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**Tale of Two Judiths:
Queering the Book of Judith with the Works of Judith Butler**

Kat Lewis

Religious Studies Honors Thesis

Dr. Susanna Drake

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Abstract

Biblical texts play a significant role in shaping expectations for behavior based on gender in Western societies. In my queer reading of the Book of Judith, I argue that Judith's performance of gender is fluid and gender expansive. I use reader-response criticism to interpret Judith in conversation with the works of Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood on gender performativity, drag, and agency. This queer reading of Judith provides representation of gender expansiveness in biblical texts and explores queer possibilities in Judith as a way to challenge and subvert a patriarchal, heterosexist gender binary.

Introduction

Many readers of Judith have identified her potential to be a feminist icon, and more recently, interpreters have looked towards the Book of Judith for its queer theological potential. A queer reading of Judith is important because it highlights the representation of gender expansiveness in biblical texts, which, in turn, disrupts common assumptions about a patriarchal metanarrative in Scripture. Western religious institutions, including Christian institutions, have a history of enacting violence against queer people. Because religion and U.S. politics are so intertwined, the history of violence against queer people in the name of religion has set the tone for how many political systems respond to issues of queer human rights. In the last few months, the United States has seen a novel increase in anti-trans legislation and violent attacks against transgender people, calling attention to the intersection of trans rights and religion in U.S. politics.¹ Our current moment begs us to accept that broad cisheterosexist stigmatization of gender variance is a result of brutal Western capitalism and colonization, and being trans is not an unnatural way of being.² Queer readings of the Bible can be a healing practice for queer

¹ See Darren E. Sherkat, "Public Opinion and Religion: Gay Rights in the United States," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, Oxford University Press, 26 March 2019, Accessed 9 April 2021. Additionally, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has 194 blog posts, cases, articles, and press releases published on their website on the topic of religious-based discrimination against queer and trans people in the United States since 2005: <https://www.aclu.org/issues/lgbtq-rights>.

² See Laurie Penny, *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism*, (Washington: John Hunt Publishing, 2011) and Calogero Giametta and Shira Havkin, "Mapping Homo/Transphobia," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 20, no. 1 (2020): 99-119.

people who are raised in communities with Jewish and Christian influence because it provides affirming theologies and safe worship spaces in the midst of rampant violence and discrimination against trans people.

My reading of the Book of Judith proceeds in two parts. First, I argue that Judith's gender performance is dynamic and fluid, which indicates that fluid performance of gender outside of the traditional Western gender binary is not a recent creation of postmodern theorists. Rather, such fluid gender performances are found in various cultures across time.³ Second, despite the Bible and other early religious texts playing a massive role in shaping expectations for behavior based on gender, queering Judith unsettles assumptions on what these texts say about gender and sexuality. I argue that Judith performs widow drag in Bethulia (Jdt 8-9, 15-16) and high-femme drag in Holofernes's camp (Jdt 10-13:10). Exploring queer possibilities in Judith is just one way to destabilize patriarchal, heterosexist gender binary. While gender roles and expectations have been culturally constructed throughout history, there has also been a consistent pattern of deconstructing, subverting, and expanding gender—a theme that is present in Judith.

Method

My queer reading of Judith privileges literary analysis and moves beyond a strictly historical-critical analysis. While it is relevant to explore historical context, questions of authorship, date, and provenance are very unsettled in regard to the Book of Judith and analyzing the text in its received format as a literary document is the most beneficial method of analysis for my purposes—especially when applying queer theory to Judith, a fictional character.

³ Sandy Stone in her 1987 essay "The Empire Strikes Back," and Allison Jasper in her 2005 essay "Theology at the Freak Show" point to instances in historical literature of significant religious figures and political leaders not adhering to modern conceptions of the gender binary. Thomas Walter Laqueur explores this further in his book, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

Representation of queer positivity is extremely important work, but it is equally important to remember that Judith performs her fluid gender on a literary stage. As important as queer positive representation in biblical texts is, there is still danger in performing gender non-conformity in the United States today. Any kind of gender performance can take place on a stage or in some form of media with the disclaimer that it is just an act, whereas acts of gender non-conformity in reality can have dire consequences. Representation and trans visibility matter, and trans liberation will not solely come from analytical projects of queer theory. There must also be a political commitment to dismantle the larger vectors of oppression that intersect with cisheterosexism, such as white supremacy, capitalism, ableism, racism, and imperialism.

Reader-response criticism is a spectrum of diverse and sometimes contradictory methodologies that focus on the reader. Reader-response criticism acknowledges that the meaning of the text lies not with the author but with the reader or reading communities. Reader-response criticism requires several assumptions about the process of reading: First, reading is assumed to be a dynamic process. Instead of a one-way transfer wherein the text presents meaning to the reader, the reading is a process of mutual exchange between the text and the reader.⁴ In the case of Judith, the reader (myself) already has preconceptions of cultural signifiers of queer and gender non-conforming identities in the modern context. The reader encounters the text, is changed by the text, and creates a world in response to the text, and then returns to encounter the text again. Each encounter results in a reader further transformed by the meaning they create. Readers can never fully reach the ultimate meaning of a text, and there may be many different meanings to discover within a literary document. Especially given the work at hand to

⁴ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *The Rustle of Language*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 49-54.

create or find queer positive meaning in biblical texts, the multitude of interpretations from readers is not a problem but instead affirms the beauty and value of the text and the reader.⁵

My reading of Judith is one in which I am simultaneously informed by the text and informing the text. Queer identities and drag did not exist in the author's world the way they exist in mine, and I explore the possibilities of Judith performing widow drag in Bethulia (Jdt 8-9, 15-16) and high-femme drag Holofernes's camp (Jdt 10-13:10). Certain aspects of historical context, such as traditional gender roles for widows, inform how I analyze Judith from a queer theoretical lens. To support my queer reading of Judith, I engage Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood's theories on gender performance and agency to Judith's gender in the biblical text. Gender does not have a fixed meaning that has remained unchanged since antiquity, and while I put Judith in conversation with modern-day feminist and queer theorists, I want to emphasize that gender is always relative to context. Geography, history, religion, and family structures are important contextual factors that impact how gender is perceived as an identity.

According to Butler, drag is not an imitation of a "real" gender—we are all in drag all the time, performing a set of gendered norms that are never truly realizable.⁶ Butler contends that hegemonic cisheterosexuality requires a repeated and constant effort to imitate its own idealizations, even by cisheterosexual people. This repetition, coupled with pathologizing practices, props up the illusion of naturalness in cisheterosexuality. Drag, then, reflects the imitative structure of cisheterosexualized gender producing itself.⁷ This understanding of drag

⁵ Stephen D. Moore and Dale B. Martin, among others, have provided valuable work on reader-response criticism in biblical studies. See Stephen D. Moore, "Stories of Reading: Doing Gospel Criticism As/with a Reader" in *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1989), 71-107. Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal*. (1st ed. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

⁶ Judith Butler, "Gender is Burning," in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 125-126.

⁷ Ibid.

does not require drag to be someone performing gender across the constructed binary, such as RuPaul. Drag can also be women like Dolly Parton who perform hyper-femininity.⁸ Knowing that sexed and gendered identity categories are unstable, I do not attempt to make claims about Judith's gender identity, and instead focus on her gender performance as it is written. Over time, the medical industrial complex has pathologized gender variance and expansiveness, as well as sexual identities, creating a model of diagnosis.⁹ Gender and sexual feelings in this model are diagnosable and seen as deviant from "naturalized" norms of cisheterosexuality. Moving away from the diagnostic model of gender and sexual identities, wherein one can be diagnosed as trans, I will use a descriptive model of gender and sexuality when exploring Judith's written gender performance.

I begin by summarizing the Book of Judith before historically contextualizing discussions on gender in the Book of Judith. Then, I describe how Judith Butler's work on gender performance and drag has shaped my conclusions on gender, power, and queerness in the Book of Judith. Finally, I give a queer exegesis of Judith chapters 8-16 that is in conversation with the works of Butler. My goal is to argue for more queer imagination in approaches to the Bible, knowing that within this call for gender expansiveness is certainly room for contradiction and

⁸ Dolly Parton and RuPaul have had conversations on their respective gender performances and drag, as mentioned in this article: James Factora, "Dolly Parton just Read RuPaul for filth in new interview," *Them*, Condé Nast, December 9, 2020, accessed April 10, 2021 from <https://www.them.us/story/dolly-parton-rupaul-interview-wig-read>.

⁹ Eli Clare's 2017 book *Brilliant Imperfections* offers valuable insights on the influence of eugenics on the current medical industrial complex in the United States and the pathologization of gender variance. Clare maps the history of gender and sexual diagnoses as they appear in various editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The first edition of the DSM was published in 1952, in which trans and gender-nonconforming people were placed in the overarching category of "Sexual Deviations" along with homosexuality, transvitism, pedophilia, fetishism, and sexual sadism. Clare argues that the DSM is not neutral—when the words disorder, paraphilia, and fetish are used to describe transgender and gender non-conforming experiences, shame, violence and hatred follow close behind. Sandy Stone problematizes the ways that transgender women have been viewed, studied, and treated by the Western, predominantly white medical establishment in her 1987 essay "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." The work was made largely in response to personal attacks made by Janice Raymond in her 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*.

critique. As Annika Thiem states, “I will admit upfront that I am not sure I will be able to make entirely good on either gender, queer desires, or the Bible here. All three of them are perhaps as enticing as difficult because all three of them continuously escape final settlement.”¹⁰ In my conclusion, I look towards the greater theological questions presented about gender and the divine in Judith.

Judith in the Septuagint

The Book of Judith appears first in the Septuagint, the Greek translations of Israel’s Scriptures that date from the third century BCE. During this time, the vast empire of Alexander the Great was divided after his death into large quadrants of successors. The area of Judah, or Judea, was a Hellenistic borderland between the Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria. Hellenization at first was successful because it focused on changes at public and constitutional levels, but local and private life could continue according to cultural traditions. As Lawrence Wills states, “indigenous people could assert an identity not necessarily *in opposition* to Persians or Greeks but *in negotiation* with these empires.”¹¹ However, this situation did not last. The Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted to Hellenize the polity in Jerusalem, resulting in the successful Maccabean Revolt of 165 BCE. Following the Maccabean Revolt, there was a revitalization of ancient Israelite traditions that formed the basis of rebellion against imperial rule.¹² Ethnic rebellion in the region was not just Jewish, but part of a broader resistance to foreign domination. The campaign of Holofernes in Judith is fictitious, but it serves as a general metaphor to the campaigns of foreign rulers. Despite the apparent uncompromising

¹⁰ Annika Thiem, “No Gendered Bodies Without Queer Desires: Judith Butler and Biblical Gender Trouble,” *Old Testament Essays* 20 (2007): 457.

¹¹ Lawrence M. Wills and Harold W Attridge, *Judith: A Commentary on the Book of Judith* (Hermeneia: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 5. (emphasis original).

¹² Richard A. Horsley, “Religion and Other Products of Empire.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 71 no. 1 (2003):18-22

Jewish identity that is present in texts such as Judith, there was a lot of internal diversity underneath the broad category of Judaism. Judith's story is likely representing the perspective of Hasmonean rulers, because Judith is written as a character who not only saves her people from colonization, but also protects a fundamental Jewish identity from other foreign groups and cultural influences.

The text opens with the "Assyrian" king Nebuchadnezzar waging war against kingdoms, defeating them, and continuing to topple cities as he makes his way towards Judea.¹³ While the Israelites living in Judea fervently pray and give offerings to the God of Israel to protect them from Nebuchadnezzar, they do not have confidence that God will deliver them from the "Assyrian" army. Judith, a beautiful and pious widow living in Bethulia, is angry when she hears that the elders of her town do not have trust in God to deliver them from their foreign conquerors. She quickly formulates a plan to protect her people and Temple, and to show the God of Israel that the Israelites are faithful. In the company of her loyal maid, Judith goes to the "Assyrian" camp and meets Holofernes, the enemy general. She slowly wins his trust by promising him information that will help him defeat the Israelites. One night, he tries to seduce Judith but passes out from intoxication. While he is asleep, Judith beheads him and returns to her town with her maid and his head. The "Assyrians," having lost their leader, flee in panic, and Israel is saved. The Jews of Bethulia follow Judith's advice and are able to attack and defeat the panicked, leader-less "Assyrian" army. Everyone praises Judith and sings a victory song before she returns to her quiet and pious life at home. Despite having many suitors, Judith remains unmarried and dies at the age of one hundred and five. Israel mourns her death, and the Book

¹³ Nebuchadnezzar was Babylonian. Judith uses the name as a calc or code name for Gentile oppression in general (and, perhaps, Seleucid persecution, in particular).

concludes by stating “no one ever again spread terror among the Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death” (Jdt 16:25).

Historically Contextualizing Discussions on Gender in Judith

The Book of Judith is undoubtedly a Jewish text, telling the story of the ideal Jewish heroine (especially indicated by her name Yehudit, or “Jewess”).¹⁴ The text has many allusions to biblical characters, passages, and themes present in the Old Testament. For instance, that “no one ever again spread terror among the Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death” (Jdt 16:25) echoes Judges’ formulaic description of successful judges: “the land had peace for forty years” (Jdgs 3:11, 5:31, 8:28). More, Judith recalls a series of biblical women, including Jael, who kills the general Sisera in her tent (Jgs 4:17–22; 5:24–27), and Esther, who charms a foreign king with her beauty.

There is little evidence to indicate that Judith had a major role in the Jewish tradition until the medieval period. In many of the medieval Jewish sources, Judith becomes linked with Hanukkah, Hasmonean victories, and other women from ancient Jewish literature, such as Jael, Deborah, and Esther. In the Middle Ages and onwards, there are many different versions of Judith’s story and depictions of her in art and literature. Despite disappearing from the Jewish tradition in early centuries, Judith returned in the Middle Ages and left a lasting mark on Jewish texts, prayers, and practices. It is not until modern times that the Septuagint version of Judith resurfaced and became popular.

¹⁴ Deborah Levine Gera, “The Jewish Textual Traditions.” In *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines*, ed. by Brine Kevin R., Ciletti Elena, and Lähnemann Henrike, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 23.

From the Middle Ages through the early modern era, Christian writers used Judith's story in many different ways, from justification for tyrannicide,¹⁵ to being a pious role model for other widows. In tandem with these depictions of Judith, the early modern era gave rise to a different style of interpretation in which Judith was vilified for her sexuality and her story became a warning to men who may be the victims of cunning women. There was a wide-spread and enduring belief that "for men, lust was a catalyst for destruction and death, and historical and biblical texts contained several examples of men who met their downfall by lusting after a woman,"¹⁶—just as Adam fell prey to Eve's treachery, Holofernes was a victim of Judith's deceit. Despite this popular femme fatale trope, many women in the early modern era identified with Judith's strength of character, and her story was used to subvert traditional gender roles in various Christian communities. Ancient Christians have interpreted Judith within a vast array of diverse cultural frameworks and offers seemingly contradictory possibilities that provide ample opportunities to engage the text with postmodern discourse, including but not limited to feminist and queer theories.

While Judith's decapitating of Holofernes received mixed receptions from Christians in the Middle Ages, many women were still inspired by Judith's story and her performance of both ideal women's social roles (prudence, chastity, etc) and her disruption of gender roles (murdering Holofernes and being celebrated as the savior of her people). St. Angela Merici (1474-1540), the founder of the Ursuline nuns, was inspired by Judith's character and chastity.¹⁷

¹⁵ For example, there were many political assassinations and regicides in France beginning in the 1560s in which the assassins of high-profile monarchs were hailed as new Judiths. Elena Ciletti Henrike Lähnemann. "Judith in the Christian Tradition" in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines*, edited by Ciletti Elena, Lähnemann Henrike, and Brine Kevin R., (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 64.

¹⁶ Janet Bartholomew, "The Role of Judith in Margaret Fell's Womens Speaking Justified." in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines*, ed. Brine Kevin R., Ciletti Elena, and Lähnemann Henrike, (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 263-264.

¹⁷ The Ursuline nuns did not live enclosed in convents, a highly controversial practice at the time.

For Merici, virginity was a very powerful status as a Christian woman, and encouraged her followers to protect their virginity “so bravely that we too, like the holy Judith, having courageously cut off the head of Holofernes... may return gloriously to our heavenly home, where, ... great glory and triumph will burst for us.”¹⁸ In a similar deployment of Judith’s story to justify women’s emerging nontraditional Christian practices, Quaker women in seventeenth century England saw Judith as validation for their wish to be able to preach.

Drawn to Quakerism for its acceptance of women and protofeminist stances, Margaret Fell is accredited to have been a key leader of the Quaker movement. Fell’s tract *Womens Speaking Justified* defended her religious sect from anti-Quaker sentiment and her sex during a time when women were persecuted for preaching in public. In her writing, Fell argues that Judith is one of many historic biblical women preaching in public and that these women were praised for doing so. Fell’s exegesis focuses on the end of Judith, after eponymous character delivers the Jews from Holofernes:

And read also her prayer in the Book of *Judith*, and how the Elders commended her, and said, *All that thou speakest is true, and no man can reprove thy words, pray therefore for us, for thou art an holy Woman, and fearest God.* So these Elders of *Israel* did not forbid her speaking, as you blind Priests do; yet you will make a Trade of Womens words to get money by, and take Texts, and Preach Sermons upon Womens words; and still cry out, Women must not speak, Women must be

¹⁸ The Regola Prologue, quoted in Mazzonis, Querciolo. "The Company in Society." In *Spirituality, Gender, and the Self in Renaissance Italy: Angela Merici and the Company of St. Ursula (1474–1540)*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 63-64.

silent; so you are far from the minds of the Elders of *Israel*, who praised God for a Womans speaking.¹⁹

Instead of Judith being seen as lustful or deceitful in the eyes of her people upon her return, the elders of her town praise her for being “blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to cut off the head of the leader of our enemies,” (Jdt 13:8). Fell’s interpretation focuses on Judith being praised for her unwavering faith in the God of Israel and her spiritual connection to God. Many other male writers in Fell’s time argued that women such as Judith were merely instruments of death God sends to punish sinful men. Later feminist theologians argued that the Bible was not written to be interpreted with men’s experiences central to every story—there is sufficient evidence of women serving as prophetesses and important leadership roles within faith communities.²⁰ Judith’s character is written as a metaphor for Israel and the nation’s faith being tested by God, a form of narrative patterning which is common in many biblical stories.²¹ Feminist writers stress that the focus for the Book of Judith should be on her embodying the virtues of God’s chosen people, not on the enemy’s shortcomings.

Feminist writers typically approach their analysis of Judith by examining her likeness to other women characters in Jewish literature, such as Deborah, Jael, Miriam, and Esther.²² There are many comparisons to be made, especially with Jael who similarly murdered her enemy,

¹⁹ Margaret Askew Fell, *Womens Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures, all such as Speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus and how Women were the First that Preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus, and were Sent by Christ's Own Command, before He Ascended to the Father, John 20:17*. (London, 1666), 15 (emphasis original).

²⁰ Deborah in Judges 4-5, Miriam in Exodus 15, and Esther in the Book of Esther are all examples of prophetesses and women in important leadership roles.

²¹ Amy-Jill Levine, “Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith,” in *“No One Spoke Ill of Her” Essays on Judith*, ed. James C. Vanderkam, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992), 17.

²² Sidnie White Crawford, “In the Steps of Jael and Deborah: Judith as Heroine,” in *“No One Spoke Ill of Her” Essays on Judith*, ed. James C. Vanderkam, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992), 5.

Sisera, in his sleep. Amy-Jill Levine argues that Judith is a metaphor for Israel despite her actions not neatly fitting into traditional narrative patterning. Levine states:

Although her name, widowhood, chastity, beauty, and righteousness suggest the traditional representation of Israel, the text's association of these traits with an independent woman and with sexuality subverts the metaphoric connection between character and androcentrically determined community... At the beginning of the book, when she is apart, ascetic, and asocial, Judith is merely a curiosity with a metaphoric potential. Present in the public sphere, sexually active, and socially involved, she endangers hierarchical oppositions of gender, race, and class, muddles conventional gender characteristics and dismantles their claims to universality, and so threatens the status quo.²³

Levine and other feminist writers explore the ways in which Judith subverts traditional gender roles. Margarita Stocker's analysis of gender in the Book of Judith notes a contrast between the anointed power of Judith's female body and the emasculation of male characters. Taking a psychoanalytic approach, Stocker views Holofernes's beheading as an articulation of subconscious male fear of castration and states that "the most striking element in the Book of Judith is that it is so conscious and deliberate in its acknowledgement of the phallic concept of power."²⁴ Because Stocker takes on this viewpoint that God is "the only possessor of supreme masculinity,"²⁵ Judith can be safely elevated without the risk of phallus rivalry. These feminist critics do not investigate their assumptions about Judith's community being misogynistic,

²³Amy-Jill Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith," pg. 18

²⁴Margarita Stocker, *Judith: Sexual Warrior, Women and Power in Western Culture*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 7.

²⁵Stocker, pg. 7.

something that Carol Meyers' problematizes in her work.²⁶ Further, second-wave feminist explorations of Judith rarely look towards Judith's queer potential and does not provide a nuanced view of intersectionality.²⁷

In queer readings of Scripture, the Bible is not a document wholly bound by ancient historical contexts. Queering biblical texts disrupts harmful notions of God-given cis-genderedness and heterosexuality, and complicates the Bible by creating a foundation for ever-expanding, imaginative theologies and interpretations. As Ellen T. Armour notes, "[the Bible] occurs/resides at the nexus of past and present insofar as these essays render visible traces of ancient origins, track biblical and post-biblical history of interpretation, and bring to bear contemporary issues and approaches."²⁸ Thiem asserts that the Bible, gender, sexuality, and queerness can prove to be rather elusive categories, as new understandings of the Bible and theology are explored and perceptions of gender and sex are subject to ever-changing social norms.

Judith has recently shown up in queer theologies. An example is Deborah Sawyer's 2001 essay "Dressing Up/Dressing Down: Power, Performance, and Identity in the Book of Judith" in *Theology & Sexuality*. Sawyer opens her essay on Judith with insights from Judith Butler's work on gender performativity and identity. According to Sawyer, the ancient world is no stranger to the fluidity of gender, and presents the argument that the author of the Book of Judith "employs

²⁶ "Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society" and *Rediscovering Eve* are two examples of Meyer's work in which she problematizes modern feminist critics inscribing modern day patriarchal and androcentric narratives upon Ancient Israel and Jewish communities.

²⁷ Intersectionality describes how aspects of a person's social and political identities intersect and interact to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. Examples of these aspects include gender, caste, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, and height. Intersectionality was developed and popularized by feminist women of color in the second and third wave feminist movements.

²⁸ Ellen T. Armour, "Queer Bibles, Queer Scriptures? An Introductory Response" in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. by Teresa J Hornsby and Ken Stone. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Atlanta, 2011), 4.

gender as an elusive category rather than one that is split down its middle and staked at two polarities.”²⁹ Caryn Tamber-Rosenau’s text-centered systemic study of Judith utilizes a queer-theoretical framework in its exploration of the “woman-turned-warrior” motif in ancient Jewish literature. Tamber-Rosenau proposes that Judith and Jael are able to execute their respective missions (to murder foreign enemy leaders) because of their focused, skilled drag performances of womanhood and femininity. By deploying feminine gendered performances with precision, both femme fatales are able to murder their male enemies and save the people of Israel. Tamber-Rosenau explores the intricate dynamics of drag and realness in the stories of Jael and Judith that brings these two characters into conversation with drag queens featured in the film *Paris is Burning*. Tamber-Rosenau remarks, “A character can be self-consciously over-the-top in her gender performance, but to the other characters in her story, she may simply look like an excellent specimen of femininity.”³⁰ She argues that these two characters’ gender performances destabilize the gender binary through parody and dramatic irony, but do not gender-bend. Their successes are not because they take on so-called “masculine” traits, but rather, their ability to disguise themselves in a parody of womanhood. Much of my analysis of Judith’s drag performances follows Tamber-Rosenau, however, I put a particular emphasis on the work of Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood when exploring Judith’s gender performance and her piety. Additionally, I analyze other aspects of Judith’s gender performance and intertextual biblical references in her story—for example, Judith’s decision to not have children and how it relates to Genesis 1:27-28.

²⁹ Deborah F. Sawyer “Dressing Up/Dressing Down: Power, Performance and Identity in the Book of Judith.” *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality* 8, no. 15 (September 2001): 24.

³⁰ Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag: Gender and Performance in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Literature*, (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 126-127.

The Book of Judith in Conversation with Judith Butler

Judith Butler's work provides tools to rethink gender, bodies, and politics in the Book of Judith. In my queer reading of the Book of Judith, it will be helpful to consider Butler's insights on gender as a performance and the biological sexed binary as a culturally constructed phenomenon, in which both gender and sex attain their meaning from pre-existing heterosexual norms.

Feminists have long been working to challenge the idea that the biology of females renders them inferior to males and a person's biology destines them to fill certain social roles.³¹ While it has been valuable in feminist movements to make a distinction between sex as natural and gender as cultural, Butler problematizes this sex/gender distinction because it assumes that social constructions of feminine and masculine are independent from the biological distinctions between male and female, without taking into account that perceptions of feminine and masculine gender presentation are derived from assumptions on biological sex. Butler argues:

The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it... This radical splitting of the gendered subject poses yet another set of problems. Can we refer to a 'given' sex or a 'given' gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means? And what is 'sex; anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such 'facts' for us? ... If

³¹ Gayle Rubin in 1975 first introduced the distinction between sex and gender as mapping onto the distinction between nature and culture, her aim was to break the normative power of the idea that 'biology is destiny.' Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic of Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975) 157-210.

the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex... gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established.³²

Butler argues that biological bodies do not exist outside or prior to social-cultural frameworks that regulate our bodies and desires as material realities. While making a distinction between sex and gender has been very valuable to feminist and queer politics in order to validate nontraditional performances of gender roles, from this distinction arises the issue of essentializing a sexed identity and ignores how culture influences our understandings of sex. We can conclude from Butler's work that sex as a material characteristic of bodies is a belated effect of understanding bodies as gendered and that the material effects of power and privilege are the results of how norms regulate bodies.

Butler argues that not only is gender performative, but there is a social audience that witnesses, reproduces, and internalizes these gendered performances and actions. According to Butler's theory, gender is a learned performative repetition of acts that are associated with historical understandings of male and female. This brings up the question of gender reality. Butler contends that "gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real

³² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism And the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 6-7.

only to the extent that it is performed.”³³ While certain kinds of acts are typically interpreted as expressive of a “gender core identity and these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way.”³⁴ Those expectations are based upon perceptions of sex, which is defined in relation to primary sexual characteristics. Gender reality only gets more unsettled when considering drag and gender nonconformity:

If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the ‘reality’ of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks ‘reality,’ and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion. But what is the sense of ‘gender reality’ that founds this perception in this way? Perhaps we think we know what the anatomy of the person is (sometimes we do not, and we certainly have not appreciated the variation that exists at the level of anatomical description). Or we derive that knowledge from the clothes that person wears, or how the clothes are worn. This is naturalized knowledge, even though it is based on a series of cultural inferences, some of which are highly erroneous... when such categories come into question, the reality of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal... what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality...

³³ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 526-528.

³⁴ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 528.

Drag is an example that is meant to establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be.³⁵

It is easy for readers of Butler to contend that gender reality does not exist insofar as it is performed. However, it is important to keep in mind the world outside of queer theory. Gender performances do have real material consequences in the world we live in, whether that is hate crimes against trans people or the many ways that women’s bodies are regulated and controlled. Considering gender as a learned social performance, these gender performances can grant bodies power or push them towards greater marginalization based on how others perceive gender reality.

Saba Mahmood considers Judith Butler’s arguments on subject formation and agency before departing into her own analysis of agency.³⁶ In Mahmood’s analysis of the women’s mosque movement in Cairo during the 1990s, she focuses on the practice of ethical self-cultivation to push back against liberal assumptions about what it means to have freedom and exact agency. Mahmood questions “the overwhelming tendency within poststructuralist feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion or resignification of social norms, to locate agency within those operations that resist the domination and subjectivating modes of power...I want to argue that it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics.”³⁷ Mahmood utilizes a poststructuralist perspective when arguing that agency cannot operate in a binary model of how oppressed a person is, especially when

³⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism And the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxii-xxiii.

³⁶ Saba Mahmood, “Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject,” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. by E. T. Armour and S.M. St. Ville, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 177-221.

³⁷ Mahmood, pg. 178.

considering women whose desires are shaped by nonliberal traditions. She presents the idea that agency is not resistance to domination, but the capability to respond to and move within historic relationships of subordination. This connects to Butler's theories on how gender and performance of gender can grant bodies with power or marginalization, but Mahmood argues that bodies that would be perceived as marginalized in the eyes of liberal Western traditions are able to exact agency without having to overcome or resist gendered hierarchies. Mahmood advocated that the pious Muslim women she studied in Cairo were not mindlessly obedient, but rather used their engagement in religious spaces and Qur'an study as a means of ethical self-cultivation.

Both Butler and Mahmood present important theoretical frameworks with which we can analyze Judith's gendered performance. Instead of viewing Judith's position solely from a Western liberal perspective wherein Judith is attempting to subvert gender norms, it is important to keep in mind that Judith's piety is core to her identity. When Judith puts on a hyper-femme performance in order to infiltrate Holofernes's camp, she is utilizing agency in the way that Mahmood describes as moving within historic relationships of gendered insubordination. When Judith performs her widowhood, she is no more oppressed or liberated than when she goes into high-femme drag. Judith is in control, making calculated decisions and using her gender performance to successfully complete her mission to save her people and further cultivate her close relationship with God.

Judith in Drag

Judith in Widow Drag

The first half of Judith describes the antagonists Nebuchadnezzar the “Assyrian” king and Holofernes, his general. The author writes Holofernes as an extension of king Nebuchadnezzar, and both men are painted as violent, greedy, and arrogant. Judith is finally introduced in chapter 8 with a grand Israelite genealogy: “She was the daughter of Merari son of Ox son of Oxiel son of Ekiah son of Ananias son of Gideon son of Raphain son of Ahitub son of Elijah son of Hilkiyah son of Eliab son of Nathanael son of Salamiel son of Sarasadai son of Israel” (Jdt 8:1). Introducing Judith with her genealogy indicates that Judith is a character as worthy of respect as the Jewish patriarchs who came before her, and the mention of Gideon (a judge) and Elijah (a prophet) foreshadow Judith’s own roles in the story. This grand introduction is unusual for widows, as widows were (and continue to be today) perceived as vulnerable characters worthy of pity, especially if they are childless.³⁸

After Judith’s genealogy, the passage describes her status as a pious widow:

Her husband Manasseh, who belonged to her tribe and family, had died during the barley harvest.... Judith remained as a widow for three years and four months at home where she set up a tent for herself on the roof of her house. She put sackcloth around her waist and dressed in widow’s clothing. She fasted all the days of her widowhood, except the day before the sabbath and the sabbath itself, the day before the new moon and the day of the new moon, and the festivals and days of rejoicing of the house of Israel. (Jdt 8:2-6)

Without an attachment to a living husband, Judith is mostly concerned with her piety, which is not specific to a masculine or a feminine performance of gender. However, Judith

³⁸ Deut 10:18, Ps 146:9, Job 24:21, Sir. 35:17, Wis 2:10 describe ways in which widows needed to be looked after because of their vulnerability.

chooses to express her piety in such a way that dramatically signals to others her status as a widow. Judith setting up a tent on the roof to pray (8:5),³⁹ wearing a sackcloth around “her loins,”⁴⁰ fasting more days than not (8:6), and engaging in mourning for a period beyond that prescribed in Jewish law all obviously convey her self-identification as a widow to others, even God.⁴¹ Tamber-Rosenau explains that this is partially due to Judith’s commitment to her own piety, but it is also a dramatic drag performance on Judith’s part:

the sackcloth, a garment of mourning, is wrapped around her loins in a symbolic gesture of sexual unavailability. How could she think of remarrying or otherwise being sexually active, even three years and four months after her husband’s death, if her very genitals are still clad in mourning attire?⁴²

Judith is very committed to playing the gendered role of widow, but there are many ways in which Judith’s widowhood distances her from womanhood. Levine connects Judith’s widowhood status to de Beauvoir’s declaration that all women are other, as they are “defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her... He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.”⁴³ Living as a widow without a man in her private life, Judith does not have a *living* man by whom to be defined. However, her late husband still defines her

³⁹ Based on Neh 8:16 and Act 10:9, Enslin and Zeitlin hypothesize that the roof may have served as a site of prayer. Judith living on the roof, as opposed to occasionally praying on it, is a grand gesture of devotion. Morton Scott Enslin and Solomon Zeitlan, *The Book of Judith: Greek Text with an English Translation*, Jewish Apocryphal Literature, V. 7. (Leiden: Brill, 1973). Contrary to the prayerful roof scenes in those verses, in 2 Samuel 16:15-23, Ahithophel sets up a tent for Absalom on the roof in which he sleeps with David’s concubines. This is a highly sexualized incident. Judith may be using the roof as a prayer site to show her piety, or subvert the sexualized story in 2 Samuel 16.

⁴⁰ Tamber Rosenau translates the greek *osphun autēs* to mean “her loins,” not “her waist.”

⁴¹ Lawrence M. Wills and Harold W Attridge, *Judith: A Commentary on the Book of Judith* (Hermeneia: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 248.

⁴² Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag: Gender and Performance in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Literature*, (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 139-140.

⁴³ Simone de Beauvoir, Borde Constance and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, *The Second Sex*, (New York: Vintage, 2011), 6.

status in significant ways because there are certain roles and behaviors expected of her as a widow, and her inheritance has left her in charge of an estate and material wealth. There is a fine balance Judith has to walk in order to not feel pressured to remarry or to have kids. Judith's control over her wealth and financial stability, in conjunction with her convincing performance of piety, allows her to continue to live independently.⁴⁴

Judith's agency as a widow comes from her faith and piety because it is a way for her to avoid having kids or engaging with a cisheterosexual contract. At the same time, not being a virgin but going into Holofernes' camp in seductive drag ensured that she wouldn't be shamed or bring shame to her family upon her return to Bethulia. Levine considers the special position Judith is granted as a widow:

This widow is hardly the forlorn female in need of male protection. Given the negative associations of her husband's name, his absence is almost welcome; he shares the name of the king held responsible for the Babylonian exile (2 Kgs 21:12-15; 23:26-27, 24:3-4)... Manasseh's absence is necessitated by the demands of Israelite patriarchy: Judith's actions would have subjected him, had he been alive, to sexual disgrace... Judith had to be a widow—that is, sexually experienced but unattached—in order for her to carry out her plan.⁴⁵

Her unique position as a Jewish widow means that Judith, and only Judith, would be able to carry out such a mission to kill Holofernes, bringing sexual humiliation to the Assyrian army without subjecting Israel to the same consequences of sexual shame. Judith's special position is not just granted to her due to her status as a widow, but also because she does not have children.

⁴⁴ Lawrence M. Wills and Harold W Attridge, *Judith: A Commentary on the Book of Judith* (Hermeneia: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 249.

⁴⁵ Amy-Jill Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith," in *"No One Spoke Ill of Her" Essays on Judith*, ed. By James C. Vanderkam, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992), 20.

Wills notes that “the three rewards of being wise in Israel, for both men and women, were wealth, old age, and children, and the wise Judith has two of these but not the third. If she had had children, however, she would have been limited in her ability to act aggressively and shamelessly.”⁴⁶ Judith’s position as a childless widow has her directly falling outside of the gendered binary that was set up in Genesis “So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created it; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it,’” (Gen 1:27-28). To have children is an expectation of both men and women in Genesis 1; to not engage with parenthood pushes the childless, widow Judith farther away from both categories of “man” and “woman.” Despite being a childless widow, Judith spins those ordinarily pitiful circumstances to her benefit. She celebrates the greater freedom that her position grants her as she undergoes her mission to infiltrate Holofernes’s camp.

There are many opportunities to apply queer theory to Judith’s childless, chaste status. In “The Straight Mind,” Monique Wittig argues that lesbians are not women because to be a lesbian is to step outside of the cisheterosexual norm of women, as defined by men for men's ends.⁴⁷ In “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” Sue-Ellen Case writes on how butch and femme lesbians annul feminine signifiers from the idea of sex with men. Femme lesbians may confuse men who pursue them because femme lesbians may appear to be cis, feminine, heterosexual women. However, femmes still exist outside of a cisheterosexual contract, and do not perform their femininity to appear attractive to men. In this way, femme lesbians do not serve the patriarchy, but continue to subvert it and cisheterosexism. To further understand Judith’s commitment to

⁴⁶ Lawrence M. Wills and Harold W Attridge, *Judith: A Commentary on the Book of Judith* (Hermeneia: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 250.

⁴⁷ Monique Wittig, “The Straight Mind” in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

widow drag, I extend Wittig's analysis of the cisheterosexual contract to Judith. Judith is a woman who was once married, but is now a woman who is not involved with men, so therefore Judith lives and operates in the same sphere as lesbians in that neither of them participate in a contract of cisheterosexuality. With Judith's drag performance of widowhood, she dramatically signals to others that she is not interested in re-entering a cisheterosexual contract. Her status as a widow protects her from that, as long as she can convince others of her commitment to being a pious, independent widow. Further, Judith's appearance in high-femme drag mimics the experience of femme lesbians: only they know that they are sexually off-limits to men, but men, who are not aware of Judith's chastity or femme lesbians' sexuality, often confuse the social markers of femininity for cisheterosexuality. In this way, Judith's chastity is a sexuality.⁴⁸

Judith in High-Femme Drag

When the author of Judith brings up the central figure's femininity, it appears to be secondary and unimportant, especially compared to the stronger emphasis on her piety and likeness to patriarchal figures from her genealogy in this introductory passage. She is "beautiful in appearance and was very lovely to behold" (Jdt 8:7), but the author returns to discussing her estate and how widely respected she is for her faith: "her husband Manasseh had left her gold and silver, men and women slaves, livestock, and fields; and she maintained the estate. No one spoke ill of her, for she feared God with great devotion" (Jdt 8:7-8). Because of her wealth, Judith is independent and lives very comfortably despite being a widow without children who

⁴⁸ Kathryn Schwarz writes on abstinence and agency in "The Wrong Question: Thinking Through Virginitly." Though her argument is centered on Queen Elizabeth I, her analysis of women deliberately choosing to publicly vaunt their virginitly indicates that virginitly can operate as a sexual orientation of its own in which women distance themselves from men and resist the patriarchy. This is easily applicable to Judith, who similar to Queen Elizabeth I, puts on a campy show of her celibate lifestyle to ward off men. Kathryn Schwarz, "The Wrong Question: Thinking through Virginitly," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 1-34.

refuses to remarry. Judith's introduction is rich with gender variance and expansiveness, as her widowhood allows her to be in a central non-binary position, but she can easily traverse the spectrum of feminine and masculine presentation. This early identification of Judith's fluid, all-embracing attitude towards gender roles sets the stage for her to later strategically deploy a gendered performance, using Holofernes's assumptions about women against him.

As Judith infiltrates the "Assyrian" camp and wins over the general Holofernes, she flips the role she plays, transitioning from a pious widow to a dangerously beautiful femme. As a widow, she performs certain gender roles in order to justify her status as unmarried and childless. In her position as a widow, she was both expected to fulfill certain roles expected of women, but she was also estranged from her womanhood because she did not have a living man to be defined by. Changing her role play to that of a seductress, Judith is not gender-bending, but rather performing a different set of expectations and roles of women. Going into high-femme drag, Judith

called her maid... and took off her widow's garments, bathed her body with water, and anointed herself with precious ointment. She combed her hair, put on a tiara, and dressed herself in the festive attire that she used to wear while her husband Manasseh was living. She put sandals on her feet, and put on her anklets, bracelets, rings, earrings, and all her other jewelry. Thus she made herself very beautiful, to entice the eyes of all the men who might see her. (Jdt 10:1-5)

This passage is the most that has been devoted to Judith's appearance thus far; while her status as a widow is not ungendered, it is certainly not feminine to this degree. As a widow, Judith does not dress to entice men, but rather ward them off. This passage comes in stark

contrast to the pious Judith who dramatically announces that sex with her is off-limits. In this new role, Judith is dressing to appeal to men and specifically the male sexual gaze. She is not, however, belittling herself in making this decision to dress seductively. Her femininity is an important tool she uses to help her accomplish the task at hand, and her ability to manipulate and deceive men with her skilled drag performances is what gives her power. It seems as though she would be at these men's mercy because in the camp she is outnumbered by an army of hyper masculine people, but she is actually the one with the agency and in control of her own destiny.

There are several references to dramatic irony while Judith is in high-femme drag. When she first arrives to the Assyrian army camp, soldiers remark to each other ““it is not wise to leave one of their men alive, for if we let them go they will be able to beguile the whole world!”” (Jdt 10:14-119). These soldiers are recognizing that with Judith's astounding beauty, she would be able to charm and deceive anyone. Little do they know, Judith's best tool in deception is her ability to pass—her beauty is an added bonus in this game of deception, but it is not why she is ultimately able to succeed in her mission. Tamber-Rosenau describes realness and passing:

Drag is often campy, theatrical, and exaggerated; drag often makes clear that what is being performed is artifice... One of the key points of the documentary *Paris is Burning* is the drag ball scene's focus on realness contests. Ball contestants compete not just in how well, for instance, a man can wear an evening gown, but also in categories such as 'military,' 'schoolgirl,' and 'executive,' where mostly working-class queer people of color perform an identity clearly not their own... By appropriating the markers of groups to which they did not and often could not belong, whether soldiers, students, or glamorous women, ball contestants showed the artifice of even 'real' examples of these types... people outside the ballroom

were playing roles, no less than the gender- and class-benders on the inside... Passing can cause great anxiety in mainstream populations because it blurs lines between categories, and even exposes those categories as unstable and socially constructed... The performing character as well as the reader are well aware of the exaggerated nature of the performance, but the targeted characters in a high-stakes realness performance may—in fact, one can argue, must—remain in the dark.⁴⁹

For Judith, she cannot simply be a beautiful woman and expect to deceive everyone in the Assyrian camp. She has to impress them with this over-the-top drag performance of perfect femininity and move within a power dynamic in which she would appear to be subordinate to all of these men—she must play the role of defector, completely uninterested in Israel’s fate, a woman sashaying to Holofernes in search of a man who is actually worthy of her. The audience of readers is well aware of Judith’s true desire to remain chaste, but in the realness contest that is Holofernes’s camp, the Assyrian army must remain unaware of Judith’s piety. Judith’s femme performance in front of Holofernes is dramatic irony, with the underlying subtext being that she is disguising herself in order to save her people and redeem Israel.

Not being able to rely on her beauty alone, Judith must act convincingly. Upon first meeting Holofernes, “she prostrated herself and did obeisance to him” (Jdt 10:23). When a woman does obeisance to a man, there are often sexual undertones.⁵⁰ Judith blends submissiveness and seduction, calling herself *doulēs sou*, “your slave” (Jdt 11:5, 16) and *paidiskē sou*, “your maidservant” (Jdt 11:5, 6, 17, 12:4, 6). Judith flatters Holofernes and makes

⁴⁹ Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag: Gender and Performance in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Literature*, (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 125-127.

⁵⁰ Ruth’s obeisance to Boaz (Ruth 2:10), Abigail’s to David (1 Sam 25:23, 41) and Bathsheba’s to David (1 Kgs 1:16, 31). In these scenarios where the woman has done obeisance to a man, they have later become sexually involved.

extravagant promises to him, claiming to have been in communication with God who “announced it to me and I have been sent to announce it to you” (Jdt 11:19). Judith sashays into the camp, dripping in her finest jewelry, plays a precise game of the elegant, submissive seductress who is also in direct contact with God, and it works. Holofernes and all of his men are completely enamored with her, saying that

‘no other woman from one end of the earth to the other looks so beautiful or speaks so wisely!’ Then Holofernes said to her... ‘You are not only beautiful in appearance, but wise in speech. If you do as you have said, your God shall be my God, and you shall live in the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar and be renowned throughout the whole world.’ (Jdt 11:21-23)

She is allowed to leave each night to pray in the valley of Bethulia before bathing at the spring in camp, coming back purified and remaining in her tent until she ate in the evening (Jdt 12:7-9).

Despite making a routine of leaving camp, Judith returns to bathe. It is unclear just how private her baths are, but it may be a way for Judith to further seduce Holofernes, advertising herself and her body as sexually available. Bathsheba is famously seen bathing by David before they have sex (2 Sam 11:2-5) and the bathing Susanna is secretly watched by two elders of her community (Sus 1:15-21) before they attempt to blackmail her into having sex with them. In these stories the women are not intentionally trying to seduce the men, but rather, the women are subjected to the male sexual gaze. Judith, choosing to bathe in camp, is taking control of the male sexual gaze and subjecting herself to it in order to make herself desirable to Holofernes.

On the fourth day of Judith's stay in the camp, Holofernes invites Judith to a banquet. Asking his eunuch servant Bagoas to summon Judith, he states that it "would be a disgrace if we let such a woman go without having intercourse with her. If we do not seduce her, she will laugh at us" (Jdt 12:12). Judith has thrown herself at Holofernes, and his response is one that seems to be compulsory. Not only does Holofernes want to lay with Judith, but he also feels as though it would be shameful and emasculate him if he did not. Continuing her role as an elegant, submissive seductress, Judith accepts Bagoas and Holofernes's invitation:

Judith replied, 'Who am I to refuse my lord? Whatever pleases him I will do at once, and it will be a joy to me until the day of my death.' So she proceeded to dress herself in all her woman's finery. Her maid went ahead and spread for her on the ground before Holofernes the lambskins she had received from Bagoas for her daily use in reclining. Then Judith came in and lay down. Holofernes' heart was ravished with her and his passion was aroused, for he had been waiting for an opportunity to seduce her from the day he first saw her... Holofernes was greatly pleased with her, and drank a great quantity of wine, much more than he had ever drunk in any one day since he was born. (Jdt 12:14-20)

Reclining in her woman's finery before him, Judith knows exactly what Holofernes's intentions are. Judith is aware of how precisely she has grabbed his attention and manipulated the male gaze as well as compulsory heterosexuality, acting submissive when she was in control the entire time. She has successfully "passed" in her high-femme drag, and these last hours are the most crucial to her performance.

Holofernes, however, was not careful in his actions. Too excited about Judith's promises of sexual intercourse and leading his army to victory, Holofernes drinks more wine "than he had ever drunk in any day since he was born," (Jdt 12:20) until he passes out drunk on his bed. At this point, it was still Judith's routine to go out of the camp to pray. All of Holofernes's servants leave the bedchamber where Holofernes and Judith are, and Judith tells her maid to stand outside and wait for her. Judith says a quick prayer in her heart for God to "help your heritage and to carry out my design to destroy the enemies who have risen up against us" (Jdt 13:5) before decapitating the drunk, unconscious Holofernes with his own sword. Judith takes the canopy from the bed posts and passes his head off to her maidservant outside. Keeping Holofernes's head in their food bag, the ladies walk out of the camp. It was customary for the women to leave and pray before returning to bathe, so they were not met with any suspicion as they took their exit. Judith sashays away with Holofernes's head as her prize for completing a successful and skilled high-femme drag performance.

Had Judith broken her chastity and had sex with Holofernes, the moral of the story may have taken a sharp left turn. Who would Judith be without her piety, the driving force of her narrative and central to her agency? As Judith puts on different drag roles and gender performances, the only constant in her character is her commitment to God and her chastity. Judith is chaste and faithful to God before she is a woman, as she performs drag to exact agency to protect her chastity. Butler poses the question, "is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established? Does being female constitute a 'natural fact' or a cultural performance?"⁵¹ Judith does not cling to an identity of womanhood, but rather an identity of faith and devotion to God. She is able to put on various

⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism And the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxviii.

roles and drag personas of female cultural performances on a whim, moving within historic gendered hierarchies, in order to protect what is truly most important to her—her chastity and the future of Israel.

Judith's Return to Bethulia

Upon Judith's successful completion of her mission and the Assyrian army is defeated, Judith returns to Bethulia:

After this they all returned home to their own inheritances. Judith went to Bethulia, and remained on her estate. For the rest of her life she was honored throughout the whole country. Many desired to marry her, but she gave herself to no man all the days of her life after her husband Manasseh died and was gathered to his people. She became more and more famous, and grew old in her husband's house, reaching the age of one hundred five. She set her maid free. She died in Bethulia, and they buried her in the cave of her husband Manasseh; and the house of Israel mourned her for seven days. Before she died she distributed her property to all those who were next of kin to her husband Manasseh, and to her own nearest kindred. No one ever again spread terror among the Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death. (Jdt 16:21-25)

The text concludes with charming simplicity, and Judith is no longer putting on a dramatic drag show of widowhood. The text does not specify whether Judith adorned her sackcloth around her loins once again, but it is clear that she remained unmarried and “she gave herself to no man all the days of her life” (Jdt 16:22). However, all the other markers of her ascetic lifestyle are no longer there—Judith “grew old in her husband's house” (Jdt 16:23) no

longer living in the tent on the roof, and the passage does not indicate that Judith fasts as she had before. Levine notes, “a utilitarian reading would even claim that Judith remains a widow both because she had nothing to gain by marriage and because no man was worthy of her... The men are weak, stupid, or impaired... The only fit male companion for Judith is the deity.”⁵² Judith’s status by the end of her story is that of a woman redeemer or *gô’el*.⁵³ Judith redistributes her wealth and is the patroness for both her husband’s extended family and her own. Judith no longer has to put on dramatic drag shows of widowhood to live unmarried and childless but still enjoys the agency that her chastity grants her. Judith saved all of Israel’s children, so it is not an issue for her to remain childless. Tamber-Rosenau remarks that “she cannot completely take herself out of the system of sexual exchange, but she can construct her own identity that is defined by the lack of sex. She can play the role of the widow to the hilt, and, because it is a role, she can turn around and put on another, that of the temptress, when the times call for it.”⁵⁴ Judith is in complete control of the men around her because of her expertise in performing gender roles. Her manipulation of these gender roles and social signifiers for the social audience allows her to remain in complete control of her life. Judith no longer has to prove herself as an honorably pious character by the conclusion, and instead she can be celebrated for her independence and heroism. She has been bestowed with the highest honor and respect, her lifestyle being unquestionable.

Conclusion: Finding Queer Theological Meaning in Judith

⁵² Amy-Jill Levine, “Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith,” in *“No One Spoke Ill of Her” Essays on Judith*, ed. By James C. Vanderkam, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992), 20-21.

⁵³ Wills translates *gô’el* to mean an extended-family redeemer-guardian who is obligated to protect a widow in the biblical tradition. Wills notes that by the end of her story, Judith is a female redeemer: “there is no feminine form of *gô’el* in the Bible or ancient Judaism, but Judith is such a figure.” Lawrence M. Wills and Harold W Attridge, *Judith: A Commentary on the Book of Judith* (Hermeneia: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 387.

⁵⁴ Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag: Gender and Performance in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Literature*, (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 186.

Analysis of Judith's story should not be limited to her gender. Instead of simply concluding this project on Judith's gender performances, I want to consider the larger theological question of gender expansiveness and divinity that the Book of Judith brings to light. Judith's closeness to God often inspires her to preach to others throughout her story, and there is valuable gender-queer theological meaning in those sermons. After Judith's initial introduction, she visits the male elders of the city of Bethulia. Judith is frustrated with the rulers of Bethulia, because it appears as though they do not trust God to save them from Holofernes's army. The elders of Bethulia hold Judith with high regard, and she preaches to them:

They came to her, and she said to them: Listen to me, rulers of the people of Bethulia! ... Who are you to put God to the test today, and to set yourselves up in the place of God in human affairs? ... You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart or understand the workings of the human mind; how do you expect to search out God, who made all these things, and find out his mind or comprehend his thought? ... Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like a human being (Jdt 8:11-16)

This quotation reifies Judith's commitment to God and her faith and brings to light an intriguing theological question of who or what form God might take. Judith advocates for the idea that God is beyond what humans can fully comprehend. This mystery of God is similar to the elusiveness of gender; neither can be essentialized or certain, despite how often humans attempt to define either. In this queer reading of Judith that seeks to deconstruct the ideas of a God-given, "natural" cisheterosexual order, the phrase "God is not like a human being," (Jdt 8:16) is worthy of note. While there is a history of humans inventing and enforcing rigid gendered and sexed binaries, God has taken on feminine and masculine traits in various instances

in the Bible and is beyond human constructions of gender and sex.⁵⁵ “God is not like a human being” (Jdt 8:16) speaks to the idea that God is a mystery to humans and is not bound by the same gendered binaries that are culturally constructed by humanity. Judith’s insistence that God cannot be fully understood by humanity inadvertently implies that constructions of gender and gender identity are a trait of humanity, while understanding gender as fluid is a characteristic of the divine. The expansiveness of God and gender open up doors to inclusivity, but also contradiction and mystery. They both escape final settlement.

Judith’s story is one that is rich with gender expansiveness, drag, and queerness. She showcases the many ways in which one can express femininity or “woman” as an identity, but she never settles on one way of expressing gender. The story of Judith dramatizes Butler’s theories on gender performativity, taking drag as we know it from a queer subcultural context and putting it on a biblical stage. No other biblical character quite showcases the famous RuPaul saying, “we are all born naked, and the rest is drag”⁵⁶ as Judith. Considering Judith’s closeness to God and what she preaches about the image of God, there is much to learn from Judith’s story about accepting that gender itself is socially constructed and doesn’t necessarily exist when it comes to the divine. Unsettling gender, both what we assume to be in the biblical texts and our current perceptions of gender, helps with the long-term goal of undoing cisheterosexism, capitalism, and colonization. Reading Judith as a queer drag performer who preaches about the elusiveness of God and gender pushes biblical scholars to consider moving beyond the violent

⁵⁵ God is often thought of as a fatherly patriarch, but there are several passages in which God is compared to a mother who gave birth such as “you were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth” (Deut 32:18) and “can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you,” (Isa 49:15).

⁵⁶ RuPaul, *Lettin it All Hang Out: An Autobiography*. (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 3.

diagnostic model of gender identity, towards a model that gives body-minds agency to describe and express their gender feelings.

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