

HANG 'EM HIGH:
HUMOR, POLITICS, AND GENDER IN ESTHER

BY

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Abbreviations

AT

Alpha Text

LXX

Septuagint

MT

Masoretic Text

Abstract

While many scholars have discussed the presence of humor in the book of Esther, much of this work aims to explain why the ancient audience might have laughed at certain passages without any explanation concerning the author's motivation for including humor. Those scholars who discuss the motivation for the author's use of humor understand them as using humor to broadly challenge the political status quo, which includes domination across both gendered and ethnic lines of social distinction. They find that the humor in Esther politically supports both the subordinated gender, women, and the subordinated ethnic group, Yehudeans. Such an understanding misrepresents the political perspective of Esther, and needs re-examination. Bea Wyler describes a situation in Esther wherein the author challenges the oppression of Yehudean men, while reaffirming the subordination of Yehudean women. In order to make sense of the political perspective described by Wyler, I examine the book of Esther through the analytical lens of masculinity studies, as laid out by Raewyn Connell in *Masculinities*. Through this examination, I find that the author of Esther uses humor as one of many tools to negotiate a Jewish masculinity that opposes Persian masculinity, challenging the ethnic domination faced by Yehudeans while supporting the gendered domination faced by women. Ultimately, I reveal the ways in which examinations of humor and politics within biblical texts can be mutually revealing.

1. Introduction - Clever Subtitle

The book of Esther follows the exploits of assorted characters in an ancient Persian court politically maneuvering against one another. The conflicts that arise between these characters consistently reveal gendered and ethnicized oppositions. King Ahasuerus, goaded by the men of his council, opposes Queen Vashti when she refuses to submit to a request from him. After their opposition turns to her deposition, new conflicts arise across lines of ethnic distinction. The Persian vizier Haman, angered by the obstinance of Mordecai, a Yehudean, plans a genocide against all the Yehudeans within the Persian empire. In order to prevent this planned genocide, Mordecai and his niece, the titular Esther, maneuver their way into positions of influence within King Ahasuerus's court. Esther joins a group of women chosen to enter the king's harem and possibly become Queen Vashti's replacement. Although she comes from a Yehudean family, Esther keeps her ethnic identity a secret from the court officials. When her turn comes to visit Ahasuerus, Esther impresses the king so greatly that they wed, making her the Queen of Persia. At the behest of her uncle Mordecai, Esther approaches the king with a request, an illegal action according to the narrator. After hearing Esther's request, and pardoning her transgression, King Ahasuerus sends out a new decree in order to prevent the Yehudeans from being slaughtered throughout his empire. Moreover, the wicked Haman and his sons receive the execution he had planned especially for Mordecai, while Mordecai receives the gifts that Haman had planned to give himself. Ultimately, Esther and Mordecai not only prevent the genocide planned against their people, but also install themselves in two

of the highest positions within the Persian empire, with Esther becoming Queen and naming Mordecai the King's chief advisor.

Humor in Esther

While a summary of Esther may suggest a serious or even somber tone to match the scale of the horrific threat faced by the Yehudeans, the narrative itself features a playful and humorous tone. Linda M. Day notes the inclusion of many exaggerated elements as proof of the book's humorous tone, such as the amount of alcohol consumed at a feast held by the king in the opening chapter, or the fear of the king's council that Queen Vashti's insubordination will lead to a women's revolt throughout the entire empire.¹ Carey Moore discusses ironic elements of the narrative structure which reveal the book's humorous tone.² Moore finds it ironic that Esther receives rewards for disobeying the king on two occasions while Vashti received punishment for disobeying him once. Beyond these considerations of humor on a narrative level, the text of Esther includes other instances of linguistic playfulness which reveal a more pervasive tone of humor within the book. Moore explains that the author of Esther employs certain linguistic techniques for poetic purposes, "including alliteration, assonance, parallelism, rhythm, symmetry, hendiadys, hyperbole, and especially chiasmic constructions."³

Discussions of humor in Esther tend to focus on this level of analysis, aiming to find what might be humorous within the text. Day writes that, "much of the sense of the

¹ Day, *Esther*, 5.

² Moore, *Esther*, LVI.

³ Moore, *Esther*, LV.

story is missed if one does not recognize how incongruous, and even funny, are many of its elements.”⁴ Day and Moore argue that Esther includes humor, and Day asserts that readers ought to understand the humor if they hope to understand Esther, but neither asks why Esther includes humor. This problem extends beyond these two specific Esther commenters, sprouting up in the work of many scholars looking to discuss humor in Esther. Yehuda Radday, in an extended discussion concerning the potential humor of the many extended lists of names within Esther, argues that the author and their contemporaneous audience would have found these name-lists to be humorous.⁵ Radday argues that in a spoken context, an extended list of names that serves no clear narrative purpose would call attention to itself and interrupt certain rhythmic expectations in possibly humorous ways. Moreover, he notes that many names within these lists might sound ridiculous to the Hebrew-ponic audience. Radday, however, never questions the purpose of these humorous name-lists, and more importantly, he never discusses the ethnicized and gendered nature of these name-lists. The three extended lists of names within Esther each describe a group of Persian men. The author of Esther includes three such name-lists that would sound silly to the Hebrew-ponic audience, intending to cause that audience to laugh at an imagined collection of men from a separate ethnic group, yet Radday does not ask why.

In an article comparing the Hebrew version of Esther to the Greek translation, David Creech argues that the Greek interpreter eliminates many elements of the humorous tone found in the Hebrew text.⁶ He discusses, for instance, how the Greek

⁴ Day, *Esther*, 5.

⁵ Radday, “Humor in Names.”

⁶ Creech, “Now Where’s the Fun in That.”

narrator postpones the drunken feast which opens the Hebrew narrative in order to begin their version with an apocalyptic vision and a discussion of YHWH's involvement in the narrative to follow. For Creech, the Greek version of Esther features a more pious, and less playful tone than the Hebrew which it represents. Unlike Radday, Creech discusses the ethnicized lines across which the narrator of the Hebrew text hurls their humor, but leaves the Greek translator's decision to downplay that humor unpoliticized. Creech finds that the Hebrew author uses humor to subvert the dominant position of the Persian rulers, and that the Greek translator, "uses God to accomplish the same task."⁷ He does not, however, question why the Greek translator might downplay the humorous treatment of Persian characters, nor does he question the distancing of Haman from the other Persian characters in Greek Esther. In a Greek addition to Esther 8, a royal decree relays the information that Haman is in fact Macedonian, and not truly Persian. This additional detail, taken in tandem with the downplaying of humorous materials concerning the Persian royalty, suggests an active shifting of the politics of Esther from the Hebrew to the Greek versions. A political shift not discussed by Creech.

Bruce William Jones discusses the gendered and ethnic conflicts within the book, especially the violent conclusion between the Yehudeans and the Persians, in terms of humor.⁸ He argues that, where previous interpreters have understood these features as representative of the author's chauvinism, he understands them as, "deliberate absurdities which the author has used skillfully."⁹ To support this argument he explains that the Persian decree for the further subordination of all women within the kingdom, as well as

⁷ Creech, "Now Where's the Fun in That," 39.

⁸ Jones, "Two Misconceptions."

⁹ Jones, "Two Misconceptions," 173.

the slaughter of thousands of Persians in the resolution of the narrative's conflict represent a literary exaggeration. Content to argue that, "it's a joke, bro," Jones does not question how such potentially humorous exaggerations could represent a political maneuver on the part of the author.

In contrast to the previously discussed scholars, Athalya Brenner examines the humor of Esther as a political tool. In an article analyzing the biblical trope of the obtuse foreign leader, Brenner describes all three male leaders within Esther (Ahasuerus, Haman, and Mordecai) as objects of satire through the political dominance of the titular woman.¹⁰ She writes that the politically active role of the woman Esther within the Persian court of her narrative, "reflects badly on the social and political fabric," of the Persian kingdom.¹¹ Brenner reveals the ways in which the humorous treatment of these characters reflects a political argument from the author against the Persian kingdom.

In order to facilitate a more complete discussion of humor, we must question the intent behind it. Because the humor apparent in the book of Esther involves specific political distinctions, as shown by Radday's argument concerning the many ridiculous names of the Persian men, the work of understanding such humor must involve arguments concerning these political distinctions. In order to begin to understand the humor of Esther, scholars must analyze that humor through critical theories concerning gender and ethnicity. In attempting a first step toward placing these two analytical methods within conversation as they relate to Esther, I will argue that the author of Esther

¹⁰ Brenner, "Who's Afraid."

¹¹ Brenner, "Who's Afraid," 48.

uses humor to negotiate a Jewish masculinity which challenges Persian domination while reaffirming masculine domination.

Historical Context of Esther

The narrative of Esther takes place during the period when the Persian kingdom ruled over Palestine, a period lasting from 539 to 332 BCE. Depending on how one interprets the name of the Persian King within the narrative, that range of dates could be whittled down. Moore understands the Hebrew אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ as referring to Xerxes I who ruled from 486 to 466 BCE.¹² He notes that other scholars understand the king to be Artaxerxes II who ruled from 404 to 358 BCE. The latter interpretation follows the lead of the Septuagint translator, as well as Josephus, who both render the name *Ἀραξέρξης* rather than transliterating the Hebrew name. Although Moore insists that the author intends to refer to Xerxes I when writing אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ, he also argues that no claims to the historicity of the actions of Xerxes within the narrative ought to be made. The name given in Hebrew, אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ, translates to Chief Ruler, a title given to many Persian kings.¹³ Because of the non-historical nature of the character, and the instability of any particular historical referent, a broadly defined narrative date between 539 and 332 BCE seems most appropriate, as does the transliteration of the name Ahasuerus rather than its replacement with either Xerxes or Artaxerxes.

Esther's compositional date likely lies within the late Persian or early Hellenistic periods. Sidnie White Crawford argues that the book arose within and addresses the

¹² Moore, *Esther*, 3.

¹³ Moore, *Esther*, 3. Ahasuerus appears as a title in Ezra 4:6, Daniel 9:1, and in certain ancient versions of Tobit 14:15.

concerns of a minority community of Jews living in close proximity to foreign rulers, judging by the thematic interests of the text.¹⁴ Both Crawford and Moore, echoing a common claim, argue that the latest limit to the compositional date lies in the early Hellenistic period because of the text's lack of Greek loan words.¹⁵ Other linguistic arguments find that the Hebrew represented in Esther differs greatly from that represented in original texts from Qumran (i.e. peshirim), forcing the date of composition further before the 2nd century BCE, when much of the Qumran literature was composed. Moore notes some fringe arguments which attempt to postpone the late limit to the book's compositional date into the Roman period, including Hans Bardtke's argument that no text evidences knowledge of Esther until II Maccabees which refers to Mordecai's Day (15:36). Lawrence M. Wills argues for a compositional date during the reign of the Hasmoneans.¹⁶ He understands the sympathetic portrayal of a Persian ruler, and the violent conclusion of the narrative as representative of the perspective of an author living through the many conflicts of the Hasmonean period looking backward to an era of Persian rule through a mythologizing lens. Neither Bardtke's nor Wills's arguments account for the linguistic identity of the book of Esther, which strongly suggests an earlier compositional date than they understand. Ultimately, most scholars accept a compositional date within the late Persian or early Hellenistic periods.

Scholars are aware of three ancient versions of Esther: (1) the Hebrew version as attested in the Masoretic Text (hereafter: MT) found in codices dating from the 9th and 10th centuries; (2) the widely known and often discussed Septuagint (hereafter: LXX)

¹⁴ Crawford, "Esther," 201-02.

¹⁵ Crawford, "Esther," 202. Moore, *Esther*, LVII.

¹⁶ Wills, *The Jewish Novel*, 99-100.

Greek translation; and (3) the lesser-known Greek translation known as the Alpha-Text (hereafter: AT). Most scholars understand an original Hebrew text that closely matches MT, and dates back to the Persian or Hellenistic periods, as discussed previously.¹⁷ The LXX version most likely comes about in the late 2nd or early 1st century BCE, and follows MT, however paraphrastically, while including six extended additions. While many preceding arguments place AT at a later date and in a dependent relationship to LXX, Martien Halvorson-Taylor argues that AT represents the earliest extant version of Esther, predating even MT. For Halvorson-Taylor, AT represents a Greek translation of an earlier Hebrew text, which she calls Proto-AT. In this theory of the development of the texts of Esther, the Hebrew Proto-AT spawned both the translated Greek AT, and the Hebrew revision MT, which itself led to the LXX translation and additions. My analysis necessarily focuses on MT, as it represents our earliest extant version in the compositional language. Following Halvorson-Taylor's argument that AT stands independent from MT, I will not compare them, but focus any comparative work on the relationship between MT and its translation, LXX.

Gender and Ethnicity in Esther

Esther attracts scholars interested in discussing gender and ethnicity for a number of reasons. Esther derives its title from a woman, one of only two books of the Hebrew Bible to do so, the other being Ruth. Moreover, every conflict that comes about within Esther occurs between parties of opposing ethnic and gender distinctions. King Ahasuerus and his all male council stand opposed to Queen Vashti and the women at her

¹⁷ Halvorson-Taylor, "Secrets and Lies," 469.

feast. Mordecai, Esther, and their fellow Yehudeans stand opposite Haman the Agagite, and the Persians who could potentially attack them in the streets if Haman's plan comes to fruition.

Examination of the scholarship surrounding the portrayal of gender and ethnicity in Esther necessitates some explanations concerning these categories and their relationship to one another. Distinctions across gendered lines arise socially, meaning that they do not simply refer to a natural distinction. Therefore, the differentiation between the categories 'woman' and 'man' refers to a *naturalized* distinction as opposed to a *natural* one. Judith Butler explains this through the language of performativity. Butler describes performativity, "as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains."¹⁸ Butler reveals that bodies are placed within a gender matrix, but also interact with this matrix in ways that either reaffirm or challenge the naturalized status of the body as gendered. She finds connections between anatomy and gender particularly unstable.¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu describes this very instability, and the naturalization of anatomy as justification of gender hierarchy in his work on masculinity. He writes that "the particular strength of the masculine sociodicy," a justification of an androcentric society, "comes from the fact that it combines and condenses two operations: *it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction.*"²⁰ By this, Bourdieu

¹⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xii.

¹⁹ Butler uses the language of sex rather than gender as the distinction between the two suggests an understanding of sex as biological and gender as social, whereas she understands sex itself to be social. I use the language of gender throughout this paper not to challenge her position, but only to create consistency among the arguments relayed throughout, many of which use the language of gender rather than sex. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 35-36.

²⁰ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 23. Emphasis in original.

means that androcentric societies justify their own androcentrism by connecting it to conceptions of anatomy, and more specifically procreative anatomy. For Bourdieu, these conceptions of anatomy themselves arise socially, rather than naturally. In this way, androcentric systems naturalize the dominant position of men through appeals to anatomical differentiation along a hierarchical binary, when the androcentric system constructed the anatomical binary to begin with.

In much the same way, differentiation across ethnicized lines, in the case of Esther, the line dividing Yehudeans and Persians, refers to a social rather than natural distinction. In an essay discussing the intersectional relationship of gender and ethnicity in Esther, Randall C. Bailey describes the ethnic distinctions made by the author of Esther.²¹ Bailey finds that the author understands ethnicity in relation to geographical and cultural determinants, not phenotypical ones.²² This explains why Esther can conceal her ethnic identity even though much of the conflict in the narrative occurs across ethnically determined lines.

Gender and ethnicity do not exist independently, however. Butler writes “that the order of sexual difference is not prior to that of race or class in the constitution of the subject,” and that just as the body is sexed, it is also raced and classed, in a way wherein each of these constructed identities inform one another.²³ While Butler, and many others describing this intersectionality, use the language of race, such language seems inappropriate in describing Esther because of its emphasis on cultural and geographic distinctions over visible, bodily distinctions. Suffice it to say that distinctions of ethnicity

²¹ Bailey, “That’s Why.”

²² Bailey, “That’s Why,” 233.

²³ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 89.

and gender arise socially, and engage in a reciprocally influential relationship. Esther is not only Yehudean, nor is she only a woman; Esther is a Yehudean woman.

Susan Nidditch examines the gendered and ethnicized conflicts in terms of their relationship to the status quo within the narrative.²⁴ Vashti challenges the status quo of the court by refusing the request of the king; Ahasuerus deposes and replaces Vashti, re-establishing the status quo. Assassins threaten the status quo by plotting to murder the king; Mordecai defends the status quo by foiling their plot. In this pattern, Nidditch finds evidence of an author prescribing that oppressed peoples fight against their oppression from within the social system that allows that oppression, rather than rejecting the system entirely. She finds that the author interacts with the problem of unjust authority by portraying the wise protagonists as tricksters. Esther makes use of her intellect and her beauty, the reason why the king took note of her in the first place, to manipulate the king in such a way that leads to the deliverance of her people. Esther challenges the unjust authority of the foolish king by acting as a trickster-protagonist, and working within the very system that allowed the planning of a genocide against her people. Nidditch ultimately finds that the author of Esther's specific relationship with authority, wherein the oppressed, if wise, may act as tricksters to manipulate the unjustly dominant from within the dominant system, suggests that the author themselves navigated the prickly politics of exilic life.

Lillian R. Klein offers an intersectional analysis of hegemony in Esther through the lens of honor and shame as the ancient audience may have understood those

²⁴ Nidditch, "Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority."

concepts.²⁵ She finds that the author of Esther presents a unique vision of honor and shame, wherein the delineated activities which bring shame upon an actor may be performed, as long as that actor maintains a public guise of the typical honor-expectations. This view of honor and shame allows Mordecai to act as a private advisor, a woman's role in Klein's argument, to Esther while she performs royal activities, a man's role. For Klein, the author argues that such transgression of gender roles becomes necessary within certain oppressive regimes. Klein and Nidditch both analyze the politics of transgression in Esther, finding that the author supports the specific transgressions of Esther and Mordecai, but explain these politics through different analytical lenses.

Klara Butting examines Esther as a variation of the Joseph novella (Gen 37-50).²⁶ She finds that in reinterpreting the narrative of Joseph, the author of Esther creates a tale that shows the similarities and connections between ethnic domination and gendered domination. Specifically, Butting argues that the author connects the oppression of Vashti as a woman to the oppression faced by the Yehudeans. She writes that, "twice we see how the wounded arbitrariness and resulting fury of a man become an affair of state."²⁷ In this she references two episodes within Esther. First, that the perceived obstinance of one woman, Vashti, becomes the basis for an empire spanning decree that all women ought unquestioningly obey their husbands, when interpreted by the furious men of Ahasuerus's council. Second, the perceived obstinance of one Yehudean, Mordecai who refuses to bow to Haman, becomes the basis for an empire spanning genocide when interpreted by the furious Haman. Butting makes sure to show that these two types of oppression remain

²⁵ Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther."

²⁶ Butting, "A New Interpretation..."

²⁷ Butting, "A New Interpretation," 244.

unique, both in explanation and effect, but argues that the author of Esther connects each form of oppression to an arbitrary reaction of a threatened man.

Whereas the preceding authors examine the portrayal of gendered and ethnicized forms of oppression within Esther, Bea Wyler examines their intersection within the body of the titular character.²⁸ Wyler offers an interpretation of Esther as a story about the emancipation of an ethnicized group (Jews in Persia) concurrent with an ‘incomplete’ emancipation of a gendered group (women). She traces themes across Esther, finding the promise of a two-fold emancipatory event (that of both Jews and women), that is only half fulfilled in the narrative’s conclusion. Her argument begins with a close examination of Esther’s opening chapter, which features no Jewish characters. She finds that this opening chapter focuses on the silencing of women within the Persian kingdom. When Queen Vashti refuses the king’s request the royal court silences her through deposition. Moreover, in the decree that announces Vashti’s deposition, the royal court prescribes that every house follows the language of the father. Wyler suggests that this legal requirement refers to households within which women taught their children their own language, rather than the language of their husbands. Thus, the decree deposing Vashti silences both her and the entire population of women in Persia. That this series of oppressive acts leads into the larger conflict of Esther, an ethnic conflict between the Persians and Jews, suggests for Wyler that a resolution to this gendered oppression belongs in the narrative following the resolution of the ethnicized oppression. She offers two imaginative chapters to be added at the conclusion of Esther, not as a true emendation of the text, but as a way to think about the narrative within modern

²⁸ Wyler, “Incomplete Emancipation.”

communities that find Esther to be an important work. These additional chapters follow Esther realizing the gendered nature of her oppression, revealing the realities of this oppression to King Ahasuerus and Mordecai, and forming a royal decree to end the practices that involve gendered oppression, including the deposition of Vashti. Beyond analyzing the text itself, Wyler offers a thoughtful interrogation of the relationship between the feminist critic and the literature under examination.

Wyler's understanding of Esther as promising resolution to both ethnicized and gendered oppressions within the world of the narrative, while only truly resolving the conflict of ethnicized oppression, reveals something interesting about Esther's author. The author of Esther finds it necessary to end the oppression of the Yehudeans within the narrative, but does not find it necessary to end the oppression of women within the story. While Wyler's creative interaction with this realization solves some interpretive issues for her in sharing Esther's story with others, I aim to understand what may have led the author to resolve one end of the oppression faced by the titular character but not the other. In order to do this I will analyze what Wyler calls Esther's incomplete emancipation through the work of Raewyn Connell concerning masculinities.²⁹ For Connell, masculinity arises as a social distinction which places men and women within a complex relationship of domination and subordination. She argues that as masculinities arise within many different cultural situations, these differentiated masculinities interact with one another in their own systems of domination and subordination. In this way, the masculinity of a man from a low-income family might oppose the masculinity of an economically elite one. For Connell, all forms of masculinity interact with what she calls

²⁹ Connell, *Masculinities*.

hegemonic masculinity, or “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees... the dominant position of men.”³⁰ She shows that this relationship to hegemonic masculinity can come in many forms, with some masculinities forming in protest to it, and others aiming to reform it. These individualized attempts at reforming masculinity, “ultimately help to modernize patriarchy rather than abolish it.”³¹

In this paper, I will argue that through the analytical lens of Connell’s theory of masculinities the perspective of the author of Esther becomes clear, particularly as it relates to the problems described by Wyler. The author of Esther opposes the ethnicized subordination of the Yehudeans, yet reaffirms the gendered subordination of women. The author challenges certain aspects of the imperial, or hegemonic, masculinity of the Persian ruling class, while maintaining the central aspect of masculinity, the subordination of women to men. I will argue for an understanding of Esther as a negotiation of an ancient Jewish diasporic masculinity in protest to an imperial masculinity, represented within the narrative by an imperial Persian masculinity.

By describing the author’s masculinity as ‘Jewish,’ I do not aim to argue for a natural category of Jewishness, as opposed to non-Jewishness. In the same way that the distinction between man and woman comes about through social construction, the distinction between Jew and non-Jew, or in this case specifically Persian, is socially defined. Shaye J. D. Cohen writes that, “Jewishness, like most - perhaps all - other identities, is imagined; it has no empirical, objective, verifiable reality to which we can

³⁰ Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

³¹ Connell, *Masculinities*, 139.

point.”³² What matters for my purposes here is that the author of Esther distinguishes between an ethnically defined in group, with which they identify, and an out group, against which they compete. The author describes the in group, represented chiefly by Esther and Mordecai, as יהודי, from יהוד the name of the Persian province comprising generally of the land which formerly made up the kingdom of Judah. The author dubs the out group פרס. The distinction seems to be something in between an ethnic one and a geographic one, with characters born in Judah and characters born in Persia to parents from Judah inhabiting the term alike. Nevertheless, the author’s treatment of Persians as other naturalizes the distinctions between Persians and Yehudeans across ethnicized boundaries. Thus, although Yehudeans living within the time period described by the book of Esther may have understood יהודי as a geographic distinction, the author projecting backward onto this time period understands it as an ethnic distinction, particularly one that distinguishes יהודי from פרס. In order to represent such a development, I describe the author’s masculinity as a Jewish one in protest to an imperial Persian masculinity, while I transliterate the term יהודי as Yehudean in translated passages from Esther, maintaining any possible ambiguities between its use as a geographic or ethnic distinction.

The Author

Before moving on, it is necessary to define and defend my use of the term ‘author.’ By referring to an author of Esther, I do not mean to suggest that MT version of Esther represents the creative output of a sole person. My use of the term encompasses the

³² Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 5.

potential roles played by any number of authors and redactors working toward the version passed down to us. Moreover, I do not wish to suggest in my discussions of Esther as a negotiation of competing masculinities that no women played a part in the creation of the text. Rather, I am arguing that the final version of Esther, passed down to us through MT, represents the perspective of an author negotiating a Jewish masculinity in opposition to an imperial Persian masculinity. As Brenner argues in her discussion of pornographic male fantasies in *The Story Of O*, which was written by a woman, “one gender’s fantasy cannot survive without the cooperation of the other.”³³ Thus, women could be involved in the formation of Esther as a negotiation of a Jewish masculinity, even though masculinity itself necessarily involves the subordination of women. Ultimately, I use the word ‘author’ to represent all people potentially involved in the creation of Esther as found in MT, and match it to plural pronouns accordingly.

Chapter Outlines

In the following chapter, I will examine the book of Esther in order to find substantial evidence of humor within it. This will involve discussions of the study of humor in general, as well as works concerning humor in biblical texts. Examinations of universal explanations of humor, particularly relating to their instability, will lead me to a more synchronic method of discussing humor in biblical texts. Using this synchronic method, I will examine details from Esther which interact with culturally defined norms in potentially humorous ways in order to make clear the humorous elements of the book.

³³ Brenner, “The Case of Jeremiah,” 271.

Chapter three will focus on connecting Connell's theory of masculinities to the book of Esther. This will begin with a response to biblical scholars who refuse to examine biblical texts through analytical lenses from contemporary social scientists, like Connell, for fear of performing eisegesis rather than their preferred exegesis. After arguing for the necessity of political interpretations of biblical texts, I will relay the relevant theoretical arguments concerning gender, ethnicity, and masculinity as socially constructed objects. I will then return to the problem of Esther's incomplete emancipation, as described by Wyler. I will examine specific episodes through the lens of masculinity studies in order to understand more clearly how Esther's emancipation remains incomplete, as well as why the author might have left it so. Ultimately, I will argue that the political perspective of the book of Esther represents a dominated Jewish masculinity competing against a dominant Persian one.

In the fourth chapter I will connect these two methods of analysis, looking at how the humor of Esther consistently portrays the Persian men as less masculine than Yehudean ones. In this chapter I will address the questions left behind by scholars like Radday and Creech, discussed earlier. This will involve detailed re-examinations of the humorous elements described in chapter two. Through re-examining these elements, I will show the ways in which the humor of Esther factors into the book's larger political goals. Ultimately, I will synthesize the discussions from the two preceding chapters in order to fully explain and support my argument that the author of Esther includes humor in the novella as a tool for challenging their own ethnic subordination while reaffirming their gendered domination.

In the concluding chapter, I will discuss the implications of this paper. The arguments and method of argument found within this paper could have an effect on further scholarship concerning Esther as well as other books of the Hebrew Bible. This chapter contextualizes my examination of Esther within broader biblical scholarship, revealing the ways in which examinations of humor and politics are mutually illuminating.

2. Killing Frogs - Dissecting Humor in Esther

Discussions of humor in literature inevitably lead to a statement concerning the subjectivity of humor. Something that seems funny to me, may not seem funny to somebody else, as evidenced by the phrase most often repeated by my mother when we get to spend time with each other, “you’re not funny.” I disagree. Because of the subjectivity of humor, discussions of humor from cultures alienated from us in time nearly universally include words of caution concerning the misrepresentation of certain texts as humorous.¹ In order to explain humor, you must reveal the cultural information relevant to it. Often this involves explicating what may only read as humorous when left implicit. As the famous quip, attributed to many but belonging to E.B. and Katharine S. White, goes, “humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”² Luckily, I do not like frogs.

While many scholars will pay lip service to the understanding of humor as culturally defined in their explanation of it, their methods often involve the use of a universal theory of humor. In this chapter I will reveal the methodological issues of examining ancient humor, in order to justify a synchronic method of analyzing the humor of the Hebrew Bible. After making clear my method, and making clear the problematic assumptions of other interpretive methods, I will examine the book of Esther in order to find potentially humorous elements within it. I will lay out the innards of the humor

¹ Curiously, far fewer authors caution the overly serious interpretation of potentially humorous passages.

² E.B. & K.S. White, “Preface,” xvii.

found in Esther in order to explain that the book includes many humorous elements, while ensuring that nobody laughs at them ever again. Moreover, I will reveal a pattern within the humorous elements of Esther, namely, that the author consistently employs humor as a tool for the derision of members of the ‘out’ group.

Three Theories, and a Few Theories More

In examining arguments concerning humor and its uses, I notice a popular method of theorizing humor. Scholars apply an earlier author’s theory, or more often one particular element of said theory, to a potentially humorous work or library of works in order to glean information concerning the hegemonic uses of humor within. For example, these arguments may take an Aristotelian ‘superiority theory,’ which understands humor as arising from one’s sense of superiority to the object, or butt, of the joke. They apply this theory to a joke in order to understand the machinations of superiority within the joke. Because such a unifying theory of humor can withstand very little scrutiny (consider the mental gymnastics required to apply such a theory to self-deprecating humor) authors making use of universal theories leave their preferred theory unchallenged. These authors paraphrase their working theory in overly simple ways, often misrepresenting the authors whose work forms the foundation for the theory. In this way, one part of Freud’s theory of jokes concerning smut, which he describes in specific gendered terms, becomes a unifying theory of humor as invective in the work of both Amy Richlin and Anthony Corbeill.³ In contrast to this common *modus operandi* Mary Beard, in her book *Laughter in Ancient Rome* challenges the ability of any single theory to explain all instances of

³ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*. Richlin, *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic*. Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter*.

humor.⁴ Beard would rather closely examine the discourse surrounding laughter and humor from the relevant culture in order to make her arguments than appeal to a universal theory.

In order to discuss how certain authors have interacted with the three popular theories of humor, I must first outline what those three theories argue. I will begin with the ‘superiority theory,’ introduced earlier. For many authors this theory traces back to Plato and Aristotle, who understood laughter as a derisive reaction against a person to whom the laugher feels superior. John Morreall, in his oft cited book *Taking Laughter Seriously*, suggests that this theory reappears two thousand years later in the work of Thomas Hobbes.⁵ Hobbes describes laughter as resulting from a ‘sudden glory’ which overtakes the strong person when comparing themselves to the weak person. According to this theory, when Michael Scott of *The Office* shouts, “I declare bankruptcy,” the audience laughs because they understand that the act of declaring bankruptcy does not involve simply shouting the words.⁶ Thus, the audience has greater knowledge of the situation than the manager of the titular office, and can derive a feeling of superiority in the form of laughter. After discussing the historical development of superiority theory, Morreall relays how Albert Rapp developed a response to my previous critique of it (that it cannot account for self-deprecating humor), wherein self-deprecating humor makes one feel superior to a projected past version of oneself. Having never felt better than myself, however, I maintain that the superiority theory neglects to explain all instances of humor.

⁴ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*.

⁵ Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 4-14.

⁶ *The Office*, “Money.”

Beard also challenges the ability of the superiority theory to explain all instances of humor by suggesting that it fails to explain the laughter brought about by puns.⁷

Next, we turn to the incongruity theory, which suggests that all laughter stems from a discrepancy between expectations and reality. Morreall suggests that this theory begins to appear in earnest in the works of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer.⁸ According to the incongruity theory, the surprise of a subverted expectation causes one to laugh. For example, when Paddington, the titular bear from *Paddington*, comes across a sign attached to an escalator which reads, “dogs must be carried,” he obtains a dog for the purpose of securing passage on the escalator.⁹ The audience laughs because of the incongruity of their interpretation of the sign’s meaning and the interpretation represented by the curious actions of the polite bear. Whereas they understood the sign to mean “if you bring a dog onto this escalator, you must carry them,” Paddington Bear understands the sign to mean, “anybody looking to ride this escalator needs to carry a dog.”¹⁰ Beard notes an experiment which supports certain claims of the incongruity theory. In the experiment, subjects lift a series of objects whose weight directly correlates to their size. When prompted to lift a small object that weighs more than the larger ones, which disrupts the pattern, subjects laugh. Moreover, the scientists behind the experiment found a correlation between the size of the discrepancy and the intensity of the laughter.¹¹

⁷ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 39-40.

⁸ Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 15-19.

⁹ King, *Paddington*.

¹⁰ Here, I provide an explanation of this humorous moment through the lens of incongruity theory. Superiority theory, however, suggests that the laughter of the audience derives from their feeling of superiority over the titular bear. Rather than the difference of interpretation causing this laughter, the superiority of the audience’s interpretation over Paddington’s misinterpretation causes the laughter. Similarly, incongruity theory can explain the earlier example from *The Office* as causing laughter because of the incongruity of the audience’s understanding of declaring bankruptcy as opposed to Michael Scott’s understanding.

¹¹ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 38.

However, the incongruity theory neglects to explain that while it may be true that all humor involves incongruity, not all incongruity prompts laughter. Certain instances of incongruity bring about feelings of pain, pity, fear, or any number of unpleasant emotions.¹² Another issue with incongruity theory arises when comparing differing perspectives of an incongruous event. In discussing the humor of subverted expectations in the book of Jonah, John R. Miles presents an image of a wedding gone wrong.¹³ At this wedding, one would-be-spouse, when prompted to utter the words, ‘I do,’ simply leaves the ceremony wordlessly. While Miles and, admittedly, myself find this image humorous, a person left at the altar in real life may not.

Finally, we turn to the relief theory, often credited to Freud. According to this theory’s common usage, which diverges from Freud’s specific theory, laughter represents the release of repressed emotion, not unlike the release of steam from an engine caused by the turning of a valve. This theory suggests that when people challenge certain taboos, the emotions commonly repressed by those taboos escape the laugher’s body in the form of laughter.¹⁴ In contrast to the common understanding of laughter escaping like so much built up steam, Freud suggests that the released energy represents that energy which would have been used for repression. Thus, a joke that openly discusses death allows the audience to laugh with the energy that would have been used to maintain the repression of the feeling which the joke gives name to.¹⁵ For example, Joe Gideon, protagonist of *All*

¹² Morreall invokes the image of a child being killed in a car accident. For Morreall, this image offers a discrepancy between the expectation that a child represents a present virility and the reality of this specific child’s lifeless body. Perhaps he could have made his point without bringing the image of a dead child to the audience’s mind, but perhaps I could have done the same. Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 19.

¹³ Miles, “Laughing at the Bible,” 205-207.

¹⁴ Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 20-37.

¹⁵ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 38-39.

That Jazz, realizes that he will die very soon, and imagines a full musical number in which he repeatedly sings the phrase, “I think I’m gonna die.”¹⁶ In response, the audience releases the energy involved in not discussing human mortality in the form of laughter.¹⁷ Both Morreall and Beard critique this theory, particularly as described by Freud, for its outdated understanding of energy, emotions, and the body.

The work of one commonly referenced theorist stands apart from these three theories, however. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his discussion of Rabelais’s humor, proposes an understanding of humor as it transforms through time, or, a history of laughter.¹⁸ Bakhtin connects Rabelais’s work to his own understanding of the *carnival*, arguing that Rabelais’s humor, and in fact medieval European humor in general, stems from an experience of temporary freedom from social mores. Bakhtin writes that, “for a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom. The very brevity of this freedom increased its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism.”¹⁹ For Bakhtin, medieval individuals experienced such freedom in both the *carnival* and humorous literature, typified by Rabelais. Jacqueline Bussie makes use of a Bakhtinian model for understanding laughter from the point of view of those disadvantaged by social hierarchy.²⁰ Bussie understands laughter in Bakhtin’s sense as a temporary revolt against social mores and hierarchies. Beard, however, challenges the

¹⁶ Fosse, *All That Jazz*.

¹⁷ While this moment most clearly matches the description of relief theory, much like the examples from *The Office* and *Paddington*, the other theories can explain the resulting laughter in different ways. A reading through incongruity theory suggests that the laughter derives from the incongruity between the seriousness of death and the silliness of a musical number. A reading through superiority theory might suggest that the audience imagines itself as superior to Joe Gideon on account of his trivializing of his own death..

¹⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 59-144.

¹⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 89.

²⁰ Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed*, 15-16.

ability of any author to accurately describe a history of laughter, as Bakhtin proposes to do.²¹ She argues that scholars cannot with certainty decide whether discourse concerning laughter changes social mores, or vice versa. Beyond this, she argues that all attempts at outlining a history of laughter feature judgements either for or against contemporary laughter. Some proudly describe a refinement of humor away from abuse, and others lament the loss of a more ‘earthy’ laughter. Beard finds a diachronic view of laughter (i.e. laughter through history) untenable, and suggests instead that authors should focus on synchronic understandings of laughter. For her, this means strictly examining laughter in ancient Rome; for my purposes, this means strictly examining humor in biblical and parabiblical texts.

Many arguments concerning uses of humor will begin with an explanation of the previously examined theories. Some authors prioritize one theory or one specific theorist over others. Other authors, like Morreall, will propose a new universal theory of humor. Morreall argues that “laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift.”²² This theory raises perhaps as many problems as Morreall intends to solve by suggesting it. First, much like the incongruity theory, while he may suggest that all laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift, surely not all pleasant psychological shifts end in laughter. When somebody proposes to their loving partner, surely the person receiving the marriage proposal experiences a pleasant psychological shift. I would worry, however, should this person simply laugh as response to the marriage proposal. Bussie offers

²¹ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 65-69.

²² Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 39.

another critique of Morreall's very simple theory: that it neglects any instance of laughter in a tragic situation, or 'inappropriate laughter.'²³

In contrast to these methods of either appropriating an earlier theory or constructing a new one, Beard insists on a synchronic analysis of laughter. For Beard one can point to the similarities between a particular instance of laughter and an understanding of laughter as proposed by a theorist, but should not work backwards from a universal theory of humor toward understanding a specific instance of laughter. In my own reading of humor in Esther I will rely on a synchronic method based on Beard's work. By this, I mean that rather than focusing on the understanding of humor from a specific universal theory, I will focus on the patterns of humor present in Esther and in the literature directly related to it from the Hebrew Bible and beyond. This involves examination of potentially humorous elements, as well as discussions of laughter within this literature. This method takes into account the cultural specificity of humor, where universal theories erase this specificity by imagining all humor as derived from just one conception of laughter. My examination of humor in Esther relies on data from the cultures that influenced Esther, and the patterns present within these data.

Freud and Humorous Invective

Moving beyond explanations of theories of humor, I will now examine the ways in which specific authors writing about humor in antiquity interact with these theories. Some name specific theories of humor in their methodological explanations, while others establish

²³ "I *am* the kind of guy who laughs at a funeral." Barenaked Ladies, "One Week." Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed*, 10.

understandings of humor specific to the culture and time within which they are working, refusing to suggest any universal truths concerning humor.

I will begin by comparing Amy Richlin's explanation of humorous invective in Roman humor of a certain era to Ralph M. Rosen's explanation of it in Roman satirical poetry.²⁴ I compare these two arguments because they propose a similar understanding of hostile humor, but while Richlin connects her argument to the work of Freud on jokes in general, Rosen only discusses his model as it relates to Roman satirical poetry, and not to any universal idea of humorous invective.²⁵

Richlin integrates elements of Freud's *Jokes* into her analysis of Roman satire as it relates to gender and sexuality. She explains Freud's argument that humorous invective²⁶ requires three parties: the joker, the object of joking, and the audience.²⁷ She calls this the A-B-C²⁸ model, wherein A ridicules B in front of C, who joins A in laughing at B. She then incorporates this model into her argument, and expands on specific elements of it to make it more applicable to Roman satire. She writes that, "often it seems that A suggests similarities between the victim of the satire and the audience. But surely the satire is funny only insofar as this identification can be quickly laughed

²⁴ Richlin describes hostile humor with the language of invective, while Rosen uses the language of mockery. Both authors discuss similar modes of humor. For clarity, I discuss the arguments of both authors with the language of humorous invective. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*. Rosen, *Making Mockery: The Poetics of Ancient Satire*.

²⁵ While I focus on Richlin as representative of this method, many others follow her lead, or perhaps Freud's lead. Corbeill follows much the same method as Richlin, for instance, heavily adapting Freud's theory to match his data on Ciceronian mockery, rather than building a model from the literature of Cicero itself. Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter*, 4-5.

²⁶ Freud uses the language of 'tendentious jokes.'

²⁷ Although Richlin cites p.133 for Freud, his discussion of this model begins on p.100. Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 60. Freud, *Jokes*, 100.

²⁸ This name comes from Richlin, though for clarity I use A-B-C model when discussing Freud's Joker-Object-Audience model as well as Rosen's Attacker-Attacked-Audience model.

off, or at worst foisted off by C₁ onto C₂ sitting next to him.”²⁹ Here, Richlin makes a distinction not found in the work of Freud, namely, that an audience may itself split into multiple groups each understanding itself as the audience rather than the object. This distinction arises from her knowledge of the ways in which Roman satirists deploy humor, and the ways in which Roman audiences most likely reacted, not from universal arguments proposed by Freud. Richlin adapts the arguments of Freud into a new model which more accurately suits her needs in discussing humorous invective in Roman satire. Richlin further adapts Freud’s model through careful paraphrasing which omits one specific element of Freud’s proposed A-B-C model: gender roles as they relate to the three relevant parties. Freud proposes his model when discussing smut, or sexually aggressive humorous invective. He suggests that such jokes arise from a tension between a man (A) and a woman (B). Freud writes that, “when the first person [A] finds *his* libidinal impulse inhibited by *the woman* [B], *he* develops a hostile trend against that second person and calls on the originally interfering third person [C] as his ally.”³⁰ Freud makes clear that the third party (C) is also a man. In her explanation of Freud’s model, Richlin downplays Freud’s gendered language. Because Freud’s theory requires these adaptations to work in Richlin’s analysis of Roman satire, and because in erasing the gendered language of Freud’s original model Richlin slightly misrepresents his argument, Richlin’s appeal to Freud’s theory makes her argument weaker.

In contrast to Richlin’s method of adapting Freud’s theory to work well for her analytical ends, Rosen establishes a nearly identical model of understanding humorous

²⁹ Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 60.

³⁰ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious*, 100. Emphasis my own.

invective without interacting with any universal claims of humor. He explains that mockery in satirical poetry occurs in four ways, each relating to a base model of A-B-C.³¹ In one model the author (A) describes to their audience (C) a fictionalized account of an interaction wherein they verbally attacked someone (B). In this mode B need not be present for C to witness A's attack. Rosen uses examples from the literature he hopes to analyze as support for his explanation of the A-B-C model. Functionally, Richlin's and Rosen's respective models perform identical tasks in comparably efficient ways, which points to the unnecessary steps taken by Richlin to align Freud's universal model with the pattern she sees in the literature she analyzes. In fact, the connection Richlin proposes between Freud's work and her own only makes her argument weaker by opening it up to challenges aimed at Freud's epistemological assumptions which do not factor in Richlin's use of the Freudian model. Of the flaws in using Freud's work as theoretical grounding, Beard writes:

Freud's 'theory' is a dazzling and confusing mixture: an attempt to reach a consistent, scientific approach (most implausibly, as we have seen, at its edges) standing alongside a range of speculations - some of which have little to do with his main argument, and some of which seem flatly contradictory.³²

In comparing Richlin's and Rosen's methods of creating a model to use in discussing humorous invective from a specific era and location, we can see why Beard proposes a method that more clearly matches Rosen's, as it stands separate from any universal theory of humor, all of which raise specific methodological issues. This is not to say that Richlin's arguments which use her Freudian model are any less persuasive or viable than arguments made by Rosen. Rather, I argue that because no single theory of humor

³¹ Rosen names his model, Attacker-Attacked-Audience. Rosen, *Making Mockery*, 24-27.

³² Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*, 41.

adequately explains every instance of humor, appealing to a universal theory of humor only creates problems for the person examining the humor.

Such uses of Freud's theory in justifying a specific understanding of ancient humor also affect biblical studies. In essays examining the political uses of the trope of the foolish foreign ruler, both Athalya Brenner and Michael J. Chan appeal to Freud's explanation of humorous invective.³³ While Brenner and Chan make compelling arguments for the use of that humorous trope as a political weapon aimed at those who oppressed the diasporic community, they weaken their arguments by connecting them to a theory of humor built around an understanding of embodied emotions as so many steam pipes and release valves. Examination of the humor of the Hebrew Bible requires a method that begins with the data of humor, rather than a universal theory. Because of this, I will follow the method proposed by Beard when analyzing Esther. Beard's method involves the identification of patterns within a literary collection, and examination of what these patterns reveal about that culture's conception of humor. Thus, in examining the humor of Esther, I reveal patterns visible within the book itself, as well as those visible in humorous elements of biblical and parabiblical texts.

Laughing at the Bible

Discussions of humor in the Hebrew Bible often involve yet another methodological issue: the assumption that biblical humor stands above its peers. This assumption arises from the understanding of the Hebrew Bible as being somehow more important or authoritative than other literary collections.

³³ Brenner, "Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism," 41. Chan, "Ira Regis," 23.

In an essay for the edited volume *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, Yehuda Radday responds to common claims that the Hebrew Bible includes no clearly humorous material.³⁴ He counters this understanding of the Hebrew Bible as a serious tome by examining certain passages that he finds overtly humorous. For example, he suggests a farcical element at play within the plague narratives in Exodus. When YHWH turns the Nile's water to blood, the pharaoh's magicians turn more water into blood, exasperating the crisis caused by a lack of potable water. Radday finds that the author of this passage makes comic characters of the Egyptian court magicians by having them react in counterintuitive ways. Rather than fixing the problem caused by YHWH, the Pharaoh's magicians make the problem worse, allowing the audience to laugh at their foolishness.

Radday moves forward by attempting to explain his understanding of humor in general. Proposing an analogy of a large house with many rooms within, he explains that 'humor' as a term encapsulates many forms: wit, joke, satire, burlesque, etc.³⁵ Although he finds this analogy helpful in attempting to identify and understand humor, he finds that 'humor' itself defies definition. Moreover, Radday argues that one's sense of humor relies so heavily on one's world view (*Weltanschauung*) that one definition could not fit all modes of humor within its borders. He spends the remainder of this essay examining assorted passages and interpretations of passages in order to reveal what, in his understanding, an ancient audience would have found humorous. While many biblical scholars have ignored humorous elements within the Hebrew Bible, Radday finds that

³⁴ Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible."

³⁵ Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible," 23-24.

many others inject passages with humor that would not exist apart from the eisegesis of these scholars. He wants to emphasize the importance of finding the humor apparent in the work of the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible without allowing scholars to inappropriately read humor into that work. Radday continues on by proposing a few reasons for the dearth of scholarship concerning the humor of the Hebrew Bible. He suggests that the Protestant connection between religiosity and seriousness greatly impacted the study of any less than serious elements of the Bible, even within non-Protestant communities. Beyond this, he suggests that the linguistic and cultural knowledge required to accurately reveal humor in an ancient text prevents many from seeing humor in the Bible even if they understood the Bible to include humor.

While Radday, in agreement with Beard's method, works entirely from within biblical literature in order to identify and discuss its potentially humorous elements, he seems to have some unnecessary assumptions of the types of humor found in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, Radday suggests that, "biblical humor is never scatological or frivolous."³⁶ While frivolity seems as culturally defined as humor, and thus difficult to speak of definitively, the Hebrew Bible certainly includes scatological humor. Judges 3 relays the assassination of the fat King Eglon by the judge Ehud. When Ehud stabs his enemy, 'the dirt,' as the NRSV coyly translates, falls out from his belly. The guards' assumption that the king is defecating when in fact he is dying solidifies the moment as humorous, and more importantly, scatologically so. In another instance of relevant scatological humor, Tobit, the titular character of his book, becomes blind after birds defecate on his eyes. Certainly such an image, taken along with other instances of gross-

³⁶ Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible," 38.

out humor within Tobit,³⁷ reveals the involvement of scatological humor in biblical literature. While contemporary Jewish canon does not include Tobit, it exists in the same literary world and represents a tone similar to many books of the Hebrew Bible. Explicating yet another potential instance of the ever present biblical poop-joke, Joel S. Kaminsky offers a new interpretation of the enigmatic term לִשְׂוֹחַ in Gen 24:63.³⁸ The word comes up when Rebekah arrives at Abraham's home to meet Isaac. Most translations follow the LXX understanding of לִשְׂוֹחַ as meaning that Isaac was out walking when Rebekah arrived. Kaminsky argues that it instead denotes Isaac urinating or defecating in the field while Rebekah arrives. While Kaminsky's linguistic justification leaves something to be desired, as it occurs only in a footnote suggesting further reading on the topic, he persuasively argues for an understanding of Isaac as the type of fool to be found answering the call of nature in his field when first meeting his betrothed. While scholars can debate Kaminsky's interpretation of this particular scene, the presence of scatological humor within the Hebrew Bible seems readily apparent to anyone willing to see it.

Radday obscures the more 'frivolous' aspects of biblical humor because of an attachment to the understanding of the Hebrew Bible as supremely authoritative. Although Radday understands that the Hebrew Bible contains humorous materials, he refuses to concede its position as the highest form of literature. Thus, the Bible contains only the highest forms of literary humor, or, more precisely, omits the lowest forms of humor: the frivolous and the scatological. In a similar maneuver, Francis Landy argues

³⁷ Tobit includes a scene wherein a newly wed couple burns fish innards as incense while consummating their marriage, and concludes with more fish innards, many weeks old by this point, acting as the medicine to heal Tobit's eyes.

³⁸ Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope," 369.

for an understanding of humor in the Bible as a high humor, which does not even correlate to laughter.³⁹ For Landy, such humor exists as well in the tragedies of Shakespeare. That Landy does not laugh when the gravediggers of Hamlet take the stage, however, reveals more about Landy's assumptions concerning 'high humor,' than it does about Shakespeare's Danish clowns. This makes clear Landy's assumption that 'high humor' does not provoke laughter. His failure to see the potential laughter involved in watching Shakespeare's clowns means that Landy approaches the humor of Shakespeare as not causing laughter; he begins with the assumption that his works are 'high.' He follows a similar method in analyzing biblical humor from the assumed view of it as being 'high humor.' These analytical assumptions of Radday and Landy reveal their position of defending the Hebrew Bible from association with 'low' literature and humor. They both concede the point that the Hebrew Bible includes humor, but maintain that this humor represents a higher register than other literature. Ultimately, the arguments of Radday and Landy concerning the humor of the Hebrew Bible represent a vestigial understanding of the Hebrew Bible as more important or more authoritative than other texts. In approaching the literary humor of the Hebrew Bible generally, and the book of Esther specifically, we must do away with assumptions of the Hebrew Bible as belonging to a higher register than other instances of humorous literature.

Humor's Innards

Through the end of this chapter, I will relay potentially humorous elements of Esther. By connecting these elements to one another as well as the culture surrounding the

³⁹ Landy, "Humour as a Tool for Biblical Exegesis."

composition of Esther, I will reveal the humorousness of the book in general. This method will resist the issues involved in relying on universal theories of humor, which, fail to reliably explain every instance of humor or treat humor as culturally specific. Moreover, I will reveal a pattern in the humorous elements of Esther that requires further investigation, namely, that the humor of Esther consistently takes Persian men as its object of derision. This pattern of humor as chiefly derisive in Esther follows a pattern in discussions of laughter from the Hebrew Bible noted by Brenner.⁴⁰ In discussing the patterns of humor and its uses in Esther and related literature, as opposed to examining the humor of Esther through the lens of universal theories of humor I can reveal more clearly the ways in which the author uses humor as well as to what ends this author uses humor.

The author of Esther maintains a comedic tone throughout the book through the use of playful literary techniques, such as alliteration and repetition. Melissa A. Jackson reveals an alliterative phrase shared between Vashti and Esther, the two wives of Ahasuerus.⁴¹ She reveals a connection between their names (אסתר and ושרי) and the verb to do or make(א-ש-ה)⁴², as well as the word for feast(משתה). While many examples⁴³ of these words coming together in alliterative fashion occur within the book, Jackson finds the repeated phrase “the feast which Esther made”⁴⁴ (המשתה אשר-עשתה אסתר) to represent the peak of the phenomenon in 5:5 and 6:14. The author’s alliterative affinity affects

⁴⁰ Brenner, “On the Semantic Field of Humour.”

⁴¹ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 210.

⁴² This verb becomes particularly alliterative in relation to their names in its perfect feminine singular form (אשתה).

⁴³ Another strong example comes when Ahasuerus remembers “Vashti and what she did [for him]. (את) (ושרי ואת אשר-עשתה) in 2:1.

⁴⁴ Translations my own.

further passages, coming up when Ahasuerus consults with legal experts in 1:13 (דעי דת יזין), when the king's pages search for potential brides in 2:2 (נערוות בתולות טובות), and when Ahasuerus asks Esther what she requests of him in 5:3 (לה המלך מה-לך).

The author includes other playful linguistic techniques such as repetition. As an example, chapter 6 features many repetitions of the phrase, “the man whom the king is delighted to honor,” (איש אשר המלך חפץ ביקרו). This repetition becomes more clearly playful when understood as evidence of Haman's continued ignorance; Haman understands himself to be worthy of the king's honor, while the King intends to honor Mordecai. The author reveals their true linguistic inventiveness, and playfulness, through the term ,מתייודים, a reflexive verb formed from the noun ייודים meaning Yehudeans, suggesting that the new word means ‘they made themselves Yehudeans,’ or perhaps, ‘they Yehudified themselves.’

The author's playfulness extends into their method of naming characters. For instance, Radday understands a connection between Esther's name (אסתר) and the verb to conceal (ס-ת-ג), relating to Esther's concealment of her identity as a Yehudean. Radday also examines Ahasuerus's name, saying that it “sounds funny in Hebrew, and would correspond to something like King Headache in English.”⁴⁵ In another essay, Radday describes the names of the many peripheral Persian men, particularly those named in the lists of ch.1 and those named as sons of Haman in ch.9, as sounding ludicrous in Hebrew.⁴⁶ For Radday, the names featured in the lists from chs.1 and 9 become increasingly humorous as the lists continue. Each of the two lists of names in ch.1 feature

⁴⁵ Radday, “Esther With Humour,” 296.

⁴⁶ Radday, “Humour in Names,” 71-72.

seven consecutive names, and in ch.9 the author relays the names of Haman's ten sons uninterrupted. In the list from 9:7-10 the manuscript B-19A, known as the Leningrad Codex, includes large gaps between each name, possibly referencing a verbal tradition involving a reader pausing between each name in order to exaggerate the list further.

By employing these linguistic techniques, the author of Esther engages with a tradition of literary playfulness found within other humorous passages from the Hebrew Bible. Esther's name refers to the concealment of her identity in much the same way that Isaac's name (אִשָּׂא) refers to the centrality of laughter (אִשָּׂא)⁴⁷ in his life. While Gen 18 clearly connects the two through the laughter of Sarah upon hearing that she will bear a son in her already advanced age, Kaminsky suggests that the connection deepens through Isaac's role as a humorous character.⁴⁸ The fool named "He-Laugh" causes the audience to laugh. Moshe Garsiel examines the humorous language of 1 Sam 25, finding alliterative phrases involving the Hebrew words meaning 'morning' (בֹּקֶר), 'on the wall' (עַל הַיֵּל), and 'dies within him' (מֵת בְּתוֹכוֹ). The passage from 1 Sam also features a foolish character named 'fool' (בֶּטוּל), furthering the connections of this tradition of playful language.

Moving on from the minute details of a humorous tone, I turn now to discuss the wild exaggerations found within Esther. The author's propensity for exaggeration becomes clear in the very opening of the narrative, wherein Ahasuerus holds two massive feasts, one of which lasts longer than half a year. During the second feast, Ahasuerus requests the presence of Queen Vashti, only to receive her refusal. In an overblown

⁴⁷ The verbal root to laugh in Hebrew.

⁴⁸ Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope," 366.

response, having been egged on by the men of his court, Ahasuerus deposes Vashti and sends a decree throughout his kingdom stating that all women must obey their husbands. In the minds of Ahasuerus and his officials, Vashti's insubordination threatens the spread of insubordination throughout the women of the entire kingdom. Ahasuerus finds this decree so important that he has it translated into every language throughout the 127 provinces of his kingdom. This statement not only emphasizes the large number of languages in which this decree circulated,⁴⁹ but also the inflated number of Persian provinces, which do not reach such a high number in any other text.⁵⁰ When Ahasuerus begins the process of finding a replacement for the recently deposed Vashti, the author reveals a hyperbolic system of preparation for the potential queens (2:12-14). Jackson explains this process as, "one whole year of scrubbing and soaking for just one night," with the king.⁵¹ After their night with the king, the women join the royal harem and only meet with the king again if requested by name. The author portrays Ahasuerus as a king willing to use absurd amounts of resources for single sexual encounters. Jackson understands this as representative of a larger pattern of characterization wherein the author portrays Ahasuerus as focussed on sex at an absurd level.⁵²

The portrayal of royalty as prone to overreaction extends beyond Ahasuerus into his wicked vizier, Haman. In response to Mordecai's refusal to bow to him, Haman

⁴⁹ Radday understands the phrasing of the MT to suggest 127 languages to match the 127 provinces. While Radday's suggested number of translations emphasizes the author's tendency toward exaggeration, the MT does not require such an interpretation. 1:22 reads, "And he sent officials to all the provinces of the kingdom, to each province as they write (אל-מדינה ומדינה ככתבה), and to each people as they hear (ואל-עם ועם) (כלשונו)." The Hebrew text does not suggest that each province has its own language, but rather, that the royal decree represents that province's dominant language. Radday, "Esther With Humour," 297-298.

⁵⁰ Moore notes that, "the Persian empire never had more than thirty-one satrapies," and that even other biblical passages (he cites Daniel 6 and 9) do not record such a high number. Moore, *Esther*, 4.

⁵¹ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 209.

⁵² Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 215-216.

concocts a plan to slaughter all of the Yehudeans simply because they are Mordecai's people. Beyond this, he builds a comically large gallows upon which he plans to execute Mordecai. Haman's wife and his closest friends goad him into erecting a gallows "fifty cubits high" (5:14), which using conservative estimates would stand more than seventy feet high, for the purpose of executing one man. In the scene that follows, Haman plans the celebration for "the man whom the king is delighted to honor" (6:7-9). Thinking that the king means to honor him, Haman says:

(8) May royal clothes, the type of clothes that would be brought for royalty, be brought. [Bring] also a horse which the king has ridden, and which was given a royal crown for its head. (9) May the clothes and the horse be given into the possession of a man from among the king's most noble officials. And have him place [the clothes] upon the man whom the king is delighted to honor. And let him place [the man] on the horse, and lead him through the city square, and proclaim⁵³ him.

Haman plans for himself a truly extravagant celebration, where even his horse wears a regal crown upon its head.⁵⁴

The author's affinity toward exaggeration expands beyond the actions of specific characters, however, as they describe the reciprocal overkill of the Yehudeans in the conclusion of the narrative. As discussed in the opening chapter, Bruce William Jones understands the murder of more than 75,000 Persians at the hands of the Yehudeans as representative of the same style of hyperbole found in the feasts of Ahasuerus, and the plans of Haman.⁵⁵ This literal overkill extends into the execution of all of Haman's sons,

⁵³ Lit: call out before-

⁵⁴ Many scholars understand the crown as belonging to the man riding the horse, rather than the horse itself. Others, such as Jackson leave the possibility that the horse wears a crown open to interpretation. Because of the repetition of the word 'which' (אשר), which clearly refers to the horse in its first instance, and has no clearer referent in its second use, I understand the horse to be wearing a crown. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 215.

⁵⁵ Jones, "Two Misconceptions."

on Haman's massive gallows no less (9:13). The author of Esther writes in hyperbole, as part of a larger humorous tone.

A similar style of humorous exaggeration can be found elsewhere in post-exilic literature. In Jonah, when the prophet proclaims his message to the enemy city of Nineveh, every inhabitant of the city wears sackcloth and cries out to Jonah's god. This group of repenting inhabitants includes the animals of the city. The king of Nineveh declares that, "they must wrap themselves in sackcloth - people and beasts alike - and must appeal (קָרָא) to God with fervor" (Jon 3:8) The verbal root (קָרָא) used here to mean "appeal," suggests a verbal appeal, often rendered "to cry out." The author of Jonah creates a humorous image by exaggerating the repentance of the Ninevites to include not only the entire human population, but also the cows, who apparently know how to verbally appeal to YHWH. This humorous mode of exaggeration appears as well in Tobit, where one inciting conflict involves a woman named Sarah who has lost seven husbands to the demon Asmodeus who lives under her bed (Tob 3:8). Why use one dead husband when seven suffice? These exaggerations act as literary embellishments that do not necessarily alter the narratives apart from signaling a humorous tone to the audience.

Many of the exaggerated elements of Esther involve another humorous technique common in biblical and parabiblical literature: reversal. As discussed previously, while Haman erects a massive gallows for the purpose of hanging his enemy, Haman himself eventually hangs from it. When Haman plans an extravagant celebration for himself, the king compels him to perform it in honor of his enemy. Moreover, the audience understands the inevitability of these reversals long before Haman becomes aware of them, extending the humorous moment in such a way that emphasizes Haman's

ignorance. For instance, when Haman misunderstands the king as wanting to honor him, the audience already knows that the king has Mordecai in mind as the object of celebration. In this way, the author frames Haman's response as ironic from the start. The audience understands the irony of the situation from the beginning, both anticipating and awaiting the punchline in 6:10, "right now, take the robes and the horse that you described and do what you have said⁵⁶ for Mordecai the Yehudean." This style of reversal features heavily in the humorous passages of the Hebrew Bible and related literature. In Dan 3, the king orders that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego burn in the furnace. When they enter the furnace, however, they do not burn. Rather, the men who brought them to the furnace burn to death from outside of the furnace, while the three men stand unharmed by the flames, and are even joined by a mysterious fourth person within the furnace. Frank Ramirez writes that, "an oppressed and persecuted people might have laughed, at least grimly, at the image of a fire so hot that the executioners were burned to death while their victims... survived unharmed."⁵⁷ These reversals allow the audience to rejoice at the imagined subversion of their own oppression.

The author uses these techniques, as well as others, to create a humorous tone. Beyond this, the author engages with humorous techniques in order to create characterization within the narrative. Specifically, the author characterizes both Ahasuerus and Haman as fools. As discussed previously, Haman wrongly assumes that the king intends to honor him, he builds a gallows to match his comically overblown rage aimed at Mordecai, and by plotting the downfall of all the Yehudeans he instead ensures

⁵⁶ Literally: thus.

⁵⁷ Ramirez, "A Guy Walks Into a Bar," 85.

his own downfall. Whereas Haman’s foolishness involves many of the previously discussed examples, Ahasuerus’s foolishness requires its own examination. When Ahasuerus decides to depose Vashti, he becomes so invested in the overreaction of the men of his court that the decree dispersed throughout the empire, stating that all women ought to obey their husbands, neglects to discuss Vashti or her status at all. When his anger abates, Ahasuerus “remembered Vashti and what she had done,” for him (2:1).⁵⁸ Carey A. Moore understands Ahasuerus’s nostalgia as the sober regrets that follow a drunken overreaction.⁵⁹ This emphasizes the foolish and exaggerated actions taken by Ahasuerus at the end of his outrageous seven months of drinking. Because Ahasuerus potentially regrets his rash decision to oust Vashti, one might expect him to think twice before dispersing a new decree throughout his empire, or at least to ask “which community will be eradicated by this royal decree?” before sending out a royal decree to eradicate an entire community. Yet, when asked by Haman to eradicate an entire community with a royal decree, Ahasuerus does not ask “which community will be eradicated by this royal decree?” Moreover, this new decree places his new queen in danger, in much the same way that his old decree placed his old queen in danger. Ahasuerus makes the same mistake twice: too quickly approving of a new law which endangers his queen. All of this reveals that Ahasuerus cannot control his court, let alone his empire, in such a way that befits a king. David Lees makes a similar argument for the humorous inefficacy of Ahasuerus through an examination of three *hapax legomena*⁶⁰

⁵⁸ An alliterative phrase in Hebrew (וַשְׁתִּי וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂתָה אֵת).

⁵⁹ Moore, *Esther*, 17.

⁶⁰ Hebrew words described as *hapax legomena* occur only one time in MT.

from Esther 1:6.⁶¹ He argues for a new translation of the three ultimate words of the verse, traditionally understood as names of fine gems. Lees sees them as referring to types of carpets. He understands the author of Esther as humorously referring to a common complaint aimed at Persian rulers following Cyrus, namely, that they place their soft couches on soft carpets rather than stone.⁶² Moreover, the author of Esther describes a pile of carpets underneath the couch of Ahasuerus, representing his exaggerated weakness. When Ahasuerus finally acts with the strength of a king he only does so because he misinterprets Haman's pleading for mercy from Esther as an attempt to assault her. Ahasuerus executes Haman because he misreads the situation, not because he gains the strength appropriate for his position. The author consistently portrays Ahasuerus as a foolish and ineffective ruler, easily manipulated by the other members of the court. Even in the earlier example, Ahasuerus only orders the execution of Haman at the suggestion of one of the eunuchs in his court.

The pattern of humor as aggressive toward 'the other' in Esther matches with Brenner's understanding of laughter as derisive in biblical texts.⁶³ Brenner examines the context of every use of a term related to laughter in the Hebrew Bible in order to see any broad patterns that might suggest the understanding of humor held by the ancient communities within which the authors formed the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Ultimately, she finds that language relating to laughter as a derisive act aimed toward enemies appears far more often in the Hebrew Bible than language relating to laughter as a shared, lighthearted experience. Thus, the pattern of humor in Esther as mostly bringing about

⁶¹ Lees, "Hapax Legomena in Esther 1:6."

⁶² Lees finds evidence of this complaint in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. Lees, "Hapax Legomena in Esther 1:6," 101.

⁶³ Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour."

laughter aimed at an ‘out’ group matches Brenner’s understanding of laughter in the Hebrew Bible.

That the author of Esther portrays the two most central Persian men of the narrative as comic fools has not escaped the analysis of biblical scholars. Jackson writes that, “the comedy in Esther exploits and utilizes boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them.’”⁶⁴ Lees understands a similar dynamic at play in Esther, while Brenner and Chan find this dynamic across many humorous court tales from the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁵ Each of these arguments, however, revolve around the ‘us’ and ‘them’ boundaries of ethnicity only. Jackson concludes her chapter on Esther by problematizing this view, arguing that the author portrays Esther as being a Yehudean first and a woman second.⁶⁶ This echoes Bea Wyler’s claims concerning the incomplete emancipation of Esther, wherein the titular queen redeems the oppressed Yehudeans without redeeming the oppressed women of the narrative.⁶⁷ That Jackson understands Esther’s identity as more Yehudean and less woman, however, deserves its own problematization. While the author’s perspective certainly prioritizes the oppression felt by the Yehudeans of the narrative over that felt by women, the character of Esther represents Yehudean womanhood. Esther’s Yehudeanness remains inseparable from her womanhood. As Judith Butler argues, the gendering and ethnicizing of a body occur simultaneously and reciprocally.⁶⁸ Because of this, the analysis of Esther as a character cannot separate these two elements of her

⁶⁴ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 217.

⁶⁵ Lees, “Hapax Legomena in Esther 1:6.” Brenner, “Who’s Afraid of Feminist Criticism.” Chan, “Ira Regis.”

⁶⁶ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 220.

⁶⁷ Wyler, “Incomplete Emancipation.”

⁶⁸ Butler uses the language of sex and race rather than gender and ethnicity. I change this language for consistency of my argument and not as a challenge against hers. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 89.

identity. Moreover, the analysis of any character in Esther requires the examination of their ethnic and gender identities. In this way, Ahasuerus and Haman are not just Persians as opposed to Yehudeans, they are Persian men opposed to Persian women, Yehudean women, and Yehudean men. In order to understand the ways in which the author of Esther deploys humor, we must examine the ways in which the humor of the book interacts with the intersectional identities of the characters.

In the following chapter I will examine Esther through the lens of masculinity studies in order to understand the perspective of the author of Esther. Once the political perspective of the author of Esther becomes clear, I will return to examine the humor of Esther in relation to this perspective. Ultimately, I will reveal that the humor of Esther reinforces the claims of the author as a Yehudean man, opposing Yehudean woman, Persian women, and most of all, Persian men.

3. Mordecai Did Not Bow - Masculinities in Esther

The book of Esther portrays its titular queen, along with her uncle Mordecai, preventing a genocide aimed at people of their ethnic identity, Yehudean. The plan for this genocide derives from the anger felt by Haman when Mordecai refused to bow to him in the court. This Persian man feels such great anger at the obstinate Yehudean standing before him that he manipulates the king to send a decree throughout the entire kingdom prescribing the slaughter of all Yehudeans. While the novella concludes with our heroic Yehudeans preventing the deaths of countless others living in Persia, it omits any such happy ending concerning the earlier royal decree enforcing the subordination of women to men. Before Haman sends the decree prescribing a Yehudean genocide, King Ahasuerus himself disperses a law throughout his kingdom reinforcing claims of masculine domination. Haman proposes his decree in reaction to the insubordination of Mordecai, who, as a Yehudean, ought to subordinate himself to Persian authority. Ahasuerus sends out his decree in reaction to the insubordination of Vashti, who, as a woman, ought to subordinate herself to the masculine authority of Ahasuerus. Moreover, both Haman and Ahasuerus propose general punishment for the community represented by the object of their ire, while planning specific and separate punishments for that object. Haman plans to hang Mordecai from a gallows while the genocide against his people occurs; Ahasuerus deposes Vashti while the decree in support of the dominance of men spreads throughout the kingdom. Bea Wyler points to the literary connections between these two forms of oppression, ethnic and gendered, arguing that the structure of the novella

suggests that the protagonists will end both of these modes of oppression.¹ While Esther and Mordecai prevent the genocide planned against their ethnicity, they do not reverse the decree which deposes Vashti and supports claims of the dominant position of men throughout the kingdom. Because Esther inhabits both of these oppressed identities as a Yehudean woman, Wyler describes the conclusion of the book as the “incomplete emancipation” of Esther.

That the author focuses on the resolution of ethnic conflict within Esther, while neglecting any potential resolution of gendered conflict, suggests a social perspective invested in both the reversal of Yehudean subordination to Persians, and the reaffirmation of masculine domination over women. Using masculinity studies as an analytical lens in interpreting Esther reveals why the book features what Wyler calls an incomplete emancipation, namely, that the author aims to negotiate a Jewish masculinity that opposes Persian masculinities while reaffirming masculine domination. In this chapter I will examine Esther through the work of Raewyn Connell concerning masculinities in order to argue that the author negotiates a Jewish masculinity challenging the ethnic component of hegemonic masculinity in Persia, while reaffirming the patriarchal view of women as subordinate.²

Biblical Studies and the Politics of Exegesis

Before connecting Esther and masculinity studies, I must justify the validity of masculinities as an interpretive lens for biblical texts. When critical lenses derived from

¹ Wyler, “Incomplete Emancipation.” Klara Butting notes these same connections. Butting, “A New Interpretation,” 244.

² Connell, *Masculinities*.

theories concerning gender and ethnicity first entered the realm of biblical interpretation, the authors utilizing such lenses faced criticism of performing eisegesis, rather than exegesis. According to this claim, the author projects their understanding of whichever theory they work from onto the biblical text, when they ought to simply describe the biblical text as it appears. For example, in an essay for Athalya Brenner's *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, Robert Carroll challenges feminist readings of pornographic material from prophetic literature, as argued by Brenner and Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes.³ Carroll takes issue with the methods used by Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes, arguing that they inject politics of masculine domination into the biblical passages they analyze. He argues that where biblical scholarship requires examination of the material itself, these scholars have imposed a radical feminist agenda onto a text that does not itself represent such politics. While he points to specific issues of interpretive method, namely that both Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes work from an understanding of pornography derived from a form of feminism that Carroll finds fringe, his true complaint derives from a difference in foundational interpretive assumptions. Carroll finds that Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes unnecessarily politicize the biblical passages they examine because he understands the Hebrew Bible as apolitical. While this type of response, openly claiming that political readings of biblical passages misrepresent the text, occurs increasingly rarely as politicizing interpretive methods shape the field, the assumption at its heart endures. Yehuda Radday describes a pattern in Esther of humor consistently aimed at Persian men, yet neglects any discussion of the possible political

³ Carroll, "Desire Under the Terebinths." Brenner, "On Prophetic Propaganda." Van Dijk-Hemmes, "The Metaphorization of Woman"

intents of this pattern.⁴ David Creech describes the downplaying of this ethnicized humor in the LXX translation of Esther without ever questioning the shift in political perspective to which it points.⁵ Bruce William Jones specifically negates a politicized reading of the murder of thousands of Persians by the Yehudeans in the conclusion of Esther.⁶ Each of these arguments works from the assumption that the Hebrew Bible exists apart from politics.

In an essay reflecting on the conceptions of religion found in anthropology, particularly those derived from the work of Clifford Geertz⁷, Talal Asad expands upon Geertz's definition of religion in order to explain one way in which it falls short: that it understands religion and power structures as separable.⁸ For Asad, discussions of religions that neglect to explain their inherent relationship to power structures fall short. He argues that studies of religions must describe this relationship,

not merely in the sense in which political interests have used religion to justify a given social order... but in the sense in which power constructs religious ideology, establishes the preconditions for distinctive kinds of religious personality, authorises specifiable religious practices and utterances, [and] produces religiously defined knowledge.⁹

Asad argues not only that scholars cannot understand religions as *separate* from power structures, but also that they cannot understand religion as *separable* from power structures. Adequate description of religions requires discussion of the hegemonic negotiations inherent to them.

⁴ Radday, "Humor in Names."

⁵ Creech, "Now Where's the Fun in That?"

⁶ Jones, "Two Misconceptions."

⁷ Particularly the essay, "Religion as a Cultural System," republished as chapter four in *The Interpretations of Cultures*. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

⁸ Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions."

⁹ Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions," 237.

Russell McCutcheon expands upon the argument made by Asad, examining the assumption of religion as *sui generis*, or existing in and of itself, separate from other elements of culture such as politics and economics.¹⁰ For McCutcheon, the study of religions must begin with the understanding that all human activity, including religions, exists in complex webs of context and influence. By analyzing the work of Mircea Eliade, and scholars who follow his method of describing religion as *sui generis*, McCutcheon reveals a “powerful means for authorizing and normativizing what turn out to be conservative political claims.”¹¹ By this, he means that examinations of religions which conceive of religion as separable from power structures ultimately obscure and reaffirm the political claims of the examined artifact, be it a tradition, practice, text, etc. Specifically, McCutcheon argues that because Eliade begins with the assumption that religion exists outside of politics, he prioritizes the power structures portrayed in the texts from which he works, most often dominant power-structures of androcentrism, ethnocentrism, etc.

Following the arguments of Asad and McCutcheon, among others,¹² any attempts to interpret biblical texts as apolitical ultimately represent conservative political claims by obscuring and reaffirming the power structures described in the examined text. Thus, when Carroll challenges the politicized interpretation of Ezekiel 23 proposed by van Dijk-Hemmes, his attempt to understand the passage as apolitical only embeds the political claims of the biblical author in his own interpretation. More immediately, any

¹⁰ McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*.

¹¹ McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*, 29.

¹² Catherine Bell and Timothy Fitzgerald propose similar arguments to Asad and McCutcheon. A full review of these, and other related arguments, would prove unnecessary and overlong for the purposes of this paper. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*.

interpretations of Esther that neglect to discuss the intricate power structures described within the narrative, obscure and reaffirm the claims of the author concerning both ethnic and gendered domination. Working from an understanding of Esther as a political document, as opposed to one representing an apolitical religion, allows certain elements of the text to have an analytical emphasis previously denied. The problem described by Wyler, that the author concerns themselves with the emancipation of Yehudeans within the narrative but not with the emancipation of women, comes into focus as a key issue relevant to interpretations of Esther. This represents a method of exegesis. The author of Esther composed the text with a specific political perspective. Rather than injecting an ancient religious novella with contemporary political perspectives, examinations of Esther using methods that emphasize its political nature only reveal a political perspective already present. A politicizing exegesis of Esther will reveal the ways in which the author negotiates a Jewish masculinity through the portrayal of specific power structures relating to gender and ethnicity.

Gender, Intersectionality, and Masculinities

Examinations of masculinities derive from an understanding of gender as performative, rather than natural. In order to understand the ways in which men appeal to conceptions of masculinity as support for claims of domination, over either women or other groups of men, examination must begin with discussions of how human bodies perform and create gender.

In his oft cited argument concerning the naturalization of sexualities within the body, Michel Foucault describes the process through which power defines the body

according to distinctions of sexualities.¹³ In one example, Foucault describes the ways in which doctors come to hysterize women.¹⁴ This process defines a body through its sexuality, while naturalizing the body's sexualized definition: the bodies of women become socially defined as overly sexual, and through medical practices this social definition appears justified by the body while becoming naturalized within it. Foucault explains that such processes happen, "not, however, by reason of some natural property inherent in sex itself, but by virtue of the tactics of power immanent in this discourse."¹⁵ Foucault argues that power creates the body, defines it in terms of sexuality, and hierarchically organizes bodies relative to the sexualities which define them.

Pierre Bourdieu discusses the ways in which power structures naturalize many social distinctions within the body through the differentiation of reproductive organs.¹⁶ Through this system of distinctions, women's bodies become marked as domestic and subordinate while men's bodies become marked as public and dominant (among many other oppositions). Bourdieu writes that, "anatomical difference between the sex organs, can thus appear as the natural justification of the socially constructed difference between the genders, and in particular of the social division of labour."¹⁷ Because a difference of reproductive organs naturally exists within bodies, androcentric social structures connect all of the oppositional social distinctions to reproductive organs and naturalize them within the bodies of men and women. Through practices that engage with these naturalized differentiations, the social becomes somatized. Bourdieu describes such

¹³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*.

¹⁴ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*, 104.

¹⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*, 70.

¹⁶ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*.

¹⁷ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 11.

practices as helping, “to transmute the arbitrary of the social *nomos* into a necessity of nature (*phusis*).”¹⁸ Bourdieu explains the process of naturalization through his concept *doxa*, or,

systems of classification which reproduce, in their own specific logic, the objective classes, i.e. the divisions by sex, age, or position in the relations of production, make their specific contribution to the reproduction of the power relations of which they are the product, by securing the misrecognition... of the arbitrariness on which they are based.¹⁹

For Bourdieu, *doxa* result from specific power relations, and act as a system for the reaffirmation of these specific power relations. Thus, Bourdieu describes gendered differentiation as a naturalized distinction inscribed within the body through practices that interact with the doxic interpretation of gendered differentiation.

Judith Butler describes the naturalization of gender in terms of a gender matrix, which sets the boundaries of the body and defines it along a gender binary.²⁰ For Butler, the process of gendering itself materializes the body. Ultimately, she argues that the actions of the body in relation to the gendered matrix either reaffirm or challenge the materiality of the gendered body, and consequently the naturalization of gender within the body.

Pointing to the social nature of distinguishing sex, Connell writes that, “there is no masculine entity whose occurrences in all societies we can generalize about. The things designated by the term in different cases are logically incommensurable.”²¹ Because man and woman are not natural categories, they cannot be compared across cultures which differentiate men and women in different ways. She continues to examine

¹⁸ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 13.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 164.

²⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

²¹ Connell, *Masculinities*, 43.

naturalizing theories of masculinity, finding a ubiquitous explanation that masculinity simply exists in men's bodies. While refuting these naturalizing theories, Connell also critiques wholly cultural theories of gender for erasing the importance of the body in performing gender. While the categories of man and woman are not biologically reducible beyond the reproductive realm, Connell insists on maintaining the centrality of the body, which practices gender, in examinations of gender formation and practice. She writes that, "gender is a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do."²² Thus, any examinations of gender require investigations into the embodied practices that simultaneously structure gender and are structured by gender within the body.

Each of these authors notes the importance of incorporating social identities beyond those of gender into examinations of gender. Bourdieu describes the naturalization of gender distinctions within the body as occurring through the same process by which class distinctions, and any other social distinctions, become naturalized in the body. Butler shows that in the same way gender matrices materialize the body through gender, race and class matrices materialize the body in their own way, while interacting with the other social matrices. In this way, an affluent, heterosexual, cisgender, white man cannot be understood through these adjectives independently. They must be understood through the intersection of these identities.

Connell connects these many intersecting social identities to her examination of masculinities as opposing one another. She explains that masculinities arising within different social groups aim to dominate other masculinities, while reaffirming the more

²² Connell, *Masculinities*, 71.

generalized patriarchal imperative: the domination of women. For instance, in discussing masculinities arising within economically oppressed communities, Connell proposes an understanding of masculinity in protest. She explains that, “protest masculinity is a marginalized masculinity, which picks up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in a context of poverty.”²³ Because this masculinity forms within impoverished communities, it opposes masculinities of wealth, but it incorporates many elements of hegemonic masculinity. For Connell, hegemonic masculinity represents the culturally defined set of claims which authorize masculine domination. She writes that, “it is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony.”²⁴ Connell finds that all masculinities interact with hegemonic masculinity by challenging certain elements while supporting others. For example, she describes masculinities formed within Sydney’s gay community that challenge compulsory heterosexuality, an element of hegemonic masculinity, while reaffirming distinctions between the ways in which men should act and the ways in which women should act (i.e. one man interviewed by Connell distinguishes between gay men who act ‘masculinely’ and ones who act ‘effeminately’).²⁵

Studies of masculinities aim to reveal the ways in which communities construct visions of masculinity as opposed to and dominant over femininity; the work of masculinity studies destabilizes naturalized visions of manliness, and challenges the status of men as default. More specifically, masculinity studies destabilize the assumption of the dominant classes (contemporarily: affluent, heterosexual, cisgender, white men) as

²³ Connell, *Masculinities*, 114.

²⁴ Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

²⁵ Connell, *Masculinities*, 156-157.

default. In her examination of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible as both embodied and gendered, Rhiannon Graybill explicitly states that an, “important component of this work is gendering the masculine in order to break the link between masculinity and neutrality.”²⁶ Because human bodies define and perform gender, the body of a man is no less a gendered object than the body of a woman. Furthermore, any claims concerning a masculinity dominant to other masculinities represent two discursive maneuvers: (1) the naturalization of masculinity as a valid category opposed to and dominant over femininity, and (2) the naturalization of a hierarchy of masculinities.

Studies of masculinities in antiquity aim to destabilize the naturalized claims of both the examined culture and the culture of the examiner, by pointing to competing claims of natural gendered hierarchies. Because the conceptions of both gender and masculinity vary greatly between cultures, yet refer to the same bodies, comparisons between differing visions of gender challenge the naturalization of both gender differentiation and the hierarchization that becomes involved in differentiation. Thus, when Martti Nissinen examines the many conceptions of masculinity, particularly as it relates to homoeroticism, in ancient mediterranean and near eastern cultures, he destabilizes all claims to a natural masculinity.²⁷ With this understanding of masculinities in mind, any portrayal of one masculinity as dominant to another represents a political claim aiming to support the domination of one community over against another. In the case of Esther, the author portrays a Yehudean masculinity able to transgress the imperial power of a Persian masculinity, and ultimately subordinate the impotent Persian

²⁶ Graybill, *Are We Not Men*, 12.

²⁷ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*.

masculinity to itself. In the following sections, I will examine the portrayal of key characters within Esther as they relate to the author's negotiation of the narrative's competing masculinities.

Esther and the Politics of Obedience

The author of Esther portrays the titular character in a way that supports claims of Yehudean men as being more masculine than Persian ones by placing her in situations related to the politics of obedience. Esther always obeys Mordecai the Yehudean, and while she often obeys Persian men, on two occasions she challenges their authority through disobedience. Because Esther remains firmly subordinate to Yehudean men, while negotiating a less stable subordinate position in relation to Persian men, her portrayal challenges the dominance of Persian men over Yehudean women as well as Yehudean men, while reaffirming the dominance of Yehudean men over Yehudean women.

From the beginning of Esther's journey, the author emphasizes her proclivity toward obedience. When she joins the king's harem, the author states that, "Esther never told of her people or her lineage, for Mordecai ordered that she not tell of them (2:10)." This means that throughout her year of cosmetic treatments, and her time as queen leading up to her defeat of Haman, Esther kept her ethnic identity secret in obedience to Mordecai. Wyler finds that "hiding her Jewishness and thus following Mordecai's command is indeed astonishing, particularly when compared to the commander/commandee relationship she has with her royal husband, who never

explicitly dictates anything to her.”²⁸ That the author portrays an explicit relationship of obedience, and therefore subordination, between Esther and Mordecai, while leaving such images of obedience happening between Esther and Ahasuerus only implicit, reveals a literary emphasis on the subordination of Esther to Mordecai.

Esther’s tendency toward obedience becomes increasingly clear through the actions she takes within the royal harem. For instance, Esther obeys the advice of Hegei the eunuch when her turn comes to spend an evening with the king. When a woman from the harem spends her first evening with the king, she may bring anything that she wishes with her (2:13). When Esther’s scheduled visit arrives, she only takes with her the things that the eunuch Hegei suggests (2:15). In this way, the author emphasizes that Esther acts obediently. Moreover, that she becomes queen directly following this obedience suggests a connection between these elements. Esther becomes the queen because she subordinates herself to the officials by acting obediently.

Later, when news of Haman’s planned genocide reaches Esther and Mordecai, Esther fears approaching the king unbeckoned as her uncle Mordecai implores her to. Until this point, the author portrays Esther as greatly obedient toward all authority figures. She obeys her uncle Mordecai, the officials in charge of the king’s harem, and the King himself throughout the first 3 chapters. In chapter four, however, Mordecai asks her to go before the king, a forbidden act, to plea that he call off the coming genocide. Mordecai’s request places Esther’s senses of obedience to her uncle and her king opposite one another, and her emotional reaction reveals the embodied nature of her obedience. Nancy Sheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock describe emotions as a potential

²⁸ Wyler, “Incomplete Emancipation,” 114.

analytical bridge connecting the body to society, finding that the body produces emotions in relation to specific cultural knowledge.²⁹ Thus, a body transgressing a well-defined social boundary would have an embodied reaction to that transgression in the form of emotion. In response to her uncle's request that she approach the king without being called by him in order to prevent the coming genocide, Esther explains to Mordecai that anyone who approaches the king without being called by him first faces execution unless the king intercedes by holding out his golden scepter to the transgressor (4:11). Such a response suggests that Esther fears what might happen to her if she breaks from this royal procedure.

Following the arguments of Schepher-Hughes and Lock, Bourdieu examines how the somatized domination leads to specific emotional responses in the bodies of the dominated.³⁰ During a transgressive act, the dominated body may feel guilt or shame, or worse, reveal these emotions to external observers through visible effects (blushing, shortness of breath, hesitation, etc...). Such emotional responses betray a domination more powerful than laws; one in which the dominated body polices itself. Bourdieu explains that, "the effect and conditions of its [symbolic violence's] efficacy are durably and deeply embedded in the body in the form of dispositions."³¹ Thus, in situations of social domination, the emotions felt by the dominated party act as a mode of self-policing in service to the dominant party. This becomes clear in Esther's fear of disobeying the king. She does not need to be reminded of the punishments that face her, for her body polices itself according to the androcentric social *nomos* of female obedience.

²⁹ Schepher-Hughes and Lock, "The Mindful Body," 28-29.

³⁰ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 38-39.

³¹ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 39.

The true test of the strength of the Persian system of domination which causes Esther's embodied reaction of fear, comes when a competing Yehudean system of domination compels her to transgress Persian law. That Esther eventually breaks from the royal procedure in order to obey the request of Mordecai reveals that she prioritizes her obedience to Yehudean men over her obedience to Persian men. The reaction that Esther has to this situation represents the larger conflict between Persian men and Yehudean men, through the influence that each group's system of masculine domination has on the body of Esther in the forms of emotions and actions. That she fears challenging Persian masculine domination attests to its efficacy, but that she ultimately acts against this system of domination attests to the greater efficacy of Yehudean masculine domination. Esther's approaching the king on behalf of Mordecai represents in one action the incomplete emancipation described by Wyler: Esther challenges one form of domination while accepting another.

Ahasuerus and the Other's Masculinity

The author of Esther portrays the Persian king as an inefficient ruler unable to control those who ought to be his subordinates. Moreover, the author shows many characters manipulating Ahasuerus for their own political gains. The author additionally exaggerates Ahasuerus's sexual appetite. Through these elements of characterization, the author creates a portrayal of the foreign ruler as simultaneously too passive socially, and too active sexually.

When the audience first meets Ahasuerus, he is throwing a party that lasts half a year for all of the officials of his kingdom. Linda M. Day notes that this event, "leaves

the entire empire without administrative support and military defense,” for the outrageous length of the feast.³² That Ahasuerus concerns himself more with displaying his wealth than with the logistics of ruling his empire, along with the brevity of his royal tenure so far (1:3 places this episode in the third year of his reign), leads Day to describe Ahasuerus as an immature boy.³³ At the conclusion of this feast, Ahasuerus begins a second feast which lasts an additional seven days (1:5). At this feast, the king orders that nobody limit the alcohol consumed by anyone present. These feasts point to many ways in which Ahasuerus lacks the ability, or the drive, to control the situations that involve him. In choosing to drink in a feast setting for 187 consecutive days, Ahasuerus leaves his empire functionally kingless. By requiring the attendance of all the officials positioned throughout his kingdom at the longer festival, Ahasuerus removes any political infrastructure from Persia for half of a year. Because of this, Ahasuerus discards his ability to control his kingdom for the length of time he feels necessary to set aside for drinking. Moreover, Ahasuerus requires that nobody working on his behalf attempts to control the drinking itself at the second, shorter festival. Ahasuerus’s inability to control these situations leads to his conflict with Vashti, representing another level of his inability to control situations.

At the peak of the king’s drunkenness, he requests the presence of queen Vashti at his banquet and she refuses to join (1:10-12). In her refusal of the king’s request, Vashti challenges the dominant position of the king and more broadly the dominant position of men over women. The men of Ahasuerus’s court describe Vashti’s actions as a challenge

³² Day, *Esther*, 28.

³³ Day, *Esther*, 24.

to masculine domination in general, saying that as news of Vashti's refusal spreads, "[the women]³⁴ will scorn all the men with contemptful eyes, when they are saying, 'King Ahasuerus ordered Queen Vashti to come before him but she would not come (1:17).'"

The fear of this challenge spreading throughout the empire leads the men of the court, dictating Ahasuerus's response, to depose Vashti and send a decree throughout the empire supporting the domination of men. Vashti's actions cause so much fear within Ahasuerus's court, that the men reply with legal force, dispersing a decree that reaffirms the status of men as dominant over women. That the author describes such a conflict occurring within the Persian court suggests another element at play here: a challenge of the dominant position of Persian men. The highest officials of Persia cannot control the women of their empire without resorting to legal decrees. The most dominant Persian man, the king himself, has so little control over his queen that in order to regain control of his court he must resort to deposing her and creating new laws concerning the dominant position of men. Ahasuerus's attempts to make women's obedience a legal requirement, however, do not prevent his second queen from transgressing a law concerning interactions with the king. As discussed previously, Esther approaches the king unbeckoned even though that transgression could legally lead to her execution. Ahasuerus cannot compel his queen to obey his laws even with the looming threats of deposition or execution.

In each of these situations, Ahasuerus's inability to compel obedience within his subordinates makes him passive in relation to the other characters involved. When Vashti

³⁴ The Hebrew verb form *להבזות* from *ב-ז-ה* is a feminine plural participle. In English this requires the explanatory addition "the women," added here in brackets because the Hebrew does not include words directly correlating to "the women."

refuses to appear in his court, she challenges his position as more active than her. When Ahasuerus disperses a decree dictated by the men of his court, he makes himself passive to them. When Esther transgresses the law preventing her from approaching the king, she challenges her position as passive within their relationship. While discussing conceptions of homosexuality in the ancient world, Nissinen describes gender roles in relation to an active/passive distinction.³⁵ Specifically, according to Nissinen, in the cultures surrounding the formation of the Hebrew Bible, men ought to inhabit an active position and women a passive one. He argues that, “sexual contact between two men was prohibited because the passive party assumed the role of a woman and his manly honor was thus disgraced.”³⁶ While Nissinen discusses these relationships in sexual situations, the distinction between active and passive roles within a relationship, and the imperative for men to be active, can help us understand the ways in which the author of Esther understands the masculinity of Ahasuerus. They consistently portray Ahasuerus as allowing transgression across social boundaries within relationships where he ought to inhabit the active role. Because of this, Ahasuerus’s position as active, or masculine, comes into question. Can the king be understood as appropriately active (masculine) when those positioned as passive (feminine) in relation to him constantly challenge their own position, and consequently his position? Moreover, Ahasuerus’s identity as a Persian man reveals an element of a larger pattern at play in Esther, one in which the author portrays Persian men as less masculine than Yehudean men.

³⁵ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*.

³⁶ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 44.

Discontent with portraying Ahasuerus as less than appropriately masculine, the author of *Esther* nuances their portrait of the foreign ruler by describing a nearly insatiable sexual appetite. As discussed in chapter two, Melissa A. Jackson finds that the author portrays Ahasuerus as absurdly focused on sexual activities, as evidenced by the year's worth of materials used to prepare the women of the harem for one night with the king.³⁷ The author connects this process of searching for a replacement queen through the use of a harem to Ahasuerus's thoughts of Vashti following her deposition. They write that, "when the wrath of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she did (2:1)," and soon after began searching for a queen by sleeping with each of the most beautiful virgins of his kingdom. While many understand "what she did" as a reference to Vashti's refusal of the king's request,³⁸ Carey A. Moore interprets this moment differently.³⁹ Moore notes that the king's anger abates before he remembers Vashti, suggesting a nostalgic, rather than irate, view of his deposed queen. With this in mind, "what she did" most likely refers to something other than the action which led to her deposition. Taken in tandem with Jackson's argument, Moore's interpretation supports a sexual understanding of "what Vashti did." That Ahasuerus begins his sexual activities with the women of the royal harem so soon after this nostalgic thought concerning Vashti supports the interpretation of this moment as sexually charged. Ahasuerus's fixation on sexual activities also affects his reaction to seeing Haman begging Esther for mercy. Misreading the moment, Ahasuerus says, "does he also rape

³⁷ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 215-216.

³⁸ Wyler, "Incomplete Emancipation," 119. Day, *Esther*, 40.

³⁹ Moore, *Esther*, 17.

(לְכַבּוֹשׁ)⁴⁰ the queen with me here, in my own house? (7:8)” Ahasuerus thinks so consistently of sexual activities that when he sees his vizier begging for the forgiveness of his queen he imagines the scene as a sexual assault. The author portrays Ahasuerus as a Persian man who always has sex on his mind.

By portraying a man from an outgroup as overly interested in sexual activities, the author of Esther takes part in a common polemic concerning the masculinity of the ‘other.’ In discussing this polemic as it relates to orientalism, Edward W. Said describes the ways in which people defining specific communities as ‘oriental’ project, “not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, [and] unlimited desire” onto members of those communities.⁴¹ Said’s description of this projection as both a promise and a threat reveals the gendered element to this portrayal of the outgroup as overly sexual. For the men projecting this vision of the oversexed foreigner onto other communities, the women represent a promise and the men a threat. Describing the same polemic as it relates to masculinities and race in the United States, Paul Hoch writes that, “the ‘devil’, dark villain or black beast becomes the receptacle of all the tabooed desires... becoming the very apotheosis of masculine potency.”⁴² In this way, the men of an ingroup define the men of the outgroup by projecting a vision of dangerous sexual desires onto them. Thus, as shown in Hoch’s language, the masculine potency of this vision of the man of the outgroup moves beyond the realm of men and into the realm of

⁴⁰ The root כ-ב-שׁ in this instance denotes rape, but in other uses it suggests the placement of one party in a subordinate role to another in non-sexual situations. In Jer 34:11, people who had freed their slaves reverse their decision and once again subjugate (ויכבישׁוּם) them to slavery. This understanding of sexual assault as similar to the owning of slaves supports Nissinen’s understanding of sex and gender roles in the Hebrew Bible as relating to an active/passive distinction. For more on כ-ב-שׁ see *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew Volume IV*, 361.

⁴¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 188.

⁴² Hoch, *White Hero Black Beast*, 44.

‘beasts.’ Hoch’s statement reveals the contradiction in the author of Esther’s portrayal of Ahasuerus, and many similar polemics concerning men of an outgroup. Ahasuerus simultaneously inhabits a position too passive to be considered appropriately masculine within his social relationships, and one too virile to be considered a man. The author of Esther portrays the foreign ruler as both too feminine and too masculine, creating a character representative of a distorted masculinity, and naming him king of all Persian men.

Eunuchs and the Anti-Foreigner Polemic

The author of Esther extends their characterization of Ahasuerus beyond the character himself by connecting him with the eunuchs of his court. This connection nuances the characterization of Ahasuerus as both man and Persian. Timothy K. Beal understands the eunuchs of Esther as simply, “ambiguously sexual figures,” meaning that they function as neither men nor women within the narrative.⁴³ Randall C. Bailey, arguing that Beal’s understanding neglects sexual interpretations of the eunuchs, examines the connotations of the phrase, “the seven eunuchs who attended (דַּמִּישְׂרָתִים) to King Ahasuerus (1:10).”⁴⁴ Bailey reveals a sexual component to the verbal root *ת-ר-ש*. For instance, he points to 1 Kgs 1:4, where Abishag “attended him [David](וַתִּשְׂרָתוּ), but the king did not know her (יָדַעָה).” By Bailey’s logic, that the author finds it necessary to explicate that David did not have sex (the meaning of the euphemism ‘to know’ somebody) with Abishag suggests that the root *ת-ר-ש* has an assumed sexual

⁴³ Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 52.

⁴⁴ Bailey, “That’s Why.” The verbal root *ת-ר-ש* occurs again in 2:2, though this time with the subject slave boys (נַעֲרִים) rather than eunuchs (סַרְיִסִים). It is unclear whether Bailey understands these two words to refer to the same group.

component.⁴⁵ Bailey understands the portrayal of the eunuchs as servants of the king whose work includes attending to his sexual whims to be an anti-imperial polemic. He writes that, “this description of the king seems to be a negative caricature of sexual practices of the colonizers.”⁴⁶ The portrayal of eunuchs as representing foreign practices, particularly in a negative light, extends beyond Esther. Nissinen describes the development of certain sexual taboos, castration among them, within the post exilic community as it relates to the construction of communal identity.⁴⁷ In this way, the presence of eunuchs can become shorthand for a foreign, or ‘other,’ community.⁴⁸ The presence of the eunuchs nuances the characterization of Ahasuerus in two ways: (1) it extends his fixation on sexual activities by suggesting an entire community dedicated to fulfilling his sexual appetite in addition to the previously discussed harem meant for the same purpose, and (2) it emphasizes the king's foreignness.

Beyond using the eunuchs to mark Ahasuerus as sexually insatiable, and unknowably foreign, the author of Esther reveals a conflicted perception of the eunuchs themselves. Jacob L. Wright and Michael J. Chan find Esther 2:21-23, which describes Mordecai foiling a royal assassination plot formed by two eunuchs, as perpetrating a widespread view that, “eunuchs frequently betray those around them.”⁴⁹ While this moment alone certainly suggests such an interpretation, the involvement of Hegei the eunuch in Esther's ascendency (2:8-11; 15-18) and of Harbona the eunuch in the

⁴⁵ Bailey, “That's Why,” 236-237. He also points to the root's use in 2 Sam 13:17.

⁴⁶ Bailey, “That's Why,” 237.

⁴⁷ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 41-44.

⁴⁸ Lynn E. Roller describes a similar connection between eunuchs and anti-foreigner polemics in ancient Rome. “Emphasizing the eunuch's foreign qualities is another way of placing him outside the mainstream of Roman society.” Roller, “The Ideology of the Eunuch Priest,” 130.

⁴⁹ Wright and Chan: Isaiah 56:1-8.

execution of the villain Haman (7:9-10) suggest a more ambivalent view of eunuchs as a group. Additionally, the status of eunuchs as gender-liminal⁵⁰ only appears relevant to the author of Esther insofar as the eunuchs appear in spaces set apart for both men and women, as represented by their presence at both Ahasuerus's feasts and Vashti's feast in the opening chapter.

Haman the Dominated Persian Man

The author of Esther continues in their anti-Persian men polemic by portraying Haman, the vizier to the king, in ways that consistently subordinate him to other characters. The author shows Haman as the subordinate party in relationships with Mordecai (Yehudean man), Esther (Yehudean woman), and even Zeresh (Persian woman). This characterization of Haman as a non-dominant member of many relationships solidifies the pattern of portraying Persian men as representing an inappropriate masculinity, shown in the preceding examination of Ahasuerus.

Haman enters into a conflict with Mordecai because the Yehudean refuses to bow before him, as he ought to. Haman, much like Ahasuerus, cannot compel his subordinate to obey even by appeals to the authority of the king (3:2). Mordecai challenges the position of Haman as dominant over him by refusing to bow. This leads Haman to his reactionary, genocidal plan. Haman fears Mordecai's ability to subvert their power dynamic so greatly that he plots the murder of all Yehudeans in an attempt to solidify his own dominance. When Haman next encounters Mordecai, he showers him in honors on

⁵⁰ Eunuch gender-liminality in Esther discussed by Beal as well as Bailey, and in other related literature by the following: Bolle and Llewelyn, "Intersectionality, Gender Liminality and Ben Sira's Attitude to the Eunuch." Lev, "They Treat Him As a Man." Wright and Chan, "Isaiah 65:1-8."

behalf of the king. That Haman planned these honors for himself, only to bestow them upon his enemy and supposed subordinate, emphasizes the subversion of Haman's conception of their power dynamic. Haman assumes that Mordecai, being a Yehudean man, ought to give him obeisance and obedience. He imagines himself as dominant over Mordecai. The author further emphasizes this reversal of Haman's position as dominant through the ultimate use of the gallows built for Mordecai's execution: Haman's execution. Haman understands himself as able to put Mordecai to death, only to have his plans reversed. The author subordinates Haman to Mordecai, even while Haman understands himself as naturally dominant over Yehudean men.

Haman's conflicts across lines of domination expand beyond just Mordecai, however, as he enters into a competition of political maneuvering against Esther when he plans a genocide against her people. Haman, a Persian man and vizier to the king, cannot imagine that a Yehudean woman could outmaneuver him politically. Yet, when he attends the second of two feasts planned by Esther, she springs the trap. Esther reveals that Haman has acted as an enemy to her people and planned a genocide that would endanger the queen herself (7:6). In response, the king leaves the feast momentarily, and upon his return orders the execution of Haman. More than this, Ahasuerus bestows all of Haman's wealth upon Esther, the Yehudean woman who outmaneuvered him in his own area of expertise (8:1). The author emphasizes Esther's defeat of Haman by crediting her with the execution of his ten sons upon the gallows he intended for her uncle Mordecai (9:13). Moreover, the author emphasizes Haman's lack of foresight in acting against the Yehudeans by portraying his wife Zeresh as more discerning than him. Upon hearing of the honors given to Mordecai, Zeresh tells her husband that, "if Mordecai, before whom

you have begun to fall, is from the children of Yehud, then you will not be able to stand against him, but instead will surely fall (6:13).” By revealing Zeresh as more able to discern the situation than Haman, the author challenges Haman’s political acumen even in relation to his own wife, a Persian woman. The author challenges Haman’s masculinity in these situations by placing him in a public competition with a Yehudean woman, and writing that the Yehudean woman defeated him.

In each of these scenarios, the author portrays Haman positioning himself as the more dominant party involved in a conflict only to be subordinated to his enemy. By connecting Haman and Ahasuerus through the role Haman plays as chief advisor to the king, the author connects their masculinities. Haman’s actions reflect upon the king; Haman’s masculinity reflects upon the king. The author emphasizes the inefficacy of Ahasuerus by portraying Haman as equally unable to compel subordination within his subjects. That they are both Persian men reveals a pattern in the author’s portrayal. Through the characters of Ahasuerus and Haman, the author of Esther challenges the position of Persian men as dominant.

Mordecai the Dominant Yehudean Man

Because of the relativity of masculinities in competition, the preceding examinations reveal much of Mordecai’s status by describing his relationships to the other characters. Esther chooses to obey Mordecai rather than the king, even with the looming threat of execution involved in such a decision. This reveals his system of masculine domination as more efficient than Ahasuerus’s. Haman loses his position of dominance over Mordecai as a result of his conflict with Mordecai and Esther. This reveals the dominance

of both Mordecai and Esther over Haman. One final element of the portrayal of Mordecai in Esther reveals the centrality of the character to the narrative: his position as the primary character of the concluding chapter. The final chapter of Esther never mentions the titular heroine, focusing instead on the legacy of her uncle. The ultimate verse relays that, “Mordecai the Yehudean, second to King Ahasuerus, great among the Yehudeans, and popular among his many kin, sought good for his people, and spoke peace to all of his descendents (10:3).” This statement contextualizes the victory described within the narrative as belonging chiefly to Mordecai, rather than Esther. Wyler emphasizes that this verse makes it, “unambiguously clear that the male vizier, and not the queen, is second to the king.”⁵¹ Lillian R. Klein describes this moment as the reaffirmation of Esther’s position subordinate to Mordecai.⁵² In this passage, the author de-emphasizes Esther’s involvement in the defeat of Haman and the deliverance of the Yehudeans. By crediting only Mordecai for the actions taken by Mordecai *and* Esther, the author solidifies Mordecai’s position as the more dominant of the two characters. Because they reaffirm Mordecai’s dominant position in the final moments of the narrative, the author reveals this point as central to the text. They frame the entire novella as leading to the point where Mordecai’s dominance as a Yehudean man becomes inarguable.

The previous examinations of elements from Esther reveal the ways in which the author negotiates a Yehudean masculinity opposed to a Persian masculinity. This specific vision of Yehudean masculinity challenges the ethnic domination of the imperial Persian men, while reaffirming the dominant position of men over women, following the pattern

⁵¹ Wyler, “Incomplete Emancipation,” 131.

⁵² Klein, “Honor and Shame,” 174.

described by Connell. With this political perspective in mind, the patterns found within the humorous elements of Esther become intelligible. In the following chapter, I return to these humorous elements in order to describe the ways in which the author supports their political claims through the use of humorous techniques.

4. Q: Are We Not Men?¹ - Humor and Masculinity in

Esther

During the resolution of conflict at the conclusion of Esther, the author describes the slaughter of more than seventy-five thousand Persians at the hands of the Yehudeans. Ahasuerus relays that the Yehudeans within Susa, where the narrative takes place, killed five hundred men on the day previously set aside by Haman as the day for the slaughter of the Yehudeans (9:12). On that day, as well as the following one, the author provides a figure of some seventy-five thousand murdered Persians throughout the rest of the kingdom (9:16). Challenging interpretations of this moment as revealing a sense of nationalism within the author, Bruce William Jones interprets the slaughter of the Persians as a humorous exaggeration.² Beyond the exaggerated number of murdered Persians, Jones points to the “less than serious terms,” with which the author describes the edict allowing the violence.³ For instance, Jones suggests that the repeated claim that the edict spread throughout every province reveals the exaggerated tone with which the author describes the edict. In the passage describing the composition and dispersal of the decree the author repeats variations of the phrase “in every province,” four times.⁴ The author includes a varied repetition of the phrase “to every people” (8:9,13) as well. Jones also discusses the linguistic repetitiveness of the phrase, “to destroy, slaughter, and

¹ Devo, *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!*

² Jones, “Two Misconceptions.”

³ Jones, “Two Misconceptions,” 178.

⁴ In 8:9 “each province (מדינה ומדינה);” in v.11 “any fortress, people, or province (כל-היל עם ומדינה);” in v.12 “in every province (בכל-מדינה);” and in v.13 a doubly emphatic variation akin to “in every single province,” in English (בכל-מדינה ומדינה).

annihilate (להשמיד ולהרג ולאבד),” in v.11 which emphasizes its point through the inclusion of synonyms. These emphatic repetitions, for Jones, reveal the passage as, “a classic example of ‘overkill.’”⁵ Moreover, as an example of humorous overkill, according to Jones, this moment involves no element of political maneuvering. He argues that the humorous nature of this passage negates any interpretations revolving around the author’s potentially nationalistic perspective. For Jones, a description of the slaughter of seventy-five thousand people from an outgroup need not represent a political statement, so long as the author intends the mass-murder to provoke laughter. I disagree.

Elaine Scarry examines war in relation to pain felt within the body.⁶ She begins by analyzing the use of pain in torture, as a means of destroying the world of the tortured prisoner, and inscribing the power of the torturing regime upon the body of the prisoner. She writes that, “as an actual physical fact, a weapon is an object that goes into the body and produces pain. As a perceptual fact, it lifts the pain out of the body and makes it visible.”⁷ By this she means that human minds understand pain in relation to the object that can cause pain more so than in relation to the body feeling pain. Through the same cognitive process, the pain felt in torture proves the pain-making abilities of the torturing regime, and not the phenomenological experiences of pain within the tortured body. In a similar way, Scarry argues, war involves a contest of bodily injury specifically because the alteration of a body through injury creates a site (i.e. the injured body) for both the memorialization of the war, and for the transubstantiation of the issues over which the war began. Scarry writes that, “what is remembered in the body is well remembered; the

⁵ Jones, “Two Misconceptions,” 178,

⁶ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*.

⁷ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 56.

bodies of massive numbers of participants are deeply altered; those new alterations are carried forward into peace.”⁸ Moreover, within the structure of war, as with torture earlier, the pain felt within the body, along with its visible alterations to the body, point to the reality of the power of the victorious regime that performed the war, rather than to the reality of the pain itself, within the body. Thus, a battle between the Yehudeans and Persians which ends with an exaggeratedly asymmetrical casualty count (seventy-five thousand Persians perish, and the lack of explanation concerning Yehudean deaths might suggest that none perished) points to the ability of the Yehudeans to cause pain in the bodies of Persians. Although no actual bodies act as memorial to these fictive events, the author references the embodied reality of war as a way to connect the narrative of cunning Yehudeans reversing their status as the object of a genocide to the bodies of the audience. Scarry’s explanation of pain as referent to power reveals an attempt by the author of Esther to define their own community as more powerful than the communities that oppose them, by inscribing the ability of the Yehudeans to inflict pain upon the bodies of their enemies within the novella. Pierre Bourdieu describes a connection between conceptions of masculine virility and the ability to perform violence.⁹ He explains that in order to appear as ‘real men,’ men must perform violence in social situations where other men can attest to the manliness shown through the violent practices. When expanded to the scale of a war, the ability of one army to injure another army points to a collective masculine virility of the victorious army. Thus, when the

⁸ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 112-113.

⁹ Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 50-51.

author describes a battle wherein Yehudean forces greatly out-injure Persian ones, they describe Yehudeans as more virile, more masculine, than the Persians.

While Jones adequately defends his interpretation of the ‘overkill’ apparent in the conclusion of Esther as humorous, his claims that the moment’s humor involves no political maneuvering simply obscures the political perspective of the humor. In this chapter, I will examine humorous elements of Esther, as outlined in chapter two, in relation to the political perspective of the author, as discussed in the chapter three. Ultimately, I will argue that the author of Esther deploys humor as a tool to use in the negotiation of a Jewish masculinity opposed to a Persian one.

The Effeminate King

Much of the humorous material of Esther revolves around the character Ahasuerus, the easily manipulated king prone to exaggerated actions. The author portrays Ahasuerus as a foolish king, simultaneously hyperactive and ineffective. Much of the humor concerning Ahasuerus involves depiction of the king’s masculinity. The author humorously skewers the Persian king with portrayals of his inability to control those who ought to be his subordinates, his tendency toward extravagance or overreaction, and his feminine position relative to others. Thus, the jokes aimed at Ahasuerus challenge his masculinity, and the general masculinity of the group he represents, namely, Persian men. Through their humorous challenging of an imperial, Persian masculinity, the author of Esther reveals their gendered, anti-imperial polemic.

The author of Esther introduces the audience to King Ahasuerus in a festival setting, specifically, a festival which lasts half a year, and which the king follows with a

smaller, week long feast. In order to emphasize Ahasuerus's drunkenness at this moment, the author writes that, "the drinking was not according to the law, with nobody constraining [consumption], because the king had ordered all of the great ones in his midst to do as they wish" (1:8). After the uptight experience of 180 days spent drinking with restraint, who could blame the king for wanting to unwind with seven days of drinking *sans* restraint? Adequately sauced, the king requests the presence of his queen at the party (1:10-11). Considering the author's inclusion of a separate feast held by Vashti and attended by the women of the palace, the audience clearly understands the king's feast as one attended by men.¹⁰ Therefore, the audience understands that the king demands the presence of his queen at a festival hall full of men at the end of a week long wine-bender. Naturally, Vashti refuses her husband's request. Carey A. Moore suggests an understanding of Vashti's refusal in this context as, "a modest and totally justifiable refusal to appear... before a group of drunken men."¹¹ Surrounded by drunk men, and drunk himself, Ahasuerus's "anger burned inside him," in response to Vashti's refusal (1:12). Michael J. Chan describes this outburst of anger as representative of Ahasuerus's tendency toward, "humorous and even childish temper tantrums."¹² The king acts with no more dignity in this moment than a child, not having their way, would. And like a child, unable to make a decision on his own, the king asks the legal experts of his court for advice on how to punish Vashti. The legal process involved in dealing with the queen's obstinance subordinates the king to his legal councilors, who have the ability to dictate

¹⁰ Carey A. Moore notes that Herodotus and Plutarch describe meals as spaces appropriate for men and women alike in Persia. Moore writes that, "we should understand the segregation of the sexes here in the narrative as a literary device of the author, whereby he sets the stage for the intoxicated king's request at his stag party." Moore, *Esther*, 13.

¹¹ Moore, *Esther*, 13.

¹² Chan, "Ira Regis," 8.

his next action. Upon joining the situation, these advisors exaggerate Ahasuerus's already overblown response to Vashti's modest refusal, saying that, "not unto the king alone has Queen Vashti done wrong, but to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all of the provinces of king Ahasuerus as well" (1:16). They suggest the deposition of Vashti, as well as the dispersal of a royal decree legally binding the women of the kingdom to obey their husbands. These decisions reveal a gendered anxiety within the highest court of Persia. The men who run the kingdom fear that the women of the kingdom will spread the news of Vashti's refusal, and look upon their husband's "with contemptful eyes" (1:17). Ahasuerus's inability to subordinate Vashti to his will threatens the ability of all men in the kingdom to do so. Thus, the author of Esther reveals the tenuousness of Persian domination through the drunken overreaction of Ahasuerus and his advisors. The author emphasizes the inefficacy of the Persian men by concluding this episode with a recreation of their decree, which fails to mention Vashti or her deposition in any capacity (1:22).

The author returns to the humorous image of the Persian king unable to force the obedience of his wife when Esther approaches the throne unbeckoned (5:1). Even after making obedience to one's husband a legal obligation, in addition to the law preventing subordinates from approaching the king, Ahasuerus cannot prevent Esther's illegal approach. Yet, Ahasuerus seems unfazed by Esther's approach, choosing to raise his golden scepter to her in a sign of legal pardoning (5:2). The contrast between Ahasuerus's reaction to Esther's disobedience and his reaction to Vashti's emphasizes the king's foolishness in the earlier scene. Chapter 5's sober Ahasuerus hardly even reacts to Esther's transgression, where chapter 1's drunken Ahasuerus not only deposes his queen

but also declares all men as legally dominant in their homes. Thus, the author of *Esther* portrays the leaders of the Persian kingdom as impious fools, subject to their own drunken whims, and goading each other into greater overreactions at never-ending parties. The Persian king prioritizes his own emotions, which become unstable while drinking, over the needs of his kingdom. Melissa A. Jackson argues that throughout the narrative, Ahasuerus remains, “more concerned with parties and beautiful women than affairs of state.”¹³ This method of deploying humor as a tool to make the ruling class seem foolish continues even in our own culture, with works like *Dr. Strangelove*, and *The Favourite* portraying the leaders of certain empires as fools akin to Ahasuerus.¹⁴ That the author of *Esther* portrays the entire community of Persian leaders as hooligans, making decisions that affect the entire kingdom based on their own drunken interpretations of situations, reveals an anti-imperial, and more specifically anti-Persian empire polemic at the core of the book’s humor.

The author of *Esther* expands their characterization of Ahasuerus as a fool by portraying him as ignorant to the point of being easily manipulated. When Haman wishes to murder every Yehudean in the kingdom, all he has to do is ask Ahasuerus for permission to slaughter the unnamed community. Ahasuerus cares so little about the affairs of his state that he never even asks Haman to name the exact community that he wishes to eradicate. Ahasuerus signs off on a genocide that will include the death of his

¹³ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 205.

¹⁴ *Dr. Strangelove* portrays a nuclear war in the mid 1960’s resulting from an American military leader’s interpretation of post-coital exhaustion as evidence of communist conspiracies against the United States. *The Favourite* portrays Queen Anne, ruler of England in the early 18th century, following the political advice of whichever woman happens to be sleeping with her at the moment. Both films use humor as a tool to attack imperial leadership in ways similar to *Esther*. Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove*. Lanthimos, *The Favourite*.

queen, without so much as one question concerning the details of the attack. Later in the story, when Esther requests that the king deliver her people from the coming genocide, and punish the man who planned that attack, Ahasuerus still does not understand what happened. After hearing her plea, Ahasuerus asks, “who is this person, and where is this person who has presumed to do these things?” (7:5). The king cares so little about running his kingdom that he has forgotten the genocide planned by his second in command.¹⁵ Jackson explains Ahasuerus’s ignorance in this situation succinctly: “even as he offers his new queen as much as half his kingdom merely upon the sight of her (5:3, 6; 7:2), he has no knowledge that he is instead the benefactor of her impending demise, having already signed her death warrant (3:12-13).”¹⁶ Ahasuerus’s ignorance allows many characters to make a stooge of him. As seen above, the drunken council manipulates the king into making ‘Man of the House’ a legal position, Haman manipulates the king into slaughtering the Yehudeans, and Esther manipulates him to abandon Haman’s plan and to allow a Yehudean counter-genocide. Reading Esther as a farce, Jackson describes Ahasuerus as the farcical fool, “a jester in his own court.”¹⁷ Following this interpretation, Jackson suggests that Esther acts as the trickster, manipulating the fool Ahasuerus to her own ends in order to bring about the resolution of her conflict.¹⁸ Thus, the author of Esther not only describes a situation wherein a Yehudean woman effectively manipulates the Persian king, but also relays this situation in a way that promotes laughter at the expense of the king.

¹⁵ Or, perhaps he grants permission to so many officials hoping to eradicate entire communities that he cannot discern which of his genocidal advisors aimed their attacks against Esther’s people.

¹⁶ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 205.

¹⁷ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 205.

¹⁸ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 206.

The author of Esther nuances their portrayal of Ahasuerus as easily manipulated through their description of his royal couches in an effeminizing trope. David Lees examines the language of 1:6, finding that the author places Ahasuerus's soft, sitting furniture upon soft carpets.¹⁹ He suggests that this follows the logic of a trope concerning the increasing weakness and inefficacy of Persian rulers following Cyrus.²⁰ Ancient authors, particularly Greek ones, made use of such a trope to effeminize the foreign rulers.²¹ The author of Esther deploys this trope, in tandem with their portrayal of Ahasuerus as more passive, and thus more feminine, in his relationships in order to challenge the masculinity of the Persian king, and more broadly Persian masculinity in general. The exaggerated tone of the author's description of the king's furniture, along with the general extravagance described throughout the chapter, suggest to Lees, "a comedic reference to the weaknesses of the king, in harmony with the rest of the opening chapter."²² Thus, again, the author effeminizes the king within the narrative, while provoking laughter at his expense beyond the narrative.

In an examination of the uses of terms relating to laughter in the Hebrew Bible, Athalya Brenner finds that biblical laughter occurs more often in derisive situations than in friendly ones. This pattern, for Brenner, suggests that laughter in the Hebrew Bible leans toward, "categories of 'heavy' laughter - that of satire, sarcasm, irony and the exposure of the contemptible, the absurd and the grotesque."²³ This cultural

¹⁹ Lees suggests a translation of 1:6b as follows: "the beds of gold and silver were set upon a flooring of regal carpets with golden thread and other brightly coloured adornments." Lees, "Hapax Legomena," 103.

²⁰ Lees, "Hapax Legomena," 101.

²¹ Xenophon describes the practice of placing a couch upon a carpet as evidence of the effeminacy (*μαλακῶς*) of the Persian kings following Cyrus in *Cyropaedia* VIII. viii. 16.

²² Lees, "Hapax Legomena," 103.

²³ Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour," 57.

understanding of laughter as predominantly a derisive act suggests a similar understanding of humor as a derisive act. That the audience laughs at Ahasuerus expands his humiliation beyond the text itself. The Jewish audience learns of Esther's manipulation, representing her domination, of the Persian king while they themselves laugh derisively at him. Ahasuerus experiences subordination at the hands of his politically proficient wife within the text, while experiencing humiliation beyond the text at the hands of the Jewish audience, who laughs at the representation of imperial masculinity.

The Hyper-Masculine King

As discussed in the previous chapter, the author of Esther describes the Persian king as simultaneously effeminate and hyper-masculine, interacting with a trope common to portrayals of the 'other' man in many cultures.²⁴ Through this portrayal, the author reveals an understanding of Persian masculinity as distorted in such a way that allows Persian men to be both inappropriately feminine and inappropriately masculine.

The author of Esther describes the animalistic masculinity of Ahasuerus through the exaggeration of his sexual appetite. The audience first learns of his insatiability as Ahasuerus remembers Vashti upon sobering up after her deposition. The king remembers Vashti, and decides to begin a search throughout his kingdom for virginal women with royal potential. Timothy K. Beal emphasizes that, "it is actually the memory of Vashti and not the lack of a queen that motivates the pageant-search for a replacement."²⁵ The

²⁴ See Said, *Orientalism*. And Hoch, *White Hero Black Beast*. Both discussed in ch.3.

²⁵ Beal, "Tracing Esther's Beginnings," 104.

connection between Ahasuerus's memory of what Vashti did and his following sexual escapades, wherein he spends four years²⁶ having one sexual encounter after another with a virginal woman from his kingdom suggests a sexual understanding of the king's memory. Moreover, the method of searching for a replacement suggests an understanding of Ahasuerus as sex-obsessed. Rather than searching for a queen from a powerful family, who could extend Ahasuerus's political power through marriage, the king and his advisors set up a seemingly endless series of one night stands in the hopes that one woman impresses the king enough to warrant a royal marriage. Jackson finds that this situation necessitates, "a kingdom-wide commitment to the task of assembling an ongoing supply of sexual partners for the king."²⁷ The king requires the aid of many officials to find these young women, and supply them with a year of room, board, and extensive cosmetic treatments. This understanding of the logistical challenges involved in satiating the king's sexual appetite reveals the exaggerated scale at which the author describes Ahasuerus's libido.

The king's insatiability extends beyond his harem, however, according to Randall C. Bailey, who suggests a sexual component to the work done by the king's eunuchs.²⁸ This understanding of the eunuchs in Ahasuerus's court reveals the existence of two communities that revolve around the sexual whims of the Persian king. The king employs a harem of women, attended by eunuchs, as well as a harem of eunuchs in order to meet his sexual needs. The author of Esther thus suggests an astronomical cost involved in satisfying Ahasuerus, who is willing to dedicate endless resources toward sexual

²⁶ 1:3 reveals that Vashti's deposition occurs in the third year of Ahasuerus's reign. 2:16 reveals that Esther's interaction with the king, and their ensuing marriage, occur in the seventh year of his reign.

²⁷ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 216.

²⁸ Bailey, "That's Why," 235-239.

experiences. Furthermore, the connection of the Persian king to practices of homoeroticism as well as castration involve the author in a specific negotiation of gender and ethnicity common to the Hebrew Bible. Martti Nissinen describes conceptions of homoeroticism in the Hebrew Bible, finding that in texts like the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26) the biblical authors differentiate their own community from neighboring ones through the defining of sexual mores. He writes that, “linking sexual transgressions with the customs of neighboring peoples must be seen as an attempt to protect the identity of the early Jewish community, which had to maintain a distinctive profile in order to survive.”²⁹ Nissinen describes the presence of eunuchs, and homoerotic activities as ways of marking foreign people, particularly foreign men, as ‘other’ in the literature of the Hebrew Bible. This process, as a method of maintaining the identity of a community, becomes increasingly important to a community in exile. The author of Esther describes Ahasuerus as sex-crazed and perverse in humorous terms, chiefly through explaining the hyperbolic lengths to which the king will go to get off, as a method of discussing the sex-crazed and perverse masculinities of Persian men. The political perspective of the author, and their audience, inform the ways in which they deploy humor. Humor becomes a tool through which the author can protest against the imperial masculinity.

The Unmanned Enemy

Apart from Ahasuerus, no character faces so much humorous derision in Esther as Haman, the chief antagonist of the narrative. The author challenges Haman’s dominant position through the use of humorous reversals of fortune throughout the book. Each of

²⁹ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, 42.

these reversals involves the preening Persian premier falling in status before a person who ought to be his subordinate. The greater the difference between Haman's original status, or sometimes only his imagined status, and his status after the reversal, the greater the potential humor. Thus, on a large scale, Haman's descent from the position of Persian prime minister, able to order any genocide he wishes, to enemy of the state, hanged from his own tree by the people he deemed worthy of genocide, creates much potential for humorous content. That the author challenges the dominance, and hence the masculinity, of Haman by humorous means, and provokes laughter at the expense of the unmanned enemy emphasizes the way in which the author uses humor for political ends.

The author begins to challenge Haman's dominant position just as they introduce the character to the audience. No sooner have we learned of Haman's placement above every other Persian official than we see Mordecai challenging that position. In 3:2, the author writes that, "all the slaves of the king... were prostrating themselves greatly to Haman, because the king commanded this concerning him, but Mordecai did not bow." Immediately, the author uses the relationship between Haman and Mordecai as a way of challenging Persian dominance. Even with all of the power of the Persian empire behind him, the prime minister cannot compel obeisance of the Yehudean man sitting at the gate. Linda M. Day describes an emphasis on Haman's position in the political hierarchy within the introduction to the character.³⁰ This literary emphasis on the position of Haman only brings more attention to his conflict with Mordecai, and his inability to make the Yehudean bow. Haman responds to Mordecai's insubordination by planning a genocide against Mordecai's people. That Mordecai's challenge causes such an intense

³⁰ Day, *Esther*, 65.

reaction from Haman points to the tenuousness of his dominance over the Yehudeans in much the same way that the overreaction of Ahasuerus to Vashti in the opening revealed the tenuousness of his dominance over the queen. Moreover, the eventual reversal of both of Haman's reactionary measures — (1) the genocide planned for the Yehudeans (3:5-6) and later reversed (8:3-8), and (2) the gallows built for Mordecai (5:14) and later used against Haman (7:9-10) — subordinates Haman to Mordecai and Esther through the employment of a humorous technique common to biblical literature.

A closer look at the humorous elements involved in the creation and use of Haman's gallows clarifies the way in which the author extends their political maneuvering through the deployment of humor. Haman, at the suggestion of his wife and closest companions, plans to build a gallows fifty cubits high for the purpose of hanging Mordecai (5:14). Through the construction of the extremely tall execution tool, standing approximately seventy feet high, Haman announces his ability to inflict pain upon his enemies. As discussed by Scarry, tools made for inflicting pain become the referent through which pain becomes perceivable outside of the body feeling the pain itself. Moreover, the weapon, "acts as a bridge or mechanism across which some of pain's attributes... can be separated from the sufferer and referred to power."³¹ Thus, Haman's gallows, as a tool able to inflict pain, refer to Haman's ability to inflict pain on his enemies. The size of the gallows points to Haman's self-evaluated pain-causing ability. Beyond this, Bourdieu describes a connection between violence and masculinity in androcentric cultures.³² With this in mind, Haman's gallows claim not only great pain-

³¹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 56.

³² Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 50-51.

inflicting ability for him, but also virile masculinity. The claim of virility made by Haman through the construction of such a large weapon ultimately, however, emphasizes his inability to perform violence, as he not only fails to use the gallows against Mordecai, but also dies on the same gallows, along with his sons, at the hands of his enemies. The great difference between Haman's self-evaluated pain-causing ability, and his actual ability to injure his enemies (i.e. none at all) allows the Jewish audience to laugh at the expense of a Persian man who imagined himself as their superior, but ultimately fell before the dominant Yehudeans. Laughter at Haman's expense, particularly as the content provoking the laughter centers on his diminished masculinity, extends the derision of Haman, representing Persian masculinity, beyond the boundaries of the text itself.

The reversal of Haman's genocidal plans, which involves the counter-genocide against the Persians in the closing passages, follows the same logic as the gallows humor, but on a larger scale. Haman imagined himself able to inflict pain upon the bodies of every Yehudean in the Persian empire, yet Haman's actions inadvertently led to the slaughter of 75,000 Persians and no Yehudeans. Again, the scale of Haman's miscalculation reveals the extent of both the challenge aimed at Persian masculinity, and the humor derived from that challenge.

Haman involves himself in yet another form of miscalculation when he plans a celebration on behalf of the king, thinking that the celebrations will honor him, when the king intends to honor Mordecai (6:4-9). The consequence of this miscalculation, that Haman leads Mordecai through the city on a crowned horse, provides a pictorial microcosm of their relationship. Haman imagines himself in a position dominant over Mordecai, only to be placed beneath the Yehudean man. Moreover, the author reveals to

the audience that Mordecai will receive whatever honors that Haman describes well before Haman discovers this information. Thus, while Haman describes the celebration intended for Mordecai, imagining it for himself, the audience laughs at the pompous Persian who thought himself worthy of riding a horse with a crown on its head. Haman plans an execution for his enemy, and a celebration for himself; Haman causes a celebration for his enemy, and an execution for himself.

The Silly Other, and Other Silliness

While the vast majority of Esther's derisive humor focuses on the characters of Ahasuerus and Haman, the author includes some material which portrays other Persians as silly. Chiefly, this sillying of the other involves the naming of the inconsequential, or barely consequential, characters in humorous ways. Day explains that the tendency of the author to name nearly every servant in the narrative differs from other biblical passages, which tend to identify slaves by their position, without supplying a proper name.³³ Yehuda Radday notes that the author provides names for, "no less than thirty nonentities who crowd the Persian Royal Court, only four of whom play at most a very minor role, and only one ever utters a word."³⁴ For example, when Ahasuerus sends a team of seven eunuchs, none of whom appear again, to fetch Vashti in the opening chapter, the author includes each of their names: "Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas" (1:10). Beyond the irregularity of listing the names of so many peripheral characters, Radday notes some potentially humorous phonetic referents for the first few

³³ Day, *Esther*, 64.

³⁴ Radday, "Humour in Names," 71.

names in this list.³⁵ He connects Mehuman (מְהוּמָן) to “panic” (מְהוּמָה), Biztha (בִּזְתָּא) to “plunder” (לָבַז), and Harbona (חַרְבוֹנָא) to “drought” (חֶרֶב).³⁶ That these names sound like known words, with only one or two small differences, makes the names sound silly to the ears of fluent speakers of Hebrew.³⁷ That the linguistic referents of these silly names follow a pattern of negative associations expands the humor of the names as well as the political content of the humor. By connecting the horde of Persian slaves to such negative phenomena as droughts and panic, the author suggests negative associations with these characters. By couching this political connection within absurd sounding language, the author belittles these characters while suggesting their association with catastrophe. To return to a parallel in our own culture, *Dr. Strangelove*'s paranoid military leader, who starts a nuclear war in response to his experience of post-coital exhaustion, goes by the name Jack D. Ripper.³⁸ English speakers hear this name as a clear, yet silly, reference to the infamous murderer Jack the Ripper. The writers connect the fictional general to an instance of real-life violence, while belittling him through the phonetic absurdity of the name. In a similar way, the ancient audience of Esther would hear both the phonetic silliness of these names, as well as their phonetic connections to catastrophe.

Apart from the previously discussed list of names for the eunuchs fetching Vashti, Esther features two further name lists. 1:14 relays the names of seven princes, “Charsena, Shethar, Admantha, Tarshis, Meres, Marsena, and Memukan.” 9:7-9 names the ten sons

³⁵ Radday, “Humour in Names,” 71.

³⁶ Radday also suggests a connection between Bigtha (בִּגְתָּא) and “drip” (דִּרְבָּ), though I do not see a phonetic connection between these two words.

³⁷ For an example of how this technique works for fluent speakers of English, see the A.I. produced Coachella lineup of fictional bands, featuring band names like “Fanch,” “Max Beaf,” and “Screepy Boys.” Botnik Studios, “Coachella.”

³⁸ Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove*.

of Haman on the occasion of their execution: “Parshandatha, Dalphun, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalya, Aridatha, Parmashtha, Arisai, Aridai, and Izatha.” Moore notes that AT omits the lists of 1:10 and 9:7-9, which serve no narrative purpose beyond their humorous content, in contrast to 1:14 (included in AT) which introduces the speaking character Memukan.³⁹ That this Greek version of Esther omits these two name lists suggests that the humor of the lists, aimed at a Hebrew-ponic audience, could not be adequately rendered in another language, and thus the translator omitted any list that served no other purpose. While the list of princes in 1:14 follows the same humorous logic of the list of eunuchs in 1:10, the list of Haman’s sons in 9:7-9 includes the added component of the execution of these named characters. The exaggeratedly long list of names for each of Haman’s sons expands the moment of their execution, while interacting with the trope of humorous overkill described by Jones in the opening of this chapter. That the author exaggerates this moment by including the execution of Haman’s sons for the actions of their father, as well as by taking the time to name each of these men, supports an interpretation of this moment along the lines of Jones’s humorous overkill. That each of the characters executed in this overkill are Persian men supports an interpretation of this humorous moment as taking part in the book’s larger anti-Persian polemic.

The author of Esther provides these Persian men with humorous names, and some of these names with connotations of catastrophe, in order to portray Persian men as simultaneously dangerous and silly. This paints the Persian men as both virile and passive, much like the portrayal of Ahasuerus through the humor analyzed in the preceding section. In this way, the author uses humor as a tool to challenge the

³⁹ Moore, *Esther*, 9.

masculinity of the Persian men, who appear silly even while posing a threat to the Yehudeans of the narrative.

The Politics of Humor in Esther

The evidence examined in this chapter, taken with Brenner's analysis of the semantic field of humor in the Hebrew Bible, suggests that the author of Esther uses humor derisively against Persian men. The author portrays the men in positions of leadership in the Persian empire as foolish and effeminate, particularly in comparison to the wise and masculine Mordecai. The author uses humorous techniques to challenge the virility, and hence the masculinity, of Persian men. The humor found in Esther is inherently political because Esther is a political narrative. Therefore, examinations of the political perspective of Esther, and the use of humor in Esther can be mutually revealing.

Knowing the ways in which the author of Esther portrays characters across lines of ethnic and gendered distinctions, leads analysis of humor in Esther toward examinations of humor as it relates to these social distinctions. Because examination of Esther through the lens of Raewyn Connell's *Masculinities* reveals a negotiation of a Jewish masculinity in protest against a Persian masculinity, elements of this negotiation become clear in the humorous content of the book. My process of connecting the analysis of gender and ethnicity to the examination of humor in Esther brings with it some implications for the further study of Esther specifically, and biblical humor more generally. In the following chapter I will discuss some of these implications.

5. Conclusion - How Did I Get Here?¹

In discussing the humorous content of Esther, Bruce William Jones argues that the slaughter of 75,000 Persians in the narrative's resolution should not be interpreted nationalistically.² By this he means to say that the humorousness of this instance of literary exaggeration, dubbed 'overkill' by Jones, negates any political understanding of this moment. In discussing the humorous names of characters in Esther, Yehuda Radday notes that each silly name belongs to a Persian man, yet never suggests that the humor of these names may add to a larger anti-Persian polemic within Esther.³ Both Carey A. Moore and Linda M. Day discuss humor in Esther in ways that fail to integrate aspects of the book's political perspective.⁴ These attempts to read the humor of Esther without reference to the portrayal of specific social identities within the narrative ultimately treat humor as separate from politics. Such an interpretive mode neglects the data laid out by Athalya Brenner concerning laughter's use as a chiefly derisive act within the Hebrew Bible.⁵ Moreover, this mode neglects the patterns apparent in the uses of humor in Esther, namely, that the author aims all derisive humor within the book at the Persian men. While some elements of humor within Esther certainly exist outside of this pattern, like the alliterative humor of "the feast which Esther made," (הַמִּישָׁתָה אֲשֶׁר-עָשְׂתָה אֶסְתֵּר) in 5:5, all derisive humor in Esther targets Persian men. Because of this pattern, any discussion of humor in Esther remains incomplete without an examination of the political deployment

¹ Talking Heads, "Once in a Lifetime."

² Jones, "Two Misconceptions."

³ Radday, "Humour in Names." Radday, "Esther, With Humour."

⁴ Moore, *Esther*. Day, *Esther*.

⁵ Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour."

of that humor, which necessarily involves the dissection of the political content of the book beyond the humor.

While the previously listed examinations of humor in Esther fail to properly politicize the interpretation of the book's humor, other examinations have discussed the political aim of the humor, but failed to integrate it fully with the narrative's political perspective in general. Melissa A. Jackson emphasizes the negotiation of ethnic distinctions in the humor of Esther, finding that the author uses the humorous content to challenge the dominance of Persians.⁶ For Jackson, this reveals a resistance to the status quo. She writes that, "unable *actually* to overthrow the powers established over them, [Jews in diaspora] can utilize comedy to overthrow them in another way."⁷ David Creech offers a similar understanding of humor in Esther as, "directed against the powerful and used in a sense to bring them down."⁸ Both of these interpretations imagine Esther as universally challenging the status quo. By the logic of these interpretations, the humor of Esther challenges the Persians, who inhabit the dominant position in the narrative, and thus challenges all status quo forms of domination. Such logic erases the gender of the targets of Esther's derisive humor. The author of Esther aims their derisive humor at Persian men. The humor of Esther challenges the dominant position of Persian men, specifically, while repurposing other elements of the status quo hegemony more generally. Namely, the author challenges the dominance of Persian men, while reaffirming the dominance of men over women in general.

⁶ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*.

⁷ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 218.

⁸ In this quote, Creech characterizes MT Esther, which I focus my analysis on, as opposed to LXX Esther which he finds erases much of the MT version's humor. Creech, "Now Where's the Fun in That," 39.

Raewyn Connell describes the ways in which competing masculinities will often challenge elements of hegemonic masculinity, while maintaining or recontextualizing the patriarchal core of hegemonic masculinity.⁹ Using her argument as an analytical lens, certain elements of the political perspective of the author of Esther become clear. The author consistently challenges the dominant position of Persian men over all other people, while reaffirming the dominant position of Yehudean men over Yehudean women. In this way, the author challenges an ethnic component of hegemonic masculinity under the Persian empire, which subordinates Yehudean men and women to Persian men and women, while maintaining the gendered component of hegemonic masculinity, which subordinates women to men. This negotiation of a masculinity in protest against imperial Persian masculinity extends into the use of humor within Esther as the derisive humor of Esther focuses on the belittling of Persian men. Thus, an understanding of the humorous content of Esther as simply attacking the status quo, in a way that benefits Yehudean men and women alike, misrepresents the political perspective of the narrative.

As shown by Bea Wyler, the author of Esther frees their Yehudean characters from their ethnic oppression, but never frees their women characters from their gendered oppression.¹⁰ She characterizes this failure of the author to challenge all aspects of the oppressive status quo as an incomplete emancipation of the titular Queen Esther. While Wyler offers an imaginative addition to the narrative, which fully emancipates Esther as well as Vashti, as a way to use the biblical text for progressive ends, the author of Esther

⁹ Connell, *Masculinities*.

¹⁰ Wyler, "Incomplete Emancipation."

does not worry themselves with challenging the status of women as subordinate to men. Because of this, examinations of the text of Esther must grapple with the problem of Esther's incomplete emancipation. Understanding the author of Esther as negotiating a Jewish masculinity opposed to a Persian masculinity addresses the issue raised by Wyler. The author neglects Esther's gendered emancipation not because they focus on her ethnic emancipation, her gender and ethnicity are inseparable, but rather, because the Jewish masculinity which they promote relies, as all masculinities do, upon the continued oppression of women.

Any attempt to interpret the humor of Esther as either (1) separate from the politics of Esther, or (2) representative of a general challenge against forms of oppression both ethnic and gendered fails to adequately address Esther's derisive humor and the titular queen's incomplete emancipation. Through the book of Esther, the author negotiates a Jewish masculinity opposed to the current Persian hegemonic masculinity. This negotiation involves the deployment of derisive humor against Persian men in such a way that belittles them before the Yehudean men of the narrative.

Beyond the book of Esther specifically, this method of connecting the dissection of humor to the examination of the portrayal of gender and ethnicity (as well as other social distinctions) within biblical texts seems a necessary development in the field. Because, as Brenner has shown, the community within which the Hebrew Bible formed understood laughter as primarily derisive, the humor of the Hebrew Bible ought to be examined as a derisive act.¹¹ Consequently, attention must be paid to the persons against whom the biblical authors aim their humor. In Esther, the author aims their humor against

¹¹ Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour."

a group which they define in terms of ethnic and gendered distinctions. Elsewhere, examination of the humor may require more attention to be paid to distinctions of class, age, physical ability, or any other social distinction. While some work has been done in discussing the role of humor in portraying social distinctions within the Hebrew Bible, like work done by Brenner as well as Michael J. Chan, these arguments tend to rely on the work of Freud, whose theory of laughter brings about as many analytical issues as it attempts to solve, concerning tendentious jokes.¹² Because, as argued by Mary Beard, no transhistorical theory of humor has proven adequate as of yet, the best possible method of analyzing the culturally specific phenomenon of humor is through culturally specific examination.¹³ Thus, discussion of humor in biblical texts should revolve around the identification of patterns in humor's usage within the Hebrew Bible and related texts. This work, of examining the politics of biblical humor through a synchronic method, has not been done (to my knowledge) beyond this paper. Further arguments making use of this method, however, will build upon the patterns of humor's usage in Esther to reveal larger patterns of humor's usage in the Hebrew Bible. In turn, those arguments will reveal elements of the usage of humor in Esther which I failed to notice.

¹² Brenner, "What's So Funny." Chan, "Ira Regic." Freud, *Jokes*.

¹³ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome*.

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Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

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Ancient: Biblical Aramaic, Biblical Hebrew, Classical Greek, Latin, Syriac (beginner)
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RESEARCH AND TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- Fall 2018 **Teaching Assistant**
Introduction to Islamic Studies, Dr. Nelly van Doorn-Harder, Wake Forest University.
- Led classes of 28-30 undergraduate students while professor was unavailable, covering topics including but not limited to: Islam in contemporary Iran, Islam in the United States, religion and identity in the United States.
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 Dr. Nelly van Doorn-Harder, Wake Forest University.
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Athlete Student Services, Wake Forest University.

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