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Images of Esther

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Images of Esther

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College Scholars Thesis
Spring 1997

Images of Esther

by
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College Scholars Senior Thesis

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Abstract

With the advent of the women's movement in Twentieth Century America, portraits of women in the Bible have become a significant aspect of biblical scholarship. As one of the few books in both the Jewish and the Christian canons that is named after a woman, the Book of Esther is a significant text in examining the treatment of women in Judeo-Christian traditions. Esther is a Jewish girl who becomes Queen of Persia after the king, Xerxes, banishes his first wife for disobeying him. Through a series of role-reversals, Esther eventually saves her people from destruction, urges the king to kill his wicked advisor Haman, and has Haman's prestigious position filled by her cousin, Mordecai. This biblical text is interpreted in radically different ways by different communities, and this project examines a few of these images of Esther and the values they reinforce.

The pre-feminist view of Esther values Esther as the ideal wife and daughter. Pre-feminist images of Esther are often found in conservative Jewish and Christian communities. These communities suggest the Bible portrays two distinctly separate roles for men and women, and therefore, they present her as an example for young girls to follow. For the most part, these materials praise Esther for her modesty, piety, obedience, and beauty. The Esther doll, which appears to be a regal "Barbie", is an excellent example of this image of Esther.

The early feminist image of Esther is the portrait of a strong female biblical character who is just as honorable and worthy of study as any male biblical character. Early feminists do not challenge the patriarchal structure of the Esther story, but they do challenge the pre-feminist notion that the Bible presents distinctly different ideals for men and for women. Early feminist interpretations often include Vashti, the king's first wife, as a hero, for she is the first woman who dared stand up to the men in her life. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Women's Bible was the first example of this early feminist image of Esther.

Recent feminist images of Esther often criticize Esther for refusing to challenge the fundamentals of the patriarchal monarchy. They challenge her appearance as every man's ideal woman, gracefully reconciling the demands put upon her by all the men in her life. They consider her to be a powerful woman merely because she knows how to use her femininity within patriarchal structures which remain secure. By contrast, one Jewish Lesbian interpretation of Esther, depicts her abandoning the patriarchal system altogether by running away into the desert.

The images of Esther in both popular media and formal scholarship include Christian, Jewish, Feminist, and Traditional portrayals. These literary and visual images of Esther show that the interpretation of Biblical texts, specifically those concerning Biblical heroines, often changes according to the values of the community interpreting the text, despite the fact that the Book of Esther itself does not change. This project is an example of reader-response criticism, for the meaning of the Esther story is created by the interaction of the reader and the text.

Introduction

With the advent of the women's movement in 20th century America, portraits of women in the Bible have become a significant aspect of Biblical Studies. As a part of both the Christian and the Jewish canons, the Book of Esther is critical text in examining the treatment of women in Judeo-Christian traditions. Because the Book of Esther is one of only two books of the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) that is both named after a woman and has a female central character, the way her actions are interpreted reflects a given community of interpretation's views on the role of women in that society. By examining visual and literary images of Esther, this paper will attempt to show that the interpretation of Biblical texts reflects the societal and personal values of the reader. More specifically, the interpretation of texts concerning Biblical heroines often reflect society's acceptable roles for women.

Three Versions of the Esther Story

There are several versions of the book of Esther. The Book of Esther as it appears in the Hebrew Bible is referred to as the Masoretic text, but the Book of Esther also appears in the Apocrypha. The Apocryphal version is a Greek version of Esther, designated as the Septuagint (LXX) text. The Greek text differs from the Hebrew or Masoretic text in that it has several small word changes and six additional texts labeled Additions A-F. There is yet another Greek text, the A text, which appears to be an approximate translation of the Masoretic text. Scholars such as Linda Day have compared and contrasted the characterizations of Esther in the various texts. Because this project seeks to understand contemporary enculturations of the Esther text and because as a part of the Jewish and Protestant Christian canons, the Masoretic text is more widely circulated, the primary image of Esther examined in this project is the Esther of the Masoretic

text. The following is a summary of this Hebrew Esther text.

Summary of the Hebrew Bible Esther

The story opens in Susa at a lavish banquet thrown by the king of Persia, Ahasuerus. Ahasuerus requests that his wife, Vashti, appear before his banquet. Vashti refuses, and the enraged king issues a proclamation that her royal position be given to another. The king's officials conduct a search and bring many young women to the royal court. Esther, the cousin of Mordecai the Jew, is among these women. After twelve months of preparation, she appears before the king, and he chooses her to become queen. Advised by Mordecai, Esther never reveals that she is a Jewess.

While this was happening, Mordecai discovers a plot to kill the king. He tells Esther, and she tells the king. The two traitors are hanged, and Mordecai's name is recorded in the king's annals.

Haman, an Agagite, is promoted to be the king's top official, and he sends out a decree that all people must bow down to him. Mordecai refuses to do so, and Haman becomes very angry. Haman tells the king that the Jews must not be tolerated, and receives permission to issue a decree that all the Jews be killed on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, a date he determined by casting lots.

Mordecai is deeply disturbed by this proclamation, and he dons a sackcloth and laments outside the king's gate. Esther hears of Mordecai's distress and sends him some clothes. Mordecai refuses them. Instead, he sends a copy of the decree to Esther and implores her to approach the king to save her people. She sends a message back to Mordecai telling him that everyone who approaches the king uninvited will be put to death. Furthermore, she has not been

invited before the king in quite some time. Mordecai replies that without her help, “relief and deliverance will arise from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish” (4:14).

Esther agrees to approach the king, and she asks Mordecai to hold a fast on her behalf.

After three days of fasting, Esther approaches the king. He accepts her presence and asks her request. Esther invites Ahasuerus and Haman to a banquet that evening. Pleased with his Queen, Ahasuerus again asks Esther’s request at the banquet and offers to give her up to half of his kingdom. Esther asks that Haman and Ahasuerus attend another banquet the following evening.

Haman is thrilled by this request, but on the way out of the palace gates, he encounters Mordecai, once again refusing to bow in deference. Haman decides to build a gallows on which to hang Mordecai, and goes to court to get the king’s permission to do so.

Meanwhile, Ahasuerus, unable to sleep, has his chronicles read to him. When he hears of Mordecai’s discovery of the plot to kill him, he learns that Mordecai was not honored for this service. The king calls Haman, who has just arrived at the court, and asks him, “What should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?” (6:6). Thinking that the honor will be bestowed upon him, Haman suggests that the man be dressed in the king’s royal robes and be led by a royal official throughout the city on one of the king’s horses. Ahasuerus then sends Haman out to do so, honoring Mordecai.

Haman and the king attend the second banquet later that day. The king asks again Esther’s request. She asks that her life and the lives of her people be spared. The king becomes enraged and asks Esther who would dare take her life. Esther points to Haman. The king decides to hang Haman on the gallows he had made for Mordecai, and Mordecai is appointed to Haman’s

office. A second decree is issued throughout Persia, allowing the Jews to defend themselves on the thirteenth of Adar. The Jewish festival of Purim is established to commemorate this event.

Historical Background of Esther

Did Esther ever really exist as a historical figure? The Jewish historian, Josephus, thought that Ahasuerus, the name of the king in the Hebrew version, was the king known in Persia as Artaxerxes I who lived 465-424 BC (Larkin, 71). Suggesting a historical reference to Mordecai, A. Ungad published a translation of a Fifth Century tablet that mentioned a certain Marduka who was a finance officer during the reign of Artaxerxes I. (Larkin, 73). These few historical references fail to verify that the Hebrew Bible account is a historical account, and indeed, outside of the three biblical texts mentioned earlier, there is no other record of the Esther story.

Does it matter if the Esther story is a historical account? In the body of reader-response criticism, it does not. The text exists, and the significance of the text lies in its function as a catalyst for the reader. Possible meanings of the text are created by the interaction of readers and the text. Bringing his or her cultural biases and experiences to the story, the reader actually creates a new text in his or her very act of reading. At this point, it does not matter if Esther was ever a living person, for she lives in the minds of the readers as they engage her story.

The Hebrew Esther text is merely a starting point for the interpretation of the text. It is a plot in which the reader fills in the motivations and meanings behind the actions. In fact, before beginning her retelling of the Esther story, Traylor says that “the Scriptures, though telling us all we know of this obscure queen, are typically scant in revealing the heroine’s heart. We see the plot, but must interpret the character’s motivations and emotions with the aid of prayer and intuition alone” (Traylor, 8). Traylor verbalizes the motivations of authors and interpreters who

recreate the Esther text. Each author feels inspired to emphasize some elements of the story over others. The author may not even be aware that s/he is showing his or her cultural biases in the retelling of the story. The Esther story, then, becomes imbued with contemporary meanings. This paper seeks to examine what the contemporary readings of the Esther narrative reveal about current American attitudes toward women.

Why Is the Image of Esther Important?

Examination of popular enculturations of this story reveals several distinctly different communities of interpretation, and these communities do not necessarily fall along religious lines. There is no distinctly Christian or distinctly Jewish view of Esther. Traditional views of women are enforced in the conservative, and orthodox communities of both religions. These images of Esther sometimes enforce a traditional ideal of woman as wife and mother while other times presenting Esther as the primary example of a strong woman who exercised power within her community. Some of the images of Esther even suggest challenging the patriarchal structure of the Persian kingdom and hence, current society.

This study began with the assumption that the analysis of gender with relation to the Esther text would fall along historical lines, and the initial intent was to trace the development of the image of Esther with the advent of the feminist movement. This method of study became increasingly problematic because the materials expressing both feminist and non-feminist viewpoints are currently being produced in great numbers, and these feminist and non-feminist communities co-exist and are often in dialogue with one another. The rise of the feminist movement has signified neither a complete restructuring of the way the American culture views women nor an abandonment of the traditional roles for women. Feminists have gained

respectability as presenting an important point of view that informs and challenges the traditional view of women.

Because of the diversity of thought surrounding the role of women in American society, the differing interpretations of Esther are not merely debates over the characterization of a biblical woman. Esther becomes an important tool in the negotiation of the definition of American womanhood. Arguing that Esther exhibits a certain ideal trait lends the authority of the Bible, and for many the support of God, to a given image of womanhood.

There are three main interpretive frameworks in the contemporary images of Esther: pre-feminist, early feminist, and recent feminist. Although there is a historical quality to these labels, they should not be understood merely in terms of time. The time element of the labels indicates the development of each viewpoint, but each of the three viewpoints currently exists and defines itself in terms of the other two viewpoints. The pre-feminist viewpoint paints Esther as a traditional woman, the ideal wife and daughter. The early feminist view of Esther emphasizes Esther's strength and power of influence. This Esther is an ideal woman in that she can be as effective as any man. In both the pre-feminist and the early feminist images of Esther, the patriarchal structure of the kingship remains unchallenged. The more recent feminist view of Esther challenges both of the previous views. It questions the very process of using Esther as an ideal image, and criticizes the patriarchal society that Esther herself must work within and does not challenge.

The Pre-Feminist Images of Esther: Man's Ideal Woman

The pre-feminist image of Esther is that of a man's ideal woman who gracefully reconciles the demands put upon her by all the men in her life. Pre-feminist images of Esther interpret Esther

as an ideal woman only in her relationships with men. They do not take into account feminist images of Esther, because within this community, feminism is not a valued viewpoint. Examples of pre-feminist communities include the conservative branches of Christianity and Judaism, which believe that God created man and woman with different characteristics to serve different functions in society. A woman is to be the daughter, wife, and mother; that is, her relationships are always defined by her proximity to men. In these communities, the Esther text is often used to teach a young woman her appropriate role in society: to be pleasing to a man, fulfilling her desires without challenging the man's authority.

Several aspects of the story are pivotal in recognizing a pre-feminist image of Esther. Vashti's relationship with the king, Esther's relationship with her family, Esther's relationship with the king, and Esther's relationship with God are all important elements of the story from a pre-feminist perspective.

Vashti's Relationship with Ahasuerus

Vashti, the king's first wife, either is not mentioned or is presented as sinful and disobedient in pre-feminist images. Miriam Chaikin creates the most astonishing image of a pre-feminist Vashti in her recreation of the story for children. Her picture of Vashti refusing to visit the king is that of a repugnant woman with her arms folded defiantly and her nose high in the air. All of her servants surround her with looks of horror on their faces. In contrast, throughout Chaikin's book, Esther is always portrayed with a pleasant expression on her face and a bowed head. This Esther never looks a man in the eye and is the ideal, submissive woman.

Vashti is also a negative character in the comical cartoon version of the Megillat Shushan, by N. Ashlag. Vashti refuses to come before "the drunkard" and then kicks her servant out the

door (Ashlag, 11). This version of the Esther story exaggerates stereotypes for humor. When Haman advises the king not merely to banish, but to kill Vashti for her disobedience, he adds that “men are the bosses at home and wives must respect them and speak their language (even if they don’t know it!)” (Ashlag, 15). The assertion that women may not speak the language of their husbands does not speak very highly of the women in that society.

Ashlag’s statement implies that women are either too ignorant to have learned their husbands’ languages or that they speak a devalued woman’s language. Ashlag grossly exaggerates the role of women to such an extent that the work appears misogynist.

The Babylonian Talmud interprets Vashti’s refusal as a function of her gentile or non-Jewish nature, for she is described as the daughter of the most evil of the Jews’ enemies, Nebuchadnezzar (Megillah, 10b). The Megillat Esther says that “both Ahasuerus and Vashti had an immoral purpose” (Megillah, 12b). It goes on to explain that Ahasuerus and his companions were talking of inconsequential matters on the Sabbath, such as whether the Median, the Persian, or the Chaldean women were the most beautiful. Ahasuerus says that his wife Vashti is the most beautiful of all, and the men request that she come before them naked. The Rabbis explained that “this remark teaches you that the wicked Vashti used to take the daughters of Israel and strip them naked and make them work on the Sabbath” (Megillah, 12b). As a result, Rabbi Jose b. Hanina said that “this teaches that leprosy broke out on her” and “it was taught that Gabriel came and fixed a tail on her” so that she was too embarrassed to appear before the men (Megillah, 12b). The Rabbis never question if the demand for Vashti to appear naked is problematic, because Vashti and Ahasuerus are Persians, not Jews, and therefore not of consequence to the Jewish teachings except as a character foil to the Jewish heroes of the story,

Esther and Mordecai.

Other pre-feminist interpretations of Esther fail to deal with the image of Vashti.

Hollender's story begins with Ahasuerus as a happy king, "except for one thing . . . Ahasuerus wanted a queen" (Hollender, 82). Greene, Griffin, Harmon, and the Rainfall images of Esther all begin the account of the story after Vashti's banishment with the king's search for a queen as well. These materials avoid the portrayal of a disobedient woman, because either they feel it is an unimportant element of the story or they do not want to portray a disobedient woman, even as a character foil, in a text that is supposed to present the image of ideal womanhood.

Esther's Relationship with her Family

In pre-feminist images, Esther's relationship with her family is that of a loyal and obedient cousin or adopted daughter. The text says that Esther is Mordecai's cousin and he "adopted her as his own daughter" (2:7) at the death of her parents. In the Babylonian Talmud, the Rabbis argue that one should not read that he took her "for a daughter" but "for a house," which is to say that Esther was Mordecai's wife, for the Hebrew word for daughter, "bat," is very similar to the Hebrew word for house, "bet" (Megillah, 13a). Whatever the relationship between Esther and Mordecai, the literature of a pre-feminist viewpoint consistently portrays Esther as submissive and obedient to Mordecai, who takes care of Esther and continues to advise her when she is in the house of the king. The implication is that Esther is unable to take care of herself. In the pre-feminist images of Esther, her relationship with her family is one of guidance because she is incapable of guiding herself. Also, it should be noted that her family consists of one male, her Uncle Mordecai. Esther is not situated within a larger family structure as are many women of the Hebrew Bible. She has no father and no children. Her relationship with Mordecai is stressed

because he is the only true Jewish role model and teacher in her life

As noted above, from a Jewish viewpoint, it is problematic for Esther to be married to a Persian and not a Jew. Mordecai is significant because his instruction and guidance help Esther to keep her Jewish practices in the palace. The texts have several clever ways of circumventing the problem of Esther obeying Jewish law when living as a Persian queen and keeping her Jewish identity secret. The Megillah explains that Esther had seven maids, one for each day of the week. Then she could keep secret that she was Jewish, knowing it was the Sabbath when the “seventh maid” served her (Megillah, 13a). Rabbi Scherman and Rabbi Zlotowitz go on to explain that if the maids had known that she always rested on the Sabbath, they would have guessed that she was Jewish; however, the weekday maids always saw her working, and the Sabbath maid always saw her resting, so she could obey Mordecai’s command not to reveal her Jewish identity (Scherman, 14). In Megillat Shushan, Esther obediently turns down a sumptuous meal for kosher “fruit, vegetables, and sprouts” (Ashlag, 22). She then proceeds to keep track of the days of the week by eating a different fruit each day (Ashlag, 22).

Mordecai not only instructs Esther on how to remain kosher, but he also advises her not to reveal her Jewish identity. In the Artscroll Youth Megillah, Rabbi Scherman and Rabbi Zlotowitz explain that her father’s first name does not appear until she is summoned before the king in 2:15, by suggesting that in remembering “that her father had been a *tzaddik*” and that “she came from such a holy family,” she does not ask for “perfume or cosmetics, hoping that they will not think she is pretty and they would send her home” (Scherman, 16). Esther’s relationship with her family is foremost in her mind, and she realizes that she must keep the laws and the customs of her people.

In an anthology of Bible stories for children, Hollender expresses a lack of confidence in Esther's ability to keep kosher and continue to live under Jewish law without the influence of her uncle. Hollender includes another character, Esther's nurse Miriam. Miriam is to "take care of Esther," even though Esther is presumably old enough to be a married woman. Mordecai visits Esther every day in this version and has to "remind [Esther] to pray to God" (Hollender, 84). Esther cannot take care of herself, and needs the influence of Mordecai.

Rainfall Educational Toys has produced two toys for young girls that also demonstrate the same premise, that Esther should not exhibit independent thought. Rainfall Educational Toys produces an Esther Collectible Doll, very similar to a "Barbie" doll, and a set of Esther and Xerxes Paper Dolls. These toys come with Parent Guides that interpret the Esther story for the parents to teach children the meaning of the Esther story. They present both questions and answers that reinforce the idea that there is only one possible interpretation of the text. In one activity, the Parent Guide suggests that "you may want to highlight some of Esther's admirable characteristics by saying . . . 'Esther was a very smart lady— she did what she was told and she asked for advice when she wasn't sure what to do.'" These toys do not value independent thinking in the character of Esther just as they do not value independent thinking in the parents and children buying the toys.

Close examination of the Esther story reveals that she does NOT always do as she is told, but rather that she is selective in the commands she chooses to disobey. The Esther in the biblical text questions Mordecai's judgement when he asks her to come before the king unsummoned. He convinces her that disobeying the king is the only way to serve her people, so eventually, she does. The pre-feminist materials do not recognize this as an act of rebellion, but rather they exalt

it as an act of bravery, further evidence that recreations of biblical stories reflect societal and personal values.

Esther's Relationship with Ahasuerus

Esther's role as queen is idealized in pre-feminist versions of Esther. True to the pre-feminist viewpoint, Esther's role as a wife is supposed to fulfill all her desires, as it is the most honored position she can achieve as a woman. Greene mentions in her children's book, The Queen Who Saved Her People, that the woman who is chosen to be the wife of Ahasuerus will "reign as his queen, she'd be his dear wife; What girl wouldn't love to live that sort of life?" (Greene, 2). Elsewhere, "life is sweet for the happy young bride" (Greene, 10). The implicit assumption is that to be the wife of the king should be a female's greatest goal.

How does Esther win this envied position as queen? Most of the texts emphasize her beauty. The Book of Esther says that "Esther was admired by all who saw her" (2:15) and that "the king loved Esther more than all the other women" (2:17). Outside of her landing the position as queen, Esther's physical appearance does not factor greatly into the biblical story; however, Esther's appearance as beautiful is a significant aspect of pre-feminist images of Esther.

In Betty Hollender's children's version of Esther, she is "the prettiest girl in the world" (Hollender, 83). It is fortunate for Esther to be so beautiful, because this text recreates a conversation between Haman and the king as they are discussing the requirements for a future queen. Ahasuerus says that "she must be very beautiful . . . she must have dark hair . . . she must be thin, too, I hate fat women" (Hollender, 82).

In Hollender's book, the illustration of Esther's selection as queen depicts a sweet, innocent, smiling Esther surrounded by several upset and obviously very jealous women. The

message to a young girl is that she must be beautiful to win the object of her desires, a man, and that she will lose all of her female friends in doing so. The Midrash also plays upon this jealousy between women. According to the Esther Megillah, the king was angry when Esther would not reveal her nationality. He planned a large feast so that she would tell, but she remained steadfast in her promise to Mordecai. Then, the king tried to frighten her, saying that he was gathering all the beautiful girls of the kingdom to pick another wife. Despite the threat to her position and the use of other women against her, Esther still did not tell her nationality (Megillah, 13a).

In Hollender's version of the story, it is not Esther's verbal ability to persuade or her stature as the wife of the king that convinces him to save her people. Esther's capacity to reason is apparently unimportant when considered alongside her stunning beauty. As Mordecai points out, "you look beautiful, the king will listen to you" (Hollender, 86). This book teaches a young girl that in order to be chosen as special or to have her voice heard, she must be beautiful.

In another children's story, Esther: The Very Brave Queen by Susan Griffin, Esther is more often described as "beautiful" and "young" than she is described as "brave." Out of the ten references to her character, three mention her beauty and youth. This story should be aptly retitled: Esther: The Beautiful, Young Queen. Griffin, of course, is not the only author who emphasizes Esther's beauty. Chaikin, Greene, and Harmon all describe Esther as "very beautiful."

After the king sees Esther and decides that she is the most qualified to become his Queen because of her beauty, he hosts a feast to celebrate. In Greene's interpretation of Esther, the pages that depict the feast once again reinforce a narrow definition of gender roles. All of the men in the picture are either seated eating and drinking or are standing and clapping. The women

in the picture are dancing and performing for the men or they are serving the men's food (Greene, 8-9).

The portrait of Esther that emerges from the examination of her relationship with the king in pre-feminist material is that of a beautiful woman who serves her husband, and has accomplished the ultimate goal for a woman, she has "captured the heart of the king" (Traylor, subtitle). Esther's relationship with the king is characterized as submissive and unchallenging. Great emphasis is placed upon her physical appearance, and the image of women as a whole in pre-feminist material is that they are obedient and happy to serve the men in their lives.

Esther's Relationship with God

The Masoretic Book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that never directly mentions the name of God. Because the hand of God and his omnipresence are very important aspects of pre-feminist, traditional communities, often these communities find imaginative ways of pointing out that God is present in the text despite the fact that his name is never directly stated.

Jewish communities often interpret Esther as a text that shows how Jews are to live in the diaspora. The problem of Esther's marriage to a non-Jew, for example, is resolved with the explanation that her position as queen was all a part of God's plan to help her save her people.

The Rabbis of the Talmudic commentary often find clever ways of ensuring that the hand of God is apparent in the text. For example, the Midrash teaches that when Esther appeared before the king without having been summoned, he wanted to kill her, but God "did a hidden miracle. He made the king like her more than ever" (Scherman, 30). Also, when Esther confronts Haman at the second banquet, she begins by saying "If you are pleased with me, O King, and if the King wishes, I request that my own life be saved and I desire the life of my nation be saved"

(7:3). The rabbis explain that Esther said the word “king” twice because she was “talking to two kings at the same time. Not only was she speaking to Achashveirosh [Ahasuerus], she was also begging for the help of Hashem [God], the real King of the whole world” (Scherman, 36).

Rabbinic commentaries have numerous other ways of explaining God’s presence in the Esther text.

Jewish communities do not have to rely on these interpretations of God’s work in the Book of Esther, however, to demonstrate why Esther is in the Jewish canon. For Jews, Esther is also a liberation text and a documentation that justifies the festival of Purim. Christians, in contrast, do not count Esther as a liberation text or celebrate Purim and therefore must struggle with why Esther is a part of the Christian canon despite the fact that God is never mentioned throughout the book.

Rainfall Educational Toys tells the parents and children that Esther is important because she “instills godly attributes . . . such as her concern for others.” Esther “had great faith in God and was willing to do what was right.” The parent guide says that the most important verse in the story is 4:16 in which Esther tells Mordecai to gather the Jews in Susa to fast. She says that she will fast, and then go to the king. This is the only indirect reference to God in the story, in that Esther is fasting and presumably praying to God. It is no accident that the only part of the biblical text that this parent guide urges young girls to memorize is the only verse that features an indirect reference to God. With the help of an Esther collectible doll and an Esther paper doll, Rainfall Educational Toys hopes that the child will realize that the Esther story is important not because it is a well written narrative or an excellent example of a liberation text, but because “God has special plans for everyone, and we need to be willing to do what He asks so that we can

accomplish His will and please Him.”

Joyce Baldwin is another Christian author who wrestles with the significance of the Book of Esther. Like Rainfall Educational Toys, she eschews the text as important because it features the liberation of an oppressed people. In her introduction, she says that she has assessed what the book meant to historical Jews, but because she is reading from a Protestant Christian perspective, she notes that “since the book is in scripture, it demands a verdict” (Baldwin, 16). What is Baldwin judging? After further reading it would appear that she is judging the importance of the book of Esther as a part of the Protestant Christian canon. She says that Esther is a historical book, describing the reason for Purim. Since Christians do not celebrate Purim she thinks that Christians must look for Esther’s other contributions to the Christian faith (Baldwin, 32). Baldwin says that Esther’s “Judaizing tendency was obvious whereas its Christian content was not” (Baldwin, 39). Baldwin seems to be rejecting the “Jewish interpretation” of the text merely because it is a “Jewish interpretation.” She even says “Purim celebrated [the Jews’] deliverance from death, which, like the Passover, should have alerted them to look for an even greater salvation” (Baldwin, 42). Can Christians not derive some meaning out of the liberation themes of Esther without presenting a negative image of Jewish communities?

Baldwin eventually concludes that Esther is a book that shows God’s work in the world without stating His name. She uses an interesting example of WWII to validate Esther’s appearance in the Christian canon. According to Baldwin, both the survival of the state of Israel and the deliverance of Britain at Dunkirk “witness to a divine overruling of events even more extraordinary than those ‘coincidences’ of the Esther story” so “the book of Esther is still relevant” today (Baldwin, 42). In her determined attempt to explain the canonicity of Esther,

Baldwin unites two distinctly separate historical events. Ignoring historical context, she uses these events of World War II to explain the canonicity of Esther.

Christians and Jews in pre-feminist communities must explain why Esther is a part of their respective canons. They use images of Esther to teach young women in their communities the values and ideals embraced by their community. In pre-feminist images, Esther is depicted as obedient to God, even though the name of the deity never directly appears in the Esther text. Pre-feminist images of Esther do not depict her challenging the power or authority structures in ancient Persia. Vashti is portrayed as a negative character, and a poor role model for women. Esther, in contrast, is the ideal woman in her relationships with her family, with the king, and with a God who is never mentioned in the text.

The Early Feminist Images of Esther

The early feminist images of Esther represent a liberal pluralist interpretation of the Bible. Liberal pluralists often explain that their task is to rewrite history in order to acknowledge overlooked voices, a task which often includes uncovering the voices of women and other disadvantaged populations. Early Feminists accentuate the female characters of the Bible to point out that the strong, favorable characters of the Bible are not only men, but women. This rediscovering of history does not necessarily challenge the hegemonic assumptions of the society. The early feminist viewpoint merely seeks to raise female characters to the status of male characters without challenging the underlying patriarchal structure of biblical society.

The central example of this early feminist work is Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Woman's Bible. Realizing that the Bible wielded great power in the battle against women's equality, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote an interpretation of the Bible that sought to point out women

figures in the Bible and the important roles they played. Of the Bible, she said:

the Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgement seat of Heaven, tried, condemned, and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home. Here is the Bible position of woman briefly summed up . . . Those who have the divine insight to translate, transpose, and transfigure this mournful object of pity into an exalted, dignified personage, worthy of our worship as the mother of the race, are to be congratulated as have a share of the occult mystic power of the eastern Mahatmas (Stanton, 7).

Note that Stanton suggests transforming the negative image of women into a more positive image. She may even question the patriarchal framework that embraces this image of womanhood, but she does not call the oppression of women into fundamental questioning by suggesting a radical restructuring of society.

All the Women of the Bible by Edith Deen is another example of early feminist scholarship. Deen's book lists all the women mentioned in the Bible and then systematically presents 316 concise biographies of these women. Deen includes "52 searching studies of women in the foreground, more than 125 shorter sketches of named women, and more than 125 sketches of the nameless women in the background" (Deen, cover). The interpretations themselves present a conservative view of womanhood, but the very act of compiling such a volume to highlight women's roles in the biblical text is exemplary feminist pluralist scholarship.

With Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Edith Deen, care must be taken not to censure them unnecessarily by judging them out of their cultural contexts. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's message of equality was radical for her day. Edith Deen must be recognized for her attempt to emphasize the women of the Bible. With the advent of more radical forms of feminism, these pluralist views of

women figures in the Bible appear to be moderate at best. Both of these women represent large advances in feminist biblical scholarship, and their feminism must not be judged by the standards of currently well developed feminist thought. There are a number of moderate feminist thinkers, however, who are currently actively developing strong images of biblical women without challenging societal norms. This explains why some truly moderate, early feminist images of Esther have been published within the past few years.

The image of Esther in an early feminist community, like those Stanton and Deen represent, is that of a strong, brave queen. Whereas pre-feminist communities emphasize Esther's relationships with men, early feminists often exalt Esther as a liberationist figure. The men in the story are often criticized, and in a true reversal of pre-feminist imagery, Vashti is venerated. It is helpful to examine several aspects of the story when describing an early feminist image of Esther. The image of Vashti, Esther's relationship with her family, Esther's relationship with the king, and her relationship with her people are all essential elements of an Early Feminist image of Esther.

The Image of Vashti

Early feminist depictions of the Esther story fiercely defend Vashti's choice not to appear before the king. There are several reasons early feminists find Vashti's disobedience acceptable. The most frequently cited reason is that King Ahasuerus has requested that Vashti act immorally, appearing before drunken men in scant clothing, if any at all. Deen defends Vashti noting that Vashti is "respected as a woman of nobility and honor and one who had the courage to refuse an unjust command from her husband" (Deen, 147). Hyman says that of all the characters of the Esther narrative, "Vashti, if anybody, should command our respect, certainly our admiration" (Hyman, 78).

Only two items in all the children's material examined actually exhibit a respect for Vashti. L. J. Sattgast mentions Vashti and defends her in her book, Esther: A Brave Queen. Ruth Brin's children's version of Esther also portrays Vashti as a woman defending her dignity. Brin says that the king "told his messenger that Vashti was to appear, unveiled, before the company of men" (Brin, 9). The book then goes on to relate that a "Persian lady" never appeared without her veil to any man but her husband (Brin, 9). Vashti is faced with a moral dilemma: should she obey her husband, or should she protect her honor? Brin's Vashti first pleads with the king to change his mind, and when he does not, she refuses to appear before him. Vashti is not evil as she appears in pre-feminist interpretations. She is a victim in this early feminist portrayal, for Brin points out that Ahasuerus was foolish, and "a foolish king can be dangerous to everyone— even to those he loves" (Brin, 10).

Elizabeth Cady Stanton uses the same defense of Vashti in the Woman's Bible. For Stanton, Vashti is a paragon of feminist virtue and ideal activist. Vashti challenges the unjust king because:

She had a higher idea of womanly dignity than placing herself on exhibition as one of the king's possessions, which it pleased him to present to his assembled princes. Vashti is conspicuous as the first woman recorded whose self-respect and courage enabled her to act contrary to the will of her husband. She was the first "woman who dared." (Stanton, 86)

Stanton goes on to say that Vashti is the "first exhibition of individual sovereignty of woman on record" (Stanton, 87). In Stanton's interpretation, dignity and modesty forbid Vashti from appearing before her foolish husband. The king is a vain, drunken man, and Stanton relates that he illustrates the truth of an old proverb: "when the wine is in, the wit is out" (Stanton, 85). Vashti becomes a symbol for Elizabeth Cady Stanton's fight for women's equality. Stanton

reveres her saying “she stands for the point in human development when womanliness asserts itself and begins to revolt and to throw off the yoke of sensualism and tyranny” (Stanton, 87).

Those who come to Vashti’s defense are not solely women. Of Vashti, the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote:

Oh Vashti! noble Vashti!
Summoned forth, she kept her state,
And left the drunken king to brawl
In Shushan underneath his palms (Stanton, 86).

Vashti is of impeccable moral character and has been forced by her morally corrupt husband to choose between two unsavory options. Vashti does not leave the marriage, nor does she abandon her role as a submissive wife. She merely defends her honor and stands up to her husband which, according to early feminist portrayals, results in an unjust punishment.

Esther’s Relationship with her Family

In early feminist images of Esther, her most important role is not that of wife or daughter, but that of advocate and liberator. Her relationship with Mordecai is portrayed with this premise in mind. Esther’s relationship with Mordecai in early feminist images of Esther is one of mutual respect; however, some authors believe that this respect is cultivated in their relationship while others believe that it was present from the very beginning.

Esther respects Mordecai’s judgement. As Deen notes, Esther exhibits “real loyalty in her co-operation with her cousin Mordecai” (Deen, 149). Mordecai, in turn, does not control Esther, nor does he tyrannically guide her. He understands the role that she is to play in the liberation of her people, and he assists her in preparing for this role.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton presents a self-sacrificing image of Mordecai. She notes that traditional lore says that Mordecai intended to marry Esther, but when he heard of the king’s edict

and “saw what her prospects in life were, and what she might do as a favorite of the king,” he decided to send her to the palace (Stanton, 88). In early feminist literature, Mordecai is a noble man. He understands Esther’s potential.

In Ruth Brin’s The Story of Esther, Mordecai disrespects tradition and teaches Esther “everything he had taught the boys” so that Esther can help him teach all the Jewish children of Persia about their religion (Brin, 6). Though it may seem that Brin challenges gender stereotypes with unorthodox actions, this one incident is the only egalitarian element of her story. Brin does not criticize the king’s authority. She presents the king as a dupe, and Esther as an innocent and wise woman, but she leaves the patriarchal structure intact, noting at the end of her story that with Mordecai as “a wise and kind adviser at his side, even a foolish king like Ahasuerus can become a good ruler and a good husband . . . and they lived happily ever after” (Brin, 32).

Hyman presents the relationship between Esther and Mordecai as more of a dialogue than a constant relationship based on mutual respect. Hyman notes that in the beginning of the story, Mordecai exhibits an intractable rigidity. When he encourages Esther to approach the king, Esther is presented with a crisis. Until this point, her cousin Mordecai had advised and protected her, indeed trying “to extend his protection or control into the very palace itself” (Hyman, 81). Suddenly, he tells her that she must risk her life, and presents three arguments in favor of his decision. He says that she cannot escape her fate; that if she doesn’t help, someone else will, and she will perish; and that it may be for this very reason that she became queen. Hyman thinks that this third argument is an insidious attempt to prey on Esther’s low self- esteem, apparent because she is passive and acts like a “scared rabbit” (Hyman, 81). Hyman argues that Mordecai must be “echo[ing] her own bewilderment” at being chosen to be the Queen of Persia (Hyman, 82).

If Hyman had stopped her analysis at this point, she would have not differed from a pre-feminist viewpoint, but she goes on to note a complete transformation of their relationship. Realizing that her fate has been ordained, Esther develops courage and develops “a dignity that was startling in this former faint-heart” (Hyman, 82). Esther confronts and accepts the possibility of her own death. Risking her life, she decides to go before the king. Hyman emphasizes that “Mordecai, hitherto the father-figure, the commander and protector of Esther, did ‘according to all that Esther had commanded him’ (4:19)” (Hyman, 82). From this point on to the end of the story, Esther becomes the active, strong figure, and Mordecai takes on a passive role. Hyman concludes her essay with a succinct analysis of the relationship between Esther and Mordecai. She says,

A careful reading of its text leaves us with just one sterling character: Esther. Rarely has so poorly equipped a woman grappled so heroically with so dangerous a challenge. As lacking as her cousin-father was in judgement and diplomacy, so was she endowed with hitherto hidden or smothered intelligence, intuition, and courage (Hyman, 85).

Early feminist images of Esther present Esther as a triumphant and powerful heroine in the conclusion of the story. Her relationship with Mordecai is not the passive relationship depicted in pre-feminist images of Esther. In early feminist interpretations, either Esther and Mordecai have a mutually respectful relationship from the opening scenes or they develop one, proving that all relationships between a woman and her father-figure do not have to be paternalistic.

Esther’s Relationship with the King

Power and authority become juxtaposed in Esther’s relationship with the king. In many of the early feminist images of the king, he is a dupe who may possess the acknowledged authority to run the kingdom, but has given the necessary power to his advisors and ultimately his

wife. The king possesses authority, that is the socially recognized permission to shape events. The king may appear to be powerful, but Esther and the king's advisors actually possess the power in the story. Esther, not the king, possesses the ability to shape events. Her relationship with the king is dominated by her upstanding moral character and ability to reason with the king, who is not a very positive character. Esther's virtue and elaborate ethical code enable her to be a just ruler, and through her sexuality and her rational abilities, she convinces the king to allow her to influence his decisions. In early feminist interpretations, by the end of the story, the king is content to approve all of Esther and Mordecai's decisions as they rule the kingdom.

Brin's book emphasizes both the sagacity of Esther and the imprudence of the king. Esther is the most beautiful of all the women who appear before the king "though she was too humble to know it" (Brin, 14). The king chooses her because she has "large dark eyes, long thick hair, and the graceful walk of a true princess" (Brin 14). While Esther is exhibiting the qualities of a true princess, the king is foolish and childish. He likes to play games, so Esther and her friends play games with him. To make him happy, "Esther saw to it that he always came out the winner" (Brin, 16). The king is a silly, easily controlled character, the perfect foil for his wise and noble queen. Brin points out that the king only does what Haman or Esther tells him to do (Brin, 24). At the end of the story she notes that once Mordecai has taken Haman's place all is well with the kingdom because "with a wise and kind adviser at his side, even a foolish king like Ahasuerus can become a good ruler and a good husband" (Brin, 32).

Deen also presents an early feminist image of Esther in her relationship with the king. The king is attracted to her because of her "surpassing loveliness" and he introduces her as "queen of one of the most powerful empires in the world" (Deen, 148). Esther is a smart young woman; she

is prudent and fearless, knowing that “though she had won her husband’s love and confidence, she was dealing with powerful and sinister forces” (Deen, 150). Deen’s image of the king goes one step beyond foolish, he is evil and controlled by pagan desires. Esther must use her cunning to move slowly with the king, hosting two banquets until she can be sure the time is right for her to confront her enemy, Haman. According to Deen, the king easily acquiesces his power to Esther’s strong character and the story ends with the Jews having successfully gained control of Persia.

In Norah Lofts’ novel, Esther is an articulate, well educated young woman who grasps the attention of the king with her widespread knowledge. Upon their first meeting, she speaks of all the scrolls in the king’s library that she has read in her year of preparation. The king is amazed by her agility with words. Esther captivates the king, and he chooses her as queen because she amuses him.

Once Esther has gained the powerful position as queen, she does not hesitate to challenge the king’s authority. When Mordecai notifies her of the plot to kill the king, she immediately, without a thought to her appearance, runs into the king’s chambers, sends his advisors away and tells him of the plot. The king is amused by Esther because he sees her as a passionate young woman who needs to be humored, and he underestimates her abilities.

When Esther astutely observes that Haman often ridicules the king and passes it off as court humor, Ahasuerus is enraged. He censures Esther, and she “rapped out a sharp retort” (Lofts, 107). Ahasuerus is taken back noting that “nobody, not his own mother, or his tutors, or even banished Vashti had ever spoken to [him] like that” (Lofts, 108). This Esther is not afraid to speak her mind and stand up for her beliefs. Lofts says that “she was no sawdust stuffed figure

with a pretty face” (Lofts, 129).

Esther does not hesitate to approach the king. When she confronts Haman at the banquet, the king realizes that he is nothing more than “a gaily dressed puppet figure whose strings had always been pulled by somebody else” (Lofts, 152). Ahasuerus is enlightened and sees “in one mental flash, that if he were ever to rule his Empire as successfully as he had led his army the one person whose help and support would be valuable, was Esther” (Lofts, 153).

Esther earns the respect of the king, and actually transforms him into a better leader. He retains the power of the kingship, with the acknowledgment that sharing the authority of the crown with Esther is both an effective and prudent way to rule a kingdom. Typical of early feminist interpretations, Lofts does not challenge the monarchy or the king’s position as ruler, but she does portray Esther as a powerful woman who earned the respect of the king and thus, convinced him to consider an egalitarian throne.

Esther’s Relationship with her People

The primary image of Esther in early feminist images is that of liberator because the role of the liberator is one of great significance in the history of the American women’s movement. Feminist women are expected to confront injustice and advocate the equality of women just as Esther must protest the immoral decisions of the men in the story and proactively pursue the deliverance of her people, the Jews.

In the early stages of the Feminist movement, employing biblical examples was an effective way for women to gain legitimacy as public speakers. Attempting to gain a voice in the Abolitionist movement, Angelina Grimké “argued the biblical precedent of Esther, a woman who dared to appear before the King of Persia and plead for the lives of her fellow slaves” (Japp, 337).

Grimké's image of Esther was one of a woman who had been forced to step out of her appropriate role as a wife in a case of extreme urgency, faced with the "death to herself and all her nation" (Japp, 337). Grimké's appeal to the model of Esther was not all positive. She considered herself accepting the position of "slave and supplicant," and she accused Esther of employing "personal charms and sensual gratification" in order to achieve her means (Japp, 340). Grimké saw herself as living in an age that "was too moral to admit of the adoption of [seduction] to obtain as holy an end" (Japp, 340). Grimké found Esther to be a powerful role model and tool, but she criticized Esther's tactics in order to avoid any false conclusions that her predominantly male audience would draw from the inference to Esther. Appealing to Esther as a moral supplicant who does not willingly challenge her husband not only gave Grimké the rhetorical power of biblical authority, but it also made her speech less inflammatory. Though Grimké's Esther is conciliatory, the main thrust of her message is that Esther was a true moral advocate for the oppressed.

In All the Women of the Bible, Edith Deen also exalts Esther as obtaining "the position of a queen of amazing power, a power which she manages to use wisely" (Deen, 147). Deen emphasizes Esther's role as a liberator and advocate of her people, saying of the Esther story, "it has become a patriotic symbol to a persecuted people of the ultimate triumph of truth and justice . . . the courage of Esther becomes the dominating factor in the salvation of her people" (Deen, 146).

Not only does Esther save the lives of her people, but she decrees that the Jews can defend themselves and defeat their enemies. As Deen notes, "Again exhibiting solicitude for the permanent protection of her people, she was instrumental in having it written into the law that the

Jews not only could defend themselves but could slay their enemies” (Deen, 151). Deen defends Esther against the criticism that she endorsed violence as a solution to oppression. She employs the rhetorical tactic of the demonization of the enemy, saying “it must be remembered that she was dealing with an implacable enemy” (Deen, 151).

Esther is ultimately the epitome of an early feminist woman. She is an advocate of the oppressed. She is courageous and rational. She works within the power structures of her society to institute change, and she never fundamentally challenges the power structures to the extent that she is vilified by the majority population. Esther speaks her voice and is heard, an important aspect of a feminist portrayal of womanhood.

Recent Feminist Images of Esther

Recent feminist images of Esther differ radically from both pre-feminist and early feminist images. Pre-feminist and early feminist images of Esther examine the character of Esther and embrace her as an ideal, the exemplary “traditional woman” and the ideal “liberated woman” respectively. Recent feminists question the process of creating and enforcing an ideal at all. Recent feminists do not concern themselves with the image of Esther or the image of women, but with the structure of society as a whole, which they see as patriarchal.

Recent feminists are informed by the work of reader-response criticism. They acknowledge that the character of Esther is created in the context in which she is read, and they challenge pre-feminist and early feminist images of Esther because they argue that these are images of Esther created within a patriarchal context. Pre-feminist and early feminist images refuse to challenge the central assumptions of their societies. Recent feminists find pre-feminist and early feminist images to be problematic because the character of Esther is a mere pawn in the

struggle to reinforce hegemonic norms. These recent feminists believe that pointing out the hoax of Esther as a liberation figure is their contribution to the revolutionary abolishment of patriarchy.

Instead of re-interpreting the character of Esther as possessing desirable androgynous character traits as early feminists do, recent feminists re-interpret the background of the story. Seeking a meaningful perspective on the Esther narrative, they create a story in which the patriarchal system is exposed and replaced with an egalitarian society. The image of Esther that emerges from this new set of background assumptions is a complex and completely different Esther.

Recent feminist criticism of Esther has developed within the last thirty years. Because of this, most of these images of Esther exist in formal feminist scholarship rather than fictional accounts or recreations, although recent feminists have created a few artistic, popular materials as well. There seems to be a lack of this recent feminist material in the form of children's books; however, Diane Wolkstein's Esther's Story is an engaging exception to this observation. For the most part, the recent feminist images of Esther emerge in feminist biblical critique and formal feminist scholarship.

Because these images of Esther are relatively young and because they seek to criticize the background of the story and not the character of Esther, the framework used to examine pre-feminist and early feminist images of Esther is no longer useful. Recent feminists do not find an examination of Vashti and Esther in relationship to their families, their husband, and their people to be incredibly enlightening.

The body of recent feminist scholarship surrounding Esther and Vashti is widely varied, and if any common themes are to be found they center around the primacy of experience and the

development of voice. As Denise Larder Carmody notes,

If there is one common characteristic uniting current feminist theologians and bringing them into potential conflict with the past, male dominated orthodoxies, it is their insistence on the primacy of experience. They are tired of having men tell them what they should be feeling and thinking, . . . how God works in their lives, and what God's plan is for them. Increasingly, they are defining fidelity to God as keeping faith with what they know firsthand, from their lived experience of what it means to be women struggling to make sense of their lives and the world . . . (Carmody, 181).

Alongside this insistence on the importance of women's experience is a series of themes centered around the struggle for a woman to find her voice and use it in a society that values her input regardless of her gender. These three characteristics define a recent feminist reading of Esther: a challenge of the patriarchal framework of the Esther story, an insistence on imagining Esther's experience, and a development of Esther's personal voice.

Esther and Vashti: Challenging Patriarchy?

There are a range of recent feminist opinions on exactly how the book of Esther challenges the patriarchal structure. Some feminists criticize it and argue that it is a book about maintaining the status quo, and that not the text itself, but the recognition of the patriarchal nature of the text will challenge the hegemonic norms. Other feminists find it to be a partially liberating message and feel that it needs only minor revisions, so they add texts to make Esther an ideal liberation text. Still others hold that the book of Esther is so absurdly patriarchal that it must be a satire, over-exaggerated only to point out the need for change.

For many Jewish feminists, the festival of Purim is not a completely festive occasion because they see patriarchy left intact at the end of the story. For these feminists, critiquing the patriarchal nature of the story is their primary way of instituting change. Katheryn Darr cites a friend of hers who, on the festival of Purim, tells her daughter, "don't be Esther, be Vashti!"

because Esther appears too docile (Darr, 188). Judith Stein finds the same faults in Esther. In the prologue to her feminist retelling of the Esther story, she writes,

As a Jewish feminist, Purim had become a particularly troubling holiday. It was wonderful to have a holiday where the hero was a woman . . . but other aspects of the story were hard to accept. Why was the first queen, Vashti, banished? Why should she have obeyed an order to appear naked before the king and his court? How could I celebrate a heroine who was chosen by a beauty contest? (Stein, i).

These women wrestle with a heroine who seems to work within the patriarchal structure.

Because they disagree with the structure, they also disagree with the portrayal of Esther as a heroine.

Susan Niditch exhibits similar criticism of Esther in her essay, "Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority." She comments that the author intends the foolishness of Vashti to be a foil for the wisdom of Esther, but that feminists often empathize with Vashti, considering Esther to be a weak collaborator. Esther is not an "image meaningful or consoling to modern woman" (Niditch, 39). She critiques the book of Esther noting that "its heroine is a woman who offers a particular model for success, one with which oppressors would be especially comfortable. Opposition is to be subtle, behind the scenes and ultimately strengthening for the power structure" (Niditch, 33).

Niditch names the central focus of the work as how Jews should live in the diaspora, becoming and staying a part of the status quo (Niditch, 35). Life in the diaspora was difficult for the Jews, for they had to balance assimilation and self-preservation. Niditch sees the Esther story as an image of how to deal with this conflict, a wholly unacceptable model for feminists.

Bea Wyler does not agree that Esther is completely an ineffective text for feminists. She believes that the book of Esther carries a liberating message that merely does not go far enough,

so she adds an appropriate end to the tale. In her essay entitled, “Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen,” Wyler argues that Esther is a well written liberation text, but that the literary device of reversal is not completed by the end of the story. Esther and Mordecai may be liberated as Jews, but Esther has not been liberated from her position of bondage to the men in her life. Says Wyler, “if the book of Esther is about liberation from bondage in general, then it simply ‘lacks’ two chapters” (Wyler, 133). She goes on to relate these two chapters.

In Wyler’s eleventh chapter of the book of Esther, Esther hosts another feast, this time inviting the king and her cousin, Mordecai. At the feast, the king asks her what she wants, up to half of the kingdom. She accepts his offer of half of the kingdom, instituting an egalitarian rule. Then, in chapter twelve, Esther and Mordecai issue a decree that the subjugation of women should end. Vashti is re-instituted and celebrated as the queen’s personal advisor. Wyler notes that this revolution is less bloody than the previous one.

Not only does Wyler amend the Esther text to make it favorable to feminists, she also resolves many feminists’ problems with the festival of Purim. She suggests that Jewish women utilize the “Fast of Esther” (Ta’anit Esther), currently a part of the Jewish calendar, as “a fast of current mourning for the lasting discrimination against and subjugation of women, Jewish and non-Jewish alike” (Wyler, 135). Though she may charge that without her additions, the book of Esther is not a complete liberation text, the festival of Purim can become a festival meaningful to women once again.

As a child, Celina Spiegel struggled with the image of Esther in Purim. She resolves her inner conflict by suggesting that feminists accept the book of Esther as “satire, expertly structured to mock the established order while empowering the Jews” (Spiegel, 193). She believes that the

Esther text is fundamentally a liberating text, strengthening the identity of the Jewish people and teaching them how to challenge their oppressors in the diaspora. Unlike Wyler, Spiegel does not take issue with the image of women in the text. She sees both Vashti and Esther as liberation figures.

Spiegel defends Vashti's actions. She notes that if the seven day festival of the king was truly a "saturnalia" (Spiegel, 194), then it was appropriate for Vashti to challenge the drunken king. In fact, this may have been "her only sanctioned opportunity to disobey the king" (Spiegel, 194). Spiegel says that the drunken king's edict banishing Vashti is grossly exaggerated. It "merely restates the status quo with absurd force, exposing the king and his ministers' insecurity as rulers, as men, and as husbands" (Spiegel, 195). Vashti emerges triumphant, and her banishment only serves to portray the poor judgement of her husband.

Spiegel also portrays Esther in a positive light. She says that the image of Esther in this exaggerated satire actually turns out to be an affirmation of "unselfconscious, unfallen female sexuality" because the Jews owe their salvation to Esther's sexuality (Spiegel, 202). She says that Esther's sexuality is actually presented as the "embodiment of Jewish virtues," suggesting a positive image of female sexuality (Spiegel, 202). Esther is beautiful, and the king listens to her because she exerts power over him. Whereas many feminists would criticize this element of the story, Spiegel says that it proves that "the subtle, indirect workings of a woman can be more effective than the brash carryings-on of a man" (Spiegel, 202). She is not suggesting a traditional role for women, working within the role patriarchy assigns them to exert some influence over the men of their lives. Spiegel suggests that the Esther text, as a grossly exaggerated farce, actually exalts women and supports an egalitarian view of society. Spiegel actually introduces the idea of

genre into the feminist criticism. She does not necessarily deny the elements of patriarchy within the text, but she suggests that the reader understand the text as a satire or as a farce. The focus of Spiegel's criticism then becomes how to read the text and not what is within the text.

Recent feminists differ immensely on how they read and interpret the relationship between the Esther story and the influence the patriarchal structure of her world. In one way or another, all recent feminist analysis criticizes the patriarchal structure, but the feminists themselves disagree to what extent patriarchy is an accepted value within the Esther text.

Imagining Esther's Experience

In the attempt to overcome patriarchal barriers to understanding Esther, many feminists find it meaningful to imagine Esther's experiences as a woman. By placing herself within the role of Esther or Vashti, a recent feminist can re-write the story to be more affirming of women's experiences.

Judith Stein rewrites the Esther story in her "Purim Megillah: A Feminist Retelling." Stein's retelling is a conversation between the voices of Vashti, Esther, and Zeresh, the wife of Haman. These three women tell the story of how they were beaten and oppressed by the men of the Esther story. Ahasuerus, Mordecai, and Haman all appear to be self-serving men who abuse the women in their lives to their own ends. As Stein relates, "this particular Megillah is not a festive one. It does not leave much room for celebration. It is less about the survival of the Jews than it is about the oppression of the women" (Stein, i).

Stein develops the three women's viewpoints from her modern, feminist perspective. She obviously does not have a very positive view of men, for all the male characters are described as dirty, greasy, and possessing ulterior motives. Stein graphically describes how Vashti and Esther

were drugged and raped into submission by the king, his advisors, and their relatives. Zeresh, Haman's wife, labels herself as "used by men to be the rotten woman who punished other women" (Stein, 13). In imagining the experience of these women, Stein reveals her personal prejudice against men.

She believes that men oppress women because they envy them. In her story, the wife of Haman, Zeresh, has a lesbian relationship with one of the king's concubines, Teshneh. When Zeresh describes this relationship and her rejection of men, she says "that's why men ignore me, and mock Vashti for being strong. On some level they know that sooner or later, the power of women together will unmake all of their lies" (Stein, 14).

Stein writes from a lesbian feminist perspective, so her answer to the oppression of men is that the women of the story run away to join a tribe of women in the desert. This action represents not a defiance of patriarchy, but an utter rejection of it. Stein finds patriarchy so offensive and oppressive, that the best way for her to deal with it is to abandon it. Stein does not promote harmony between men and women in a structure that transcends patriarchy. She thinks that men are all sinister and power-hungry, and she encourages women to break away from them. She possesses radical feminist beliefs, but she expresses them in a form that is typical of both radical and conservative recent feminists. Stein imagines the Esther story from the point of view of the women in the story. She affirms women's experiences by relating the Esther story on a personal level.

Developing the Voice of Esther

Recent feminist images of Esther differ dramatically from the other images because they almost always employ the first person to tell the Esther story. The reader hears from Esther

herself, and the story is not relayed through a supposedly objective third person narrator. Much of the power of the Judith Stein's piece noted above resides in the fact that it is a conversation between the voices of Esther, Vashti, and Zeresh. Each of these women speaks with her own voice, relating her own experiences. The development of the female voice is empowering to women; therefore, recent feminists often employ the first person in their re-imagining.

Diane Wolkstein's children's book, Esther's Story, is written to be Esther's diary. She tells the story from Esther's point of view, including personal doubts and reflections that give the story a realistic quality. Wolkstein's image of Esther does not seem contrived. It is well written and researched, for it contains elements of the story from the Talmud and Jewish folklore in addition to the story as it appears in the Masoretic text.

The reader develops a sense of Esther's emotions, especially her fear, which is seldom mentioned in pre-feminist or early feminist images. Because it is told from the first person, and appears to be forthright and honest, the Wolkstein Esther story presents an incredibly realistic image of Esther. She is not revered or exalted. She does not seem divine in her bravery or her astute judgement. She makes mistakes, possesses insecurities, and questions herself.

In the beginning of the story, Esther is a bewildered young girl, confused because her uncle Mordecai has changed her name from Hadassah to Esther. She has many questions, but she was astute enough to recognize that "somehow I knew that the answers, even if I asked for them, were not yet known" (Wolkstein, 6).

When she is taken to the palace, a few years later, she exhibits the voice of a confused young teen, saying "I don't want to be queen. I miss Uncle Mordecai. I want to go home" (Wolkstein, 11). Later, Esther becomes acclimated to palace life. She is very confident when she

finally meets the king. She imitates his actions, and when he compliments her, she challenges him by complimenting him back. Wolkstein relates a playful, flirting exchange between Esther and the king before he chooses her to be his queen.

Wolkstein's image of Esther has psychological depth, which is typical of recent feminist portrayals of Esther. As a queen, Esther says that "some days when I look in the mirror, I see the queen of Persia. Other days, I see Esther, who was once Hadassah." (Wolkstein, 16). Though Esther may struggle with her identity as any woman coming of age, she does not doubt the powers of her god. When confronted with the possibility of death in defending her people, she remembers the words of the Prophet Isaiah: "When your hair is white, I will be with you. I made you. I will care for you. I will sustain and rescue you" (Wolkstein, 22). Mordecai has all the Jews in Susa blow the shofar to remember Esther, and when she hears it, she is encouraged to approach the king. The story concludes, "I am over seventy now and my hair is white. Many people say I was very brave, but I do not remember feeling brave. I remember feeling afraid, yet, despite my fear, wishing to help my people (Wolkstein, 38).

Wolkstein's Esther is an exemplary recent feminist first-person account of the Esther story. Esther is not an exalted character in the story. She is fully human, making mistakes and expressing self-doubt and anxiety as well as happiness and encouragement. The reader does not find her to be some great heroine, but a character with whom she can relate. This Esther is a character who deserves the respect, but not the reverence of the reader.

Developing the voice of Esther in the first person is an effective way of relating the power of her point of view as a woman. In the few creative retellings of the Esther story by recent feminists, the voice of Esther powerfully legitimizes her experience and makes it seem realistic

and meaningful to women.

Recent feminist images of Esther do not present one coherent image of a character as do the pre-feminist and early feminist images of Esther. Recent feminist interpretations are widely varied with a few characteristics in common. All recent feminist images of Esther challenge the patriarchal structure of the Esther story, emphasize the importance of Esther's experience, and develop the voice of Esther and the other women characters.

Conclusion

It must be acknowledged that this scheme for understanding Esther is limited. There are images of Esther that cannot easily be labeled as pre-feminist, early feminist, or recent feminist. With other images of Esther, these categories overlap or do not apply at all. Such is the nature of a heuristic typology. Imposing order upon the numerous contemporary portrayals of the Esther story requires making generalizations and broad observations, which often do not account for the wide variety of images that exist within any one category.

The Romance Novel

An excellent example of an image that is both pre-feminist and early feminist is Ellen Gunderson Traylor's Esther: The Woman Who Captured the Heart of a King. This novel is written by a conservative Christian author, but it is typical of a modern romance novel with its writing conventions and portrayal of modern woman.

The women in the novel, as a group, are subordinate to the men in their lives. The king actually calls Vashti his "most precious possession" (Traylor, 34). Esther is described as "docile as a doe" (Traylor, 39). When Esther questions Mordecai about whether or not she can remain a faithful Jew despite the fact she was brought to the house of a pagan, Mordecai says, "When a

young woman is forced into disgrace, she is absolved before God and man if she cries out. This is all that is necessary . . . for it is all a girl can do” (Traylor, 109). Women in Traylor’s novel seem powerless.

Besides being submissive, Esther and Vashti exhibit the traits of ideal women in pre-feminist communities. Typical of a pre-feminist image, their beauty is emphasized and they are consumed by retaining it. For example, Traylor says that Vashti’s feast in the opening chapters of the story is a “fashion show . . . put together by the experts who wished to show the latest in womanly attire for the interest and entertainment of the guests” (Traylor, 56). Esther is a moderately humble character, but she is also described as ravishingly beautiful. There are very strong elements of pre-feminist ideas about women exhibited in the Traylor novel.

The Traylor novel also possesses elements of an early feminist interpretation. It does not challenge the patriarchal structure, but at the end of the story, the women appear as strong, forceful women who achieve their desires. The women have been using the screen of submission to hide their ambitions all along. Esther actually controls the king throughout the novel. She acts and is not acted upon. She is far removed from the impotent and weak Esther of a pre-feminist portrayal. At the conclusion of the novel, Esther asks the king to annul their marriage because they never really loved one another. She all but tells him that he is an unsatisfying life partner to her. In fact, Traylor says that her blush “was not the blush of a virgin, for she was that no longer. Rather it was the result of unvoiced longings, unmet needs” (Traylor, 195). Esther tells the king that “My soul belongs to the God of Israel and my heart to yet another” (Traylor, 196). At Esther’s request, the king lets her go and restores Vashti to her rightful place. The novel concludes with Esther returning to her pastoral cousin David, whom she loved all along. He

meets her, and “bending over her, he drew her to his bosom and breathed into her hair. His sigh said it all, and his lips met hers. . .”, and they lived happily ever after (Traylor, 206).

The Traylor novel exhibits all the conventions of a romance novel. Esther is an active heroine who is faced with a dangerous situation, created and imposed upon her by men. Through her unending virtue, she eventually persuades the man in question to bend to her will, and either through argumentation or careful use of her sexuality, she gets her way. The genre of the romance novel possesses characteristics that are neither pre-feminist nor early feminist. These classifications fail to describe the ambiguous portrait of women found in romance novels.

Catholic and Orthodox Images of Esther

The scheme fails entirely for Catholic or Orthodox images of Esther, because these images are based on the Greek versions of Esther. The images of Esther examined in this paper are all based on the Masoretic text in the Hebrew Bible or the Protestant Old Testament, and therefore, all of these images are from either Jewish or Protestant Christian communities. An attempt was made to include Catholic and Orthodox images of Esther, but very few were found. Perhaps the dearth of images of Esther in these contexts is due to the wealth of other female biblical heroines found in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Mary and a number of women saints overshadow Esther in these communities. Esther is significant in the Hebrew and Protestant Christian canons because she is one of the few women who plays an active role in the folklore. Since the figure of Mary is unimportant in Jewish culture and a taboo subject in Protestant culture, Esther has developed overwhelming significance as an exemplary woman in these contexts.

The categories of pre-feminist, early feminist, and recent feminist are useful in examining contemporary enculturations of the Esther story. As a Biblical heroine, Esther is interpreted

differently within different contexts, and how a community portrays Esther often explains more about that group's image of the ideal woman than it does about that group's treatment of scripture. The interpretation of the Esther story within Judeo-Christian traditions often indicates the ideal image of American womanhood embraced by the community doing the interpreting.

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Vita

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A display of the visual images from this project won first place in the Humanities Division of the Undergraduate Academic Fair that took place at the University of Tennessee on Wednesday, April 2, 1997.