

Jael Is Non-binary; Jael Is Not a Woman

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Abstract

In this article I suggest that the non-binary identity of Jael (Judg 4–5) has been erased or overlooked due to dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender. This biblical narrative depicts Jael performing roles and behaviours which have been identified as masculine (violent, warrior, killer) and feminine (mother, seductress, nurturing). Moreover, Jael's name appears in the Hebrew masculine form, alongside Jael's feminine label of "woman/wife." Despite such evidence of gender ambiguity, interpretations of Judg 4–5 tend to identify Jael unproblematically as a woman, thereby ignoring this character's non-binary potential. This article contributes an original reading of Jael by interpreting the text from a non-binary perspective, employing queer methodologies. Inviting the reader to look beyond hetero-binarized expectations, my investigation reveals Jael as a gender ambiguous character.

Key words

Jael; Judges 4–5; non-binary; gender ambiguity; queer theory

In this article, I present a gender ambiguous interpretation of the biblical character Jael, reading Judg 4-5 from a non-binary perspective. In doing so, I acknowledge that gender can be performed in a variety of ways and highlight Jael's non-binary gender characterization as a literary figure. Nevertheless, I continue to use the binary language of femininity/masculinity and man/woman, challenging the binary gender often ascribed to Jael without attempting to dismantle gendered categories.¹ I use the terms "man" and "woman" to refer to characters who are gendered as masculine or feminine, respectively, without inferring the sex of those characters.

My reluctance to undo constructions of femininity and masculinity is informed by Julia Serano and Jennie Barnsley who stress that "shattering" what is understood by femininity and masculinity undermines transgender (trans) individuals' right to assert a stable gender category.² Rather than deconstructing femininity and masculinity, I work towards disrupting the constructed notion that there are only two fixed and mutually exclusive genders. A non-binary perspective—one that recognizes

¹ It is not within the remit of this article to fully explore the advantages and disadvantages of deconstructing the concepts of femininity and masculinity.

² Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007), 359; Jennie Barnsley, "Grounding Theology in Quotidian Experience of Complex Gender: A Feminist Approach" (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2013), 51.

any identity or expression that falls outside the binarized heteronormative categories of masculinity and femininity,³ and does not treat these two categories as mutually exclusive—need not undermine the existence of femininity and masculinity as valid gender identities; these gender categories are still worthy of recognition. I do not attempt to define non-binary further, as doing so would impose boundaries on something which by its very nature *disrupts* such boundaries.

Commentators typically label Jael as a woman, despite sometimes recognizing this character's performances of masculinity, thus grounding Jael's gender in dominant discourses of binary gender and heteronormativity. Since binarized notions of gender present only two mutually-exclusive options (masculine or feminine, man or woman), those who interpret Judg 4–5 with such binary assumptions are restricted in how they can label Jael's gender. Julia M. Asher-Greve comments that a binary framework presents gender using an "either/or model," which dictates the attribution of a single gender from only two valid possibilities, presented as oppositional.⁴ Hence, if an individual is not a man, they must be a woman. Instead I understand non-binary as encompassing *any* form of gender that is not restricted to an either/or model of gender where masculinity *or* femininity are the only options.

Asher-Greve remarks that the practice of commentators approaching the biblical text with assumptions of binary gender is widespread. She admits that much of her own work was likewise laden with this bias before she "systematically re-examine[d]" it.⁵ Many of her interpretations concerned individuals in ancient Sumer, assumed to be women, who did not neatly conform to a binary gender category. She interpreted them as women, regardless, and in doing so, "pressed [them] into a two-gendered system," thus erasing their non-binary gender.⁶ Asher-Greve argues that the binary model is problematic as it restricts interpretive outcomes. By re-thinking her use of this model, she was able to recognize a number of images that depicted "persons whose dress and features" were "ambiguous."⁷ Consequently, she notes that gender-ambiguous individuals have always been present in the materials she studied, but they had been forced into binary categories and thus elided. This, I claim, is also true of many characters in the Hebrew Bible.

³ Sally Hines, *Is Gender Fluid? A Primer for the 21st Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 10.

⁴ Julia M. Asher-Greve, "Feminist Research and Ancient Mesopotamia: Problems and Prospects," in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 233.

⁵ Asher-Greve, "Feminist Research," 233.

⁶ Asher-Greve, "Feminist Research," 233.

⁷ Asher-Greve, "Feminist Research," 233.

Deryn Guest, among others, supports Asher-Greve's claim that scholars' assumptions of binary gender are common and significant to their interpretations.⁸ According to Guest, approaching the Bible with assumptions of binary gender is potentially detrimental, since it can prevent interpreters from identifying possibilities regarding biblical characters' sex, gender, and sexuality.⁹ Similarly, Caryn Tamber-Rosenau notes that some interpreters may draw on binary discourses of gender to read biblical texts in ways that reinforce such discourses.¹⁰ These readings, and the binarized understandings of gender that underpin them, perpetuate a system that ignores many alternative ways of performing gender. Biblical characters who fall between binary genders or encompass both genders are simply not represented. Consequently, non-binary characters become invisible.

Following on from this, Gil Rosenberg stresses that when interpreters approach texts with expectations of binary gender, disruptive and queer aspects of the text are left underexplored.¹¹ This is because a binary approach leads to these queer aspects being identified "as problems in need of resolution"; since queer textual features do not conform to a binary framework they are considered unacceptable and are forced to fit into a binary model.¹² Rosenberg states that biblical scholars' assumptions of binary gender are commonly "unacknowledged but foundational" to their interpretations.¹³ Queer characteristics and features are rejected through either emendation of the text, explaining away the queerness in the text, or by ignoring such queerness altogether. This leads to the perpetuation of binary gender and, in Jael's case, to the continued erasure of this character's non-binary gender.

I argue that Jael exhibits a form of non-binary gender that is evident through performances constructed as feminine *and* masculine, often simultaneously, rather than adopting *either* feminine *or* masculine performances in isolation to each other. Therefore, Jael ought not be identified as masculine *or* feminine, but as masculine *and* feminine, disrupting the binary concept that these two categories of gender are mutually exclusive and distinct and thus allowing a character to be recognizable as both genders at one time.

⁸ Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 6; Gil Rosenberg, "New Authorities, New Readings: Queering Hebrew Bible Text Criticism," *Biblical Interpretation* 23 (2015): 575; Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag: Gender and Performance in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Literature* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press LLC, 2018), 228.

⁹ Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael*, 19.

¹⁰ Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 228.

¹¹ Rosenberg, "New Authorities," 575.

¹² Although Rosenberg ("New Authorities," 599) is referring to textual criticism in this quotation, his comment regarding the correction of what is perceived to be queer applies more widely to interpreters' approaches to gender.

¹³ Rosenberg, "New Authorities," 577.

Similarly, I suggest that Jael should not be understood as a “woman,” or as a “man,” but rather as a gender ambiguous figure—as both a man and a woman simultaneously.¹⁴ I adopt the phrase “gender ambiguous” as a synonym for non-binary gender in order to reflect wider ambiguities present in Judg 4–5, especially in relation to Jael’s character.¹⁵ Interpreting Jael as gender ambiguous challenges the exclusive binary labels of femininity and womanhood typically attributed to Jael by biblical scholars. It also draws attention to the absence of a clear binary gender in Jael’s characterization. During their consideration of Samson (Judg 13–16), Guest defines gender ambiguity as denoting an individual who is “neither one gender nor the other,” but as someone “who confounds our gender categories.”¹⁶ Gender scholar Jack Halberstam, when discussing toilet and bathroom usage, understands gender ambiguity as conveying “[n]ot-man and not-woman ... also not androgynous or in-between.”¹⁷ Halberstam notes that a gender ambiguous individual can be understood as “gender deviant.”¹⁸ Elsewhere in the same study, Halberstam expands on this idea of gender deviance, commenting that “[a]mbiguous gender, when and where it does appear, is inevitably transformed into deviance, thirdness, or a blurred version of

¹⁴ Deryn Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 142; Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), 21.

¹⁵ There is a theme of ambiguity running through Jael’s narratives in relation to Jael as well as other characters and plot points. There are numerous gaps in Judg 4 and 5 that can be read as points of ambiguity. For example, the text is ambiguous regarding why Barak requests Deborah’s presence alongside him in battle (Judg 4:8). It is possible that his request is due to his respect for her position and leadership (Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003], 1–9) or because he is scared to go to war without her (David J. Zucker and Moshe Reiss, “Subverting Sexuality: Manly Women; Womanly Men in Judges 4–5,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 45.1 [2015]: 34). There is also ambiguity regarding whether Deborah is married or not (Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: the Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988], 21; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Deborah 2,” in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* [ed. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001], 66; Sidnie Ann White, “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: Scholar Press, 1992], 6). Some scholars understand Lappidoth as Deborah’s husband (Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting Sexuality,” 33) while others interpret this same term as describing Deborah as a “fiery woman” (Frymer-Kensky, “Deborah,” 66; Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* [New York: Doubleday, 1998], 38) or “woman of torches” (Mieke Bal, “The Bible as Literature: A Critical Escape,” in *On Story-Telling; Essays in Narratology* [ed. David Jobling; Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1991], 67; Jack M. Sasson, “A Breeder of Two for Each Leader’: On Mothers in Judges 4 and 5,” in *A Critical Engagement: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of J. Cheryl Exum* [ed. David J. A. Clines and Ellen van Wolde; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011], 333–55). Some interpreters understand this term as a reference to Deborah as a “pyromancer” (Sasson, “Breeder,” 342). These noted ambiguities in Judg 4 and 5 do not comprise an exhaustive list but are mentioned here to highlight that ambiguity is recurrent in Jael’s narrative and therefore that ambiguity can be considered a theme of the text. Thus, my claim that Jael’s gender is ambiguous fits into a narrative pattern of ambiguity in Judg 4 and 5. Further discussion of the ambiguities running throughout these chapters is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁶ Guest, *Beyond Feminist*, 142.

¹⁷ Halberstam, *Female*, 21.

¹⁸ Halberstam, *Female*, 21.

either male or female.”¹⁹ Both Guest’s and Halberstam’s comments upset the constructed notion that gender is binary, fixed, and distinct. I similarly suggest that gender ambiguous individuals should be understood as exhibiting gender in various ways, distorting the mutually-exclusive, binary concept of gender. For example, gender ambiguous performances can include mixed or blurred acts of femininity and masculinity or simultaneous acts of more than one gender. I understand Jael’s non-binary gender as being embodied through simultaneous performances of masculinity and femininity.

My gender ambiguous interpretation of Jael is based on gender markers evident in Judg 4–5. Gender markers carry implications of gender. Roles or performances can suggest gender along with a variety of other things such as occupation, dress, names, emotions, motives, items, linguistic choices, and spaces. They suggest an individual’s gender due to their socially-constructed association with a particular gender.²⁰

Biblical scholarship records Jael as a woman who kills Sisera, an army general (Judg 4:16–22; cf. 5:6, 24–27), by penetrating his head using a tent peg and hammer (Judg 4:21; cf. 5:26). Jael has garnered much attention in biblical scholarship, triggering many scholarly debates. Commentators question which part of Sisera’s body Jael pierces with the tent peg,²¹ and whether or not Jael breaks the sacred code of hospitality by killing Sisera in the tent.²² Biblical scholars also frequently debate

¹⁹ Halberstam, *Female*, 20.

²⁰ Julia M. Asher-Greve, “The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body,” in *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean* (ed. Maria Wyke; Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 10; Joan Acker, “Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations,” in *Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Class: Dimensions of Inequality* (ed. Susan J. Ferguson; Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 414–17, 420; Joan Z. Spade and Catherine G. Valentine, *The Kaleidoscope of Gender: Prisms, Patterns, and Possibilities* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 159.

²¹ The following studies note the possibility that Jael penetrates Sisera through his mouth: J. Cheryl Exum, “Shared Glory: Salomon de Bray’s *Jael, Deborah and Barak*,” in *Between the Text and the Canvas: The Bible and Art in Dialogue* (ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 20; Danna Nolan Fewell, “Judges,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 69; Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, “Inside, Outside, or in Between,” in *Joshua and Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 69–91, 75. Other scholars comment on the possibility that Sisera’s throat was pierced by the tent peg: Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 107; Ellen van Wolde, “Deborah and Ya’el in Judges 4,” in *On Reading Prophetic Texts: Gender-Specific and Related Studies in Memory of Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes* (ed. Bob Becking and Meindert Dijkstra; New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 293. The following works conclude that Sisera’s neck was pierced by Jael’s tent peg: Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera’s Death* (trans. Matthew Gumpert; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 134; Niles Elliot Goldstein, *Lost Souls: Finding Hope in the Heart of Darkness* (London: Bell Tower, 2002), 127. Some scholars suggest that Sisera’s temple could have been the part of his body penetrated by Jael: Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 134; Fewell, “Judges,” 69; J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1987), 92.

²² The following studies discuss the possibility that Jael breaks the code of hospitality by killing Sisera: Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 24; Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Reformed and Feminist: A Challenge to the Church* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 72. However, Victor H.

whether or not Jael has a sexual encounter with Sisera, and if so, whether or not this encounter should be understood as consensual intercourse or rape.²³ There is, however, a lack of scholarly debate regarding Jael's gender in this narrative. In biblical scholarship, Jael is typically presented as a woman, albeit one who acts "in defiance of traditional gender expectations."²⁴ Scholars, including for example Mieke Bal, Colleen M. Conway, and J. Cheryl Exum, attribute a specific gender to Jael by using feminine pronouns such as "her" and "she" or by referring to Jael explicitly as a "woman."²⁵ Few studies acknowledge Jael's gender as complex or liminal. However, those that do continue to feminize Jael by utilizing feminine pronouns.²⁶ In order to avoid such implicit binarizing, I refer to Jael throughout this article by name and, when appropriate, by adopting gender neutral pronouns such as "they" and "their." I suggest that Judg 4 introduces Jael as gender ambiguous through the use of a masculine name *and* a feminine label (Judg 4:17) and that Jael's performances of gender support this non-binary presentation. My interpretation disrupts the erasure of non-binary individuals, demonstrating that non-binary characters are represented in the Hebrew Bible.

In the rest of this article, I address the textual evidence for Jael's gender ambiguity and consider biblical scholars' assumptions about Jael's binary gender. But first, let me outline in more depth my queer approach to understanding gender as non-binary. This will allow me to highlight further some of the problems that arise when approaching a biblical text with dominant perspectives of binary gender, especially the consequences of interpreting Jael as having the binary gender identity of "woman." In these discussions I give examples which show how a hetero-binary

Matthews and Don C. Benjamin (*Social World of Ancient Israel 1250–587 BCE* (Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993) do not recognize the code of hospitality as applying to Jael's invitation and thus do not perceive such a code to have been broken when Jael kills Sisera.

²³ Interpretations of Judg 4–5 sometimes suggest a sexual encounter may have taken place between Jael and Sisera (e.g. Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 101, 123; Serge Frolov, "Sleeping with the Enemy: Recent Scholarship on Sexuality in the Book of Judges," *Currents in Biblical Research* 11.3 [2013]: 310–17; Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Uncovering Jael and Sisera: A New Reading," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19.1 (2005): 29–31; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 87). The following studies understand the sexual interaction as one of reversed rape (i.e. Jael rapes Sisera): Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 134, 228; Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 and 5," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 58.3 (1990): 394.

²⁴ Ackerman, *Warrior*, 90; Colleen M. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter in the Tent of Jael: A Cultural History of a Biblical Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5, 59.

²⁵ Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 121; Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 15; Exum, "Shared Glory," 33.

²⁶ In particular, Guest comments that any liminality or ambiguity ascribed to a character such as Jael is lost through the use of feminine pronouns. See Deryn Guest, "From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Ken Stone and Teresa Hornsby; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 17. However, they continue to use feminine pronouns to refer to Jael (see pp. 18, 19, 28). Other scholars to note Jael's gender liminality or ambiguity yet who use feminine pronouns to refer to Jael include Nokuphiwa S. Langeni, "Gender Ambiguity in the Bible" (Masters diss., Chicago Theological Seminary, 2015), 6–7, 28; Gale A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4," *Semeia* 61 (1993): 100–105.

approach has impacted interpretations of Jael's gender. I then offer my own interpretation of Jael as a non-binary character, focusing on the gendered labels used in the text to refer to this character, especially in Judg 4:17, and exploring Jael's performances of femininity and masculinity. I conclude that Jael is introduced as gender ambiguous and performs gender-ambiguously, and thus should not be identified unproblematically within scholarship as a "woman."

Queer Methodology

This article follows the recent trend of studies on Jael and Judges in shifting from a feminist perspective to one that draws upon queer theory.²⁷ Queer theory disrupts the confines placed on identity, especially the binary constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality.²⁸ Queer theory emphasizes the vulnerability of a binary gender system and its associated constructed binaries of sex and sexuality, highlighting instances of gender crossing or gender blurring.²⁹ A queer approach thus challenges commonplace understandings of constructed identity categories, rupturing the normalcy of heteronormative discourses.³⁰ Thus, when I reference an aspect of Jael's gender or narrative as queer, I mean that it disrupts normative hetero-binary frameworks. As such, a queer approach provides a valuable lens for identifying Jael's non-binary gender.³¹

Queer theory regards sex and gender as separate categories that, while socially intertwined, are not exclusively dependent on each other.³² According to Judith Butler, gender is performative; gender labels (masculine/feminine) result from something an individual *does* (acts, roles, behaviours), rather than something an individual *has* (sexed body parts).³³ In this article, I am concerned with Jael's gender, not their sex. For this reason, I employ language relating to socio-cultural gender (masculinity/femininity and man/woman), but not to sexed bodies (male/female). I make no effort to decipher, understand, or label Jael's sex, nor do I

²⁷ Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*; Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael*; Guest, *Beyond Feminist*; Ken Stone, "How a Woman Unmans a King: Gender Reversal and the Woman of Thebez in Judges 9," in *From the Margins 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives* (ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 71–85.

²⁸ Chris Beasley, *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 161.

²⁹ Beasley, *Gender*, 851.

³⁰ David Gauntlett, *Media, Gender and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2005), 135.

³¹ Guest, "From Gender Reversal," 6.

³² Ben Vincent and Ana Manzano, "History and Cultural Diversity," in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders* (ed. Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker; London: Palgrave; Macmillan, 2017), 26.

³³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Tenth Anniversary Edition; London: Routledge, 1999), 78, 101–81; Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1–27; G. G. Bolich, *Dress and Gender: Crossdressing in Context* (Raleigh, NC: Psyche's Press, 2006), 125.

consider Jael's sex as being significant to their gender. Butler states that if gender is recognized as performative, then "there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured."³⁴ Thus, any individual can perform any gendered performance, regardless of their sexed body, and can perform more than one gender at any given time.

In my exploration of Jael's non-binary gender, I acknowledge Guest's previous work on Jael which also disrupts the heteronormative binary in this biblical tradition. However, there are two key differences between their study and my own. First, while we both employ queer theory, Guest prefaces "lesbian perspectives" in their queer reading. I have chosen not to take this approach in order to focus more fully on Jael's performances of gender.³⁵ Secondly, while I use the term "gender" in relation only to the socio-cultural construction of gender, Guest uses this term in reference to sex *and* gender, recognizing that these categories are separate yet socially intertwined. I focus only on Jael's gendered performances—their behaviours which are socio-culturally constructed as either masculine or feminine—without reference to their sex or to gendered expectations of sexed bodies.

Thus, while my study of Jael shares some common themes with Guest's, namely that we both employ a genderqueer approach and rupture heteronormative binaries, Guest considers Jael's performance of gender in light of Jael's sexed body, rather than focusing on gender performance alone. My focus on Jael's gender will, I hope, complement Guest's previous work on this biblical character.

Gender reversal

The notion of gender reversal is widely applied to Jael in biblical scholarship. I perceive this as problematic for interpretations of Jael as it perpetuates a binary framework and undermines Jael's gender ambiguity. As Guest has noted, gender reversal presents performances of gender as temporarily "shifting the ground from one to the other" binary gender.³⁶ Gender reversal has its foundations in binary gender presenting only two genders, which are framed as being mutually-exclusive and distinct. As a result, gender reversal allows only one gender to be recognized at one time. Butler argues that through labelling an individual as momentarily or temporarily taking on the (supposedly) other gender, supremacy is attributed to what is constructed as the individual's "first" or "real" gender, with the "other" gender being framed as "mere artifice."³⁷ This way of framing gender strengthens the binary notion that an individual is *either* masculine *or* feminine and erases the potential for them to be both simultaneously. Consequently, any gender indicators that do not cohere with a character's identified gender, such as their behaviours or

³⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 180.

³⁵ Guest, "From Gender Reversal," 10.

³⁶ Guest, *Beyond Feminist*, 21.

³⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxii.

their name, are overlooked, downplayed, or presented as temporary in order to perpetuate a single binary gender for that character.

Biblical scholars may at times suggest Jael is performing gender reversal in order to explain Jael's apparent disruption of the hetero-binary framework when they perform femininity *and* masculinity.³⁸ The notion of gender reversal does not compromise Jael's femininity, because it frames Jael as *temporarily* switching to act in a masculine way. Thus, gender reversal legitimates and perpetuates Jael's binary femininity, allowing them to be recognizable as a single binary gender at one time (either/or) rather than multiple genders simultaneously (both/and).³⁹ In other words, when scholars claim that Jael reverses their gender through performances of masculinity, they suggest that Jael has a "real," in this case feminine, gender which Jael supposedly reverses from and reverts back to.⁴⁰ As a result, Jael's masculinity is presented as temporary, secondary, and artificial compared to their femininity.⁴¹

The use of gender reversal as perpetuating the binary and maintaining Jael's femininity is evident in some commentators' use of language when discussing Jael. For example, Barnabas Lindars explains Jael's shifting gender performances as Jael switching their gendered behaviour from femininity to masculinity, and back again. According to Lindars, "[a]t first she [Jael] entices Sisera with the bowl of milk, performing the woman's part. But then she takes over the role of the man when she uses the tent-peg to penetrate his skull."⁴² Lindars' language highlights that he perceives a shift taking place, noting that "at first" Jael is feminine, "but then" Jael is masculine. Despite this shift, however, Lindars still regards Jael as having one gender (femininity), which Jael eventually returns to following their murder of Sisera; as he notes, "[f]inally, the proper roles are resumed."⁴³ Lindars thus frames Jael as a woman who *temporarily* performs masculinity, but whose true and "proper" gender is femininity.

Scholars who refer to Jael's performances as gender reversal undermine Jael's gender ambiguity and thus validate an either/or framework of gender.⁴⁴ I argue that Jael embodies femininity *and* masculinity concurrently and thus, supporting Guest's and Butler's call for a move away from gender reversal,⁴⁵ recognize Jael's

³⁸ Stone, "How a Woman," 79; Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 121; Rachel C. Rasmussen, "Deborah the Woman Warrior," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Mieke Bal; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1989), 91; Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 391.

³⁹ Guest, "From Gender Reversal," 9.

⁴⁰ Guest, "From Gender Reversal," 20.

⁴¹ Guest, "From Gender Reversal," 9, 20; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxii.

⁴² Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1–5: A New Translation and Commentary* (ICC; ed. A. D. H. Mayes; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 275.

⁴³ Lindars, *Judges 1–5*, 275.

⁴⁴ Gauntlett, *Media*, 137–38.

⁴⁵ Guest, "From Gender Reversal," 9; Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.

performances of more than one gender as an indication of their non-binary gender rather than as a performance of gender reversal.

Queer aspects as errors

Another consequence of approaching interpretations using the dominant discourse of binary gender is that queer aspects of a text—those aspects that do not conform to binary heteronormativity—are commonly explained as errors rather than as informative features of a character's queerness. This results in an interpretation that weighs hetero-binary assumptions as more important than what is presented in the text. When commentators attempt to explain away queer aspects of Jael's characterization, they (albeit unwittingly perhaps) reinforce binary gender and perpetuate Jael's femininity at the expense of their masculinity and gender ambiguity.⁴⁶

If we allow ourselves to recognize the queer aspects of Jael's character and narrative, we can begin to see how they resist binarized notions of gender. For example, Sisera's use of the masculine imperative (*'āmōd*) when he commands Jael to "Stand in the doorway of the tent" (Judg 4:20) is a queer feature of the text. This masculine verbal form is frequently explained away as an error, highlighting the influence of dominant heteronormative discourses that insist on gendering Jael as a woman.⁴⁷ Pamela Tamarkin Reis calls Sisera's use of the masculine imperative a "grammatical slip," while Berit Olam notes that "it was definitely a mistake" since Jael is "clearly a woman."⁴⁸ Bal similarly frames Sisera's masculine address of Jael as an error, suggesting that he speaks incorrectly because he is battle-weary and, as an army commander, he is comfortable and accustomed to addressing men, not women.⁴⁹ Subsequently, Jael's gender is forced to conform to an "either/or model" instead of being recognized as ambiguous.⁵⁰

Thus, clear indications of Jael's masculinity are not recognized by many biblical scholars as significant for understanding Jael's gender. Interpretations that are framed by dominant discourses of binary gender present Jael's masculinity as secondary, erroneous, or illegitimate; they therefore "correct" what is supposedly an error in the text and overlook anything that appears to be queer. These interpretations strengthen the constructed gender binary, erasing Jael's gender ambiguity and reinforcing the label of femininity attributed to this biblical figure.

⁴⁶ Guest, "From Gender Reversal," 9; Nicole J. Ruane, "When Women Aren't Enough: Gender Criticism in Feminist Hebrew Bible Interpretation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect, Volume 3: Methods* (ed. Susanne Scholz; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2016), 254.

⁴⁷ Robert Boling, *Judges: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 98.

⁴⁸ Reis, "Uncovering Jael," 80; Berit Olam, "Deborah, Judges 3:31–4:24," in *Judges* (ed. Tammi J. Schneider; Minneapolis: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 74.

⁴⁹ Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 121.

⁵⁰ Asher-Greve, "Feminist Research," 233.

Jael's Non-Binary Gender

In this section, I address the non-binary gender labels used for Jael in Judg 4, focusing on v. 17 where Jael is first mentioned. In this verse, the reader is given information concerning Jael's gender. It is this, or more accurately these, references that are explored in this section. I discuss Jael's feminine label of "woman/wife" as well as their name, which appears in the masculine form and can thus be understood as a masculine gender indicator. Alongside an exploration of Jael's non-binary gender labels, which demonstrate that Jael should not be binarized as a woman, this section highlights how existing literature has perpetuated Jael's feminine identity whilst overlooking their masculine identity, thereby erasing Jael's gender ambiguity. I then discuss Jael's performances of more than one gender, which, I argue, reinforce the gender ambiguity evident in Jael's introduction in v. 17. Jael exhibits femininity and masculinity simultaneously, demonstrating that their gender is ambiguous. I highlight some of Jael's feminine and masculine performances before showing that these are performed concurrently.

Jael's gendered labels

Judges 4 explicitly labels Jael as a woman. The Hebrew term *'ēšēṭ*, commonly translated into English as "wife of," makes reference to both a woman and a wife, interchangeably, based on the narrative context.⁵¹ The introductory identification of Jael as a "woman/wife of" (v. 17) has led most biblical scholars to identify Jael unequivocally and solely as a woman.⁵² The following examples demonstrate how commentators use Jael's feminine label as foundational to this character's identity but do not use Jael's masculine label in the same way.

John Gray appeals to Jael's introduction as a woman/wife to support his argument that "the tent of Jael" (Judg. 4:17) is a textual error and that "we should expect it to be termed the tent of her husband Heber."⁵³ Gray assumes that the tent does not belong to Jael because he understands Jael as a woman,⁵⁴ and property ownership as being associated with men rather than women.⁵⁵ Thus, for Gray, Jael's

⁵¹ Leila Leah Bronner, "Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 80.

⁵² Athalya Brenner, "A Triangle and a Rhombus in Narrative Structure: A Proposed Integrative Reading of Judges 4 and 5," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 102–103; John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (Basingstoke: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 259.

⁵³ Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 259.

⁵⁴ Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, 259.

⁵⁵ Alice Bach, "Introduction: Man's World, Women's Place, Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (ed. Alice Bach; London: Routledge, 1998), xx; Carolyn Pressler, "Wives and Daughters, Bond and Free: Views of Women in the Slave Laws of Exodus 21.2-11," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M.

femininity takes precedence over their masculinity, despite *both* being evident. Gray understands Jael as a woman and as a wife, and as such, ownership of the couple's possessions would most commonly fall to the man/husband. Gray relies here on the text's explicit reference to Jael's femininity; he does not consider Jael's masculine name (v. 17), and allows only Jael's femininity to feed into his interpretation.

Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin also offer an explanation as to why the tent mentioned in v. 17 is designated as belonging to Jael, rather than to Jael's husband. They suggest that Jael has a separate tent because Jael was one of Heber's multiple wives; this tent may have been allocated as Jael's living space, but it still falls under Heber's ownership.⁵⁶ Like Gray, Matthews and Benjamin assume here that Jael is a woman and a wife (and nothing else), and so could not own property; this assumption perpetuates hetero-binary gender frameworks and ignores the text's assertion that Jael is performing the traditionally masculine role of home ownership. Jael's femininity is thus asserted, while their gender ambiguity is overlooked. In other words, while Jael's feminine label of woman/wife may be used to guide interpretations of this character's identity, the masculine label attributed to Jael in this same verse is not given similar consideration, with the result that Jael's non-binary gender fails to be recognized.

Thus, as highlighted by Baruch Halpern, the designation of woman/wife "has programmed all subsequent views" of Jael.⁵⁷ Similar to Jael's masculine performance of tent ownership, Jael's name, presented in the *yiqtol* third person masculine singular verbal form (*yā'ēl*), despite a feminine form (*tā'ēl*) being available,⁵⁸ is widely overlooked, while their femininity is widely perpetuated.⁵⁹ The few biblical scholars who grant attention to Jael's name tend to consider its meaning, rather than its grammatically masculine form. Leila Leah Bronner, for example, notes that Jael is a masculine word, but focuses on the fact that it means "wild goat," suggesting that this reflects Jael's daring when they murder the seasoned warrior Sisera.⁶⁰ Similarly, Katherine Steinly also mentions that Jael's name can be translated "wild goat," and comments that it could "allude to her [Jael's] untamed nature and unpredictable actions."⁶¹ I would suggest that, just as the meaning of Jael's name might be significant for understanding Jael's identity, so might its masculine form.

Levinson, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky; London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 166; Bernhard Lang, *Hebrew Life and Literature: Selected Essays of Bernhard Lang* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), 78.

⁵⁶ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 87.

⁵⁷ Baruch Halpern, "The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography," *The Harvard Theological Review* 76.4 (1983): 393.

⁵⁸ Ellen van Wolde, "Ya'el in Judges 4," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 107 (1995): 244–45.

⁵⁹ Bronner, "Valorized or Vilified?" 87; van Wolde, "Deborah," 292.

⁶⁰ Bronner, "Valorized or Vilified?" 87.

⁶¹ Katherine Steinly, "Jael, Warrior of YHWH: Judges 4:17–24" (Masters diss., Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, 2012), 7.

As Guest rightly notes, biblical scholarship has not addressed the meaning and implications of Jael's masculine name. Guest describes Jael's name as an "initial minor curiosity" and an "oddity,"⁶² viewing this as a "genderqueer" aspect of Jael that confuses gendered categories.⁶³ Despite this though, Guest retains Jael's binary label of femininity when they comment that "the narrator does signal Jael is a woman."⁶⁴ I suggest, however, that the narrator also signals that Jael is recognizable as a man by virtue of their masculine name. While Jael's feminine label as "wife/woman" has played an important role for scholars in ascribing this character's gender, Jael's masculine name should play an equally important role, indicating their non-binary gender.

Names are often used to indicate an individual's gender,⁶⁵ particularly if visual indicators of gender are not available. The gendered meaning carried by a name is so significant that many people change their name if they feel that it does not represent their own gender identity.⁶⁶ In agreement with Butler, I understand that naming has the power to bring into being that which it names. Butler argues that naming something shapes the reality of what or who it is.⁶⁷ Therefore, naming can create the thing it names. Helena Mihaljević and Lucía Santamaría likewise suggest that names are significant markers of an individual's gender. Identifying naming as a gendered process, they argue that while determining an individual's gender based on their first name is neither simple nor straightforward, "first names are embedded into the gender binary."⁶⁸ Names are assigned a gender and are also assigned to individuals based on how that individual is expected to be gendered throughout their life.⁶⁹ Thus, Jael's masculine name should be understood as providing the reader with insight into Jael's gender: *Jael* as a "wife/woman" is feminine *and* masculine concurrently, not one gender *or* the other.

⁶² Guest, "From Gender Reversal," 21.

⁶³ Guest, "From Gender Reversal," 21.

⁶⁴ Guest, "From Gender Reversal," 23.

⁶⁵ Angela Clark-Oates, Duane Roen, and Sherry Rankins-Robertson, "Understanding the Life Narratives of Immigrants Through Naming Practices," in *Rhetorics of Names and Naming* (ed. Star Medzerian Vanguri; New York: Routledge, 2016), 89; Jane Pilcher, "Name and 'Doing Gender': How Forenames and Surnames Contribute to Gender Identities, Difference, and Inequalities," *Sex Roles* 77 (2017): 812; Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Rachel Thwaites, *Changing Names and Gendering Identity: Social Organisation in Contemporary Britain* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1–2.

⁶⁶ Helen J. Carroll, "Joining the Team: The Inclusion of Transgender Students in United States School-Based Athletics," in *The Routledge Handbook of Sport, Gender and Sexuality* (ed. Jennifer Hargreaves and Eric Anderson; London: Routledge, 2014), 368; Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 188.

⁶⁷ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 2.

⁶⁸ Helena Mihaljević and Lucía Santamaría, "Telling the Gender from a Name," *Gender Gap in Science*, <https://gender-gap-in-science.org/2018/07/16/telling-the-gender-from-a-name/>.

⁶⁹ Mihaljević and Santamaría, "Telling the Gender."

The importance of names for conveying information about an individual is especially true in the Hebrew Bible where names often express meaning.⁷⁰ Biblical characters' names sometimes change in order to recognize a shift or transformation in the individual, and accordingly reflect something regarding their character (e.g. Abram/Abraham, Gen 17:5; Sarai/Sarah, Gen 17:15; Jacob/Israel, Gen 32:28). Biblical names are thus informative and have the power to shape readers' perceptions of a character.⁷¹

I suggest that Jael's name is not always given the chance to influence interpretations of Jael's gendered identity since it disrupts readers' assumptions of binary gender. The appearance of Jael's name in the masculine form disrupts the feminine label that scholars ascribe to Jael.⁷² Judges 4:17 introduces readers to a woman/wife who has a masculine name, suggesting that Jael is not only a woman but is also a man and is thus non-binary.

An interpretation that draws directly from the text, informed by queer methodologies, results in a non-binary interpretation of Jael. Not only is Jael introduced with a feminine label *and* a masculine name, but the text repeatedly refers to Jael using both their masculine name and feminine label (Judg 4:17, 21; 5:24). Such gender ambiguity is supported by an analysis of Jael's performances of gender, which I now discuss in more detail.

Jael's gendered performances

Jael's performances of femininity are overt; Jael performs actions, roles, and behaviours typically constructed as feminine, such as caring, nurturing, and maternal behaviour, as well as potentially seductive behaviour.⁷³ For example, when Jael gives Sisera milk and covers him with a blanket (Judg 4:19), biblical scholars frequently frame Jael as performing femininity by exhibiting nurturing behaviour towards Sisera.⁷⁴ Jael tells Sisera not to be afraid and Sisera is led to believe that Jael will stand guard over him while he sleeps, ensuring his safety and wellbeing (Judg 4:18, 20).⁷⁵ These nurturing and protective actions have led to biblical scholars binarizing Jael as a woman. For example, Tikva Frymer-Kensky links Jael's nurturing conduct to domesticity and femininity, noting that "nurture" is "the currency of the private

⁷⁰ Aaron M. Gale, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 12.

⁷¹ John A. Beck, *God as Storyteller: Seeking Meaning in Biblical Narrative* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 37; Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible: The Life and Times of All the Women of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 21.

⁷² Langeni, "Gender Ambiguity," 7.

⁷³ van Wijk-Bos, *Reformed and Feminist*, 75; Ackerman, *Warrior*, 17; Lindars, *Judges 1–5*, 275.

⁷⁴ van Wijk-Bos, *Reformed and Feminist*, 75; Ackerman, *Warrior*, 17.

⁷⁵ Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 213.

domain, the one in which women were most prominent.”⁷⁶ In a similar vein, Conway notes that “several scholars point to the poem’s reference to milk” as suggestive of Jael’s femininity, due to its connection to motherhood.⁷⁷ This consequently leads to Jael’s feminization.

While Jael behaves in ways constructed as feminine, they also perform actions that are typically identified as masculine. In doing so, Jael’s performances disrupt the binary label of femininity attributed to them by biblical scholars. Jael’s masculine performances include, but are not restricted to, violence, murder, and engagement with warfare (Judg 4:21–22; cf. 5:26–27), all of which are typically constructed as masculine pursuits.⁷⁸

Thus, according to biblical scholars David J. A. Clines and Harold C. Washington, violence and related behaviours, such as murder and warfare, are traditionally associated with masculinity in the biblical texts and their interpretations.⁷⁹ Jael can therefore be recognized as performing masculinity when undertaking these behaviours. For Washington, violence, especially in the Bible, is associated with masculinity to the extent that being the *victim* of violence leads to the victim’s feminization.⁸⁰ He describes war as “acutely gendered,” as it is an activity that expects and at times demands violence and killing. Washington notes that warfare is often framed “as performed by men only, in a space containing nothing but men.”⁸¹ Hence, not only are acts of biblical violence, killing, and warfare closely related to each other, they are constructed as masculine; in the same way, Jael’s involvement in warfare and their performances of violence and murder can be understood as signalling this character’s masculinity.

Beyond biblical interpretation, and within wider studies of gender, Tim Edwards likewise suggests that violence is typically constructed as a marker of masculinity and a negation of femininity.⁸² Similarly, Laura Sjoberg and Caron E.

⁷⁶ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddess: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 139.

⁷⁷ Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 17.

⁷⁸ Harold C. Washington, “Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible: A New Historicist Approach,” *Biblical Interpretation* 5.4 (1997): 329–31; Stuart Macwilliam, *Queer Theory and the Prophetic Marriage Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Routledge, 2011), 39; Julia M. O’Brien, *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of The Bible and Gender Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 289; Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2006), 60; Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19.6 (2005): 840.

⁷⁹ David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 217; David J. A. Clines, “He-Prophets: Masculinity as a Problem for the Hebrew Prophets and their Interpreters,” in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll* (ed. Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies; JSOTSup 348; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 314.

⁸⁰ Washington, “Violence,” 311.

⁸¹ Washington, “Violence,” 329–30.

⁸² Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity*, 44, 60.

Gentry note that violence committed by those perceived to be women disrupts “ideal-typical understandings of what it means to be a woman.”⁸³ Consequently, when those identified as women commit violence, they are framed as failing to fulfil their assigned femininity.⁸⁴ Thus, violence is strongly and closely constructed as a masculine performance, to the point that (as Washington likewise noted) victims of violence become feminized and those who commit violence are masculinized.⁸⁵

Jael’s violent act (Judg 4:21; cf. 5:26–27) is widely recognized as a masculine performance by biblical scholars.⁸⁶ Jael uses force to penetrate Sisera with the tent peg and hammer, participating in the masculine domain of warfare by killing this military commander and bringing victory to the Israelites. Susan Ackerman recognizes Jael’s act as “bellicose violence” and notes that such an act is expected of men rather than women.⁸⁷ Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos also comments on Jael’s murderous act, saying that Jael “kills [Sisera]—which was not women’s business,”⁸⁸ while Gale A. Yee refers to Jael as a “Woman Warrior” because of their role in Sisera’s murder.⁸⁹ Each of these interpreters highlight Jael’s femininity, while acknowledging that Jael’s violence, murder, and engagement with warfare are more traditionally constructed as masculine. There is, therefore, a sense that such violence is incompatible with Jael, *because* Jael is identified as a woman. Yet Jael’s performances of masculinity distance them from the exclusive label of femininity that biblical scholars so often ascribe to this character.

The examples given above demonstrate that biblical scholars recognize Jael as performing in ways expected of men (violence, murder, and warfare) *as well as* in ways expected of women (providing care and nourishment). Despite this, interpreters typically maintain (or at least presume) that Jael should be understood as a woman. However, Jael’s performances of more than one gender support my claim that a single binary label does not fit Jael’s characterization in this text. I propose that Jael’s enactments of femininity and masculinity are performed simultaneously, embodied through the *same* actions and behaviours. Jael does not shift from one gender to the other, thereby reinforcing a binary framework, but performs femininity *and* masculinity at the same time in a gender-ambiguous way.

For example, when Jael performs caring and nurturing acts such as offering Sisera shelter (Judg 4:18) and giving him milk (Judg 4:19; cf. 5:25), Jael simultaneously

⁸³ Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 1–2.

⁸⁴ Sjoberg and Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 1–2.

⁸⁵ Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, “Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror,” *International Relations* 22.1 (2008): 14.

⁸⁶ Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives,” 406; Yee, “By the Hand”; Ackerman, *Warrior*, 68; Susan Niditch, *Judges, A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

⁸⁷ Ackerman, *Warrior*, 91.

⁸⁸ van Wijk-Bos, *Reformed and Feminist*, 73.

⁸⁹ Yee, “By the Hand.”

demonstrates traditionally masculine behaviours of assertiveness (approaching Sisera and inviting him into the tent; Judg 4:18) and control (giving Sisera milk when he requested water; Judg 4:19; cf. 5:25). By giving Sisera milk despite him requesting water, Jael can be seen to behave in ways expected of women *and* men. “‘I’m thirsty,’ he said. ‘Please give me some water.’ She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up” (Judg 4:19). This verse demonstrates Jael’s assertive and controlling behaviour: Sisera will receive a drink, but not the one he requested. Jael decides what Sisera will drink without consulting him, overruling his request for water. The milk nourishes Sisera’s body and relaxes his mind and is an act often recognized as denoting feminine care and maternal nurture. However, by making Sisera comfortable and putting him at ease using a soporific,⁹⁰ Jael makes him vulnerable to the violent attack that leads to his death. Thus, although Jael is performing masculine acts of assertion and control that render Sisera vulnerable to violence, they simultaneously perform “care” for Sisera by providing him with a nourishing drink and covering him up. Consequently, Jael performs masculinity *and* femininity simultaneously.

Moreover, when Jael is interpreted as demonstrating feminine, motherly care by watching over Sisera while he sleeps,⁹¹ this can likewise be framed as a soldier’s job of guarding their army general. Jael’s performance of this masculine, military role is only strengthened by the fact that the narrative is set within a context of warfare. In their initial engagement with Sisera, Jael’s feminine, nurturing behaviour is thus simultaneously recognizable as masculine, soldierly behaviour. By performing behaviours that incorporate both masculine *and* feminine roles, Jael again demonstrates that their femininity and masculinity are inseparable and simultaneous.

The examples above demonstrate that Jael’s performances of gender indicators typically associated with masculinity (controlling, assertive, and violent behaviours) do not typically inform commentators’ attribution of Jael’s gender; instead, Jael’s *femininity* is stressed and presented as significant for understanding the character and their narrative.⁹² As a result, their gender ambiguity becomes invisible. Readers may note that this text explicitly labels Jael using feminine pronouns (e.g. wife/woman *’ēšeṯ* Judg. 4:17), as well as Jael’s explicit feminine performances of offering Sisera care and nourishment (Judg. 4:18-19; 5:25); these are then used in order to justify the identification of Jael as a woman. Yet, the text also

⁹⁰ Yee, “By the Hand,” 113.

⁹¹ Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 69; Elie Assis, “Man, Woman and God in Judg 4,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 20.1 (2006): 116.

⁹² Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting Sexuality,” 35–36; Judy Taubes Sterman, “Themes in the Deborah Narrative (Judges 4–5),” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39.1 (2011): 23; Bal, *Murder and Difference*, 121; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 92–93; Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language*, 165; Priscilla Alexander, “Feminism, Sex Workers, and Human Rights,” in *Whores and Other Feminists* (ed. Jill Nagle; New York: Routledge, 1997), 92; Bruce A. Jacobs and Richard Wright, *Street Justice: Retaliation in the Criminal Underworld* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 75.

presents Jael as having a masculine name and being addressed by Sisera using a masculine verbal form; it also depicts Jael performing traditionally masculine acts. Identifying Jael unequivocally and solely as a woman thus results in a facet of their gender being rendered invisible. A binary model of gender is imposed on Jael's character which fails to represent their non-binary gender ambiguity.

Conclusion

Judges 4 introduces Jael using a feminine label *and* a masculine name; accordingly, the text should be understood as introducing Jael as feminine *and* masculine—as gender ambiguous. Scholars who approach Jael's narratives with assumptions of binary gender draw on Jael's explicit feminine label all the while overlooking Jael's masculine label.

The book of Judges' gender ambiguous labels for Jael are supported by Jael's simultaneous performances of femininity *and* masculinity in a gender ambiguous way. While Jael's gender performances of femininity *and* masculinity are explicit, their masculinity is often elided from scholarly analysis of this biblical text. Drawing on dominant discourses of binary gender, exegetes frame Jael's masculinity as temporary and secondary, or as a textual "error"; the queer aspects in the text that indicate Jael's gender ambiguity are consequently explained away or ignored. Jael is gendered as a woman at the expense of their masculinity, erasing their non-binary identity. Jael's performance of multiple genders reflects their gendered designations in the text as ambiguous: they are a character with a feminine label *and* a masculine name. Thus, based on these queer gender markers in the text, I suggest that Jael should not be binarized as a woman, but recognized as a non-binary character who performs in a gender ambiguous manner.

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