

BIBLICAL BATHING BEAUTIES AND THE MANIPULATION OF THE MALE GAZE:

What Judith Can Tell Us about Bathsheba and Susanna

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The famous baths of two biblical women, Bathsheba and Susanna, captured the lust of their respective onlookers. Despite what is not a hint of seductive intent in their stories, many interpreters have portrayed these two characters as, essentially, “asking for it.” Feminist scholars have worked to rehabilitate Bathsheba and Susanna’s reputations. Curiously, though, neither traditional scholars portraying the characters as *femmes fatales* nor feminist interpreters defending them have brought a third biblical bathing woman, Judith, into the discussion. This paper argues that Judith is the only one of the three to whom the biblical text actually does attribute seductive motives. Judith uses the idea that a bathing woman is an irresistible object of desire to her advantage and so arranges semipublic baths while she is in an Assyrian military camp. Using close readings of the three texts and feminist interpretive strategies, Tamber-Rosenau argues that Judith, unlike the other two bathing women, choreographs her exposure for maximum effect. Judith’s baths, unlike those of Bathsheba and Susanna, are a calculated part of a larger seduction routine.

Keywords: bathing in the Bible, Bathsheba, Judith, male gaze, Susanna

The famous bathing scenes of two biblical women, Bathsheba and Susanna, captured the lustful attention of their respective onlookers. In 2 Sam, a bathing Bathsheba is seen by King David as he paces on his roof then summoned

to him for a sexual liaison (2 Sam 11:2–4). In the apocryphal Greek additions to the Book of Daniel, the married Susanna prepares to bathe in her garden and attracts the attention of two elders who threaten to accuse her of having a young lover unless she has sex with them (*Sus.* 1:15–21). Just as Bathsheba and Susanna attracted the lust of the men who watched them wash themselves, so too have they captured the imaginations of clerics, secular scholars, and artists for centuries. Many interpreters have seen in both Bathsheba and Susanna a certain blameworthy seductiveness, holding them partly responsible for the events that follow. Despite what I argue here is not a hint of seductive intent in either Bathsheba or Susanna's stories, many have portrayed these women as, essentially, "asking for it." Feminist scholars have worked to rehabilitate Bathsheba and Susanna's reputations, contending that neither should be blamed for being looked at. Curiously, though, neither traditional scholars portraying Bathsheba and Susanna as *femmes fatales* nor feminist interpreters defending the characters have brought a third biblical bathing woman, Judith, into the discussion.

Scholars often forget, it seems, that baths are also part of the story of the eponymous heroine of the apocryphal Book of Judith. Once she has infiltrated the Assyrian camp, Judith bathes nightly. Using feminist methodologies, I argue in this paper that Judith's baths, unlike those of Bathsheba and Susanna, actually are designed to capture male attention. Combined with the rest of Judith's actions, her baths show what it looks like when a biblical bathing woman does want to stir men's lust. Judith's deliberateness in seeking to be looked at is instructive for the discussion of Bathsheba and Susanna. By contrasting Judith with Bathsheba and Susanna, we get a better picture of just how blameless the latter two characters are in the events that transpire in their stories. We also gain a new appreciation for Judith's skillful manipulation of the male gaze.

The Male Gaze

The term *male gaze* was perhaps first used by Laura Mulvey in a 1975 essay on psychoanalysis and cinema. In classical Hollywood films, Mulvey argued, a (male) audience member sees the female characters both through his own gaze and through the gaze of the male protagonist with whom he identifies.¹ The male viewer derives pleasure from scopophilia, or "love of watching" the objectified women on screen. The female characters in film are passive and arranged for maximum erotic effect, or what Mulvey called "to-be-looked-at-ness."² But the male gaze is not limited to film: in art, the viewer or reader is invited to

I first presented a version of this paper before the Bible and Second Temple Literature section of the Association for Jewish Studies (AJS) 2014 annual meeting. This revision and expansion incorporates the helpful feedback I received from attendees.

¹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975): 6–18, esp. 13.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

see female figures or characters from the erotic perspective of the painting's (implied heterosexual) male figures.³ Mulvey's theory has been expanded, refined, and critiqued over the intervening decades, addressing matters such as race, female heterosexual and lesbian desire, male objects of the gaze, and female viewers.⁴

Feminist biblical scholars have seen the male gaze at work in the biblical texts, as well as in subsequent interpretations of them. Scholars have examined the role of the gendered gaze in texts such as Judah and Tamar's liaison in Gen 38; Jacob's wrestling match with the messenger in Gen 32; Ezekiel's description of the sexually promiscuous female-personified Israel in Ezek 16; Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel's treatment of the naked female body; and the Song of Songs.⁵ As J. Cheryl Exum wrote, "the biblical text and its visual representations align readers with a male subject position."⁶ Looking at the Bible's representations of the female body, one cannot escape the conclusion that it is a collection written "by men for men," according to Exum.⁷

Biblical scholar Jennifer Glancy has questioned the suitability of the gaze as a tool to understand biblical literature, asking, "is it legitimate to draw on an essentially visual category in the analysis of written texts? Moreover, is vision a natural category common to all human cultures, or is vision historical,

³ Judith Roof, "Gaze," in *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 611.

⁴ See, for example, Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 2 (1988): 155–77; bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 122; Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema, Theories of Representation and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 122–30.

⁵ Samuel Tongue, "Scripted Bodies: Reading the Spectacle of Jacob Wrestling the Angel," *Journal of Men, Masculinities, and Spirituality* 6 (2012): 20–37; Mary E. Shields, "Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender Characterization in Ezekiel 16," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14, no. 1 (April 1, 1998): 5–18, esp. 16; Athalya Brenner, "Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 70 (1996): 63–86, esp. 83; Christopher Meredith, "The Lattice and the Looking Glass: Gendered Space in Song of Songs 2:8–14," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 365–86; and Donald C. Polaski, "What Will Ye See in the Shulammitte? Women, Power, and Panopticism in the Song of Songs," *Biblical Interpretation* 5 (1997): 64–81.

⁶ J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 9–10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11. Of course, it is hardly only the representation of the female body that makes the case that most or all of the biblical materials were written by and for men. Other clues are the prevalence of unnamed female characters, the frequent silence of female characters, the implicit and explicit textual assumptions that women are untrustworthy, the reduction of female characters to their roles as mothers and wives, and the failure to include women in key communal moments and roles.

embedded in culture? And if the experience of vision, of seeing, is culturally constructed, is it legitimate to draw on the notion of the gaze in a transhistorical manner?"⁸ I appreciate Glancy's questions and find helpful the answer reached by Samuel Tongue, who addresses Glancy's concerns by using Mieke Bal's work on the role of "envisioning" in the reading process and the ways in which text and image interact. Tongue also cautions that scholars using the idea of the gaze to understand biblical literature must acknowledge that they are "reading the past through the present" and not using a transhistorical tool.⁹ I recognize that discussing the male gaze with regard to biblical bathing texts, like using most feminist theoretical concepts to read most ancient texts, is a delicate enterprise. It necessitates the qualification that one is not claiming cognizance of modern scholarly constructs by the authors of premodern literature. While I do not see the author of the Book of Judith making a conscious decision to have the main character manipulate the male gaze, I hold that the concept of the gaze is extraordinarily helpful in explaining the effect of the author's narrative choices.

I wish to clarify further what I mean in this paper by male gaze: the gaze *in* the text (of male characters at female characters), the gaze *of* the text (of presumably male authors, through their narrators, at their literary creations and at the rest of the world), or the gaze *at* the text (of readers at a text and its characters)?¹⁰ Just as Mulvey imagined the gaze of the male viewer aligning with the gaze of male characters created by a male filmmaker, I hold that these three gazes often overlap in texts as well. They are not identical—particularly with an author writing in one time period but setting his story in another and then that story being read thousands of years later. Even if we can assume the gaze of the text and the gaze in the text are similar because the author created both, postmodern methods of literary interpretation demonstrate that there is no stable meaning inherent in the text, so we cannot assume that the gaze *at* the text is identical with the gaze *of* or *in* the text. Nevertheless, I would argue that certain traditions of biblical interpretation may lead readers to a strong identification with the author of a text or with its apparent protagonist. Even for scholars, there is a tendency to "side" with God and with the characters whom Jewish and Christian traditions have treated as heroes. For example, in the case of Bathsheba's bath, some modern interpreters may, consciously or not, mirror the gaze of God's beloved King David or the faceless biblical narrator. With the recognition that the different types of gaze may overlap quite a bit, in what

⁸ Jennifer A. Glancy, "Text Appeal: Visual Pleasure and Biblical Studies," *Semeia* 82 (1998): 63–78, quotation on 64.

⁹ Samuel Tongue, *Between Biblical Criticism and Poetic Rewriting: Interpretative Struggles over Genesis 32:22–32*, Biblical Interpretation Series 129 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 241.

¹⁰ I thank the anonymous *JFSR* reviewer who asked this question and helped me clarify my own thinking about the gaze.

follows I endeavor to clarify which male gaze—in, of, at—I am referring to at which point.

My reading is fundamentally literary and not historical; I examine the texts at issue here as texts. That is, I view them as pieces of literature and aim to discover how the characters engage with the male gaze in furtherance of the plot. My argument is based on how readers can (and should) engage with the stories. A modern reader, even one who recognizes the multiplicity of authors and time periods represented in the biblical material, is likely to encounter the stories of Bathsheba, Susanna, and Judith as part of a single book. The reader may draw comparisons among the texts involving bathing, trying to figure out how they speak to and about one another. My discussion of blame and agency in the three bathing texts reflects this comparative tendency. Though the texts are certainly not by the same author, they are in dialogue with one another.

Bathsheba

I turn now to Bathsheba, a character known primarily for her nudity. In the text of 2 Sam, there is no hint that Bathsheba is trying to seduce anyone with her bathing, but this has not stopped some commentators gazing at the text from ascribing seductive intent to her. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg wrote of Bathsheba that she might have been engaging in “feminine flirtation” by bathing in a place where David could see her from her roof.¹¹ Gösta Ahlström cited the assumed small size of Jerusalem at the time of David to argue that Bathsheba “certainly knew what she was doing.”¹² Similarly, George Nicol wrote that, “it cannot be doubted that Bathsheba’s action in bathing so close to the king’s residence was provocative, nor can the possibility that the provocation was deliberate be discounted. Even if it was not deliberate, Bathsheba’s bathing in a place so clearly open to the king’s palace, can hardly indicate less than a contributory negligence on her part.”¹³

Randall Bailey suggested that Bathsheba may have been even more calculating about her bath, bathing within sight of the king because she knew he would summon her for sex, which in turn could help improve her status.¹⁴ Building on Bailey’s argument, Lillian Klein has posited that Bathsheba may have orchestrated the encounter with David in order to conceive. She notes that Bathsheba and Uriah are not said to have any children together, perhaps

¹¹ Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1964), 309.

¹² Gösta Werner Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 486.

¹³ George G. Nicol, “Bathsheba, A Clever Woman,” *Expository Times* 99, no. 12 (September 1, 1988): 360–63, quotation on 360.

¹⁴ Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10–12*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplements* 75 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 89.

implying infertility on Uriah's part. Klein writes that Bathsheba may have bathed on the roof in hopes that David would see her, summon her, and impregnate her.¹⁵ Some commentators have suggested that Bathsheba's bath is significant because, based on 2 Sam 11:4, its purpose was to purify her after her menstrual period.¹⁶ Meir Sternberg and Menahem Perry proposed that the reader might initially take the comment, "and she was purifying herself from her impurity" as an assurance that King David, although he had sex with another man's wife, at least did not violate the law against sex with a menstruating women (Lev 18:19). Sternberg and Perry argued that when Bathsheba becomes pregnant, the true purpose of the interjection becomes clear: to prove that David must be the father of the child.¹⁷ The possibility that Bathsheba's bath is meant to be understood as a postmenstrual purification has been used to indict her.¹⁸ For instance, Nicol held that David may not even have known what Bathsheba did: that she was purifying herself after her period and that therefore she was likely to be fertile. "In this limited sense," he wrote, "it may not be entirely accurate to say that the narrator has withheld Bathsheba's point of view, for he has represented her as participating in adultery at a time she had some reason to believe she was fertile."¹⁹ These scholars have argued that, essentially, David gazed upon Bathsheba lustfully, but she was complicit in that gaze. Her behavior, in bathing where she did, when she did—and perhaps in being beautiful—means that the gaze was inevitable and deserved.

Some feminist interpreters have endeavored to rehabilitate Bathsheba, absolving her of any knowledge that she was being watched. For example, Tikva Frymer-Kensky wrote:

If she wanted to bathe, where else would she be? It is spring, when the cisterns and water jugs on the roof stand full of the winter's rain. And when better to bathe but in the cool of the late afternoon, after the day's work is done? To say that Bathsheba set out to entice the king is to say that violated women "were asking for it" because they smiled,

¹⁵ Lillian R. Klein, "Bathsheba Revealed," in *Samuel and Kings, A Feminist Companion to the Bible* 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 52–53.

¹⁶ Some translate *wēhî' mīṭqaddešet mittum 'ātāh* in reference to Bathsheba's sexual contact with David; in other words, that she had to purify herself because she had had intercourse.

¹⁷ Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, "The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process," *Poetics Today* 7, no. 2 (1986): 275–322, esp. 288.

¹⁸ When I presented an earlier version of this article at the 2014 AJS conference, it was suggested to me that Bathsheba's bath was evidence of her intent to seduce David because, with her husband Uriah away at war, what other reason could she have had for purification? I believe this argument conflates bathing by characters in the Bible with much later rabbinic rules regarding menstrual impurity, including the tradition that a woman should not immerse in the *mikveh*, or ritual bath, when her husband is out of town.

¹⁹ George G. Nicol, "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some Observations on Ambiguity in Biblical Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 73 (1997): 43–54, quotation on 50–51.

or wore tight clothes, or went to a club. Bathsheba is enjoying a private moment—she thinks—and we violate it the moment we stop to contemplate her beauty.²⁰

Not only does the text betray no hint that Bathsheba is to blame for being seen, as others have noted, it also gives no indication that she could have resisted David, given the power imbalance between them.²¹

Exum and Alice Bach have argued that the description of Bathsheba in 2 Sam itself is inherently voyeuristic.²² Second Samuel 11:2 tells us, “David saw a woman bathing from the roof, and the woman was very beautiful.” Bathsheba does not even get a name here; she is simply the beautiful (and presumably, naked) woman whom David sees while pacing his roof. The reader is cast, with David, as a voyeur. Exum asked, “What about the responsibility of the narrator, who made the decision to portray her in the act of washing? It is, after all, the biblical narrator who, using David as his agent, makes Bathsheba the object of the male gaze.”²³ I would disagree with Exum that the text itself hints that Bathsheba asked for David’s sexual attentions by allowing herself to be seen.²⁴ I see no implied blame for Bathsheba either here or in later treatments of her interactions with David. Even when David and Bathsheba’s first son dies, the prophet Nathan makes it clear that this is punishment for David’s sins alone, not for any act by Bathsheba. I would maintain that any blame for Bathsheba comes entirely from postbiblical interpretations and cannot be sustained simply by reading the text.

Susanna

As with Bathsheba, the text of Susanna portrays its female character primarily as an object to be looked at.²⁵ The sixty-four verses of Susanna’s story are

²⁰ Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002), 144–45.

²¹ Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 83–103; and Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili, “Was It Rape? The David and Bathsheba Pericope Reexamined,” *Vetus Testamentum* 61 (2011): 1–15.

²² Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 134–35.

²³ Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 47. In a forthcoming book, Exum writes, “Bathsheba is not held accountable in the biblical story. God, through the mouth of his prophet Nathan, condemns David alone for sin.” In correspondence with this author, she clarified that, while the text does not hold Bathsheba responsible, because it does not give the reader her point of view, it leaves her open to charges of responsibility (Chery Exum, personal correspondence, July 7, 2017).

²⁵ The two versions of the story of Susanna differ substantially. The earlier of the two is the Old Greek version; the later version is Theodotion’s, which became part of the Christian canon. It is not clear whether the Theodotion version is simply a reediting of the Old Greek, or whether the two represent entirely different translations of, perhaps, two separate Hebrew or Aramaic originals of the story. Carey A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions: A New Translation with*

suffused with verbs of seeing and watching. In his commentary on Judith, Carey Moore called the bathing verses added to the story in the Theodotion version “most welcome,” since they “can also fire the imagination of some readers.”²⁶ Dan Clanton has even raised the possibility that the author of Susanna meant to explain the elders’ lust—and stir similar feelings among readers—by specifying that Susanna asks her maids for *smēgma*, “soap,” “cosmetics,” or “ointment” for her bath. Clanton argues that there may be an intended connection to Esther, who is provided with cosmetics before her encounter with King Ahasuerus (2:9), or Judith, who anoints herself before leaving home for the Assyrian camp (10:3). Both of these characters use ointment or cosmetics before entering a sexual situation, so perhaps the elders and the audience are meant to be excited by the thought that Susanna could be preparing for an encounter with her husband, Clanton writes. Thus, the issues of voyeurism presented by the story of Bathsheba, who may be purifying herself after her menstrual period, and that of Susanna may be similar, he argues.²⁷

Some commentators gazing at the text see Susanna as seductive and thus worthy of blame. The church father Tertullian partially blamed Susanna for what befell her, writing that she wore a veil to her inquest because she was “ashamed of her dishonor” and was now “rightly concealing her beauty” (*Ter. De Corona* 4). Glancy has noted that modern commentators have also sometimes seen Susanna’s beauty, rather than the elders’ rapaciousness, as the cause of the action in the story. Glancy points out Robert Dunn’s comment on the text’s attention to the details of Susanna’s preparations for her bath. Dunn wrote that “what these details suggest is that the old judges have a reason for responding to Susanna the way they do, for she is shown as especially lovely.”²⁸

Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 78–80. For my purposes, the most significant difference between the manuscripts is that Theodotion mentions Susanna preparing to bathe in the garden, while this detail is absent from the Old Greek. The Theodotion version, which I base my analysis on here, is far more widely read than the Old Greek.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 97. See also Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “The Additions to Daniel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 7 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 176; Amy-Jill Levine, “‘Hemmed in on Every Side’: Jews and Women in the Book of Susanna,” in *Esther, Judith, and Susanna, Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 313; Susan Sered and Samuel Cooper, “Sexuality and Social Control: Anthropological Reflections on the Book of Susanna,” in *The Judgment of Susanna: Authority and Witness*, ed. Ellen Spolsky, Early Judaism and Its Literature 11 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1996), 50; and Marti J. Steussy, *Gardens in Babylon: Narrative and Faith in the Greek Legends of Daniel*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 141 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1993), 133. Steussy comments astutely that Theodotion “treats the elders’ lust as investigative commissions often treat pornography—righteously denouncing it, in prurient detail.”

²⁷ Dan W. Clanton, *The Good, the Bold, and the Beautiful: The Story of Susanna and Its Renaissance Interpretations*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 430 (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 64–65.

²⁸ Jennifer A. Glancy, “The Accused: Susanna and Her Readers,” in *Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, 112. See also Robert P. Dunn, “Discriminations in the Comic Spirit in the Story of Susanna,” *Christianity and Literature* 31, no. 4 (June 1, 1982): 19–31, esp. 25.

Despite presenting Susanna's beauty for the reader's admiration, the author through his narrator gazes at her admiringly, as a virtuous wife and a victim of the conniving elders, and does not imply that she is to blame for what happens. In contrast to what historian Margaret Miles has argued, I do not see Susanna's donning of a veil for her inquest as symbolic of her guilt.²⁹ Rather, the veil may be there because this is how married women normally went about in public, as opposed to privately in their own gardens. Literarily, she may be veiled so that she can later be ordered unveiled, in order to shame her and symbolize the removal of the husband's protection from a woman accused of adultery. See, for example, the uncovering of the suspected adulteress's head in Num 5:18. Even if, as Clanton argued, there is meant to be a titillating implication that Susanna is preparing herself for sex, it does not imply blameworthiness. There is no hint that she is aware she can be seen—in fact, she even sends away her female attendants so she can bathe alone—or that, if her bath, if indeed she ever actually undresses for one, is a prelude to romance, it would be with anyone other than her husband. As I argued above regarding Bathsheba, the biblical text may be voyeuristic, but it hardly contemplates a blameworthy bathing beauty.

The Trope of the Bathing Beauty

I propose that the author of *Judith* would have known of the motif of the bathing beauty. *Judith* is generally accepted to have been written in the second half of the second century BCE.³⁰ Any Jewish author at that time would have known the story of David and Bathsheba; even the latest proposed date for the “succession narrative” or “court history” (2 Sam 9–1 Kgs 1–2), which includes the tale of Bathsheba, is well before this. *Judith*'s author was familiar with biblical materials, making numerous explicit and implicit references to characters such as Simeon, Dinah, Ehud, Delilah, Jael, Deborah, and David. The case for familiarity with Susanna is less certain since there is no firm consensus on Susanna's date, though some place its composition in the first century BCE, after the writing of *Judith*.³¹

²⁹ Margaret R. (Margaret Ruth) Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 22.

³⁰ Discussions of the dating consensus may be found in Deborah Levine Gera, *Judith* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 38–44; and Carey A. Moore, *Judith: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 67. Zeitlin is an outlier, dating the book from the first half of the first century. Morton Scott Enslin and Solomon Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith: Greek Text with an English Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 28.

³¹ For a review of positions on Susanna's date, see Clanton, *The Good, the Bold, and the Beautiful*, 9–43. Clanton dates the composition of both the Old Greek and Theodotion versions of the tale from the first century BCE. Contra Clanton, Carey Moore posited a date as early as the Persian period, though he acknowledged that the story was not associated with the rest of the Daniel literature until much later (Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah*, 91–92).

Perhaps both Judith and Susanna integrate an already established trope, the bathing woman as object of lust for powerful men.³² In addition to Bathsheba, for example, there was the Greek goddess Artemis.³³ The second century BCE Apollodorus of Athens wrote of the legend that Actaeon was killed by Artemis after he saw her bathing. The goddess is said to have turned Actaeon into a deer and then set his pack of hunting dogs on him (*Apollod* 3.4).³⁴ Artemis was also reported to have turned Sipriotes into a woman after he saw her bathing (Antoninus Liberalis *Metam.* 17.203–5).³⁵

Amy-Jill Levine has pointed out that two other postbiblical texts, Jubilees and the Testament of Reuben, also use the trope of the bathing woman who seduces a man with her beauty, in this case Bilhah and Reuben.³⁶ In Jubilees, Reuben sees Bilhah bathing and later enters her house and has sex with her while she sleeps (*Jub.* 33:2–4). The Testament of Reuben portrays Reuben as too overcome with lust to possibly resist Bilhah after he sees her bathing, and Bilhah as passed out drunk and naked when the attack happens (*T. Reu.* 3:11–15). The author of the testament ascribes seductive intent and blame to Bilhah where the biblical literature (Gen 35:22) itself provides none.³⁷ John Collins saw the motif

³² The careful reader will note that there is another biblical woman who bathes: Pharaoh's daughter in Exod 2:5. There is no sexual content to her story whatsoever, but then, she is surrounded by other women at the time.

³³ I cite Greek and Roman stories when discussing the Book of Judith because the evidence of Greek and Roman influence on biblical and, especially, postbiblical Jewish literature, and vice versa, is clear. The Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods saw increases in bilingualism. Several writers of the time who wrote in Greek use or claimed to use ancient Near Eastern documents as their sources, and there are many bilingual inscriptions of the period. See Tim Whitmarsh, "The Romance between Greece and the East," in *The Romance between Greece and the East*, ed. Tim Whitmarsh and Stuart Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8–9. The connections are especially strong between Greek and Jewish culture in the Second Temple period, when the latter was "extraordinarily vibrant, responsive and adaptive" (*ibid.*, 12). There is major Greek influence, in language and ideas, on Jewish histories and narratives of the period, and of course, on the very existence of and innovations introduced by the Septuagint (*ibid.*, 14–15). Some scholars have suggested that even Jewish authors writing in Hebrew or Aramaic at this time might have had knowledge of Greek sources through oral traditions. See for example Mark Stephen Caponigro, "Judith, Holding the Tale of Herodotus," in "*No One Spoke Ill of Her*": *Essays on Judith*, ed. James C. VanderKam, *Early Judaism and Its Literature* 2 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1992), 58. Greco-Roman literary influence on the Book of Judith, then, seems almost a foregone conclusion.

³⁴ For variant versions, see Pausanius Description of Greece 9.2.3, Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.138 and Diod. 4.81.3–5.

³⁵ Translation from Francis Celoria, *The Metamorphoses of Antoninus Liberalis* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

³⁶ Levine, "Hemmed in on Every Side," 314.

³⁷ For more on Bilhah as a seducer in *T. Reu.*, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "Bilhah the Temptress: 'The Testament of Reuben' and 'The Birth of Sexuality,'" *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96 (January 2006): 69–73.

of the bathing beauty becoming more common in the Hellenistic period.³⁸ The trope seems to have been established by the time Judith was written, so it is reasonable to assume that the author knew of it and consciously used it.

Judith

Judith is a beautiful, wise, and virtuous widow who intervenes in the Assyrian siege of her Israelite town by dolling herself up, sashaying into the Assyrian camp, and over the course of three days and nights, flirting her way into the tent of the general, Holofernes. Holofernes, in his excitement at the prospect of sex with Judith, drinks too much and passes out. Judith beheads him with his own sword and carries his head back home, ending the siege and bringing peace to Israel.

Scholars have made much of Judith's preparatory bath in chapter 10. I discuss this at length elsewhere, but here I focus on the baths she takes during her sojourn in the Assyrian camp.³⁹ Judith 12:7 states that, on each of the three nights the heroine spent with the army, she went out to the valley of Bethulia to pray, and also that she *ebaptizeto en tē parembolē epi tēs pēgēs tou hudatos*, "[ritually] bathed in the spring of water in the camp." We can probably assume that Judith was nude because of the use of the word *ebaptizeto*. As Morton Enslin and Solomon Zeitlin suggested, this rare use of the verb *baptizō* signifies that Judith actually immerses in the water rather than just taking a sponge bath.⁴⁰ A full immersion for Judith also fits well with archaeological evidence showing the existence of immersion baths in the Second Temple period.⁴¹ Certainly, this is also the more appealing choice if we read Judith's baths as calculated to titillate. Judith 12:9 indicates that she *eisporeumenē kathara*, "returned pure" or

³⁸ John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 431.

³⁹ Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, "Striking Women: Gender and Performance in the Bible and Early Jewish Literature" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2015), 173–79.

⁴⁰ Enslin and Zeitlin, *Book of Judith*, 146.

⁴¹ For more on these baths and ritual purity in this period, see Boaz Zissu and David Amit, "Common Judaism, Common Purity, and the Second Temple Period Judean Miqwa'ot (Ritual Immersion Baths)," in *Common Judaism: Explorations in Second-Temple Judaism*, ed. Wayne O. McCready and Adele Reinhartz (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008), 47–62. Hayah Katz proposes that a new focus on purity and impurity in this time period led to a requirement that impurity be addressed not just by washing with water poured from a vessel but by dunking oneself fully: "We see during that time a series of cultural changes grounded in even-increasing strictness regarding the laws of purity and impurity. That increasing stringency manifested itself in many areas of life, including an insistence on full bodily immersion as the exclusive means for achieving purification" ("'He Shall Bathe in Water; Then He Shall Be Pure': Ancient Immersion Practice in the Light of Archaeological Evidence," *Vetus Testamentum* 62 [2012]: 369–80, quotation on 380). See also Adela Yarbro Collins's article on immersion for ritual purity or conversion in Second Temple Judaism ("The Origin of Christian Baptism," *Studia Liturgica* 19 [1989]: 28–46).

“returned purified” to her tent, indicating that there was some ritual cleansing component to her bath.

In his commentary on the Book of Judith, Moore noted that most manuscripts of Judith read “in the camp,” but a few substitute the words “from the uncleanness.” The variant reading is based on an assumed textual corruption in the Hebrew *Vorlage* of Judith, resulting in a confusion of *bmlnh*, “in the camp,” for *mhdh*, “from the uncleanness.” Moore preferred the “uncleanness” reading and thus located the spring where Judith bathed near, but outside, the camp.⁴² This argument requires multiple assumptions: that the Book of Judith was originally in Hebrew, that a scribal error resulted in the confusion of multiple letters, and that some Greek manuscripts were evidently made from the “correct” version. This represents too many leaps. Furthermore, these linguistic gymnastics seem to be intended primarily to avoid the problematic idea that Judith bathed where she could be seen by Holofernes and his men. As I argue, a semipublic bath may be just what Judith intends. It is also worth noting the interpretation of Deborah Levine Gera, who writes that “it is simplest to understand ‘in the camp’ in the wider sense of ‘the area under enemy control,’ despite its more limited meaning earlier in the verse.”⁴³ Though I would argue for reading “in the camp” to mean plainly and literally inside Holofernes’s military installation, Gera’s interpretation is plausible and would have Judith bathing in the general vicinity of the camp.

Unfortunately, the text does not provide Judith’s reasons for bathing, though some scholars have hypothesized that she is purifying herself after her menstrual period. Indeed, a *midrash* on Judith reaches just this conclusion. In this late writing on the theme of the Judith story, the general, here called Seleucus instead of Holofernes, asks Judith to have sex with him. She tells him that she would love to but is still in her menstrual impurity. Tonight, she says, she will bathe to purify herself, and when she returns, she will give herself to him.⁴⁴ Others have proffered reasons relating to prayer, food, and even purification after the mere *possibility* of intercourse. For example, Jonathan Lawrence has wondered if Judith’s baths might be preparatory for her prayers or her meals. In support of some relationship between bathing, prayer, and food, he cites a passage from Josephus describing the Essenes’ practice of prayer, followed by work, bathing, and a communal meal.⁴⁵ Gera, too, argues that Judith’s bath relates to prayer; if the purification related to

⁴² Moore, *Judith*, 219. Gera writes that 12:7 is problematic because references to a spring in chap. 7 make clear that it is outside the camp (*Judith*, 373). We may be talking about two different springs; it would certainly make sense for the soldiers to encamp somewhere with a ready water supply.

⁴³ Gera, *Judith*, 373.

⁴⁴ Enslin and Zeitlin, *Book of Judith*, 145.

⁴⁵ Jonathan David Lawrence, *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 60–61.

menstruation, one immersion should have done the trick, Gera reasons.⁴⁶ By contrast, Lawrence Wills has argued that Judith bathes because of the mere suggestion that sexual intercourse with Holofernes could have occurred. Wills also points to the Qumran sect's focus on bathing as a means of ritual purity, but it should be noted that the document he cites, the *Manual of Discipline*, appears to be addressed primarily to men and so does not contemplate bathing as a means of cleansing from menstrual impurity.⁴⁷ Still others suggested that Judith's bath was meant to convince Holofernes of the holiness of her nightly forays and the likelihood that she was receiving divine communication.⁴⁸

Since the text does not spell out Judith's reasons for bathing each night, we must make an educated guess based on what else we know about her character. Considering her behavior in the rest of the book, I propose that Judith's motivations for her nightly immersions have more to do with seduction than food, prayer, or ritual cleanliness. If she is going out of the camp each night anyway to pray in the valley, one wonders why she does not bathe there as well. The obvious answer is that she wishes to be glimpsed by Holofernes or at least wants him to be aroused by the prospect of her bathing so nearby.⁴⁹ Even assuming there is a ritual component to Judith's baths, we cannot and should not read her bathing in isolation from her other actions in the book.

Judith, over the course of chapters 8 through 16, moves from an over-the-top performance of the role of grieving widow (in which she drapes her loins in sackcloth, fasts more days than not, and lives in a tent on her roof) to a similarly campy rendition of the role of a sexually available bombshell and then back to the role of perpetually celibate and pious widow. As I argue in detail elsewhere, feminist theorist Judith Butler's work on gender as a "stylized repetition of acts" can help us understand Judith's character.⁵⁰ Butler uses drag performance as her paradigmatic example of gender performance:

The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical

⁴⁶ Deborah Levine Gera, "Shorter Medieval Hebrew Tales of Judith," in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies across the Disciplines*, ed. Kevin R. Brine, Elena Ciletti, and Henrike Lahmann (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 87.

⁴⁷ Lawrence M. Wills, "The Book of Judith," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 1158.

⁴⁸ Enslin and Zeitlin, *Book of Judith*, 146.

⁴⁹ Wills, though he dismisses this possibility, describes it aptly as bathing "for erotic effect" ("Book of Judith," 1158).

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 179.

appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme identities. . . . The notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original. . . . [G]ender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin.⁵¹

Even if the gender being conveyed “matches” the underlying biological sex, it’s still a performance.

The character of Judith can be understood as parodying the gender “female” throughout the book. In preparation for her seduction-and-destruction mission into the Assyrian camp, Judith removes her widow’s garments (including the sackcloth she had worn around her loins); bathes in her home despite a water crisis in Bethulia; and dresses in all her finery (described as “clothing of gladness” or “festive attire”), jewelry, and even a tiara (Jdt 10:1–4). Her new appearance has its intended effect, first on the Bethulian men as she departs the city and then on the Assyrian soldiers when she arrives in the camp (Jdt 10:7–19). She works hard to seduce Holofernes, speaking suggestively to him, calling herself his “slave” and his “maidservant,” and stroking his ego by complimenting his military prowess and offering to bring him even greater victories. She also addresses him as “my lord” (or so he thinks; she is actually speaking about God) and bows to him, both actions which, I show elsewhere, are often performed by women toward men with whom they have or will have a sexual relationship. Later, Judith goes to Holofernes’s tent alone for a drinking party, accepting an invitation from his servant to “become today like one of the Assyrian women who serve in the house of Nebuchadnezzar” (12:13).⁵² Again and again, we see a woman who had been acting as an ascetic widow doing an over-the-top performance of seductive womanhood in order to get the Assyrian soldiers, and particularly Holofernes, where she needs them. Judith’s baths are an integral part of this masterful performance. The nightly immersions, like her appearance and the rest of her behavior, serve to spur Holofernes’s lust to such heights that he loses his head over Judith.

Even if Judith does not anticipate Holofernes actually watching her bathe, she may plan for word of her baths to reach and excite him. Were his men to

⁵¹ Ibid., 174–75.

⁵² In my dissertation, which addresses gender and sexuality in biblical stories of “lethal women,” I contend that in the Book of Judith, the title character “puts on” the persona of a seducer in order to save her town and the land of Israel. I use vocabulary derived from the queer-theoretical writings of Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, Sue-Ellen Case, and Lee Edelman to show how Judith plays with gendered expectations to reach her goal (Tamber-Rosenau, “Striking Women,” chap. 4). See also Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); and Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

report back to him that this stunning creature was bathing in his camp, his sexual interest in her would surely be stimulated. He would be even more interested if he knew or deduced that Judith's baths were not merely for cleanliness, but might serve to purify her and put her in a state where she would be receptive to sexual intercourse.⁵³ This is particularly the case when one considers that, aside from her nightly forays, Judith spends all her time in her tent (12:5–9), creating an air of mystery. What must Holofernes and his men think of Judith, who hides her beauty from them all day, then emerges at night and disrobes for a bath?

Perhaps the uncertainty in the text about whether anyone is looking at Judith while she bathes explains scholars' failure to recognize the baths' true purpose. The gaze *in* the text is unclear, which leaves the gaze *at* the text less constrained. In the stories of Bathsheba and Susanna, the male gaze is the point: the adulterous liaison in 2 Sam 11 and the trial and exoneration of Susanna in apocryphal Daniel follow directly from the gazes of David and the elders, respectively. Readers are left with no doubt about where to point their own eyes, and many identify with the point of view of the male watchers. The Book of Judith, however, does not describe any of the Assyrians crouching in shadows or lurking at tent openings, slavering over Judith's naked form. It is the case of Schroedinger's Peeping Tom: in the absence of textual material about whether or not Judith is being observed, she is both watched and unwatched.

Even if the text did say that Holofernes or his soldiers were looking at Judith, the reader would be reluctant to identify with them and their gaze. David, many faults aside, is God's favored hero, so identifying with his gaze at Bathsheba is easy. The elders in Susanna's story are contemptible, but they are, at the start of the story at least, respected Israelites; the reader feels guilty about following their gaze toward the beautiful Susanna, but he probably does it anyway. By contrast, who wants to identify with Holofernes, the simultaneously cruel and foolish man threatening Israel's existence? The text mocks Holofernes at every turn, so that by the time the reader gets to Judith's baths in chapter 12, he or she thinks of him as a megalomaniacal, overdecorated dolt.⁵⁴

In the absence of a sympathetic male character who is clearly looking at Judith, readers seem not to comprehend the purpose of her baths. However, when one takes Judith's point of view and considers the rest of her behavior, it is apparent what is happening: she invites Holofernes to look and then uses his gaze against him. This represents an implied challenge to the destructive male gaze, both in other bathing-beauty stories and beyond. David's gaze results in Bathsheba's summoning to the palace—whether she wants to go or not—and her husband's murder. Eventually, David is punished for his gaze and its consequences by losing his firstborn son. The elders' gaze leads to Susanna's trial

⁵³ Enslin and Zeitlin, *Book of Judith*, 145.

⁵⁴ For a selection of material prior to chap. 12 which paints Holofernes negatively, see 3:1–8, 5:22–6:10, 10:21–22, and 11:20–23.

and her near death. Eventually, the elders are executed as punishment for their gaze and the actions that follow. The Book of Judith cuts out the middle step between male gaze and male punishment: here, the gazed-upon does not suffer. Instead, the reader skips right to the retribution visited upon the gazer: Holofernes looks with predatory intent and then dies. Furthermore, the retribution comes straight from the gazed-upon woman and is loaded with images of sexual conquest.⁵⁵ Judith manages, in essence, to reverse the direction of the gaze. The reader's gaze is focused, finally, not on Judith in her state of undress, but on Holofernes at the highly sexualized moment of his demise.

Some might find shocking the notion that Judith wants to be seen or imagined naked. After all, Judith is a biblical woman, and we are predisposed to think of the women of the Bible as pious, chaste, and modest. More to the point, we make their modesty and chastity a prerequisite for piety. However, Judith is interesting and controversial as a heroine precisely because she is immodest; though ultimately chaste, she is exceedingly sexual and uses that sexuality in service of pious aims. She prays so fervently before beginning her mission in

⁵⁵ The most obvious point of commonality between what Judith does to Holofernes and what he was hoping she would do is the bed. Holofernes strategically chooses to hold the party in his chambers; he or his eunuch-servant Bagoas must also have conveyed to the attendants that they should leave tactfully so that Holofernes would be alone with Judith. The locus of his intended actions with her is the bed; this is also where she performs the assassination. Instead of getting into the bed with him, as he had no doubt intended, Judith stands over it, but the bed is still the center of the action. There is also a heavy dose of irony here, given the implication in 12:12 that Holofernes would have sex with Judith even if she did not consent. In such a situation, he might find himself standing over Judith as she is forced onto the bed. Here, though, Judith is the one who is standing up, and Holofernes is the one lying powerless on the bed. The unrealized potential for Holofernes to rape Judith is also interesting in light of Judith's use of a phallic instrument to remove his head. He could have used his literal phallus against her; instead, she uses his figurative phallus, the sword, against him. Nicole Duran, "Having Men for Dinner: Deadly Banquets and Biblical Women," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35 (2005): 117–24, esp. 120. When Judith rolls Holofernes's body off the bed (13:9), he ends up in the same position as Sisera relative to Jael in Judges 5: lying dead at her feet. This posture evokes death, but it also calls to mind sex, specifically violent rape: Holofernes is Judith's conquest, ravished and left lying, despoiled, on the ground. There is also the matter of the canopy. In 13:9, we learn that Judith "pulled the canopy from the pillars." She takes it with her back to Bethulia, but no explicit reason is given for this curious action. Enslin and Zeitlin proposed that the canopy serves as a trophy of her kill (*Book of Judith*, 153). The trophy theory seems likely, but there is more: as Lawrence M. Wills noted, we can draw an analogy between Holofernes's canopy and the *bētûlîm* of Deuteronomy 22 (*The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995], 149). This chapter deals with what is to be done if a husband claims that his new bride was not a virgin when they married. If she truly is a virgin, her father is to bring evidence of her virginity, referred to as *bētûlîm*, and spread it out before the elders of the town. The proof is presumably the bloody sheets from the wedding night, proving that the woman bled when her hymen broke and thus had been a virgin when she was married. The blood shows that intercourse between the bride and groom has occurred and that the bride had been pure. Wills argues that in Judith's case, the canopy serves a similar role as the bed sheet in Deut 22. Judith brings Holofernes's canopy to the elders of her town as proof that she has "done" him.

part because her actions will be transgressive; she must cloak them in piety and divine approval (Jdt 9). This is a character who dresses up as someone she isn't, enters a camp full of enemy men, lies to the face of a feared general, enters his tent alone for the night, beheads him, totes his head back home, and orders it hung on the city wall. This is exactly the sort of character we can imagine using her own nudity as a tool in her arsenal.

Judith is reminiscent of Bathsheba and Susanna in that her bathing is connected to her sexuality and others' sexual desire for her. However, where Susanna clearly believes she is not being watched and there is nothing indicating that Bathsheba wants to be seen, by David or anyone else, Judith is a different story. She uses the idea that a bathing woman is an irresistible object of desire to her advantage and so arranges her semipublic baths. Whereas Bathsheba and Susanna are objects of the male gaze, Judith is a subject: she grabs and manipulates that gaze, directing it for the desired effect on Holofernes and his soldiers, and eventually subverts and even reverses it. Judith, unlike the other two bathing women, choreographs her exposure for maximum effect. Judith wants Holofernes in a state of high arousal, so eager to bed her that he makes himself vulnerable. She wants his men so besotted with her that they disregard their own good judgment and fail to alert Holofernes that she might pose a threat. Judith is hardly independent of the gaze that invites the reader, along with Holofernes and his men, to look upon her and be titillated. Descriptions of Judith bathing cannot be divorced from the larger authorial tendency to tailor female characters for the male gaze. However, in the world of the text, Judith is something very different from the other biblical women who bathe: while Bathsheba and Susanna bathe, or prepare to do so, in what they apparently believe to be private space, Judith bathes for public arousal. Within her literary world, Judith grabs control of the male gaze and doesn't let go, using this gaze to further her own ends.

We might compare Bathsheba and Susanna to victims of cloud-hacking scandals or revenge porn, their private images stolen or misappropriated, their motives, savvy, and sexual intentions scrutinized. In the course of living their lives, they are sexually victimized, then blamed for it. Judith, conversely, is more akin to a burlesque performer, shedding her clothes to titillate and tease. Like many who participate in neoburlesque culture, Judith performs with a wink; she recognizes that she is playing a role, and she gets something out of playing it. In Judith's case, the performance has high stakes; she must be convincing as a seducer or face the possibility that she will be killed and her people captured.⁵⁶ Reading Judith this way, one admires the way the story uses the trope of the bathing beauty, taking a motif centered on a lovely but helpless woman

⁵⁶ I do not argue that someone acting as Judith does, or someone participating in the burlesque scene, cannot be victimized because she is sometimes publicly sexual. Expressing one's sexuality does not mean that one implicitly consents to any and all sexual activity.

and repurposing it to achieve heroic ends. Additionally, reading Bathsheba and Susanna with Judith in mind shows the absurdity of attributing responsibility for the consequences of the male gaze to the gazed-upon. When we discuss the famous baths of Bathsheba and Susanna, we must bring Judith into the discussion as well. While Bathsheba and Susanna are sometimes discussed or portrayed as seducers who know—or should know—that they are being watched, such depictions of them are incorrect. The story of Judith, with its decidedly, deliberately, and devastatingly sexual heroine, shows us what it actually looks like when a biblical bathing woman wants to be looked at.

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