TP* 211). McKenzie wonders how he could have possibly mistaken J.L. for a man. His reflection reinforces the notion of an idealized female essence.

. . . women are so mysterious, so blind and inward and silent, so tuned to vibrations that we have never been able to hear. They turn in faultless circles, they move like vases forming, always changing, but always perfect. And even J.L., slight and angular as she is, has the fluidity, the deep swirling motion of water. (*TP* 145)

Here, as J.L. stands in for all fluid and swirling women, it is difficult not to recall Russ’s sarcastic comments about women’s shapeless thoughts seeping out “like menstrual fluid.”

### J.L.’s Metaphorical Mallet and Peg

As the title of the novel suggests, the tent peg plays a central, if metaphorical, role in the story, as does the metaphorical mallet. Almost all of the male characters describe a hammering in their head in relation to J.L.’s effect on them. As in the biblical versions, J.L. is a deliverer. But in a radical reversal of the action in Judges 4-5, her tent peg penetrates the minds of the male campers in a way that brings them life rather than death. Rather than killing men, J.L. enables them to escape the clutches of patriarchy.

The story of this transformation makes clear that J.L. also views gender identity in essentialist terms. Even though J.L. eventually speaks of seeing her male campmates as individuals, she begins by regarding “men” in a general sense. They are a “paradox” and a “quandary.” She writes to

Deborah about their audacity, demonstrated in the way men have named a part of their anatomy, the temple, after a place of worship.

The forehead of a man is the seat of wisdom, the place of being, the center of thought. How many of them have we seen posed, head ostentatiously propped on a fist. And temple it is, they worship themselves as intently as we poor females have never dared. Worship their own intellectual capacity when it is (if they only stopped to consider the danger) no larger than ours. (*TP* 172)

J.L. contrasts these self-worshipping men with “we women” in a way that highlights the theme of anger and couples it with a call for action. Her words also point to the influence of the goddess traditions in second wave feminism.

And women, we have no temples, they have been razed, the figures of our goddesses defaced, mutilated to resemble men, even Athena destroyed. Where do you worship when your temples are stolen, when your images are broken and erased, when there is only a pressure at the back of your brain to remind you that we once had a place to worship. Now lost, leaderless, no mothers, no sisters, we wander and search for something we can have no memory of. . . . I know that in the end what matters most is how we survive. But I find myself raging, I find myself waiting angrily for that promised period of peace. I’m beginning to think that unless we take some action ourselves it will never come. It’s time we laid our hands on the workman’s mallet and put the tent pegs to the sleeping temple, if ever we are going to get any rest. (*TP* 172–173)

What exactly this means is shown in J.L.’s individual encounters with the men in the camp. As she puts it, “At first they were just a mass, a clot of men, all of them watching me, pulling at me, indistinguishable. But now they’re separating into themselves, distinct male people” (*TP* 136). McKenzie is a prime example of the transformative effect that J.L.’s presence has. He has suffered for the ten years since his wife unexpectedly and inexplicably disappeared with their children. Only now is he facing the question of why she left and cannot understand what he did to warrant her leaving. Again, the “women’s liberation” context of the novel is fully apparent, as J.L. explains to him that his wife left to “find herself.” When

McKenzie objects that he would not have prevented his wife from doing what she wanted, J.L. explains, "That's it right there. The very idea that you could allow her or prevent her. That's why she left." At this, McKenzie is overcome with shame. "It is the sound of my own assumption that hammers in my temple. I . . . try to drive away the hubris I have committed, believing that another life could be at my disposal that I had any right to try and make it so. The dizzy blackness I feel is shame, nothing more or less than shame" (*TP* 202–203). One could say that J.L. has a similar effect on McKenzie as the Jael of Judges 4 has on Barak and Sisera, that is, she humiliates him. But unlike the biblical story, this is a shame that comes through the self-revelation and introspection that J.L. enables. While not all the men are similarly humbled, each has their own moment of J.L.-inspired penetration. She helps Thompson realize that he should just enjoy his girlfriend and not expect that she will ever "belong" to him. "There is something hammering inside my skull as if she has struck at the one answer I never wanted" he confesses (*TP* 158). She helps Hudson see that his tormentor, Jerome, can't hurt him. "And then it hits me," Hudson relates, "It pierces the fog in my head" (*TP* 170). Ivan, the bush pilot, admits that he has a fear of dying in a crash, and the realization is a "crashing behind his skull" (*TP* 186).

Although J.L. is angry about "men," in general, she does not assign blame to individual men at the camp. In fact, she suggests more than once that the men are not at fault. She comforts the anguished McKenzie by assuring him, "All that socialization, all that pressure. Not your fault" (202). In a letter to her friend Deborah, J.L. writes of the men approaching her individually, "pouring their pestilence into my ears, trying to rid themselves of the poison." She continues:

I can't blame them, the goddess knows they need to tell some body . . . I know that if I repulse them, they may never speak again, they'll have lost their only opportunity to become men. Poor children. (*TP* 172)

This maternal aspect of J.L. comes out at various points in her dealings with the men. For example, for most of the novel, Cap is obsessed with the idea of sex with J.L. "How does it feel to screw a witch?" he wonders (*TP* 125). But when he finally finds himself naked with her in the camp shower, he responds like a young child. "For a moment only the silken feel of her body hammers in my temple and then I lay my head on hers and I cry . . .

She holds me and comforts me like I'm some big goddamn baby" (TP 193). As J.L. dries Cap off much like a mother with her child, he wipes his face with his fist. Here then, is another way of finding a maternal side of Jael—not Mieke Bal's perverse mother that gives birth to the dead body of Sisera, but a nurturing and comforting presence that brings peace to the men at camp.<sup>40</sup>

If all of this transformative hammering seems unrealistic, it is because van Herk is not striving for verisimilitude in her story. As she emphasizes in a number of interviews, the author understands the book to be an allegory and J.L. to be a symbol. She variously identifies J.L. as a witch-figure, a shaman, and a priestess.<sup>41</sup> As van Herk explains,

Only her superlative ability enables her to survive within that male world, and only with her supernatural skill can she commune so completely with the natural world around her. She is depicted as a realistic character, but at the same time, the things she does are completely unrealistic. She can shoot a gun perfectly without ever having learned, she calls down a mountain and then stops the resultant landslide, she has a conversation with a mother grizzly bear, and she dances on fire, all impossible acts. It is she who mediates between nature and the men, she who serves as the catalyst for their private epiphanies.<sup>42</sup>

In spite of all the peace that is mediated at the camp, one man does not respond to J.L.'s presence in a positive way. Jerome is "the archetypal villain" who goes "unshriven."<sup>43</sup> He antagonizes J.L. throughout the narrative, beside himself that a woman has infiltrated the camp. Jerome's opposition to her presence reaches a climax when he enters her tent armed with a rifle, intending to rape her. J.L.'s reaction to this threat evokes the violent warrior image that is more in keeping with the biblical Jael of Judges 5. Although she doesn't actually kill her would-be rapist, she does fight back viciously, kicking him, wresting the gun from his grip, aiming and pulling the trigger. Jerome avoids a bullet to his groin because the safety is still on the gun. When McKenzie runs to her tent, he finds J.L. standing over Jerome, "holding his Magnum in her hand as fierce and steady as an old warrior" (TP 221). Thus, although J.L. is a peace-bringer to most men in the story, when she is threatened with violence, she responds in kind. It is at this point in the novel that voice of the biblical Deborah appears. Van Herk devotes a chapter to her song, quoting Judges 5:24–27. But again, in

spite of the way these verses celebrate a man's death, J.L. never actually kills anyone. Her penetration remains figural. Even when faced with physical confrontation, J.L. manages to escape without the use of violence after all. Perhaps this is because of van Herk's belief "that women who espouse violence are a product of the imprinting of male values . . ." <sup>44</sup>

Russ and van Herk, with their differing versions of a twentieth-century (or later) Jael, are positioned on two sides of the second wave feminist debate about gender essentialism. Van Herk's basic assumptions of gender essentialism permeate her novel as much as Russ's cyborg Jael challenges and deconstructs them. To the end, J.L. exudes a mysterious innate quality of "female" that is there in spite of her boyish body. This is nowhere so evident as in J.L.'s final scene where she dances for the men, moving in circles just as McKenzie understands women to do. As the men stand around a burning plywood table, J.L. puts on a skirt, jumps on the table, lifts her arms, and whirls. She is aware of the men's eyes following her body, "breasts and hips alive with the tingling fire" (*TP* 225–226). So while J.L. enters the novel disguised as a man, she leaves it with her female attributes fully on display. This optimistic and celebratory picture of the dancing J.L. presents a sharp contrast to the closing image of Russ's Jael, her face luminous with hatred. The two versions of Jael also differ in their treatment of the gender binary. As we have seen, in her hatred of men (at least human males), the boundary-blurring cyborg actively and insistently reinscribes gender binaries. There are no individual men in her worldview—only Them, the Haves. Somewhat surprisingly, J.L., the quintessential female, finds her way past the general tag of "men," to see clearly the broken and confused individuals that surround her. But in showing her in this light, van Herk strips Jael of the deadly violence that has made her figure persist in human imagination over the centuries.

### *Jael Battles Back against Domestic Violence: Sara Maitland's Daughter of Jerusalem*

The last work to be considered in this chapter is a vignette from British author Sara Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* (hereafter *DJ* in the citations) (1978).<sup>45</sup> I include it here as another example of a second wave feminist author appropriating the figure of Jael to express the anger and frustration of women in the mid- to late twentieth century. Different from the work of Russ and van Herk, Matiland juxtaposes a version of the Jael-Sisera

tradition in its ancient Israelite setting with a contemporary story of a British couple's struggle to conceive a child.<sup>46</sup> In fact, each of the nine chapters of the novel ends with a brief vignette featuring biblical women. The juxtaposition of these biblical characters with scenes from Liz and Ian's life create an intertextual reading of gender relationships between the ancient and modern world.

Maitland is a devout Catholic and her work is infused with spiritual themes and biblical allusions (even apart from the vignettes). She also is a feminist and her interest in the relationship between women and men, as well as women's friendships is apparent throughout the book. The main character, Liz, enters the story wearing a T-shirt that reads "I am a humourless feminist" as she prepares to visit her fertility doctor. The plot is driven by this doctor's suggestion that Liz's inability to conceive is psychological—she does not really want to be a mother. As the narrative unfolds, it is evident that both the formerly promiscuous Liz and the formerly (?) gay Ian have personal issues to address as they try month after month to conceive.

The scene with Jael and Sisera comes at the end of a chapter in which the growing tension between Liz and Ian reaches a violent climax. They fight bitterly. Ian accuses Liz of marrying him as "some damn prize bull." Liz responds icily that she would hardly have picked him for such a role, "lapsed faggot with a guilt complex" and "impotent queer" that he is. At this, Ian beats her. He bangs her head up and down on the sofa arm, strikes her face and breasts, then tells her to get out (*DJ* 150). Liz flees and seeks refuge with a male colleague at work and then with her friend Nancy. Both tell her she is not to blame. The chapter ends with Liz and Nancy holding hands across the table, feeling close to each other.

On the next page, the story of Jael and Sisera begins with this line: "Jael fondles the tent peg, one hand wrapped firmly round it, the other stroking the pointed end, caressingly" (*DJ* 161). One could say that Maitland is as heavy-handed with her use of erotic language as van Herk is with her hammering metaphorical mallet. Indeed, this blatant link between sex and slaughter is hard to take seriously. But Maitland is deadly serious in her depiction of Jael. As the scene continues, Jael identifies ever more closely with her weapons of choice. "The weight of the hammer is with her now, the pointed stick is no longer alien but a part of her person" (*DJ* 161). Following this hint of gender switch, a reverse rape scene unfolds in disturbingly graphic detail. Before reaching this point, in a way that recalls elements of both de Tabley's and Kiper Frank's versions of the

story, Jael dwells on her admiration of Sisera, especially compared to her husband. She sees him as a king, “bred on royal food.” “He is the most powerful, the most beautiful man she has ever seen: he is more beautiful than her husband ever dreamed of being, more lordly, more manly, more virile.” Bringing him milk, she admits, “For the first time in her life, it is a joy to service a man” (*DJ* 161). As he sleeps, Jael is moved to kiss his glowing temple “with a tenderness she has never felt before” (*DJ* 161). Again, the narrator mentions that Jael is “very joyful” as she steps outside to gaze at the starry night sky. Then, comes the killing of Sisera.

He groans once, unable to resist the strength of her stroke, she has heard that groan before. She goes berserk; long after it is necessary, bang, bang, bang, physical, powerful she bangs in and in; the blood and the flesh flow out over the sheepskin coverlet, over the pillow, she is delighted with her power, her strength. Bang, Bang, Bang. Her moment in history, her song, her story, her revenge.

After, she sinks exhausted against the bed, lying close to the bleeding hulk, that had once been a king: she sees that with his last reflex he has shat himself, and, worn out by her own excitement, she giggles. Looking at the mess, she has her greatest moment of triumph; when her husband returns from his war and sees what she has done he will be very very frightened, of her, of her. (*DJ* 161)

The novel’s juxtaposition Jael’s admiration for Sisera with her brutal killing is disturbing to say the least. The explanation for the murder of the beautiful man whom Jael admired lies in the bloody scene she creates for her husband to see upon his return. Sisera may be an enemy of Israel, but in this version of the story, he is a victim of Jael’s anger and revenge toward her husband, and seemingly toward men in general. Murdering him is a triumph for Jael because it will make her husband fear her.

The story then shifts to Deborah’s perspective. Like Jael, Deborah expresses the thrill of freedom from the oppression of her husband. Looking over the slaughter on the field, she laughs. The narrator remarks, “she had looked so at her husband but had never before felt the freedom to laugh” (*DJ* 162). It’s not evident what “looking so” at her husband means (wishing him dead?), but it is clear that Deborah now laughs with pride at her accomplishments. She called up and led an army to victory, turning Barak into a general. And it was she who “had been Barak’s courage and the courage of the whole armed force for the tribes of Israel” (162).

Nevertheless, Deborah's sense of pride is overwhelmed by another emotion as she stands at Jael's tent.

It no longer bothered her that she was an ugly woman; she had wept over that throughout her youth, but now it did not matter anymore. Her words had delivered Sisera into the power of a woman. (*DJ* 162)

While the women are giggling and laughing over their power, the men are afraid. This theme of fear predominates as the story moves toward its conclusion. Barak "feels sick with fear" and does not want to go into the tent again to see the "bloody mass, the remains of a worthy enemy" (*DJ* 161). Meanwhile, the two women smile and hold hands (like Liz and Nancy), "breathing in the stink of fear." As Deborah holds up the right hand of Jael for the army to see, the men are silent. A series of questions focuses on the source of the women's emotions and power.

What is the source of the joy that lights up these two women? What are the words of the song that they will sing together? What power drove the hand that drove the nail? The men cannot help seeing the women, they cannot help feeling the hatred, and the joy. They are sick with fear. (*DJ* 161)

The questions are left unanswered. But the fact that Deborah is called "the Prophetess," hints at a divine force that empowers these women in their struggle against men. The story ends with the men's fear hanging in the air, unresolved.

There is nothing subtle about Maitland's appropriation of the Jael-Sisera tradition. By situating her version of the story as a counterpoint to Liz's experience of domestic violence, Maitland "constructs an affinity of feeling between Liz and Jael as if Liz would like to do to Ian what Jael did to Sisera."<sup>47</sup> Conversely, the narration of violence between Ian and Liz alongside the story of Jael provides a reason for the biblical figure's action. Maitland, like Russ and van Herk, shapes the story so that Sisera's murder becomes a justified retribution by a victim of male violence and oppression. In this case, the threat of violence is not from "beautiful" Sisera *per se*, but from Jael's husband and seemingly from all men. The effect of interpreting the biblical story by way of literary juxtaposition builds a powerful link between the ancient world and the contemporary one. Not only does the parallel reading make the ancient tradition relevant to the lives of

twentieth-century women, it also suggests that the type of violence experienced by Liz is as old as the Bible.

That said, Maitland's use of Jael is not without problems. For instance, apart from this one scene, Ian is completely loving and devoted to Liz. After this episode, the two make up and go on to strengthen their relationship. It is as though Maitland wanted to make a point about domestic violence and exploited her otherwise harmless character Ian in the process. As it happens, Maitland's version of the Jael and Sisera tradition stands alone as the opening story in *Telling Tales*, a collection of her short stories published a few years after *Daughter of Jerusalem*.<sup>48</sup> In this context, standing alone as a short story, it becomes an even more effective and frightening portrayal of women's fantasy of vengeance against violent men. Indeed, it is almost as if the cyborg Jael was transported back to biblical times. While Maitland's Jael is not a cyborg, read apart from the lives of Liz and Ian, she represents the same sort of unleashed anger and hysteria that Russ builds into her version of Jael. Both the cyborg and Maitland's Jael laugh in the aftermath of their murder.

### *Reflections on the Feminist Jael in the 1970s and 80s*

As different as the three Jael's created by these three second wave feminists are, they share some common traits. As in the literary appropriations of the biblical figure in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in each of these novels Jael's murderous act demands explanation. To that end, all three of the authors situate the violence of Jael in the context of violence done to her, an element that is absent from de Tabley's, Robinson's, and Kiper Frank's retellings. In the case of Russ and van Herk, there is an immediate threat of rape. With Maitland, there is an implied history of violence against Jael, and women in general, that drives Jael to her act of vengeance. And all three representations of Jael are presented without judgment. Compared to earlier mixed assessments of Jael, these feminist versions all find something to admire in the biblical figure. All three authors find in Jael a woman who can be put to work for the cause of women's liberation.

It is true that the cyborg Jael gives the other characters in *The Female Man* pause. She is an assassin after all, and has committed more than one killing. As readers, we are privy to only one example. But the scene unfolds

in a way that suggests that the pattern is all too familiar to Jael—she merely bides her time while “Boss” progresses through the stages that lead to his attempted rape. In one sense, creating the cyborg Jael as a violent, single-minded warrior in the battle of the sexes may seem to take us a long way from the biblical versions of Jael. But in another sense, Russ may have captured something of the biblical Jael that other literary representations did not. After all, Jael has no role in Judges beyond humiliating and killing Sisera. She is as single-minded and successful in her task as Russ’s Jael is with hers. To be sure, by making Jael a cyborg, Russ takes this gender-bending biblical figure to a place that stretches identity categories nearly beyond recognition. For some, this may offer a place of freedom; for others, such a place may be as terrifying as the cyborg Jael.

Like the cyborg, the point of Maitland’s representation of Jael is to stir fright in the minds of men, at least those who commit violence against women. Her Jael is as cold-blooded and unflinching as Russ’s, perhaps even more so. Jael admires her victim as much as the cyborg despises hers, and there is little to indicate that he posed any threat to her personally. Instead, she takes joy in his presence, but especially in the fact that she can use him to instill fear in her husband. If the reader waits in anticipation for the odious Boss in the *Female Man* to be killed, they may well recoil at the bloody mess that Jael makes of Sisera’s beautiful body.

Compared to both of these versions, van Herk’s Jael is the most fully developed character, but also the most disappointing. For one thing, Jael’s sessions with each of the male campers now appears quite condescending to men. But worse, by making Jael’s primary function the transformation of these childlike men, van Herk has removed the compelling force of the biblical character. With her retelling, Jael becomes not so much a shaman or priestess as a mother or psychoanalyst. Nevertheless, with each of these feminist Jael’s, we come back to the Power of Women series of the sixteenth-century prints. Each of these representations of Jael are intended precisely as displays of women’s power. But now their warnings are directed toward men who pose a violent threat to women. And, in contrast to the Power of Women series, the figures created by these twentieth-century women are meant to address and resist the cultural impulse that would claim, as did the inscription on van Leyden’s print, “All evil is small compared to the evil of a woman” (Sir. 25:19).

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*Gender and Cultural Memory  
in A. S. Byatt's "Jael"*

*I remember Jael because the story doesn't quite make sense.  
The emotions are all in a muddle. You're asked to rejoice  
in wickedness.*

JESS<sup>1</sup>

BY THE END of A. S. Byatt's short story "Jael," the reader, too, may find her emotions in a muddle. At least, the reader is left wondering about what to think about Jess, the story's first-person narrator. She does not have many admirers among the story's readers. One critic finds Jess malicious and self-serving, not to mention mean-spirited.<sup>2</sup> Her own creator describes her as unpleasant and mendacious.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps. But Jess also stands in for Byatt's own focus on cultural memory and the preservation of cultural traditions, which in the case of this story, are represented by Judges 4–5. And overall, the story is a brilliantly compact illustration of Byatt's ongoing thematic interest in showing the relationship between present lives and past classics. As one reviewer aptly observes:

One would have to go a long way before finding a contemporary writer to whom the literary classics of the past are so little "classic," so much alive and near and immediately relevant as they are to A. S. Byatt. One would have to go an even longer way before finding a writer who insists on making the relation of our own present to those literary classics one of the central and recurring themes not of her essays, but of her fictions.<sup>4</sup>

In "Jael," Byatt leads her reader through a gradual but only partial revealing of the precise nature of the relationship between the Jael-Sisera story and the life of the aging, twentieth-century set designer Jess. Her

four-letter name beginning with J signals a link with the figure of Jael. Nevertheless, Jess will play the part not only of Jael, but also of Sisera.

Byatt's story appeared first in *The Guardian* in 1997. The next year "Jael" was published as part of her short story collection *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*.<sup>5</sup> The volume contains a mixture of fairy tales and realistic fiction, often featuring female characters as protagonists. But here we should be clear from the outset. In "Jael," Byatt does not offer another battle of the sexes. In fact, Byatt has a notoriously complicated relationship with feminism. She is on record for being unhappy with feminist writers who make "wilful changes to plots and forms to show messages of female power. . . ." <sup>6</sup> Although Byatt is not here referring to changes in biblical stories, one can image her disapproval of the feminist use of Jael in the novels of Russ, van Herk, and Maitland. Notwithstanding her objections, many critics have seen in Byatt's fiction a preoccupation with questions related to women's agency. For example, (and ironically given Byatt's comment above), Jane Campbell argues that Byatt subjects the genre of the fairy tale to feminist revision to, examine "the possibilities and limitations of women's lives in the contemporary world."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Mariadele Boccardi argues that in *Sugar and Other Stories*,<sup>8</sup> Byatt "explores the possibilities for emotional and intellectual fulfilment afforded to women in a particular place and at a particular time (England in the mid-twentieth century), and the resulting creative solutions they manage to find."<sup>9</sup> As for the women in *Elementals*, Campbell observes that they are put in points of extremity, hence the collection's subtitle, *Fire and Ice*.<sup>10</sup>

These observations about Byatt's exploration of emotional and intellectual options for women apply also to "Jael." Note, for example, Jess's off-hand comment about Deborah in Judges 4–5: "No, we were not offered her as a rôle-model for leadership qualities. I'm not sure the concept existed in the early 1950's" (201). Beyond such a direct statement, there are more subtle indications in "Jael" of Byatt's interest in exploring the options available to women, and in the case of this story, young schoolgirls. But in so doing, Byatt decidedly does *not* rewrite the biblical story of Jael. As we will see, her character offers both a highly traditional narration of Judges 4–5, and a quite unimaginative interpretation of the tradition.

"Jael" is one of the few fictional works that Byatt has written in the first person.<sup>11</sup> More typically, Byatt employs a style designed to "defend the unfashionable Victorian third-person narrator."<sup>12</sup> In this case, however, the use of a first-person narrator allows Byatt to effectively explore the vagaries of personal memory, the role of cultural memory, and how both

contribute to identity formation. The reader shares in Jess's internal process as she interweaves memories from her days as a schoolgirl in a "good ancient establishment for girls" with recollections of a recent conversation and worries about her vulnerable position as an aging executive. These tangled reflections encourage the reader to consider how all of these experiences relate to the story of Jael and Sisera. In the context of this study, Jess's first-person account also recalls another first-person voice, Lord de Tabley's Jael. In this way, Byatt's beloved Victorian period finds its way into her story even without a third-person narrator.

### *Remembering with Judges 4–5*

Each of the short stories in *Elementals* is prefaced with a drawing. In the case of "Jael," the reader encounters the image of Jael poised with hammer in hand over Sisera's sleeping body in a drawing attributed to the School of Rembrandt. The artwork thus points both to the biblical story and to its transmission in Western cultural tradition. But there is a second drawing that opens the narrative, this one remembered by the narrator, Jess. With her opening words, "I remember," she invites her listener to look back on her nine- or ten-year-old self enthusiastically illustrating the Jael-Sisera story. Jess's focus, like so many other artists before her, is on Jael's attributes—the hammer and mallet. But whereas many of her predecessors avoid drawing a bloody scene, the young Jess chooses a bright vermilion pencil to color a "great sheet of blood stemming out like a great river onto a sheet or a cloth, over the couch he lay on, and the floor of Jael's tent, and the grayish, over-absorbent lined page of my exercise book" (197–198). Here is an early indication of Jess's longing for sensuous experience, because as she recalls, "You didn't get much intense sensuous excitement at Armadale High School, Girls' Public Day School Trust, GPDST" (199).<sup>13</sup> Notably, Jess mentions that she did not draw Jael's face, opting instead to hide it behind a flowing headscarf. Although she now claims this was because she lacked skill, the detail points ahead to Jess's reluctance to connect more intimately with the biblical figure.

The occasion for Jess's memory of the drawing is a conversation with Jed, a colleague in his thirties. "We were talking about how our past life is mapped two ways, with significant things that of course you remember, births, marriages, deaths, journeys, successes and failures, and then the other sort, the curiously bright-coloured, detailed pointless moments that

won't go away" (199). One of these "pointless" moments that won't go away for Jess is her illustration of Jael and Sisera. Just *why* the memory of the drawing, and of the biblical story, persists will be a question that she addresses several times in the rest of the story.

Initially, though, it is the color of her artistic effort that pervades Jess's memory. The brilliant red of her pencil is juxtaposed with the dull hue of her life. "Whenever I remember that patch of fierce colour, I remember like an after-image, a kind of dreadful murky colour, a yellow-khaki-mustard-*thick* colour, that is the colour of the days of our boredom" (206). From this point on, boredom emerges as dominant theme in the story as Jess continues to paint a lackluster picture of her school days. She explains, "We were the pre-television age, and we cannot—that is, the absolute quality of our boredom cannot—be imagined by those who grew up with the magic lantern, the magic window on the world." Jess admits to some excitement coming from the world of books, but ". . . none of it, nothing at all seeped out into life" (207). Apart from books, her world provided only "this smeared fuggy, limited light of boredom, where you couldn't see very much or very far, and the horizon was unimaginable" (208). Such boredom, Jess suggests, was specific to girls' lives. She contrasts the "gangs" that the girls formed at the school with the "active gangs" of boys who lived in their industrial town. From her schoolgirl perspective, the boys' gangs were *real*. The boys carried real things like chains and knives, and actually did things that were reported in the papers. The girls, Jess admits, did little more than pass notes between each other and perpetuate the inner and outer circles of their cliques. "Our gangs were not *gangs*. Nothing ever happened" (211).

This first-person account of boredom recalls the similar fate of the Victorian Jael imagined in the poetic monologue by Lord de Tabley (chapter 6). On the surface, of course, the life circumstances of the two women are vastly different. An adolescent British girl of 1950s in a venerable girls-only institution seems to share very little with a tent-dwelling woman. Yet, both figures are constricted by their gendered roles and both long for excitement and recognition. They hold in common a deeply felt boredom with their lives and a compulsion to *do* something about it. At least, it seems likely that Jess did something, even if her memory apparently fails her on this point. "Nothing ever happened," she insists, "Or at least, I think nothing happened. No, change that, *something* happened but I do not remember how" (211).

### *Remembering the Biblical Jael and Sisera*

Before we learn more about what exactly did or did not happen when she was nine or ten, Jess tells the story of Jael and Sisera. She prefaces her detailed recitation of the tradition, by acknowledging the low regard that she, her peers, and her teachers had for the Bible. From the perspective of everyone in her “high-powered” academic environment, scripture didn’t “count” like English, history, or science. Teaching the Bible was considered a chore meted out to the less important teachers. Her teacher’s efforts did not extend beyond having her students illustrate Bible stories. Now, as an adult, Jess admits to finding religion “not only incredible, but dangerous and disgusting,” a position she attributes to her early schoolgirl exposure to “dead and nasty” scripture (200). Not surprisingly, then, Jess finds the Jael-Sisera story “particularly disagreeable and morally equivocal” (198), “a horrible story,” and “a nasty piece of work” (202).

With this seeming distaste for scripture established, Jess narrates Judges 4–5 as she told it to Jed during their lunchtime conversation. Before telling the story, she inexplicably refutes a particular interpretation of the account. “Explaining [the story] to Jed, our cameraman, I said, it’s not even about treachery or loyalty. I told it to him from memory, as it came into my head whenever I saw that red sheet” (200). What exactly the story is about, from Jess’s perspective, is left open at this point, but this odd comment about what it is *not* about foreshadows Jess’s discomfort around the idea of treachery.

At this point, the narration of the story is notable in several ways. That Jess quotes passages that she “has always known by heart” from the King James Version suggests her rootedness in a particular British cultural tradition regarding the Bible. That she is sure the young cameraman has never opened a Bible himself emphasizes the generational divide between them. Most significant is the detailed recollection of the biblical tradition. Jess gives the account in full beginning with the prose version in chapter 4, including several direct quotations from the King James Version and a part that she has “always known by heart.” This memorized verse happens to be the account of the murder itself: “Then Jael Heber’s wife took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it into the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died” (cf. Judg. 4:21 KJV). There is a tension between Jess’s pronounced disregard for this story and her detailed memory of it. And it’s not just that these verses memorized long ago have

stayed with her. She also expresses appreciation of their poetic artistry. She "loves the rhythms" of Judges 5, and repeats 5:27 for the reader's benefit—"At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he fell down dead" (KJV)—noting how it is done with "heavy monosyllables, strokes of the hammer, stokes of the axe, and yet it flows, too" (204).

In spite of her statements to the contrary, then, Jess clearly sees value in this "horrible" story, and arguably in the Bible as a whole. Indeed, she bemoans the fact that poetic passages such as Judges 5 are "vanishing from our world" (204). Jess also has nostalgia for the story at a more personal level. It reminds her of her mother and her life. Indeed, part of her interest in the Jael-Sisera tradition comes from the place it holds both in her personal memories and in the collective cultural memory. For example, Jess recalls with fondness how her mother recited "Here is the butter in a lordly dish" whenever she opened the refrigerator and how, when Jess found the matching verse in the Bible, "it was a piece fitting into a cultural jigsaw" (204). Her childhood memory highlights the integral way that cultural traditions such as the Bible are deeply woven into people's daily mundane experiences.

Such moments of nostalgia indicate that Jess believes it is important to *know* the scriptures, even if she thinks they are dead and nasty. Her ambivalence matches Byatt's own sentiments quite closely. While the author dislikes Christianity, even identifying herself as "anti-Christian," she recognizes the Bible's central place in Western culture.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, by her own admission Byatt often speaks "in a very alarmist way about how a culture of great complexity and beauty, which I value, is vanishing overnight. . . ." <sup>15</sup> In this sense, one thing "Jael" achieves is the transmission of the story of Jael and Sisera to an audience who, like Jed, might never have heard of these figures. But the short story does not merely hand on the Jael-Sisera tradition, which as we have seen, can take many different forms. It is a retelling of the biblical account of Judges 4–5 by way of the complexity and beauty of the King James Version. This, too, Jess celebrates in her own way, remarking, "I love to think of those seventeenth-century bishops, in a world where bishops were regularly burned for believing, or not believing things, making those rhythms" (203). Although, as mentioned early, Byatt does not seem to like her protagonist much, Jess certainly conveys at least some degree of her creator's appreciation for cultural tradition.

Indeed, as literary critic Lena Steveker argues, Byatt's novels often function as mediators of cultural memory in their own right, serving "as

imaginary museums exhibiting literary texts and verbal reconstructions of objects of pictorial art, which have been inscribed into British cultural memory.”<sup>16</sup> So too, in a very condensed way, “Jael” brings the reader into a museum of biblical artifacts, showcasing the ancient tale of Jael and Sisera as expressed in the King James translation. But, as we will see, Byatt’s use of the Jael-Sisera tradition in her short story does more than this. It also reveals her conviction that canonical traditions are not merely museum pieces to be preserved. They play a role in the moral formation of human beings.

*“Why do I remember Jael?”*

Jess asks and attempts to answer this question more than once in the narrative. Her various answers are no doubt true to a certain extent. But her repeated exploration of the question, all the way to the closing lines of the story, suggests that she never arrives at the central reason for her persistent memory. Although Jess admits to feeling a symmetry with Jael and comes close to acknowledging the nature of this connection, her personal reflections remain oddly disassociated with the story.

Initially, Jess denies any reason at all for her vivid recollection of her childhood illustration along with the story itself. She does not remember wondering at the time why they were required to make a picture of this “very odd tale.” “Nor do I really think there is any reason why I remember that drawing more than any other in that exercise book” (198). She is “quite sure” that her teacher provided no explanation, though she also notes that she doesn’t remember anything at all that the teacher said. As for her exchange with Jed, Jess avers,

I said, and I’m sure I’m right, that I didn’t think I was remembering it for its shocking morals, I said I was sure I was remembering it because of the excitement I’d felt over spreading more and more of that red over the paper. (199)

Campbell argues that language such as this “moves between insistence on the truth of her version and half-acknowledged admissions that this version suppresses the truth.”<sup>17</sup> To be sure, her assertions leave room for doubt as to the fulsomeness of her account. But Jess does not so much suppress the truth as omit, or “forget,” crucial parts of it, consciously or not. That is, she likely did find excitement in filling her notebook page

with red, and remembers that excitement with nostalgia. In fact, her closing words to the story reinforce the point. "I remember Jael because of the delicious red, because of the edge of excitement in wielding the pencil point, because I had half-a-glimpse of making art and colour" (216). In wielding her red pencil, as Jael wielding her tent peg, Jess finds a parallel with the biblical woman. As an adult, her sensual enjoyment of color and echoes of the Jael-Sisera tradition find their way into the set Jess designs for a grenadine commercial. The set features a red silk tent light with red spotlights, and a lordly dish on a low table. Remarking on the verbal links between grenade and grenadine, she echoes her earlier description of her Jael-Sisera drawing. "What a delicious metaphor, sheets of red juice, explosions of extreme sensuality, sheets of red blood" (205).

Thus, on the one hand, in the same way Jess's passion was stirred by her blood-red illustration of Jael's deadly act, she now finds satisfaction in set designs. On the other hand, as she looks nostalgically back at a time when she had just half-a-glimpse of making art, it is clear that Jess is not telling a story of professional fulfillment. She claims to like her job, but also remarks on the oddity of being "a pointless poet who doesn't make poems" (205). She observes the way her detached mind works with detached metaphors, a state of affairs that runs counter to her academic credentials, namely getting a first at Cambridge, where she wrote "Empsonian essays" on complicated metaphors. That William Empson's most influential work is on ambiguity in poetic language is revealing.<sup>18</sup> Here is a woman who has devoted hours of attention to the use of rich metaphors from classical texts, but now uses these images, ripped from their context, for advertising fruit syrup. No wonder that in her second attempt at understanding why she often thinks of Judges 4-5, Jess's "faint click of symmetry" with Jael is followed by the comment: "Pencil, peg. Another *detached* image. . . . Pointed, pointless" (206). In the same way that she sees Jael's killing of Sisera as pointless, so at some level, are Jael's artistic and intellectual endeavors. While she may know the canonical traditions, she uses them only to sell things.

The story's attention to metaphor and artistic expression corresponds to Byatt's own longtime interest in these topics. As Christien Franken has convincingly argued, many of Byatt's fictional characters "long for artistic genius because of the promises it contains, for instance the transcendence of the limitations of gender, the achievement of excellence and the wholeness of art which may act as a stronghold both against the disorder and the dullness of reality."<sup>19</sup> At this point in her life, Jess seems long past setting

her hopes on artistic genius. She has settled for any excitement she can muster for designing commercial sets, but now sees that as threatened as well.

Jess fears her own demise. She worries that she appears outdated and irrelevant to her younger colleagues. Recalling her co-worker Lara's critiques of Jess's political incorrectness in her use of a captive young woman for a commercial, Jess does express some regret. However, she is not so concerned about her use of the image, but rather about explaining her mythological allusion to Lara. "I shouldn't have told her about Persephone; it convinced her even more that I'm passé, in need of replacement, encumbered with dead cultural baggage" (205). Still (and ironically), Jess's major professional crime is not offending people but rather boring them. She believes Lara is spreading rumors about the results of a media survey that suggest Jess's commercials are infecting entire advertising slots with boredom and apathy. She describes her professional predicament with battle allusions. "Even if I manage to annihilate the survey or demolish its hypothesized findings," Lara's resourceful attack will "leave a question hanging like smoke in the atmosphere" (213). Of Lara, she observes:

She's quick, and she's brave. She lives in a world of interactive computer-generated gladiators, bomb-lobbers, kamikaze scantily-clad dolls, headsmen with swords and laser-duelists my reactions aren't quick enough for. She can fill screens with blood I shall drown in, at the touch of her glossy black fingernails. (213)

Lara's computer-programmed blood-filled screens create a parallel but at the same time a technological contrast with Jess's schoolgirl notebook colored with red pencil. Although the young Jess relished her rendering of "Jael's neat and bloody disposal of Sisera" (198), as a grown woman she resembles more the vulnerable Sisera, about to be undone by her traitorous young assistant director.

Only at this point, with Jess's confession of her fear of Lara, does the reader finally learn about Jess's own childhood plan for treachery. Again, as with de Tabley's Jael, utter boredom and perhaps inspiration from her drawing of Jael, lead Jess to find a way to add excitement to her life. This brings us again to the so-called gangs in Jess's girls-only school. She describes her experience as one of the girls on the edge of the gangs, uncertain about her own inclusion and uncertain about what the gangs actually did. Nevertheless, the gangs offered the promise of something.

"We thought, if we could be in the inner circle . . . we would be part of something that was going on, we would be less bored" (211). Jess's plan involves an idea of treachery to stir things up.

I may have hit on some narrative universal: what is interesting about boring gangs has to be treachery. It was a silly idea because . . . there were no secrets, no plans of battle, no battles, nothing to betray. (212)

The comment alludes to the Jael-Sisera tradition, which does have plans for battles, a battle, and a fleeing general to betray. It is a connection that the adult Jess fails to make herself in spite of her own narration of the story. At this point, her earlier denial that the Jael-Sisera story is about treachery begins to look suspicious. Indeed, Jess seems to step widely around the tradition. In spite of her conscious and subconscious recollections of Jael and Sisera, she claims that her notions of betrayal likely came from a childhood interest in one Rupert of Hentzau, a treacherous character from a popular late-nineteenth-century novel of the same name.<sup>20</sup>

In any case, Jess's idea of treachery involves the leaders of the two school gangs. Wendy, the leader of the larger gang, was the quintessential blue-eyed, blond-haired popular girl who was good at everything and nice to everyone. "Her gang clustered round her because she was a star whose star quality was a perfect normality. Looking back, I think you could call it grace" (210). Jess thinks of her as the person in the parable given ten talents who used them to make another ten. In hindsight Jess wonders if she saw herself as the one who protectively buried her own talent and yielded nothing more. Her references to the Bible reinforce the impression that Jess's worldview is deeply shaped by the biblical tradition. In contrast to Wendy, Rachel was dark, moody, and mildly rebellious with an "indefinable sexiness." Her smaller gang was "naughtier" and "less conformist" albeit in a context in which all of them were "totally respectable nice girls" (209).

The devious plan, finally revealed in the last two paragraphs of "Jael" was to stretch a cord between two trees in the woods that would trip Wendy during a cross-country race. The point would be to bring the popular Wendy down and open a way for Rachel, who would be grateful to Jess for her covert action. "It would be a *real* secret, something would really have happened that could never be told. It would be real treachery, not just giggling and whispering" (213). Thus, the scheme involved a gratuitous act of violence to match the gratuitous violence that Jess reads

in Jael. She insists that she had no particular love for either Rachel or Wendy, or for anything at all. She does not act out of passion, but out of its lack. She perceives that her very identity is at risk in such a passionless environment. "I was afraid of being annihilated by boredom," she argues, "of there never being anything else" (214). In this way, from a gender critical perspective, Jess becomes another female figure, rebelling against narrowly described social roles (the "nice" girl of her venerable institution). No doubt she also acts out against the arbitrariness of life that produces popular girls who are good at everything, and girls like Jess, who stand on the edges of the group wondering whether they are included. In this way, Byatt's use of the Jael-Sisera story moves outside of the typical gendered binary of so many other renditions. She draws on it instead, to explore conflicts between women (young and old), as well as between generations.

Which brings us to the story's ambiguous conclusion. Just as Jess finally gives voice to her plan, she denies carrying it out. She claims that she realized it could easily backfire with Rachel reacting negatively to her treacherous scheme. But before the reader can sigh in relief, Jess also remembers that Wendy mysteriously tripped and fell in just the place that Jess had envisioned, hitting her head on a sharp rock. After spending a long time in the hospital, the popular "star" never fully recovered and was unable to pass her exams to advance in her education. "A light went out," recalls Jess. The reader might be left puzzling over this remarkable coincidence except for Jess's final recollections. She admits, "I have a very clear memory of the piece of cord—sort of fairly thick garden twine, such as my father had in his shed, a dark khaki-green twine, completely invisible over dead leaves and puddles" (215). This memory seems to bring her close to admitting her guilt, but Jess immediately backtracks by claiming, "I have the opposite of Alzheimer's. I remember things I really think didn't happen" (215). While Jess speaks of Judges 4–5 being a muddle of emotions, her own emotions seem similarly confused. The fact that Jess never articulates the most obvious connections she has with the Jael-Sisera tradition is one of the blatant ironies of Byatt's story.

It is true that compared to that other bored woman, such as de Tabley's Jael, Jess lacks much deep introspection. Whereas de Tabley's Jael is filled with remorse over her glory-seeking assassination of the "goodly" Sisera, Jess remains largely detached from the results of her action against the graceful Wendy. Or at least, the click of symmetry she feels with Jael is never articulated in terms of a shared pointlessness to their violence.

On the other hand, at some level Jess seems to seek exoneration, giving excuses for her youthful indiscretions. "We shall be judged without being imagined" she protests at one point, and "Ignorance. Innocence, boredom" she blurts out at another (206–207). While both comments are said in relation to using the word "nigger" to describe the brown of their school uniforms, they function more generally to describe Jess's own defensive fears regarding her past.

Here I must admit to some empathy toward Jess. She speaks haltingly and with the vagaries of memory of a horrible story that happened long ago. It is she who puts her own story alongside the Jael and Sisera tradition. If she does not connect the dots, she makes it possible for her audience to do so. In this way, Byatt makes the reader do the work of recognizing the value and moral relevance of the canonical tradition in relation to this twentieth-century woman. Again, Byatt has little interest in the religious dimension of the biblical text, and definitely not in a Christian interpretation of it. Nor is she interested in returning to the type of moralizing, gender-directed uses of the biblical tradition that were so popular in the sixteenth century. But, she is quite concerned with preserving cultural memory and the Bible is certainly part of that.<sup>21</sup> Still, we could ask further why Byatt is interested in this particular tradition from Judges 4–5, which her protagonist declares at the outset is a nasty story.

### *Why Does A. S. Byatt Remember Jael?*

For all the many interviews that Byatt has given, I have found no discussion of "Jael" apart from her comment, noted above, about Jess's untruthfulness. So, we have no firsthand account of the author's interest in the story of Jael and Sisera. It is tempting to read autobiographical details in the narrative, such as Jess's memories of her mother remarking on the lordly butter dish in their refrigerator. And while such details may flavor the story, I do not think the author is confessing to her own instance of childhood treachery, although at least one reader made this assumption.<sup>22</sup>

Instead, I suggest that Byatt's interest in Judges 4–5 coincides with several different concerns that have shaped her fiction. The first relates to her worries about cultural forgetfulness, or the loss of canonical traditions. Byatt sees a connection between the preservation of cultural traditions and the functioning of our moral compass. For her, the story of Jael is no doubt a "horrible story" from the past, but it is one that helps illuminate similarly horrible behavior in the present. Knowing the story, knowing that it asks

one to rejoice in wickedness, perhaps gives one pause over similar rejoicing in the present. Along this line, in her reading of the story, Campbell finds fault in Jess for not connecting her own life story with the biblical one and for not admitting culpability. She sees Jess's coworker Lara as an agent of delayed retribution for Jess's childhood treachery. Because Jess has not owned up to her own childhood betrayal, Campbell argues, the cycle of betrayal will continue.<sup>23</sup> What is especially problematic is that Jess's failure occurs even though she is the only one in the story who is in touch with the biblical tradition. That is, Jess represents the preservation of cultural memory and demonstrates how this memory is so intricately interwoven with personal memory. Nevertheless, she has lost her moral compass, which suggests that Jess's problem concerns more than missing a connection with the Judges tradition.

This brings us to another interest expressed through Byatt's fiction, and I believe, in her protagonist Jess. Christine Franken concludes from her work on art and identity in Byatt's fiction that "nothing is more authentic or central as [Byatt's] ambivalence."<sup>24</sup> One form of this ambivalence concerns the relationship between artistic genius and morality. As Franken shows, while Byatt places enormous value in artistic creativity, she is keenly aware of the detrimental effects of its seductive aspects. Franken focuses on these effects in relation to the construction of male identity and the masculine pursuit of artistic genius in Byatt's work. She highlights Byatt's implicit critique of this masculine elevation of art at the cost of morality. As Franken sees it, Byatt's novels "show the dangers of a concept of art and the imagination which denies the ethical boundaries it is bound to run up against."<sup>25</sup>

Much of this seems evident in "Jael," except that this story makes clear that a focus on art that sacrifices morality is not specific to male identity. Jess's repeated focus on color and art, and on her own childhood efforts to escape boredom, point to her own yearning for transcendence through art. However, by insisting that she remembers the story of Jael because of her excitement about making art and color and *not* because of its questionable morals closes off the possibility of self-reflection. This aspect of Byatt's short story suggests just the sort of critique of art at the expense of ethics that Franken argues is directed toward male artists in Byatt's work. Here however, it is a woman who is at fault.

Finally, there may be something else at work with Byatt's interest in Jael. As mentioned earlier, Byatt clearly values the importance of the Bible in Western culture. Yet, she also speaks of its influence rather darkly, as in

her observation that "the great novels of Western culture, from *Don Quixote* to *War and Peace*, from *Moby Dick* to *Dr. Faustus*, were constructed in the shadow of the one Book and its story."<sup>26</sup> Such is the influence of the Bible, in her view, casting an ever-present shadow over the great works of the Western canon. Byatt then goes on to say, "There is a difference between these great, portentous histories and the proliferation of small tales that are handed on, like gifts, like objects for delight and contemplation." Here the author's much-debated postmodern leanings are evident, as she lifts up the idea of the *petit recit*, the small story, over the master narratives of Western culture.<sup>27</sup> It is unclear whether Byatt would consider the story of Jael-Sisera as a small tale that she hands on like a gift. But, in fact, this gift-giving is precisely what Byatt accomplishes with her short story "Jael." That is, even while Jael and Sisera's encounter has come to be part of the biblical "master narrative" of the academically named Deuteronomist history (Deuteronomy–2 Kings), and of the Bible more generally, this book has shown how the story functions on its own. Time and again, apart from the Bible, Jael and Sisera take on various lives, related only to the master narrative through female-on-male violence. In Byatt's story, the "small tale" of Jael and Sisera is handed on again, this time both literally by way of a memorized time-honored and much-loved King James translation and figuratively in the life of an aging art director.

Byatt's story "Jael" has received very little critical attention. Reviewers of *Elementals* routinely omit mention of it at all. From my perspective, the story's primary weakness is, in fact, its treatment of the Jael-Sisera tradition. As we have seen, when Jess relates the story of Jael and Sisera to her coworker, she offers her own moral assessment of the biblical Jael. The biblical woman violates the hospitality code and commits a grisly murder. Compared to other very imaginative representations of Jael and Sisera by female authors in the twentieth century, to find these figures firmly planted in the King James Version in a "morally objectionable" story makes Byatt's version a bit disappointing. Next to other more creative readings, Jess's interpretation of Jael is rather traditionally boring. If Jess is worried that she will be judged without being imagined, the character Jael could raise the same objection about her treatment by Jess.

But maybe this is the point. It is Jess, after all, who lacks imagination and does not explore the significance of the tradition beyond the bloody illustration she made as a young girl. In her fixation on the flowing rhythms of an antiquated translation, the artistry of the poetry, Jess does not pause to consider about how the story might inform her own understanding of

life. For her, the plot of the narrative remains simply “a nasty piece” to be scavenged for images and color, perhaps for a detached metaphor, but not for meaning. Meanwhile, Byatt shapes a narrative that intersects in complex ways with the Jael and Sisera tradition, thereby undercutting Jess’s easy dismissal of the story. It may be nasty, but the story’s capacity to link with contemporary lives appears alive and well (if unrecognized by Jess) in Byatt’s characters. In the end, her reader is invited to contemplate yet another cultural performance of Jael and Sisera. This time both figures are represented in the same character—Jess is both perpetrator and victim—in a postmodern world losing touch with its traditions.

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## *Old Tales in New Forms*

### REFLECTIONS ON A CULTURAL HISTORY OF A BIBLICAL STORY

*People think stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around . . .*

*Stories etch groves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a mountain side. And every time fresh actors tread the path of the story the groove runs deeper . . .*

*Stories don't care who takes part in them. All that matters is that the story gets told, that the story repeats. Or, if you prefer to think of it like this: stories are a parasitical life form, warping lives in the service only of the story itself.*

TERRY PRATCHETT<sup>1</sup>

IN HER ESSAY, "Old Tales, New Forms," A. S. Byatt includes these observations by author Terry Pratchett to illustrate the power of stories. For Byatt, metaphors such as these that imagine stories with a life of their own are no doubt quite compelling. They were for me as I began work on this book. I pictured the story of Jael and Sisera wearing deep cultural grooves as it was told over and over again, or attaching parasitically to various literary settings in order to be repeated. But at the end of this study, I find such images do not quite satisfy. To be sure, it may be that from a storyteller's perspective, especially one who is drawn to fairy tales like Byatt is, there is no new story to be told. Perhaps one's characters are, in spite of all best attempts at originality, warped into old story patterns. But this study has shown that the opposite is also true. People *do* shape stories. Cultural settings have a way of warping old tales to fit contemporary interests.

Or to put it a different way, this study shows that the Jael-Sisera tradition is at one and the same time *the* story and a *new* story that does not always follow the same familiar path. At the beginning of this book, I described the tradition of Jael and Sisera as a story about death. It is that. But, as it turns out, it is also a story about heroism, courage, treachery, boredom, lovers, jealousy, rape, chastity, women's power, women's oppression, and domestic violence. And the list could certainly continue.

To put it yet another way, the story of Jael and Sisera is fundamentally a tale of a woman killing a man. This theme persists and becomes deeply embedded in the culture, much like water cutting a groove down the mountainside. On the other hand, storytellers, poets, playwrights, and artists situated in diverse cultural contexts shape the flow of the story so that it readily turns down alternate paths, carving out new directions. Tributaries develop as the story charts a new course. These new directions or new themes in the story are not merely "afterlives" of a once-original story from the Bible. They *are* the story, or stories. They are what allow the water to continue to flow down the mountain, rather than drying up altogether.

One of the goals for this book was to illustrate what can be learned from studying such alternate paths in some detail. Rather than undertaking a biblical reception history that merely catalogues different uses of a biblical tradition, I was interested in doing a deeper analysis of performances of the Jael-Sisera tradition in different genres, media, and cultural contexts. This approach meant that I have not been comprehensive, but rather representational in offering a cultural history of the Jael-Sisera tradition. So what has been the yield? What is now apparent about the capacities of this particular biblical tradition to engage in cultural conversations especially around themes of gender and violence?

One basic observation is that from very early on, as early as the biblical versions themselves, the story has been tugged in different directions. Some versions of the tradition point to concerns about the seductive, erotic elements of what took place in the tent of Jael, while others play out the implications of viewing Jael as a fierce woman warrior. In the earliest post-biblical retellings, the tradition is reworked in varying ways to ensure the chastity of its female heroine, in spite of the presence of more or less explicit erotic elements. Thus, in the book of Judith, Jael is reworked into a beautiful and deviously seductive, but also wholly righteous, chaste, and pious Israelite widow. *LAB's* Jael invites her male adversary to lie on a bed strewn with rose petals, but then kills him before he awakens from his

deep sleep. In both of these early versions, the fate of the people of Israel remains a central focus. This means that questions about Jael's own ethnic identity are intertwined with representations of the tradition. The book of Judith addresses the problem by making its version of the Jael character unquestionably a Judean, working on behalf of her Judean townspeople. In contrast, *LAB* signals Jael's foreign status both by distancing her from the people of Israel and by subtly undercutting her status as heroine.

Notably, this worry about Jael's ethnic identity all but disappears as a problem in later cultural performances. As authors and artists offer new versions of the story that are no longer about Israel's victory over the Canaanite oppressors, but something else altogether, Jael's foreign status is either of little concern or regarded as a benefit. The early Christian use of the tradition, for instance, redefines the combatants in the battle from Israel versus Canaan to the church versus the devil, with the Jewish people playing a subordinate or nonexistent role. Origen and Ambrose follow this Christian transformation of enemy forces in their own use of the story, seeing Jael as the church and Sisera as the defeated devil. Significantly, in the case of Origen, it is precisely Jael's foreign Gentile status that makes this transformation possible. So the very "problem" that the book of Judith eliminated and *LAB* recognized, Origen brings back as a centrally important and positive aspect of Jael's identity in the tradition. This shift of opposing forces is evident in the allegorical representations of Jael and Sisera in medieval manuscripts such as the *Mirror of Human Salvation* and the *Bible Moraliseé*, where Jael/Mary hammers the nails of the cross into Sisera/Satan. As Mary, Jael is decidedly not a foreigner.

None of these explicitly Christian theological readings take issue with erotic elements of the biblical story because in these renditions Jael and Sisera do not play the role of a woman and a man. When the deadly encounter of the two biblical figures becomes a fundamental struggle between good and evil, this transcends any struggle between men and women. Theology trumps gender ideology in these representations of the tradition. Jael is symbolically female insofar as the church is personified as a woman, or to the extent that she prefigures Mary, the mother of the church. But she is *not* a woman engaged in a battle of the sexes.

Nevertheless, the Jael-Sisera tradition certainly has the capacity to express this type of gender struggle, and in fact, doing so gives the story enduring significance. As we have seen, the deployment of the Jael-Sisera story for gender battles is latent in the biblical stories themselves. It develops more fully when Jael and Sisera step beyond strictly theological

settings into largely secular contexts. Initially, in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, Jael and Sisera are drawn into cultural conversations regarding the moral aptitude and proper instruction of women and men. Already at this stage, authors and artists were attuned to the story's capacity to speak differently to different audiences. They believed that Jael, along with certain other biblical women, had something to teach women about courage and heroic conduct. They also saw how, armed with her tent peg and mallet, and looming over the dying or soon to be dead body of Sisera, she could warn men about the lethal dangers of women. In other words, during this period the malleability of the figure of Jael—what I described as her Pixar “Elastigirl” qualities in the introduction to this book—become ever more pronounced.

Of course, this tendency to stretch women two ways, in this case either brave heroine versus femme fatale, has long been noted. But as I showed in chapter 4, the fact that the same artist could work the tradition in these two directions with two different audiences in mind makes clear the economic nature of the enterprise. It is not so much a “true” reading of the character of Jael, or of women in general, that undergirds these print productions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as much as the true nature of the market for these prints.

Similarly, the market dictated the paintings of Jael and Sisera from Renaissance Italy, whether this was pleasing individual patrons, or showcasing one's ability to execute a particular artistic style. In this way, the moralizing influences of the broader culture are still firmly in view, more than penetrating interpretations of the biblical text. For this reason, even while featuring Jael at the dramatic highpoint of the story, many artists downplay her violence either by incongruously presenting a serene Jael smiling down at her victim, or by depicting a not-quite-convincing resistance mounted by the man under attack. Yes, there are a few visual representations that *do* depict Jael's violent act in more realistic ways. Most striking is the drawing of Rembrandt, and much later Marcelle Hanselaar's print. By showing a struggling Sisera, pinned down under the body weight of Jael, these versions offer a sharp contrast to the majority of quiet paintings of Jael and Sisera from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The contrast highlights just how firmly entrenched the domesticated version of this scene becomes in the visual tradition, in spite of the story's violent content.

Here we should recognize that apart from (or along with) the economic opportunities such moralizing efforts provided the artists, these

unrealistic renditions of the Jael-Sisera story insert themselves into real debates about the nature of men and women. These artistic efforts amount to one way of controlling a cultural resource available to inform those debates. Celebrating Jael's victory and holding her up as a model for women becomes a means of "safely" transmitting an authoritative cultural tradition about a violent woman so that it does not present a threat to men. This safe transmission occurs not only by speaking of her violence as courageous, heroic, and above all seemingly (!), but even more by transforming its practicable application for women into a battle of womanly virtues over non-womanly vice. In short, offering Jael as a type of moral model for women to emulate effectively tames the biblical figure. Placing her in a gallery to be admired contains Jael's violent act. Doing so also helps avert the potential for the tradition to speak to the frustrations of real women.

At least for a time. As we have seen, literary performances of the Jael-Sisera tradition in the nineteenth century reflect a new sensitivity to the restricted roles of women. Here women begin to stake their own claim to the biblical tradition with new literary renditions of the story. Allusions in novels by Brontë and Eliot show the capacity of the story to engage the psychological conditions of the female subject. Both nineteenth-century female novelists allude to the violent woman, Jael, to express the mental frustrations and states of repression of their female protagonists. But this linking of the story to women's social and psychological repression is not limited to female authors in this period. Lord de Tabley saw a similar potential in the story, as he situates the motive for Sisera's murder in the plight of a bored woman. Especially interesting in this case is that the British nobleman does not stop here with his gendered explanation of Jael's violence but also implicates a failed masculinity in the crime. The inferior masculine deportment of Jael's husband, Heber, contributes to Jael's motivation for her act and thereby provides a means for offering a cultural critique of weak and ineffectual men. At this point, we are a long way from a biblical tradition that casts Sisera as the enemy. In fact, even though de Tabley's poem maintains an ancient battle scenario, Sisera is not portrayed as the opponent. In contrast to Heber, who has run from the battle, Sisera is a great and noble man, hardly deserving of death at the hands of a temporarily deluded woman.

Together, Brontë, Eliot, and de Tabley all find in the Jael-Sisera tradition the capacity for expressing the tormented interiority of the contemporary nineteenth-century woman. In the early twentieth century, the American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson again turns to the story to explore

psychological states, but in a quite different way. His poem "Sisera" is not interested in the condition of women per se, or of Jael's life in particular. Instead, he takes on the question of mental stability in relation to religious fervor by way of the figure of Jael. His poetic representation of Jael is, on the surface, simply a retelling of the biblical versions. But at another level, it challenges the lauding of Jael as one inspired by God. Far from a biblical heroine, the poem implies that Jael was little more than a misguided and likely crazed fanatic. Here is another way of explaining Jael's violence, which as with de Tabley's poetic exploration, undercuts the divine sanction on which the monumental Jael had long stood. Robinson does not make a direct moral condemnation of Jael; he uses his male character Barak to do it for him. Meanwhile, the figure of the warrior Sisera becomes a tragic victim of female fanaticism.

Then there is Florence Kiper Frank's poetic drama performed early in twentieth-century Chicago. As did de Tabley before her, Kiper Frank contrasts a weak and undesirable husband, Heber, with the glorious specimen of the man who is Sisera. But while the male poet imagines Jael grasping futilely (and ultimately devastatingly) at a chance for glory, Kiper Frank's Jael remains in charge of her destiny from beginning to end. She acts boldly not because she wants glory like a man, but because she loves fiercely and jealously like a goddess. She is not crazed, but passionate and determined. Thus, the early-twentieth-century suffragette poet brings us, perhaps for the first time, a literary version of Jael who acts with a violent assertion of independence and dominance to achieve her own personal goal. Hers is no God-driven mission. To be sure, this Jael is not a full-blown twentieth-century "New Woman," but she certainly shares some of her traits. And despite Kiper Frank's ancient setting for her play, the people of Israel and their god are nowhere in view in the final scene. Jael's love relationship with Sisera provides the central focus.

Overall, in these nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century works, female authors generally turn to the tradition with a more sympathetic view toward Jael's violence, while male authors typically condemn it. This is not a hard and fast rule, however. Brontë alludes to Jael as the strict guard of repressed desires while de Tabley recognizes, seemingly with some empathy, Jael's restricted social position. In later twentieth-century feminist fictions, Jael repeatedly channels the frustrations of contemporary women regarding their social status. Female authors Johanna Russ, Aritha van Herk, and Sarah Maitland all deploy the biblical woman to convey anger and violence against patriarchy. Still, each author nuances

their figurations of both Jael and Sisera in distinct ways so that the story speaks differently even within the same second wave feminist context. In her war against “Manland,” Russ’s Jael unremittingly and brutally attacks men as the enemy. She is the personification of feminist anger itself. In contrast, van Herk’s Jael touches men as with the healing power of an earth mother/goddess figure. Meanwhile, Maitland writes domestic violence into the ancient story itself, with Jael and Deborah seeking revenge and triumphantly evoking fear in the men around them.

I do not know whether these three authors were aware of each other’s work. Given their location in three different countries and their very different fictional genres, it seems unlikely. If they did not know of each other, it is all the more fascinating that each author makes creative use of this ancient tradition to articulate the anger of contemporary women. It is at this cultural moment, the second wave feminist movement of the twentieth century, that the Jael-Sisera tradition most clearly shows its capacity to articulate not only ideas, but also deep-seated emotions linked to gender and power. That these female artists each turn to the figure of Jael reveals the appeal and inherent power in speaking with, in, and through this cultural tradition even when the point has nothing to do with its origins as a battle song in ancient Israel.

This type of interest in Jael and Sisera continues into the present period, where recently the biblical figures have caught the attention of queer theorists. As we saw, the potential for Jael’s queerness, her defiance of binary gender categories, was already present in early warrior representations, especially the Heemskerck/Coornhert *Power of Women* print (figure 4.7). But only in the twenty-first century has her queerness been theorized. And in the hands of queer theorists, Jael is no longer stretched in competing directions. Nor does she represent an inversion of the traditional gender binary. Instead, she dwells in a space that resists gender binaries altogether. Remembered for centuries as a female who kills a male, now Jael is genderqueer, or gender non-conforming. What happens to Sisera in this reading of Jael? Is he still the enemy to be resisted? Or is he simply a prop that enables Jael to manifest the violence that constitutes hir? (their?) queerness? Perhaps because Sisera’s male status still leaves him in the realm of gender binaries he remains the enemy.

Although I did not set out to learn whether female artists work in different ways with the Jael-Sisera tradition, it is not surprising to see the history unfolding in this way. What is more interesting is how authors and artists engage the tradition in relation to particular cultural conversations

at different cultural moments. Jael is split two ways during periods of cultural gendered moralizing, reflects psychological tensions when the exploration of interiority becomes fashionable, bears the anger of twentieth-century feminists, and becomes a queer subject for twenty-first-century queer theorists. Meanwhile, Sisera plays a supporting role in all of these renditions. Whether enemy, victim, lover, hero, rapist, or chauvinist fool, he is never as fully developed as Jael. In the end, it seems this is her story and has always been her story.

Finally, at the end of this book and at the end of my own long-term focus on the many different cultural iterations of the Jael-Sisera tradition, I have a confession to make. As happens when working for several years on a project such as this one, I had many occasions to answer the question “What is your book about?” A large majority of the people with whom I shared my topic (and were outside the field of biblical studies) were not familiar with the Jael-Sisera story. This was true although most of these people were typically highly educated members of “Western culture.” Not only were my conversation partners unacquainted with the book of Judges, they had not encountered this particular story by way of cultural dissemination. Whatever deep groove the story of Jael and Sisera has carved through Western culture, it seems to be eroding.

This experience leaves me with another question. What do we lose if the water of our common cultural discourse dries up? With what and through what will we convey our ideas and emotions? There is, of course, the discourse of popular culture. My own family speaks through canonical *Seinfeld* episodes, Monty Python skits, and certain other family film and TV series “classics.” But, outside of my family and perhaps my own generation most of my clever and witty allusions to these artifacts of popular culture are met with a blank stare. Such references apparently do not have the staying power that older more authoritative canonical traditions typically do.

Or at least, they did. The experience I had while writing this book made me wonder whether we in the twilight phase of the cultural use of biblical traditions. Are they “vanishing from our world,” as Byatt’s *Jess* suggests?<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the memory of these traditions and thus the ability to understand our own experiences through their lens is disappearing. On the other hand, the stories themselves may live on in any case. Byatt demonstrates just this with her protagonist *Jess*, who recalls her childhood view that the Bible was “dead and nasty,” while living a life that parallels in multiple ways the tale of Jael and Sisera. No doubt this is what Byatt means with her insistence that old tales repeat themselves in new forms. The story

repeats even when we don't know the story. To be sure, her protagonist Jess was familiar with the Judges 5, but only at a surface level. She knew her antiquated King James Version and the traditional moral assessment of Jael's killing of Sisera. Had Jess known the story at a deeper level and had she known the rich cultural history of the tradition, she may have been able to see herself in both Jael and Sisera, as Byatt leads her reader to do. Knowing more about the cultural history of the biblical story, Jess might have linked memories of her own dull days at her private girls' school with the tales of Jael's boredom that had already been told by nineteenth-century authors. That said, Jess's younger colleagues have even further to go. They have no knowledge at all of the biblical story, or any of the classical myths that Jess at least turns to for advertising purposes.

This brings us back to the beginning of the book. In the introduction, I noted that some biblical scholars claim that doing reception history is the last chance for biblical studies to survive as a field. The old historical questions are exhausted, the argument goes, but revealing the ways the Bible has played a long and important role in Western culture offers a way forward. I don't agree that historical questions are no longer worth asking about the Bible. I suspect there are still things to learn. Still, by offering a cultural history of a particular biblical tradition, I hope that I've done more than "go on holiday" as a biblical scholar. One aim for my work has been to demonstrate the potential for undertaking a sustained analyses of different uses of a story such as the Jael-Sisera tradition. I suggest that this potential goes beyond the resuscitation of biblical studies, important though that may be.

Throughout this book, my overall goal has been to show the capacities of one particular biblical tradition to speak across multiple generations regarding matters of gender, sex, and violence. In so doing, I have offered just one example of how Western culture repeatedly turns to certain ancient biblical traditions to articulate and contribute to contemporary conversations. This speaking by way of the Bible and the biblical occurs repeatedly over time because these traditions do their work well. They remain open to new representations, to being stretched, shaped, and reshaped anew. And in so doing, biblical traditions like the Jael-Sisera story speak with an accumulated cultural authority that individual voices do not carry on their own. If these stories are indeed vanishing from our world, we are at risk of losing not just the stories, but also a powerful means of constructing and contributing to a common cultural discourse. The writing of cultural histories of biblical stories such as this one may slow this loss.



# Notes

## CHAPTER 1

1. See, for example Joy Schroeder, who journeys with Deborah through the centuries, or Ian Boxall, who embarks on a similar time-traveling journey to Patmos. Joy A. Schroeder, *Deborah's Daughters: Gender Politics and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ian Boxall, "Tracing Patmos through the Centuries," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. Emma England and William John Lyons (London; New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 155–168. And of course, the entire Blackwell Bible Commentary series is written to take the reader "through the centuries" as for example, D. M. Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).
2. See James G. Crossley, "The End of Reception History, a Grand Narrative for Biblical Studies and the Neoliberal Bible," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. Emma England and William John Lyons (London; New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 45; Susan Gillingham, "Biblical Studies on Holiday? A Personal View of Reception History," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. Emma England and William John Lyons (London; New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 17–30.
3. As in Timothy Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward a Cultural History of Scripture," *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2011): 357–372; Roland Boer, "Against 'Reception History,'" *The Bible and Interpretation* (2011), <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/boe358008.shtml>; Crossley, "The End of Reception History, a Grand Narrative for Biblical Studies and the Neoliberal Bible."
4. Or, more particularly for the field of New Testament studies, as in W. John Lyons, "Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 (2010): 207–220.

- See also Jonathan Morgan, "Visitors, Gatekeepers and Receptionists: Reflections on the Shape of Biblical Studies and the Role of Reception History," in *Reception History and Biblical Studies*, ed. Emma England and William John Lyons (London; New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 61–76.
5. The origins and contours of the debate, taking place especially among British New Testament scholars, are reviewed in James G. Crossley, "An Immodest Proposal for Biblical Studies," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 2 (2012): 153–177. See also Morgan, "Visitors, Gatekeepers and Receptionists: Reflections on the Shape of Biblical Studies and the Role of Reception History."
  6. Art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg coined the phrase, *Die Nachleben der Antike*, with reference to the legacy and lasting effects of the classical world. Its English equivalent has become quite popular in titles for biblical reception history. See, for example, Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jennifer L. Koosed, *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011); Annette Yoshiko Reed, "The Afterlives of New Testament Apocrypha," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134 (2015): 401–425.
  7. Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward a Cultural History of Scripture," 368.
  8. Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 15–74.
  9. *Ibid.*, 114–115.
  10. See especially Boer, "Against 'Reception History.'"
  11. James G. Crossley, *Reading the New Testament: Contemporary Approaches*, 1st ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 118–129.
  12. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History*, 115.
  13. Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward a Cultural History of Scripture," 369.
  14. Ulrich Luz, "The Contribution of Reception History to a Theology of the New Testament," in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of Robert Morgan*, ed. Christopher Rowland and C. M. Tuckett (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006), 124–125. Quoted by Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward a Cultural History of Scripture," 369.
  15. "Reception History and Beyond: Toward a Cultural History of Scripture," 369.
  16. *Ibid.*, 371.
  17. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History*, 140–141.
  18. These persistent themes might be likened to Breed's concept of "nodal points." His reception historical project describes a method in which historians trace readings across different contexts to "locate various semantic modes through which cluster of readings converge" (140). While I am interested in the convergence of readings, I also want to maintain a sense of the chronological in this book. I don't want to collapse the distinct ways that Jael-Sisera expresses

- women's discontent in the nineteenth century compared to a semantically similar but nevertheless distinctive expression of this theme in the twentieth century.
19. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History*, 129–130. Breed cites an “old joke” about topologists being unable to distinguish between a coffee cup and a doughnut because the two are topologically equivalent. Even more amusing, at least to me, is that there are old jokes about topologists, told, I assume by old topologists.
  20. For Breed's elaboration of his “processual” approach to reception history, see *ibid.*, 116–141.
  21. See especially Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); *Undoing Gender* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004).
  22. Ken Stone, “Bibles That Matter: Biblical Theology and Queer Performativity,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 38 (2008): 14–25.

## CHAPTER 2

1. For a discussion of dating old Hebrew poetry, and Judges 5 in particular, see Mark S. Smith, “Why Was ‘Old Poetry’ Used in Hebrew Narrative? Historical and Cultural Considerations about Judges 5,” in *Puzzling Out the Past: Studies in Northwest Semitic Languages and Literatures in Honor of Bruce Zuckerman*, ed. Steven Fine, Marilyn J. Lundberg, and Wayne T. Pitard (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2012). Others argue that the two traditions may have existed concurrently, and that in any case, there is no possibility of reliably ascribing relative dating to the two traditions. Athalya Brenner, “A Triangle and a Rhombus in Narrative Structure: A Proposed Integrative Reading of Judges IV and V,” *Vetus Testamentum* 40, no. 2 (1990): 129–138. Fewell and Gunn critique the tendency of biblical scholars to treat the traditions separately, attempting instead to read Judges 4–5 as a coherent narrative. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men and Violence in Judges 4–5,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (1989): 389–411. Alternatively, Jacob Wright argues that Judges 5 reflects an early battle victory song that was expanded on the basis of Judges 4, including the later insertion of the Jael-Sisera episode. Jacob L. Wright, “Deborah's War Memorial: The Composition of Judges 4–5 and the Politics of War Commemoration,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 123, no. 4 (2011): 516–534.
2. McDaniel suggests that Judges 4 is a commentary of sorts on what had already become a difficult poem to understand. *Deborah Never Sang: A Philological Study on the Song of Deborah* (Jerusalem: Makor Pub., 1983), 52–53. Similarly, see Robert G. Boling, *Judges*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 98; Baruch Halpern, “The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography,” *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983): 389.

3. For example Wolfgang Richter, *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Richterbuch* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein Verlag, 1963), 111–112; Barnabus Lindars, “Deborah’s Song: Women in the Old Testament,” *Bulletin of John Rylands University* 65 (1985): 160. Mieke Bal emphasizes the difference between the two accounts that is often elided by biblical scholars in *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera’s Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
4. One is found in the Vaticanus Codex (referred to as the “B” text of Judges) and one is in the Alexandrinus Codex (known as the “A” text). While these Old Greek translations tend to follow the MT fairly closely, the differences between the two, especially in the case of Judges 5, are a further indication of the obscurity of the Hebrew vocabulary. As Soggin notes, in vv. 7, 16, and 21–22 LXXa simply transliterates unknown Hebrew words while LXXb offers “the fantastic interpretations of the translator.” J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 92. For detailed discussion of the manuscript traditions of Judges, see <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/07-judges-nets.pdf>.
5. For a detailed discussion see Robert Rezetko, “The Qumran Scrolls of the Book of Judges: Literary Formation, Textual Criticism, and Historical Linguistics,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 13 (2013): 1–68.
6. See the discussion in Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 21–23.
7. As noted also in Brenner, “A Triangle and a Rhombus in Narrative Structure: A Proposed Integrative Reading of Judges IV and V,” 129–130.
8. The name accompanying Jael’s, Shamgar, appears elsewhere only briefly in Judges 3:31. There he appears as a Samson-like figure who kills 600 Philistines with an ox goad. Some argue Shamgar was an oppressor of Israel who is here contrasted with Jael. In this case, the days of Shamgar and Jael would represent the beginning and end of a period of oppression. See Barnabus Lindars, *Judges 1–5: A New Translation and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995); John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Basingstoke: W. B. Eerdmans; M. Morgan & Scott, 1986). Gray suggests that the editor responsible for the earlier reference in 3:31 assumed Shamgar was a deliverer because of his association with Jael in the poem. *Ibid.*, 266. Alternatively, because Shamgar and Jael share an uncertain ethnic identity, perhaps they both represent foreigners who came to the aid of Israel. Trent Butler suggests that the two figures may be symbolic of a period when Israel lacked its own strong leadership. Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 120.
9. Lindars, *Judges 1–5: A New Translation and Commentary*, 235.
10. For a more detailed discussion of her translation style see Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 25–26. There she notes her interest in the orality of the

biblical traditions and describes her goal as an attempt to “capture both the meaning and the medium of the Hebrew, paying special attention to its heard quality and to be as literal and rooted in the Hebrew as possible without sacrificing an economical elegance of the traditional language.”

11. As Alter observes, “A sense of narrative progression is thus produced in a manner analogous to the illusion of movement created in the cinema, where a series of still photographs flashes in the retina with sufficient speed so that one seems to flow into the next, each frozen movement in the visual sequence fusing into temporal flux.” Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 39.
12. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 227–228.
13. Susan Niditch, “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 50.
14. For the phrase see *Judges: A Commentary*, 57, 66. Niditch draws on language from Emily Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, Sather Classical Lectures (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
15. For additional examples see Niditch, “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael,” 48–49.
16. For a more detailed discussion see *ibid.*, 47–50. In this case, the woman Jael is in the position of rapist. So also, though more tentatively, Alter notes that Sisera’s “death throes between her legs, kneeling, then prostrate, may be, perhaps, an ironic glance at the time-honored martial custom of rape.” *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 49.
17. Niditch notes the use of the motif in Greek epics, as well as classical South Asian literature. *Judges: A Commentary*, 81.
18. Most English translations soften the term with translations like maiden (RSV), woman (GNB), girl (NRS, NJB), or damsel (KJV).
19. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 46.
20. Freema Gottlieb, “Three Mothers,” *Judaism* 30 (1981): 200; Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 81.
21. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men and Violence in Judges 4–5,” 404; Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera’s Death*, 130–131. Also *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 228. These scholars all point to on the gruesome imagery of Deuteronomy 28:56–57, where *ben ragleha* refers to the afterbirth falling “between the legs” of a mother.
22. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 76.
23. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men and Violence in Judges 4–5,” 405.
24. Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*, 228. See also Van Dijk-Hemmes and A. Brenner who identify the poem as an “F” text, that is, predominately female oriented. Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, “Mothers

- and a Mediator in the Song of Deborah,” in *Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).
25. Butler, *Judges*, 90.
  26. D. F. Murray, “Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story (Judges IV 4–22),” in *Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament*, ed. John Adney Emerton (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 168. For his detailed argument regarding this section see pp. 168–183.
  27. L. Alonso-Schökel, “Erzählkunst im Buche der Richter,” *Biblica* 42 (1961): 164.
  28. So Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19 (2005): 32–34; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men and Violence in Judges 4–5,” 394.
  29. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 224–225.
  30. Murray, “Narrative Structure and Technique in the Deborah-Barak Story (Judges IV 4–22),” 185.
  31. *Ibid.*, 173.
  32. Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera’s Death*, 118. So also Butler, *Judges*, 90.
  33. Rather than humiliate Barak, she suggests that his request elevates the status of Deborah. The prediction that glory will go to a woman fits with the theme of the unlikely hero in Judges. Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 65. See also Brenner, “A Triangle and a Rhombus in Narrative Structure: A Proposed Integrative Reading of Judges IV and V,” 131.
  34. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men and Violence in Judges 4–5,” 392. Writing from a tradition history perspective, Yair Zakovitch suggests that an earlier rendition of the story was all about sex, but in its present state, most of the explicit references have been censored. Yair Zakovitch, “Sisseras Tod,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 81 (1993): 364–374. See also Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 37–38.
  35. Reis, “Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading.”
  36. *Ibid.*, 29.
  37. As Reis points out, her reading of the tradition would be supported by a Talmudic tradition that suggests that Jael and Sisera actually had sex seven times. I discuss the rabbis’ logic for this interpretation in the next chapter.
  38. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 48. So also Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, 66.
  39. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men and Violence in Judges 4–5,” 392–393.
  40. Peter C. Craigie, “Three Ugaritic Notes on the Song of Deborah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 2 (1977): 33–49; “Deborah and Anat: A Study of Poetic Images (Judges 5),” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90 (1978): 374–381; Stephen G. Dempster, “Mythology and History in the Song of Deborah,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (1978): 33–53; J. Glen Taylor, “The

- Song of Deborah and Two Canaanite Goddesses,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 99–108.
41. Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 93–102. Ackerman also builds on an earlier study by Benyamin Mazar, “The Sanctuary of Arad and the Family of Hobab the Kenite,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 24 (1965): 297–303. Ora Brison suggests that Jael be read from a cultic perspective in light of biblical figures such as the medium of Endor (1 Sam. 28:5–25) and the prophet/diviner Balaam (Num. 22–24), who unwittingly advised kings of future defeats. In this case, Sisera fled to Jael’s tent to seek advice from her because she was a cultic diviner. Ora Brison, “Jael, ‘Eshet Heber the Kenite: A Diviner?,” in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya and Gale Yee Brenner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).
  42. For a good overview of these discussions see D. M. Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 71–87.
  43. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985), 20.
  44. Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 73.

## CHAPTER 3

1. Margarita Stocker discusses this confusion in her lengthy study of the figure of Judith in cultural history. Oddly, given the antiquity of the Jael tradition, Stocker refers to Jael as “a truncated version of Judith” (14), and Jael as “the canonical guise for Judith” (150). In the same vein, Stocker discusses representations of Jael as if they were actually of Judith, or “Judith-Jael” as she puts it (see for example, 160–172). Margarita Stocker, *Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998).
2. Sidnie White Crawford, “In the Steps of Jael and Deborah: Judith as Heroine,” in *No One Spoke Ill of Her: Essays on Judith*, ed. James C. VanderKam (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 6.
3. On this similarity see Patrick W. Skehan, “The Hand of Judith,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 5 (1963): 94–100.
4. In this way Judith is more like another Jewish heroine, Esther, than Jael. See Esther 2:7.
5. Yael Shemesh makes a similar point. Yael Shemesh/יעל שמש, “‘Yet He Committed No Act of Sin with Me, to Defile and Shame Me’ (Judith 13:16): The Narrative of Judith as a Corrective to the Narrative of Yael and Sisera” / “יג יהודית, ולבשת לטמאה” / “חטא עמי עשה ולא וסיסרא יעל לסיפור מתקן כסיפור יהודית סיפור (טז),” *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* / לקר שנתון (2006) 16: 159–177.

6. As, for example, in George C. M. Douglas, *The Book of Judges* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1881), 31. Douglas notes the “base intentions” that are sometimes imputed to Sisera, which would explain and justify Jael’s actions.
7. For discussion of bodily mutilation as a shaming strategy see T. M. Lemos, “Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 234.
8. Although later interpreters did not always recognize her as such. See Stocker, *Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture*.
9. For discussion of the genre see Daniel J. Harrington, “Palestinian Adaptations of Biblical Narratives and Prophecies,” in *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and George W. E. Nickelsburg (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986). Other writings that Harrington puts in this category are Jubilees, the Assumption of Moses, the Temple Scroll, Genesis Apocryphon, and LAB. For more recent discussion see Géza Vermès and József Zsengellér, eds., *Rewritten Bible after Fifty Years: Texts, Terms, or Techniques? A Last Dialogue with Geza Vermes* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014).
10. Of course, claims of omissions assume that Josephus was working with manuscript traditions that included this material, which given the existing LXX versions is a safe assumption.
11. For a detailed debate about the role of Deborah in Josephus see Mark Roncace, “Josephus’s (Real) Portraits of Deborah and Gideon: A Reading of *Antiquities* 5.198–232,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 31, no. 3 (2000): 247–274; Louis H. Feldman, “On Professor Roncace’s Portraits of Deborah and Gideon in Josephus,” *ibid.*, 32, no. 2 (2001): 193–220. Roncace objects to Feldman’s comparative method which he finds of limited value for character analysis. In particular, he objects to Feldman’s claims that Josephus downplays the importance of Deborah and lifts up Barak because of his inherent misogyny.
12. See Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 369–373.
13. Feldman notes that because Sisera takes the initiative, Josephus’s account has no violation of hospitality on Jael’s part. Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus’ Rewritten Bible* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1998), 160.
14. Though Roncace argues that Barak “is nowhere to be found when Sisera dies,” a detail which he suggests contributes to his characterization as a coward. Mark Roncace, “Josephus’s (Real) Portraits of Deborah and Gideon: A Reading of *Antiquities* 5.198–232,” 256–257.
15. Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation*, 2 vols., *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1996), 253.
16. The academic introduction of the work and the alternative designation “Pseudo-Philo” come from Leopold Cohn, who also posited the Hebrew origin of LAB.

- See Leopold Cohn, "An Apocryphal Work Ascribed to Philo of Alexandria," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 10 (1898): 277–332. For a more recent introduction see Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation*, 195–280. Also important is Louis H. Feldman, "Prolegomenon," in *The Biblical Antiquities of Philo*, ed. M. R. James (New York: Ktav, 1971).
17. The dating debate has focused on *LAB* 19.7, where God tells Moses that on the seventeenth day of the fourth month (17 Tammuz), foreigners will breach and encircle the place where the Israelites have served God. That is, it will happen on the same day that Moses smashed the tablets of the covenant. The question is whether this date was associated with the destruction of the First or the Second Temple. Cohn, James, Nicklesburg, and Jacobson all see it as a reference to the Second Temple. See the extensive discussion in Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation*, 199–210. Though I find Jacobson's argument for a post-Second Temple date convincing, it makes little difference for this study.
  18. For discussion of themes in *LAB* see *ibid.*, 241–253.
  19. Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, "At the Hands of a Woman: Rewriting Jael in Pseudo-Philo," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 17 (1998): 54.
  20. *Ibid.*, 54.
  21. Burnette-Bletsch suggests that *LAB* differs from Deuteronomistic theology insofar as salvation is not dependent on repentance. *Ibid.*, 55.
  22. For positive assessments regarding the role of women in *LAB* see Pieter Willem Van der Horst, "Portraits of Biblical Women in Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 5 (1989): 29–46; Mary Therese DesCamp, *Metaphor and Ideology: Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum and Literary Methods through a Cognitive Lens*, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007). Alternatively, see Betsy Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Women in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*," in *Women Like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991); Donald C. Polaski, "On Taming Tamar: Anram's Rhetoric and Women's Roles in Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 9," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 13 (1995): 79–99.
  23. The combination of elements in the narrative from both the prose and poetic accounts of the Bible mean that in *LAB* the song that follows the Jael-Sisera story is composed of entirely different material. It focuses mostly on Abraham, especially the sacrifice of Isaac, along with Moses and a brief mention of Joshua and Sisera, followed by general praise of Yahweh and his creation.
  24. The notion of punishment being meted out "measure for measure" is common in *LAB* and explicitly stated in 44.10, where God says, ". . . every man will be so punished, that in whatever sin he shall have sinned with this he will be judged." Similarly, the people acknowledge that their sufferings will correspond to their

- conduct: “whatever we ourselves devised, that will we also receive.” See Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation*, 246. On LAB’s moral causality see also Frederick James Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 247–248.
25. Burnette-Bletsch suggests that the author takes the idea of covenant so seriously that he avoids depicting Jael as a treaty-breaker. Burnette-Bletsch, “At the Hands of a Woman: Rewriting Jael in Pseudo-Philo,” 58.
  26. According to Burnette-Bletsch, the omission is meant to de-emphasize Jael’s foreign associations, but it seems that omitting the word “Kenite” would be far more useful toward that end. *ibid.*, 58, nt. 8.
  27. Erich S. Gruen, “Subversive Elements in Pseudo-Philo,” in *For Uriel: Studies in the History of Israel in Antiquity Presented to Professor Uriel Rappaport*, ed. Menachem Mor et al. (Jerusalem: Zalman Center for Jewish History, 2005), 45–46.
  28. Jacobson suggests that the author has Genesis 24:17 in mind, where Abraham’s servant asks for a sign from God regarding a wife for Isaac. The chosen woman is to respond positively to his request to “give me a little water to sip,” a phrase that is almost identical to Sisera’s request. Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation*, 852.
  29. Burnette-Bletsch, “At the Hands of a Woman: Rewriting Jael in Pseudo-Philo,” 61.
  30. DesCamp, *Metaphor and Ideology: Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum and Literary Methods through a Cognitive Lens*, 107.
  31. DesCamp also notes the distinction and inclusion implied in this verse, though she emphasizes the possibility that Jael should be considered among God’s chosen ones. *Ibid.*, 229–230.
  32. Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation*, 855. He notes the similarity to Pyrrhus before his slaughter of Priam (Aeneid 2:547–550). In Vergil, the point is to show the utter depravity of the Greeks (e.g., Pyrrhus) in their ruthless slaughter of the enemy. Here the point is to reinforce the humiliating nature of Sisera’s death.
  33. For a more detailed discussion, see Bronner, who notes that “the subject seems to have captivated their attention powerfully, as it is discussed with slight variations in several places in the Talmud and midrash.” She also cites a tradition that has Jael giving Sisera milk from her breasts. Leila Leah Bronner, “Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 89. Also D. M. Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 54–55.
  34. See Louis Ginzberg, “Akiba ben Joseph,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1033-akiba-ben-joseph>. Ginzberg cites Rabbi Nissim Gaon as the source of the story.

## CHAPTER 4

1. Translations are from Origen, "Homilies on Judges," in *The Fathers of the Church* 119, trans. Laura Elizabeth Ann Dively (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 83.
2. *Ibid.*, 80.
3. See *ibid.*, 80, nt. 33.
4. Translation from *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (2nd series)*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. X (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978).
5. Over 350 manuscripts of the *Speculum* still exist. By the early fourteenth century, the Latin text had been translated into German, Dutch, French, English, and Czech. See Adrian Wilson and Joyce Lancaster Wilson, *A Medieval Mirror: Speculum Humanae Salvationis, 1324–1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 10, 24.
6. The legend of Tomyris comes by way of Greek historians such as Herodotus. She was queen of the Scythians who commanded the beheading of the defeated King Cyrus of Persia. For detailed discussion of the account in Herodotus see Niki Karapanagioti, "Female Revenge Stories in Herodotus' Histories." Athens Dialogues. 2010. Stories and Histories. EUNIC Papers. <http://athensdialogues.chs.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/athensdialogues.woa/wa/dist?dis=93>.
7. *Le Miroir de Humaine Salvation*, circa 1455. Translated by David Wright with the assistance of John French, Jr. pp. 90–93. Newberry Call No. folio BS478.S64. <http://dcc.newberry.org/collections/wives-and-wenches-sinners-and-saints-women-in-medieval-europe#women-from-the-bible>.
8. As per the image description accompanying this print in the Bodleian collection. <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/detail/ODLodl~1~1~34369~119487>.
9. The nine male worthies were made popular by a 1310 poem by Jacques de Longuyon, "Les Voeux de Paon" (The Vows of the Peacock), which celebrates three exemplary pagan, three Jewish, and three Christian men. By the late 1300s, the balladeer Eustace Dechamps introduced nine female worthies, but his women were all pagan and mostly Amazon warriors.
10. See Ann McMillan, "Men's Weapons, Women's War: The Nine Female Worthies, 1400–1640," *Mediaevalia* 5 (1979): esp. 129–130.
11. Jeanne Marie Noël and Ellen Muller, "Humanist Views on Art and Morality: Theory and Image," in *Saints and She-Devils: Images of Women in the 15th and 16th Centuries*, ed. Lène Dresen-Coenders (London: Rubicon Press, 1987), 129–159.
12. *Ibid.*, 136.
13. Bleyerveld notes that in Coenelius Anthonisz's woodcut of a wise man and a wise woman, in which he provides an allegorical presentation of ideal male and female virtues, only the women's virtues are linked to celebrated women

- of the past. She offers this as further evidence for “a tradition specifically for women of instructing them with the aid of exemplars.” Yvonne Bleyerveld, “Chaste, Obedient and Devout: Biblical Women as Patterns of Female Virtue in Netherlandish and German Graphic Art, ca. 1500–1750,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 28, no. 4 (2000–2001): 224. For another detailed discussion of this woodcut see Ilja M. Veldman, “Lessons for Ladies: A Selection of Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Prints,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 14 (1986): 113–114.
14. Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth Century Manual*, trans. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 268. See Ellen Muller, “Humanist Views on Art and Morality: Theory and Image,” 137.
  15. Ilja Veldman notes that visual admonitions for female conduct became increasingly popular in the sixteenth century, corresponding to an increase of instructional books intended for women. Veldman, “Lessons for Ladies: A Selection of Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Prints,” 114.
  16. Quoted in Bleyerveld, “Chaste, Obedient and Devout: Biblical Women as Patterns of Female Virtue in Netherlandish and German Graphic Art, ca. 1500–1750,” 221.
  17. Veldman, “Lessons for Ladies: A Selection of Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Prints,” 114.
  18. See the extensive discussion in Joan Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory and the ‘Querelle des Femmes’, 1400–1789,” *Signs* 8, no. 1 (1982): 4–28; *Women, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*, ed. Joan Kelly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
  19. Ilja M. Veldman, “The Old Testament as a Moral Code: Old Testament Stories as Exempla of the Ten Commandments,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 23 (1995): 218.
  20. *Ibid.*, 220.
  21. A. von Keller, *Hans Sachs. Werke*, 26 vols., Tübingen 1870–1908, vol. 1, pp. 203–210. Cited in Bleyerveld, “Chaste, Obedient and Devout: Biblical Women as Patterns of Female Virtue in Netherlandish and German Graphic Art, ca. 1500–1750.”
  22. See J. and W. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 16 vols., Leipzig 1854–1960, vol. 8, pp. 475–482, esp. 478. Among the many meanings listed are upright, good, honest, loyal, and innocent.
  23. Bleyerveld, “Chaste, Obedient and Devout: Biblical Women as Patterns of Female Virtue in Netherlandish and German Graphic Art, ca. 1500–1750,” 39.
  24. In the first set of six, Schön illustrates the first six women of Sachs’ poem: from left to right are Eve, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Jael. The second woodcut features Ruth, Michal, Abigail, Judith, Esther, and Susanna.
  25. For a discussion of these monumental heroines in the context of the *femme forte* of the seventeenth century, see Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image*

- of the *Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). Garrard argues that while it may be remarkable that images of strong virile women, often juxtaposed with “tiny and subordinated images of devalued and denigrated men,” were so popular at this time, they were likely viewed as “curiosities at best, heroic only insofar as they are virile, and virile only insofar as they are imaginary” (168–169).
26. Thanks to my Seton Hall colleague Frederick Booth for his assistance with the Latin translation.
  27. As David Gunn suggests, see D. M. Gunn, *Judges*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 75.
  28. Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women: A Topos in Medieval Art and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 193–194. See also Julia Nurse, “She-Devils, Harlots and Harridans in Northern Renaissance Prints,” *History Today* 48, no. 7 (1998): 41–48.
  29. The first appearance of the *topos* in the graphic arts was the Housebook Master’s paired prints of the mounted Aristotle and Solomon’s idolatry, circa 1485. Smith, *The Power of Women: A Topos in Medieval Art and Literature*, 199.
  30. On the example of Solomon, Vives notes that he “lost his mind because of women and from a wise man became the most foolish of men.” See Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth Century Manual*, 328.
  31. Quoted in Sijbolt Noorda, “Jaël, Judith and Salmone: Femmes Fatales in the Biblical Tradition,” in *Femmes Fatales, 1860–1910*, ed. H. W. van Os (Antwerp: Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen; Groningen: Groninger Museum; Wommelgem, Belgium: BAI, 2002), 32. It is true that an accompanying volume was published a few years later on “The Deceit of Men,” but Bleyerveld notes that in this case examples of “deceptive” men focused on the sin of adultery rather than their own inherent deceitfulness, as in the case of women. See Yvonne Bleyerveld, *Hoe bedriechlijck dat die vrouwen zijn: vrouwenlisten in de beeldende kunst in de Nederlanden circa 1350–1650* (Netherlands: Primavera Pers, 2000), 86.
  32. The print is with a drawing of Judith putting the head of Holofernes into a bag. As such, it is not part of a Power of Women series, and together the prints may have been intended as a heroic representation of both women. But I would argue that Sisera’s vulnerable body evokes a sympathetic response, complicating the interpretation of Jaël as heroic.
  33. Van Heemskerck spent time in Rome, where he developed a strong appreciation for the work of Michelangelo and an interest in the meticulous representation of the human anatomy. See Ilja M. Veldman, *Maarten van Heemskerck and Dutch Humanism in the Sixteenth Century* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1977), 120–121.
  34. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 23.
  35. Robyn Fleming to revena’s journal, Dec. 1, 2005, <http://revena.dreamwidth.org/128023.html>. See also Deryn Guest, “From Gender Reversal to

- Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens,” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Ken Stone and Theresa J. Hornsby (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011), 9–43.
36. Pierre Le Moyne, *The Gallery of Heroick Women* (London: Printed by R. Norton for H. Seile, 1652), Monograph. preface, n.p. The English quotations that follow will come from this same translation.
  37. For more detailed discussion of the work as a whole, see: Derval Conroy, “Description or Prescription: Verbal Painting in Pierre Le Moyne’s *Gallerie des Femme Fortes*,” *French Forum* 35 (2011): 1–17; Joan DeJean, “Violent Women and Violence against Women: Representing the ‘Strong’ Woman in Early Modern France,” *Signs* 29, no. 1 (2003): 117–147.
  38. The drawings for the twenty illustrations were done by Claude Vignon and likely in collaboration with Le Moyne. See Conroy, “Description or Prescription: Verbal Painting in Pierre Le Moyne’s *Gallerie des Femme Fortes*,” 13, nt. 6.
  39. *Ibid.*, 1–2.
  40. Le Moyne, *The Gallery of Heroick Women*: preface, n.p.
  41. Joan DeJean, “Violent Women and Violence against Women: Representing the ‘Strong’ Woman in Early Modern France,” 131. DeJean further notes that Le Moyne’s “verbal portrait of his heroine is absolutely faithful to the authoritative account.” It is not clear what this comment means, since even if one assumes Judges 4–5 is the “authoritative account,” as we know, it does not provide only one version of the tradition.

## CHAPTER 5

1. Anthony Trollope, *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, 2 vols. (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1867).
2. *Ibid.*, 347–350.
3. For more on the significance of this painting in Trollope’s novel, see chapter 6.
4. Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
5. Martin O’Kane, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007).
6. *Ibid.*, 3.
7. J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu, *Between the Text and the Canvas: The Bible and Art in Dialogue* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 1.
8. For other studies see Natasha O’Hear, *Contrasting Images of the Book of Revelation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art: A Case Study in Visual Exegesis* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Jane Boyd and Philip Esler, *Visuality and Biblical Text: Interpreting Velázquez’ Christ with Martha and Mary as a Test Case*, *Arte E Archeologia* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 2004); Andrea M. Shaeffer, *Envisioning the Book of Judith: How Art Illuminates Minor Characters* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014).

9. Shaeffer, *Envisioning the Book of Judith: How Art Illuminates Minor Characters*, 8–9.
10. See for example, J. Cheryl Exum, “Shared Glory: Salomon De Bray’s *Jael, Deborah and Barak*,” in *Between the Text and the Canvas: The Bible and Art in Dialogue*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007).
11. Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 463.
12. R. Ward Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).
13. Writing toward the end of the seventeenth century, Pieter de Grebber summarized in eleven rules on a single broadsheet all that artists needed to know to execute a painting, beginning with consideration of the location of the painting and knowing the history. Amy Golahny, *Rembrandt’s Reading: The Artist’s Bookshelf of Ancient Poetry and History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 44; Peter C. Sutton. “Grebber, Pieter de,” *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T034185>.
14. Ann Sutherland Harris, “Artemisia Gentileschi: The Literate Illiterate or Learning from Example,” in *Docere, Delectare, Movere: Affetti, Devozione e Retorica nel Linguaggio Artistico del Primo Barocco Romano*, ed. Bert Treffers, et.al. (Rome: De Luca/Istituto Olandese a Roma/Biblioteca Hertziana, 1998), 108. Biblical scholars are apparently not the only ones to make faulty assumptions about artists and literacy. Harris notes that art historians also assume a level of literary competence that was well beyond that of most artists (109).
15. Mieke Bal, *Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition: The Northrop Frye Lectures in Literary Theory* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 77.
16. *Ibid.*, 126, also 406, nt. 27.
17. *Ibid.*, 77. For Bal’s concept of “textual communities,” see Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
18. Bal, *Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition: The Northrop Frye Lectures in Literary Theory*, 177.
19. *Ibid.*, 178.
20. *Ibid.*, 207.
21. *Ibid.* Elsewhere, Bal also sounds much like the biblical reception critics mentioned above, as when she argues that “images are readings, and the rewritings they give rise to, thorough their ideological choices, function in the same way as sermons: They are not a retelling of the text but a use of it; not an illustration but, ultimately a new text”; *ibid.*, 34–35. In this case, the artist acts as exegete after all.
22. *Ibid.*, 76.
23. Babette Bohn, “Death and Dispassion and the Female Hero: Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Jael and Sisera*,” in *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*, ed. Mieke Bal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 113–114.

24. *Ibid.*, 116.
25. *Ibid.*, 114–115.
26. Notably, the curator notes for this painting provided by the San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts do not identify these figures as Jael and Sisera (apart from the title of the painting). The web page includes the following two descriptions: “Man fallen onto ground with raised hands trying to ward off two female attackers. One figure pounding a large stake into the man’s head with a large hammer.” Then: “Jael AND SISERAH, SCHOOL OF DOMENICHINO ZAMPIERI, dramatic scene of a woman about to drive a stake into the side of a man’s head, man dressed in soldier attire rests his head on pillow, he raises his hands in anticipation of pain, woman with spike holds her hammer poised above her head while another woman holds a blanket over the fallen soldier, perhaps this is a mercy killing (or an ancient cure for a headache!).” See <https://art.famsf.org/domenichino-domenico-zampieri/jael-and-tisseran-196324210>. Neither of these two statements read the painting iconographically, linking it to the biblical tradition in Judges 4–5. Nor do they read the man in the same way. Is he a man fallen to the ground warding off female attackers or a fallen soldier resting his head on a pillow? Unintentionally, the differing comments reflect the ambiguity of the two biblical versions.
27. Though not all, as we saw in Reis’s reading of this “covering” as a reference to sexual intercourse. See p. 24.
28. F. Marion Crawford, *Fair Margaret: A Portrait* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 3–4.
29. Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate this painting and secure permissions for its reproduction here. The painting can be viewed in the online 2012 auction listing from the Desa Art gallery in Krakow. This site identifies the painting as from the circle of Jacopo Amigoni. See <http://desa.art.pl/index.php?pozycja=19338>. It can also be viewed at various online art collections: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/28433765@No7/7177236795> and <http://necspenecmetu.tumblr.com/post/32884437986/jacopo-amigoni-yael-and-sisera-18th-century>.
30. Nanette Salomon, “Judging Artemisia: A Baroque Woman in Modern Art History,” in *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*, 51.
31. One example is the painting of Jael and Sisera by Alessandro Turchi, circa 1600–1610. A bas-relief carved by Giovanni Lasagni (1558–1617) on the exterior of the Cathedral of Milan offers another striking image of a topless Jael.
32. For more on the history of breast iconography see Anne M. Ashton, “Interpreting Breast Iconography in Italian Art, 1250–1600” (Dissertation, University of St. Andrews, 2006); Margaret R. Miles, *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350–1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
33. According to Babette Bohn, another rendering of Jael and Sisera painted by Bolognese painter Barbara Sirani has been lost. Bohn, “Death and Dispassion and the Female Hero: Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Jael and Sisera*,” 123–124.

34. Agnès Merlet, "Artemisia" (United States: Miramax Zöe, 1997); Susan Vreeland, *The Passion of Artemisia* (New York: Viking, 2002).
35. See especially Elizabeth S. Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 (2000): 47–75. Cohen offers an important corrective to reading twenty-first-century perspectives of rape back to seventeenth-century Italy.
36. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 5. Here Garrard is distinguishing the daughter's work from her father's. While Artemisia's female characters superficially resemble those in Orazio's work, Garrard claims that "they respond and act in an entirely different way."
37. Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné*.
38. *Ibid.*, 119–120.
39. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, 136. Garrard also cites another letter to support the idea of a gender-consciousness in Artemisia where the artist states, "If I were a man, I cannot imagine it would have turned out this way."
40. Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné*, 212.
41. Yael Even, "Review of *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art* by R. Ward Bissell; *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1620–22: The Shaping and Reshaping of Artistic Identity* by Mary D. Garrard," *Women's Art Journal* 23 (2002): 37.
42. Judith W. Mann, "Identity Signs: Meanings and Methods in Artemisia Gentileschi's Signatures," *Renaissance Studies* 23 (2009): 93–94.
43. *Ibid.*, 94.
44. Bohn, "Death and Dispassion and the Female Hero: Artemisia Gentileschi's *Jael and Sisera*," 127.
45. Bissell identifies Cigoli's painting as one of the primary sources for Artemisia's "derivative" work. Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné*, 24–25, 212.
46. Bohn, "Death and Dispassion and the Female Hero: Artemisia Gentileschi's *Jael and Sisera*," 121.
47. *Ibid.*, 121–122.
48. *Ibid.*, 126–127.
49. Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné*, 213.
50. Bohn, "Death and Dispassion and the Female Hero: Artemisia Gentileschi's *Jael and Sisera*," 127.
51. As suggested by Jesse M. Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 82. See also Keith Christiansen, "Becoming Artemisia: Afterthoughts on the Gentileschi Exhibition," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 39 (2004): 116.

52. Bal makes this drawing a subject of analysis, seeing in the figure of Jael a self-reflexive image of the visual artist. With her raised mallet, Jael becomes a sculptor at work. As Bal puts it, “the drawing of Yael is supposed to be about murder, but murder is not seen as violent and destructive here; murder is, according to the drawing’s metaphorical argument, as necessary for the creation of Israel as the work of craft is necessary for the creation of a work of art.” Bal, *Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition: The Northrop Frye Lectures in Literary Theory*, 298. Bal is here referring to the biblical narrative context and therefore ancient Israel. Nevertheless, her words unwittingly evoke the fraught political realities of the contemporary Isareli-Palestinian conflict.
53. Golahny, *Rembrandt’s Reading: The Artist’s Bookshelf of Ancient Poetry and History*, 204; Seymour Slive, *Rembrandt Drawings* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2009), 204.
54. Golahny, *Rembrandt’s Reading: The Artist’s Bookshelf of Ancient Poetry and History*, 33.
55. Anat Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt’s Work* (Delft: Eburon Publishers, 2003).
56. Anthony Dyson, *Printmakers’ Secrets* (London: A&C Black Publishers, 2009), 68.
57. *Jael and Sisera 1* is now part of the Ashmolean collection, keeping company with the Rembrandt drawing shown above. It can be viewed on multiple websites, including the artist’s own. See <http://www.marcellehanselaar.com/etchings-2006-07-slider/#jael-and-sisera-1>.
58. Dyson, *Printmakers’ Secrets*, 69.
59. Personal correspondence with Marcelle Hanselaar, June 2–4, 2015.
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER 6

1. Peter Merchant, “Inhabiting the Interspace: De Tabley, Judges, ‘Jael,’” *Victorian Poetry* 36 (1998): 189.
2. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, Penguin Classics (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 121.
3. Celia Wallhead, “The Story of Jael and Sisera in Five Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Fictional Texts,” *Atlantis* 23 (2001): 153–154.
4. Geoffrey M. Harvey, “The Form of the Story: Trollope’s ‘the Last Chronicle of Barset,’” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 18, no. 1 (1976): 94.
5. John Leicester Warren, *Searching the Net: A Book of Verses* (London: Strahan and Company, 1873); John Leicester Warren, Lord De Tabley, *Poems Dramatic and Lyrical* (London: Elkin Matthews and John Lane, 1893). Peter Merchant notes only a few slight word and punctuation changes. Merchant, “Inhabiting the Interspace: De Tabley, Judges, ‘Jael,’” 202, nt. 8. Parenthetical page numbers for the poem refer to the 1893 publication.

6. Hugh Walker, *John B. Leicester Warren, Lord de Tabley: A Biographical Sketch* (London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd, 1903), 43–44.
7. *Ibid.*, 57.
8. *The Spectator* June 10, 1893, p. 20. <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/10th-june-1893/20/lord-de-tableys-poems>.
9. For discussion of “the Victorian preoccupation with fraught self-consciousness” in poets such as Browning and Tennyson (both friends of de Tabley) see Valentine Cunningham, *Victorian Poetry Now: Poets, Poems, Poetics* (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 189–258.
10. Virginia B. Morris, *Double Jeopardy: Women Who Kill in Victorian Fiction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 4.
11. *Ibid.*, 3.
12. *Ibid.*, 3.
13. Peter Merchant, whose article on the poem I found particularly helpful even while I differ at points from his interpretation, suggests that the substitution of third person for first are the poet’s way of interjecting Jael’s speech with “as objective an analysis as possible” (190). Objectivity hardly seems the goal of this third-person section, though, as will become evident in the discussion. Merchant is more on target later when he notes that this central section “marks the climax of Jael’s self-accusation” (196), though again, it is not an “objective” assessment. Merchant, “Inhabiting the Interspace: De Tabley, Judges, ‘Jael.’”
14. *Ibid.*, 200.
15. *Ibid.*, 197. Merchant also concludes that the indignity of dying at Jael’s hands deprives Sisera of his manhood. While this is the intent of the biblical story, de Tabley’s depiction of Sisera, even in death, resists that reading.
16. There is a large body of literature on Victorian masculinities—more than can be discussed here. For a small sampling, see Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Martin A. Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Aldershot, Hants, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2005); Herbert L. Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
17. This last option is Merchant’s reading of the poem. He argues that de Tabley was aware in his time of both negative and positive portrayals of Jael. Given these conflicting images, de Tabley creates an “interspace” between loathing and pity for Jael, (playing on de Tabley’s image of the “interspace between beard and brow” that Jael penetrates with her nail). Merchant, “Inhabiting the Interspace: De Tabley, Judges, ‘Jael.’” I agree that the poem elicits conflicting emotions toward Jael, but find it to be as much concerned with masculine failure as with Jael’s own fall.
18. Morris, *Double Jeopardy: Women Who Kill in Victorian Fiction*, 5.

19. Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), 166.
20. Quoted from *The Bookman*, March 1897, in Ben Ray Redman, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: R. M. McBride & Company, 1926), 32–33.
21. Robinson, *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson*, 135.
22. Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Nicodemus: A Book of Poems* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932). Robinson wrote several poems based on biblical characters. Four of them, “Sisera,” “Young Gideon,” “Nicodemus,” and “The Prodigal Son,” appear in *Nicodemus*. Parenthetical page references for the poem are from *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937).
23. Robert L. Gale, *An Edwin Arlington Robinson Encyclopedia* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), 200; Yvor Winters, *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, Rev. ed. (New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1971), 156.
24. Eric Weil suggests the poem is misnamed because Jael is the protagonist. But the poem begins with Sisera’s perspective and Robinson devotes more space to the male viewpoint of Sisera and Barak than of Jael. Eric Weil, “‘Well, She Was a Woman’: Female Characters in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson” (Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1993), 207.
25. Nicholas Ayo, “Robinson and the Bible” (Dissertation, Duke University, 1966), 164.
26. *Ibid.*, 162.
27. Edwin S. Fussell, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 168.
28. Nicholas Ayo, “Robinson’s Use of the Bible,” in *Appreciation of Edwin Arlington Robinson*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, ME: Colby College Press, 1969), 265. See also “Robinson and the Bible,” 169.
29. Robinson, *Nicodemus: A Book of Poems*, 63–65. The biblical story of Gideon appears in Judges 6:36–40, right after the story of Jael and Sisera. Gideon twice asks for a sign from Yahweh that he will bring Gideon victory over the enemy Midianites.
30. Robert Károly Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players: Theatre in Ferment* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 187. According to Sarlós, Frank was part of the Chicago literary circle with authors such as Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, and Amy Lowell. She would go on to be one of the members of the Provincetown Players, where Eugene O’Neill got his start.
31. See for example, her poem “Song of the Women” and her suffrage play, *Cinderelline*, a parody on “Cinderella,” in which the protagonist advocates for the right to vote.
32. The poem was originally published in the January 1914 issue of *Forum* and was republished later that year in her collection, Florence Kiper Frank, *The Jew to Jesus and Other Poems* (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1915).

33. Florence Kiper Frank, *Cinderelline; or, The Little Red Slipper*, Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Company, 1913. Reprinted in Bettina Friedl, ed. *On to Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Woman Suffrage Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987). Kiper Frank's play is one of a number of amateur plays from this period that were written for private use rather than the public stage. Page numbers below refer to the reprinted play.
34. *Ibid.*, 278.
35. *Ibid.*, 281.
36. Florence Kiper, "Some American Plays from the Feminist Viewpoint," *Forum* 51 (June 1914), 921.
37. *Ibid.* Kiper Frank's embeddedness in the turn-of-the-century milieu is apparent in her list of topics such as "race-suicide, the double standard of morals, the taints of heredity" as "issues that are relevant to all of national existence." This comment, as well as Cinderelline's question about her prospective husband's purity, suggests that Kiper Frank was interested in, along with many other upper-class feminist reformers, the preservation of the "race," which was to be buoyed up by the social purity movement and the pseudo-science of eugenics. See Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester, UK; New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 111–118.
38. Apparently this biblical style found its way into Kiper Frank's poetry as well. As one reviewer of her collected poems comments, "With this modern Jewess, intense vitality and passionate conviction demand utterance in a kind of solemn chant, as with some of the ancient prophetesses of her race. She was born too late for Deborah's heroic simplicity of mood and divine splendor of lyricism, but something of Deborah's spirit is in her." Harriet Monroe, "Review of Florence Kiper Frank, *Collected Poems*," *Poetry* 8 (1916): 265–266. Perhaps this is so, but the play suggests that Kiper Frank may identify more with Jael, especially since her version of the story has no mention of Deborah.
39. Anonymous, *The Cornhill Booklet* 4 (1914), 83.
40. The script is dedicated to Miriam Kiper, Florence's sister, who played the part of Jael. Miriam Kiper was one of Maurice Browne's leading ladies. See Maurice Browne, *Too Late to Lament: An Autobiography*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1956.
41. Kiper, "Some American Plays from the Feminist Viewpoint," 92.
42. The relationship between first wave feminism and eugenics is a complicated one. Most middle- and upper-class feminist reformists favored the movement, insofar as it promoted sexual "purity," while some more radical feminists did not. Kiper Frank appears to belong to the former group. However, the satirical comedy that she wrote for the Provincetown Players, *Gee-rusalem*, pokes fun at a range of social topics, including eugenics and the single New Woman.
43. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 19.
44. Kiper Frank, *The Jew to Jesus and Other Poems*, 8.

45. This is not the only time that Jael and Sisera fall in love with each other. From 1917 to 1921, just a few years after this play was written, Italian composer Ildebrando Pizzetti wrote an opera depicting Sisera as a sympathetic character whom Jael is unable to resist. In the opera, Jael kills Sisera only under pressure from a ruthless Deborah, who tells her that neither she nor Sisera can escape the hand of God. See Helen Leneman, "Re-Visioning a Biblical Story through Libretto and Music: *Deborah E Jael* by Ildebrando Pizzetti," *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2007): 428–463. Leneman speculates that Pizzetti's libretto may be a subtle evocation of early Christian allegories that celebrated Jael as a symbol of the "new law" of the Christian church (see esp. 460–463).
46. Florence Kiper Frank, "The Bisexual American Woman," *The American Mercury*, March 1950, 279.
47. *Ibid.*, 282–283.

## CHAPTER 7

1. Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (Boston: Gregg Press, 1977); Aritha van Herk, *The Tent Peg: A Novel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981); Sara Maitland, *Daughter of Jerusalem* (London: Blond & Briggs, 1978).
2. Russ, *The Female Man*. All page references to *The Female Man* will be to this 1977 volume. On the publication date see Marilyn Hacker, "Introduction," in *The Female Man, The Gregg Press Science Fiction Series*, ed. David G. Hartwell (Boston: Gregg Press, 1977), xx. Also Jeanne Cortiel, *Demand My Writing: Joanna Russ, Feminism, Science Fiction*, Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 57–58.
3. *Ibid.*, 58. For a discussion of the critical response, which Russ anticipates in her novel (see note 4), see Ritch Calvin, "'This Shapeless Book': Reception and Joanna Russ's the Female Man," *Femspec* 10, no. 2 (2010): 24–34.
4. The following is a sample. The ellipses are present in the text as quoted: "Shrill . . . vituperative . . . no concern for the future of society . . . maunderings of antiquated feminism . . . selfish femlib . . . needs a good lay . . . this shapeless book . . . of course a calm and objective discussion is beyond . . . twisted, neurotic . . . some truth buried in a largely hysterical . . . of very limited interest, I should . . . another tract for the trash-can . . . burned her bra and thought that . . . no characterization, no plot. . . ." Russ continues further on: ". . . a brilliant but basically confused study of feminine hysteria which . . . feminine lack of objectivity . . . this pretense at a novel . . . trying to shock . . . the tired tricks of anti-novelists . . . how often must a poor critic have to . . . the usual boring obligatory references to Lesbianism . . . denial of the profound sexual polarity which . . . an all to womanly refusal to face facts . . . pseudo-masculine brusqueness. . . ." and so on (*FM* 140–141).
5. Farah Mendlesohn, ed. *On Joanna Russ* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), viii.

6. Although it's not a major theme in the novel, the character Cal's "failed" masculinity points to Russ's awareness of the constructed nature of manliness as well, as does Jael's observation regarding men's "perpetual losing battle with fear, the constant unloading of anxious weaknesses on to others. . . ." (*FM* 189).
7. What distinguishes the J's are the "intricate socio-economic conditions of power that constitute their different worlds." Samuel Delaney, "Joanna Russ and D. W. Griffith," in *On Joanna Russ*, ed. Farah Mendlesohn (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 194.
8. Whileaway first appears in Russ's short story, "When It Changed." "Supposedly" because later in the novel, Jael provides Janet with an alternative, darker origin story for Whileaway.
9. In an interview about the book, Russ remarked, "The worlds in *The Female Man* are not futures; they are here and now writ large. . . . A flat statement of it would be that Jeannine's world is the past (but still very much present); that Janet's world is a kind of ideal. . . . and that Jael's world is here-and-now carried to its logical extreme. . . . Janet's world is the potential one, not Jael's." Quoted in Hacker, "Introduction," xxii. The interview appears in "Reflections on Science Fiction: An Interview with Joanna Russ," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* 2 (1975): 40–49. The quotation appears on p. 45.
10. Cortiel, *Demand My Writing: Joanna Russ, Feminism, Science Fiction*, 201.
11. Paul March-Russell, "Art and Amity: The 'Opposed Aesthetic' in Mina Loy and Joanna Russ," in *On Joanna Russ*, ed. Farah Mendlesohn (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 177.
12. One such hint occurs during a lesbian encounter between Janet and the teen-aged Laura. An unidentified "I," seemingly put off by a kiss between the two women, remarks "Janet's rid of me. I sprang away and hung by one claw from the curtain" (*FM* 71).
13. March-Russell, "Art and Amity: The 'Opposed Aesthetic' in Mina Loy and Joanna Russ," 180.
14. *Ibid.*, 180.
15. *Ibid.*, 181.
16. She imagined her as a gargoyle and even gave her bat wings at one point, before deciding the wings did not fit with her futuristic science-fiction setting. Cortiel, *Demand My Writing: Joanna Russ, Feminism, Science Fiction*, 84.
17. What she is "not" is made clear in the next paragraph that defines what men want: ". . . a devoted helpmeet, a self-sacrificing mother, a hot chick, a darling daughter, women to look at, women to laugh at, women to come to for comfort, women to wash your floors and buy your groceries and cook your food and keep your children out of your hair. . . ." (and the list continues, *FM* 195–196).
18. Judith Spector, "The Functions of Sexuality in the Science Fiction of Russ, Piercy and Le Guin," in *Erotic Universe: Sexuality and Fantastic Literature*, ed. Donald Palumbo (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 201.

19. Valerie Broege, "Technology and Sexuality in Science Fiction: Creating New Erotic Interfaces," in *ibid.*, 125.
20. Joanna Russ, *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 142.
21. Veronica Hollinger, "'Something Like a Fiction': Speculative Intersections of Sexuality and Technology in Queer Universes," in *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction*, ed. Wendy G. Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 154.
22. Joanna Russ, "Amor Vincit Foeminam: The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 7 (1980): 2–15. Republished in Russ, *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*.
23. *Ibid.*, 43.
24. Hacker, "Introduction," xxi.
25. Cortiel, *Demand My Writing: Joanna Russ, Feminism, Science Fiction*, 172.
26. The essay appeared first published in 1985 in *Socialist Review*. It gained wide readership after its publication in Donna Jeanne Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Citations are from the 1991 publication.
27. *Ibid.*, 151.
28. *Ibid.*, 175.
29. *Ibid.*, 178.
30. Hollinger, "'Something Like a Fiction': Speculative Intersections of Sexuality and Technology in Queer Universes," 156.
31. *Ibid.* See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 7.
32. Deryn Guest, "From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Ken Stone and Theresa J. Hornsby (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011), 36.
33. Aritha van Herk, "*Judith and the Tent Peg: A Retrospective*," in *A Frozen Tongue*, by Aritha van Herk (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1992), 280.
34. *Ibid.*, 280–281.
35. *Ibid.*, 281.
36. Aritha van Herk, "Women and Faith: The Reach of the Imagination," in *A Frozen Tongue*, 112–114.
37. *The Tent Peg* represents van Herk's second effort in this direction. Her first prize-winning novel was titled *Judith*, with the protagonist modeled after Jael's counterpart in the Apocrypha.
38. *Ibid.*, 116.
39. Van Herk notes that she borrowed this structure directly from William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. "*Judith and the Tent Peg: A Retrospective*," 282.
40. For discussion of interpretations of Jael as mother see chapter 2, pp. 17–18, 24–25.

41. I. S. McClaren, "A Charting of the Van Herk Papers" (1987), <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/43990>; Van Herk, "Judith and the Tent Peg: A Retrospective," 282.
42. Ibid.
43. Van Herk, *A Frozen Tongue*, 282.
44. Van Herk, "Women and Faith: The Reach of the Imagination," 116.
45. *Daughter of Jerusalem* was Sara Maitland's first novel and won Britain's Somerset Maugham Award for writers under the age of thirty-five.
46. Although the story was also published as the opening story in a collection of short stories, which is where I first encountered it. Sara Maitland, *Telling Tales: Short Stories* (London; West Nyack, NY: Journeyman Press, 1983).
47. Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London; New York: Edward Arnold, 1995), 138.
48. Maitland, *Telling Tales: Short Stories*.

## CHAPTER 8

1. A. S. Byatt, "Jael," in *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 195–216. The story first appeared in *The Guardian*, December 27, 1997. Parenthetical references in the text are to the collected volume.
2. Jane Campbell, *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), 11, 208.
3. A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 178, nt. 13.
4. Dieter E. Zimmer, "Intelligente Landschaften," review of *Die Jungfrau im Garten* [The Virgin in the Garden], *Die Zeit*, Dec. 10, 1998. Translated and quoted in Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble, *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Imagining the Real* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 2.
5. A. S. Byatt, *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998).
6. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, 143. Byatt's ambivalence is seen in her acknowledgement that *Possession*, her Booker Prize-winning novel, is "a very, very feminist book," and that its character Christabel "is actually inventing a whole feminist religion," alongside her resolve not "to be ghettoized by modern feminists into writing about women's problems." Nicolas Tredell, *Conversations with Critics* (Manchester, UK; Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: Carcanet; Sheep Meadow Press, 1994), 60, 64.
7. Jane Campbell, "'Forever Possibilities. And Impossibilities, of Course': Women and Narrative in *the Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*," in *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Imagining the Real*, ed. Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 135. Here Campbell is speaking specifically of the fairy tale in Byatt's collection, A. S. Byatt, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994).
8. A. S. Byatt, *Sugar and Other Stories*, 1st American ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1987).

9. Mariadele Boccardi, *A.S. Byatt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 92.
10. Campbell, *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination*, 231.
11. Others include an autobiographical narrator in the short story "Sugar," and a male first-person narrator in the novel *The Biographer's Tale*.
12. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*.
13. I was amused to find, given Byatt's grim description of the schoolgirl experience under the GPDST, that the current website advertises this still mostly segregated educational system in England and Wales as "exhilarating" and "inspirational." <http://www.gdst.net/>.
14. A. S. Byatt, interview by Sam Leith, April 24, 2009. Celia Wallhead argues that both Byatt and her protagonist Jess "are in favour of questioning the ideology of authoritative texts like the bible, but also of preserving them from cultural loss" and similarly "both . . . stand for the preservation of a cultural heritage which is intellectually demanding and helps to form a robust cultural identity." Celia Wallhead, "The Story of Jael and Sisera in Five Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Fictional Texts," *Atlantis* 23 (2001): 162–163. While I agree with this understanding of Byatt, it is not clear that Jess has much interest in the Bible at an intellectual level, as I will argue further below.
15. Tredell, *Conversations with Critics*, 72.
16. Lena Steveker, *Identity and Cultural Memory in the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Knitting the Net of Culture* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 140.
17. Campbell, *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination*, 209.
18. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930).
19. Christien Franken, *A.S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave, 2001), 109.
20. Written in 1898 by Anthony Hope as a sequel to *The Prisoner of Zenda*.
21. Byatt, "A Life in Writing in Terms of Pleasure."
22. Byatt mentions a "scornful and hostile" letter from a reader who insisted on seeing ["Jael"] as an autobiographical confession. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, 178, nt. 13.
23. Campbell, *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination*.
24. Franken, *A.S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity*, 109.
25. *Ibid.*, 111.
26. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*, 48, 170.
27. Discussion of Byatt and postmodernism has centered on her most successful novel, *Possession*. Byatt herself says, "*Possession* is a postmodernist and post-structuralist novel and it knows it is." But see Jackie Buxton, "'What's Love Got to Do with It?': Postmodernism and *Possession*," in *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Imagining the Real*, ed. Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001). Buxton argues, "for all its postmodern gestures, *Possession* is first and foremost a 'straight' narrative, a realistic fiction" (98).

## CHAPTER 9

1. Terry Pratchett, *Witches Abroad: A Discworld Novel* (London: V. Gollancz, 1991). Quoted in A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 149.
2. I am not thinking primarily of the ongoing use of the Bible's role as scripture. That is another important story related to the ongoing life of the Jewish and Christian traditions, but not one that I'm trying to tell.



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