

THE STORY OF Jael AND SISERA IN FIVE NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH- CENTURY FICTIONAL TEXTS

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In a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century fictions, the biblical figure of Jael can be found inscribed as explicit allusion or even subtext. The work of Mieke Bal on the subject forms the starting-point from which this study sets out to examine those texts that have appropriated Jael's story. One of the principal objectives of the study is to determine the political and artistic purposes that have informed their authors' relocation of the figure. According to their respective dates of publication, the texts are: Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853); Herman Melville's "The Bell-Tower" (1856); George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); Sara Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978); and A.S.Byatt's story "Jael" in *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998). What emerges from the study is a strong impression of the adaptability and versatility of the basic elements of the story as it reappears in new contexts. It can emerge fairly intact, or stripped of various aspects and reduced to a motif, or it can accrue new connotations. In all cases, the gender both of the writing position and of the narrative standpoint are of vital importance, as the story is used to explore such subjects as female power and creativity, and also private and social identity as shaped by the different socio-historical preoccupations of each writer's context.

1. INTRODUCTION

The presence of references to the biblical story of Jael and Sisera in certain nineteenth- and twentieth-century fictional narratives has been attested and commented on in the past (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 412; Gasiorek 1995: 138), but, so far, no monographic study has been carried out on the subject. The story of Jael itself has been exhaustively analysed in two works which form part of a trilogy of studies on biblical narrative by the narratology scholar, Mieke Bal. Bal's work, therefore, is not only indispensable as a starting-point for this analysis of the Jael story in modern British and American fiction, but also informs it by providing a framework based on a narratological approach to the motif, its presentation and its significance. After examining Bal's vision of the Jael story and the purpose of its

inclusion in the *Book of Judges*, this study sets out to show how three novelists from the nineteenth century and two from the twentieth have resituated Jael and Sisera in a new context—a contemporary setting in all cases except that of Melville—for their own political and artistic purposes and shaped by their particular social and historical concerns. The Jael subtext signals its presence explicitly through the use of her name and basic characteristics in the following works of long and short fiction: Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853); Herman Melville, "The Bell-Tower" (1856); George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860); Sara Maitland, *Daughter of Jerusalem* (1978); and A.S.Byatt, "Jael" in *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998).

Aspects that will be examined include the adaptability of the Jael motif to the new writer's purposes; the potentiality of its visual impact as a useful motif in Gothic horror literature; the importance of the gender connotations of the motif, particularly regarding power politics and the way "history" has been recorded; and finally, its use as an instrument in the exploration of public and private identities, often in relation to notions of freedom and creativity.

2. MIEKE BAL'S ACCOUNTS OF Jael AND SISERA

In *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (1988a), the second volume of her trilogy on biblical narrative, Bal's approach is semiotic, as the academic disciplines—anthropology, philology, historiography, narratology and textual criticism—are considered to be codes or implicit rules, on the basis of which scholars attribute meaning to texts. The two versions of the murder of Sisera, in *Judges* 4 and 5, being different in genre—one prose, one song—are contrasted, and literary analysis becomes part of the semiotic method. Bal had previously nailed her colours to the mast of narratology, a method which allows us to establish connections between textual features and social meanings. Her book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* came out in 1985, two years before the first volume in the trilogy: *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (1987). Bal sets out her model for narratological analysis in an appendix to the third volume of the trilogy: *Death and Dissymmetry: the Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (1988b: 248-49). It has a tripartite formula whereby it explores, firstly, the *role* or delimitation of the subject; secondly, his/her *position* in the hierarchy; and thirdly, his/her *action* in terms of *organisation* and *results*. These three aspects are then analysed in terms of the dichotomy initiator/recipient of the action. For the purpose of her study (but not for other purposes), Bal rejects the work of feminist biblical scholars, classifying them either as "reformist", like Phyllis Trible (1978, 1984), or "radical", like Esther Fuchs (1985, 1988). The former, in spite of her critique of male behaviour toward female characters, maintains a positive view of the Bible, based on an attempt to exonerate Yahweh from the scandal caused by male characters; the latter claims that overall biblical ideology is basically patriarchal and sexist. In Bal's view, "Both positions are based on a dichotomy, as if only two possibilities, 'good' versus 'bad' situations for women, existed" (1988b: 33).

For Bal, the real situation of certain women in the Bible, as we judge it today, is more complex than that and often ambiguous. Jael is a particularly ambiguous figure for several reasons, as Bal shows. In *Murder and Difference* (1988a), she makes an extensive analysis of the murder scene, and emphasises the radical difference between the two accounts of the murder of Sisera by Jael. There is a generic and a gender difference, for Deborah's song in Chapter 5 is clearly based on a female tradition, whereas the prose text of Chapter 4 belongs to the more usual epic tradition, the male quality of which is widely accepted. The prose account is part of a heroic tale of war, yet the lyrical one is commemorative and triumphant.

The division of historical accounts into male and female traditions is one of the factors that have militated against the presence of women in history, especially in the Bible, if this quintessential patriarchal text is viewed as history. As Bal says in *Death and Dissymmetry*:

If 'history' is seen in the narrow sense of the narration of military, economic, and political change, it prevents scholars from seeing other issues and continuous structures. Indeed, if history is reduced to a narrative of war and political leaderships, this is at least partly due to a number of 'centrism': ethnocentrism, androcentrism and theocentrism. (1988b:13)

She feels that the tendency to start from the central place of men in history and to consider the participation of women in history as an abnormality makes Jael an anomalous figure. Women are generally absent from history, since history is equated with sociopolitical change, and men bring about change, whereas women are involved in continuity. Bal questions the kind of changes that have usually been considered truly "historical":

The answers vary, but are no more than rephrasings of the same hypothesis in different dichotomies: because women are related to nature and men to culture; because women are caring and men are aggressive, notably in the public sphere, hence, men cause the wars that make history; because, in brief, women are dominated, men dominate. None of these consistently binary, essentialist, and universalistic answers addresses the question of what history is. They adopt the presupposition that we know what it is, that women do play a minor role in it, and that it is what it has always been thought to be. (1988b: 13-14)

If we take the *Book of Judges* as historiography, there is an immediate contradiction: women do act, and on behalf of their group. In *Death and Dissymmetry*, Bal analyses and interprets the story of Jael and Sisera in the context of the whole *Book of Judges*. Jael becomes one of three women who murder men, juxtaposed to three women who are murdered by men.

As Bal points out (1988b: 14), the men who get killed meet their fate, in two cases out of three, after going willingly into a private home and engaging in a

private relationship. In these two cases (Sisera and Samson), they are not the aggressors, they are attacked. The war against Sisera is religious, rather than political, and it is instigated by a woman (Deborah). Thus the commonplaces about history and women's absence from it are seriously challenged by this historical book. In Bal's particular view of the *Book of Judges* (1988b: 2), the women who kill (Jael, instigated by Deborah; Delilah, through her betrayal of Samson; the woman on top of the wall who kills Abimelech with a mill-stone), do not kill only for political and religious purposes, they also appear to kill for the purposes of justice and aesthetic symmetry in relation to the other stories. They introduce anger, an anger that, again, cannot be referred to as either political or private. Hence, they will be seen as figures that help to construct the book as a representation of the life of the people, in all its complexity.

If Jael's story appears to give the impression of excessive, almost gratuitous violence, particularly in the manner of Sisera's death—which has so impressed later observers, including all five writers—it is because her female anger joins that of the other two women to counteract the violence done to the three nameless young women by men—fathers and husbands—in the same book. This is the "counter-coherence" in the "dissymmetry" of the *Book of Judges*, which is the thesis of Bal's book *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges*. This countercoherence relates the "official" reading to what it leaves out, and it relates everything that is denied importance to the motivations for such denials. The motivations revealed in the *Book of Judges* are shown to be the usual hegemonic tendencies to exclude or reduce the impact of women on the history of a people.

Bal's analysis of the Jael-Sisera story, in terms of the location of the action, the hierarchical position of the subjects involved, and the nature of their relationship, sheds light on the public/private, male/female dichotomy in this "history". Where murder takes place in the house, at the exit of the house or at its threshold, space seems to be a relevant structural representation. That Jael's tent is a dangerous place has been amply argued by the critics Bal has consulted, but she goes on to look at the location from a feminist angle: "that the tent in question is a woman's space and that the man who enters it is thus transgressing a spatial, institutional limit has not, however, been taken into account" (1988b: 183). The idea of the house, moreover, relates the spatial domain to the historical, thus undermining the dichotomy of the public *versus* the private. The private, the female, is essentially connected with sexuality. Bal refers to the work of Bruns (1954) and Zakovitch (1981) for the interpretation of the biblical prose text as signifying that Jael lured Sisera into love in order to kill him.

The three women murdered by men in *Judges* are completely powerless, especially compared to the three men murdered by women, who are powerful. These are all (Sisera, Samson and Abimelech) involved in military leadership, hence killing such men would have been highly dangerous, and required cunning, planning and wit. One of the differences between the killing of the three women and that of the three men concerns the relation between power and sexuality. Whereas the three female victims are somebody's property, the three female killers appear to live as

independent women (Bal, in her philological analysis, points out that "Heber" is not necessarily a proper name, hence "Heber the Kenite" is more likely to refer to Jael's tribe or clan than to a husband). Modern readers tend to stress the sexual aspects of the stories of Delilah and Jael. The underlying claim is that the women's identity can be simply derived from their sexuality, and from their sexual stance as regards the men. It is only through sex that the women gain access to the men, and since, from this perspective, the identity of men depends heavily on their control over women as sexual beings, this reversal of power is what threatens them most. In the case of the murderous Jael and the treacherous Delilah, the sexual aspect of the stories is expressed in seduction, but whereas there is a connection between seduction and power—Jael and Delilah acquire power over their victims—there are also radical differences between the two stories.

Samson and Sisera lose their male power due to their susceptibility to the female powers of seduction. But there the comparison ends, for Samson is a hero and wins a moral victory in his death. Sisera, on the other hand, although a leader, is not heroic. He abandons his army in distress and abdicates the token of his power: his chariot. Hence, Sisera is an ambiguous figure as much as Jael is. As long as Sisera is seen as an enemy of the people, Jael is a patriotic heroine. Yet from the Canaanite perspective, Sisera *is* a hero, and Jael a mere murderess. Not only is she blamed for her act from this perspective, but from other perspectives she is blamed: for her excessive violence and for breaking the sacred law of hospitality. Ironically, her tent represented this hospitality, not as a female space, but because it was neutral ground; as a Kenite, Jael was not at war with Sisera and his people. Furthermore, those aspects of the story that suggest mothering (the milk, the bedcover, the fall "between her feet") point to a double betrayal by Jael. In a way, Jael is the surrogate of Deborah the "Judge", and is more lethal, for she functions on neutral and domestic territory, where Sisera feels safe. Furthermore, both she and the woman who killed Abimelech kill with domestic instruments: a hammer and tent peg (the Kenites were apparently metal workers, so the choice may be emblematic), and a mill-stone for grinding corn.

3. MIEKE BAL AND FEMINIST BIBLICAL REVISION

Although Bal rejected feminist biblical revision as a model for analysing the Jael-Sisera story, aspects of her approach and findings do coincide with those of feminists. Bal refers to what feminist theologians call a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1982), a fundamental mistrust of political hierarchies and values embodied in the biblical text. As Amy Benson Brown says: "While this hermeneutics of suspicion is almost always accompanied and complicated by other ways of reading biblical texts, this political critique is basic to biblical revision and distinguishes it from other literary uses of the Bible". (Benson Brown 1999: 7) This basic mistrust underlies the project of her *Death and Dissymmetry* in that she has searched for the identities of both the prominent and the suppressed females of *Judges* as a study in power relations. Furthermore, in acknowledging the assertions of Bruns and Zakovitch, she testifies to the eroticisation of the story of Jael and

Sisera. This eroticisation corresponds to the feminists' "hermeneutics of desire" (Ostriker 1993), whereby the new writers who use the original text either identify with the latent eroticism or overtly eroticise the text, inserting themselves into the story, conflating its spiritualities with their own sensualities. Alicia Ostriker also writes of a "hermeneutics of indeterminacy", a framework in which we can assert that biblical revisions may be immediately persuasive but never claim to be the definitive or final "truth". Instead, they posit indeterminate and plural possibilities of signification (Ostriker 1993: 66-67). Fourthly, her "hermeneutics of vision" refers to the community destined to receive the new ideas transmitted through biblical revision. Mieke Bal's work on Jael is limited to the *Book of Judges*, but as we go on in this study to examine the reappearances of Jael in nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, we must bear in mind not only Bal's analyses, but also feminist assertions about the new possibilities of signification to which the biblical stories and motif can be attached.

4. JAEI IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *VILLETTE*

When using the story of Jael and Sisera in *Villette*, Brontë does not revise and present it as a central focus in the work so much as employ it as a motif, for metaphorical purposes, to plumb the psychological complexities of the character of the protagonist, Lucy Snowe. In the novel, Brontë dramatises the plight of the genteel Victorian orphan and spinster. Lucy Snowe is a displaced woman, who feels compelled to leave her native England in order to define an independent identification for herself (O'Reilly Herrera 1999). Her independence can be compared to that of Jael and Delilah, but it is not an independence that she enjoys. Particularly repressed in the house of the nun-like Madame Beck, she experiences a moment of freedom, ironically, in the enclosed garden. *Villette* has been studied in great detail by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984; first ed. 1979), and these scholars emphasise the fact that the novel is replete with imagery of enclosure, and employs the use of doubles, the complementary signs of female victimisation (1984: 443). They point out that, generally speaking, Brontë's heroines are confined within uncomfortable selves as well as within uncomfortable spaces, and cannot escape the displaced or disguised representatives of their own feared impulses. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera refers in the title of her work on *Villette's* heroine to her being caught "between a husband and a wall": "In some sense, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* can be read as a rebuke against the narrowness and the limitations of the female domestic ideal that had been laid out for women to emulate" (1999: 68). *Villette* is centrally concerned with the subject of personal, as opposed to public, identity. This is suggested by its autobiographical form, a generic form that implicitly and consciously entails the exploration and exposure of the self for public view. Yet the novel is also specifically concerned with the idea of women's social identity, as opposed to private identity. In the development of Lucy, Brontë has the character reveal to the reader an inner self and also has her perform her various roles in society. In the case of the former, Lucy only shows us what she wants us to see, as O'Reilly Herrera puts it: "she presents for the reader's scrutiny only selective incidents in her life and thereby maintains some

control over the way she is represented" (1999: 69). In terms of her social role, she does not always exercise control over that. She would like to take on the socially sanctioned role of wife, but this seems to be denied her. On one occasion she is forced to take on the role of a man, although when play-acting. She insists upon wearing her own clothes beneath her costume, indicating, as critics have suggested (O'Reilly Herrera 1999: 69), the charades women like the Brontë sisters had to engage in (as they did by assuming male pseudonyms) in order to compete in a public arena largely dominated by men.

Brontë thus discusses in the novel both the idea of artifice or self-fashioning, and also the artificial and contrived nature of gender roles. The play-acting scene is not the only one in which Lucy's female self is denied. When she identifies with the murderess Jael, she simultaneously identifies with her victim, Sisera. Both Jael and Sisera constitute the displaced or disguised representations of her innermost feared impulses. The oppressive environment of Madame Beck's establishment, coupled with the emotional and physical isolation of the life Lucy has chosen to lead, cause her to undergo an identity crisis that pits her authentic or natural emotional self against her passionless social self, a crisis that leads her to the brink of madness (O'Reilly Herrera 1999: 72). The fear of insanity is a fundamental source of terror in Gothic literature, and the forms of insanity are usually clearly gendered in early Gothic fiction. While the mad heroines in these novels lose their wits pathetically, the male villains of Walpole, Beckford, Radcliffe, Lewis and their followers are driven to insanity by vaulting ambition and uncontrollable lust (Mulney-Roberts 1998: 152-57). Thus, whereas in these novels male insanity is little more than a cipher for immorality and evil, a woman deranged by the loss of a lover or a child, or by the sexual predations of men, has an unchallenged claim upon the reader's sympathy.

In her repression and inner conflict between conformity and the desire for freedom to live a more authentic life, Lucy remembers a moment in her childhood during a storm, in which the ferocity of the elements made her feel more vital and in touch with God. This reminds her of the story of Jael, where, during a storm, the waters rose up to trap Sisera and fulfil God's will concerning him. In this context, Brontë uses the Jael story with an added element: that of memory, for the Jael story seems to impress most in childhood. The original biblical narrative belongs to "history", so any new version must inevitably look back to it. Lucy looks back at an authoritative text which had a great impact upon her as a child. The act of remembering covers both the recollection of her sensations on reading the biblical passage, and contemplation of what she considers a life of greater freedom in the past. As Gilbert and Gubar point out (1984: 411), this moment of reminiscence is highly literary, indeed, an intertextual reference to Wordsworth's points of time and infinity.

As a child, Lucy was struck by the storm representing war and the power of God, but as an adult, she focuses more upon the gendered power relations between Jael and Sisera. Although Bal did not place special emphasis on the storm, in the Brontë version it is of interest insofar as it affects the subject's state of mind, and

also suggests the idea that nature is in alliance with women, in that the storm facilitates Deborah's and Jael's project. Lucy sees a parallel in the conflict between her anarchic innermost desires and the need to conform, which her reason dictates, and the conflated roles of victimizer and victim in Jael and Sisera. As Gilbert and Gubar show (1984: 411), "Reason" and "Imagination" are the terms Lucy uses to describe the conflict between her conscious self-repression and the libidinal desires she fears and hopes will possess her, but, significantly, she maintains a sense of herself as separate from both forces and, therefore, feels victimized by both.

Since the male role has traditionally been equated with the external and the rational, and the female with the internal and emotional, one might expect Lucy's innermost feelings to be represented by the figure of Jael, but the reverse is true: the desire to escape is personified in Sisera and the rational repression of it in Jael, in line with the logic of the story. On the evening of the storm, when Lucy remembers her childhood freedom, her vision is of Sisera asleep, unaware of the imminent moment of horror. Hence she equates her childhood innocence and freedom with Sisera's ignorance. Her vision focuses upon the moment of extreme violence, the penetration of the tent peg into Sisera's temples. Sisera is described as "transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core" (1979: 176). Curiously, Sisera does not die in Lucy's vision, and this suggests that her yearnings to escape mental and almost total physical imprisonment are only curbed, not eliminated.

The presence of themes of incarceration, fear, and death, so prevalent in Gothic literature, have led some critics to call Charlotte Brontë's works "New Gothic" (Heilman 1958:118-32). The word "rebellious" attributed to Sisera's reaction, and Lucy's equating of herself with Sisera suggest that Brontë, an avid reader of Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, was participating in a female subculture, where to be a creative woman in nineteenth-century England meant to be caught between the distinctively female twin temptations of angelic submission and monstrous assertion. The latter tendency evinced the triumph of the private self over the one that was socially acceptable for women. As Avril Horner summarises:

The web of religion, nationality, class and gender which Brontë spins in *Villette* allows her to probe the problematics of identity: Lucy's negotiation of conflicting discourses and subject positions advances considerably the Gothic novel's exploration of the split self. Much of her silent suffering is related to questions concerning women's expression of sexual desire, the economic dependency of women, and cultural notions of 'femininity'. (in Mulney-Roberts 1998: 117)

After the warring of Lucy's two antagonistic selves has worked itself out, she is able to recognise that she has been victimised or haunted by a perversely sentimental and oppressive image of womanhood. Thus at the end, she is emotionally strong enough to strike out on her own and establish herself outside the context of either marriage or the convent (O'Reilly-Herrera's husband or wall). In so doing, she neither denies herself the experience of love nor renounces her femininity. The Jael-

Sisera motif thus marks a dramatic, climactic moment in Lucy's development which leads to harmonious resolution, with or without a husband.

Finally, Brontë has used the Jael story in a novel rich in cultural references. In addition to other female figures from the Bible, such as the "whore of Babylon" and Rachel, Brontë includes references to male figures such as Moses, Methuselah, Jonah, Nebuchadnezzar, Jacob and Esau. Usually, these are passing references, for example, Methuselah is used to affirm the great age of a tree. None of the references are developed so fully as that of Jael and Sisera. Brontë also includes in *Villette* allusions to figures from classical literature, for example, Rhadamanthys, son of Zeus and Europa, Hebe, the daughter of Zeus, and Aurora, a daughter of Hyperion and goddess of the dawn. She hereby affirms that western culture has varied origins, and although the Bible is an authoritative text, some people will deny its claim to a monopoly on truth. Brontë can be seen, therefore, as practising Ostriker's "hermeneutics of indeterminacy" mentioned above. By asserting their right to question biblical authority, writers feel free to use material of biblical origin in their own ways and for their own particular purposes.

5. JAEL AND SISERA IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S "THE BELL-TOWER" (1856)

In this story, the protagonist, Bannadonna, "the great mechanician", builds an amazing bell-tower, at the top of which he places a clock-bell adorned with twelve female figures representing the twelve hours. All the living characters in the story are men, and the narrative appears to be a celebration of male creativity, capacity and power. But, in its Italian setting, "The Bell-Tower" pays homage to Hawthorne, recalling such stories as "The Birthmark" and "Rappacini's Daughter", and the protagonist's name contains the name for woman, *donna*, which points to the idea, suggested by Robert S. Kellner in his study "Toads and Scorpions: Women and Sex in the Writings of Herman Melville" (1977), that for Melville, women were a motivating force. Melville's male heroes depend upon the essential and determining role of women. Certainly, characters like Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* and the eponymous Billy Budd personify features usually regarded as feminine, such as generosity and tenderness. As María Felisa López Liqueste writes:

Although the prevalence of maritime settings may explain, for some, the scarcity of female characters, many literary critics consider women and sexuality vexed issues in Melville's fiction and usually impute those difficulties to personal factors, especially the author's problematic relationship with his mother. But, such accounts fail to heed Melville's sympathetic awareness of the female reality, a sensitivity particularly evident in certain short stories. (López Liqueste 1995: 115)

Although short, "The Bell-Tower" is complex and many-layered. The story of Jael and Sisera is not the only biblical reference here; a whole series of biblical and historical allusions operate: from the Tower of Babel, to Esther and Haman, and others. The Tower of Babel motif suggests human pride and desire to emulate God,

followed by punishment. According to Charles L. Crow, editor of the volume *American Gothic: An Anthology 1787-1916*, which includes the story:

The allusions are linked by common themes of dominance and rebellion. Taken together, Melville implies a criticism of modern western society's attempt to dominate women, nature, machines, and other peoples: a quality of western civilization which is ultimately self-destructive. (Crow 1999: 121)

If Bannadonna brings down retribution upon his own head for his Faustian attempts to build a version of the Tower of Babel, this retribution is instrumented through the female figure, the inanimate mechanical figure of Una, the first hour on the clock, and a strange, sexless, mechanical device covered by a cloak and called the "domino". Bannadonna is Sisera to their composite Deborah/Jael, and his death is preceded by a premonition :

"In Christ's name, Bannadonna", impulsively broke in the chief, his attention, for the first time, attracted to the figure, by his associate's remark, "Una's face looks just like that of Deborah, the prophetess, as painted by the Florentine, Del Fonca". (Crow 1999: 125)

According to Crow, Del Fonca was apparently Melville's invention, but the story was certainly the subject of many paintings, as well as Bible illustrations, including the one by Rembrandt.

The climax of the story is the death of Bannadonna, which appears to have been an accident, witnessed by no one. But some human agency and aggression, perhaps a Frankenstein-like vengeance, can be attributed to the mechanical figures of Una and the "domino":

Bannadonna lay prostrate and bleeding at the base of the bell which was adorned with girls and garlands. He lay at the feet of the hour Una; his head coinciding, in a vertical line, with her left hand, clasped by the hour Dua. With downcast face impending over him, like Jael over nailed Sisera in the tent, was the domino; now no more becloaked. (Crow 1999: 127)

In narrative terms, it is interesting to point out that the female figure of the story, Una, has no voice, unlike Deborah; but neither does the domino, although it appears more masculine than feminine, suggesting the "strong woman" aspect of Deborah and Jael. Also of interest is the fact that the inert Bannadonna lies at the feet of Una, much as Sisera had lain "between the feet" of Jael in the biblical account.

As López Liqueste points out, feminist critics have appreciated a change in Melville's production, in the form of a growing interest in women (1995: 117). "The Bell-Tower" is a late work, coming after *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, of 1851 and 1852 respectively, and does seem to suggest a female revenge for aggression suffered at

the hands of a male. As such, it reflects Melville's uncomfortable relationship with the social prejudices of his age, in which women tended to be reduced to their sexual and maternal roles. In eroticising the hour Una, emphasising her sexual role, and placing her in a context of bloody retribution, Melville consciously evokes the genre of Gothic horror stories, much as Brontë had done. The act itself, as in Brontë, takes place in private, and hence is surrounded in mystery.

The division of Gothic writing into male and female traditions is customary, and usually, but not always, follows the gender of the author. It distinguishes between masculine plots of the transgression of social taboos by an excessive male will, and explorations of the imagination's battle against religion, law, limitation and contingency. Bannadonna is not a villain, but he does represent excessive male will and the chafing against limitation. Melville is thus participating, along with women writers, in the growing movement in the nineteenth-century novel towards a critique of patriarchy and its hegemonic texts.

6. Jael and Sisera in George Eliot's *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

George Eliot uses the Jael story in *The Mill on the Floss*—which, though it was first published in 1880, was written in the 1850s—like Charlotte Brontë, but unlike Herman Melville, to indicate self-division and also female self-hatred. As in both the previous authors, the concept of repression of women is evoked. For the adult Lucy, the incident arose as a childhood recollection, but here, for the first time, a child is decked out in the trappings of Jael. At the beginning of the novel, Maggie Tulliver is described as a child who looks "like a small Medusa with her snakes cropped" (1985: 161), and a whirling "pythoness" (1985: 79). In being likened to Medusa, she is placed in a long line of femmes fatales, strong women of a sinister and tempting beauty, like Eve, associated with Satan. As Brontë had done, Eliot makes references both to male figures in the Bible, for example, Aaron, and to figures from classical literature, such as Rhadamanthys, Ulysses and Nausicaa, thus adding herself to the list of practitioners of Ostriker's "hermeneutics of indeterminacy".

The reference to Jael comes during the episode where Maggie, furious at the way she has been refused the chance to accompany her father because she is a girl and must not get her hat wet, and also at the way she has behaved, takes refuge in the attic, her female, enclosed space or "home". Although she goes there voluntarily, the action can be seen as cognate with the pursued maiden who is incarcerated in a tower or labyrinth. Maggie vents her anger on a fetish that she keeps there for the very purpose. The wooden doll is described thus:

defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering. Three nails driven into the head commemorated as many crises in Maggie's nine years of earthly struggle, that luxury of vengeance having been suggested to her by the picture of Jael destroying Sisera in the old Bible. (79)

At this point in the story, where the protagonist is but nine years old, there is no sense of a relationship between violence and sex. Indeed, the violent act is somewhat attenuated by its repetition —*three times*. Nevertheless, when Maggie feels that she has been unjustly punished, and wishes to get her own back, her revenge is at least seen by the narrator as sensuous through the use of the phrase "luxury of vengeance". Maggie enacts the role of Jael, and on this occasion, the fetish, or Sisera, represents her Aunt Glegg. Nonetheless, she also sees herself as Sisera, and dramatises the situation as she has seen it in the illustrated family Bible, demonstrating empathy with the male figure.

In identifying, like Lucy Snowe, with both Jael and Sisera, Maggie gives us a prevision of the consequences that the dichotomy in her personality will have later on in the novel. Maggie can be a satanic inflictor of pain, as in the episode where she pushes her cousin Lucy into the mud, but she is also repentant and convinced of her (female) unworthiness, and attempts to strengthen her spirit and combat these temptations by studying Thomas à Kempis. In this self-inflicted martyrdom and the renunciation of her relationship with Philip Wakeham, she suffers the sort of repression and even self-division that Lucy Snowe had undergone. But whereas the end of *Villette* sees Lucy suffering at the supposed death of M. Paul, albeit strengthened by her new self-confident independence, Maggie develops the dichotomy into two distinct personae, and ironically becomes at once Madonna and Medusa. In attempting to save her brother's life she is the Madonna, but insofar as she is the condemned femme fatale, she is Medusa, and brings Tom down with her.

In her use of the Jael motif, Eliot testifies to its visual impact, especially upon children, who appear to be shocked and fascinated by a punishment doubtfully commensurate with the crime or sin committed. As the young Maggie reenacts the role of Jael in secret, she has a strong sense of suffering on account of being female and of not being allowed to express her frustrations publicly. The repetition of the punishment of the fetish indicates that Maggie is building up both her resentment and her identity as female and repressed, in comparison to her brother Tom, who enjoys male freedom. Her anger on this occasion was on account of not being allowed to go and fetch Tom back from school. Eliot develops the theme of education in "Boy and Girl", the early chapters of the book, and as Maggie is portrayed as quick and intelligent, a good potential student, and Tom as slow and reluctant, she questions the socially-accepted gender divisions of her time which dictated that boys should receive an education at the expense of girls. Any female creativity, as in her own case, had to find its own channels of instruction, refinement and expression.

7. Jael and Sisera in Sara Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem*

The intervening years, indeed, the century, that divides Sara Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem* from the cluster of texts of the decade of the 1850s we have just examined, constitute the crucial years for the growth and flourishing of the Women's Movement. Whereas Charlotte Brontë could only write about female

aspirations in a tentative way, Maitland writes on a solid foundation of many decades of women's rights and achievements. Thus she can openly address the issues of women's employment and domestic violence. Her message is a forceful one, stating that women can no longer be suppressed either by legislation or physical violence.

In her writing, Sara Maitland is influenced as much by socialist feminism as by revisionist theology. She eschews the notion of a "women's language" in favour of a form of feminist fictional critique that takes socially-produced discourses as its objective. She focuses on the social construction of categories such as gender, sexuality and identity, and her preferred strategy is to contest our basic habits of thought by rewriting the stories and myths that have been central to western conceptions of gender. She says in her essay "Futures in Feminist Fiction" (in Carr 1989: 193-203) that literary works should be "vehicles of social revolution", and sets up a dialogue between feminism and theology by focusing on biblical texts, particularly those that sanction and promote institutional androcentrism. Her fictional mode thus owes much to the work of theologians such as Phyllis Trible, whose *Texts of Terror* (1984) re-examines the appalling treatment of women in certain biblical narratives, and whose work is referred to by Bal (see above).

In recognition of the heterogeneity of women's needs and writing, and as a way of circumventing the homogenization of women, Maitland came to place greater emphasis on genre and discourse. For her, the concept of a woman's language is compromised by the kind of biological essentialism she repudiates. The concept of discourse, however, resists any such limitation since it focuses on language's social dimension and stresses that language is inseparable from its use. Language used in the Bible, for example, has a purpose connected with the exercise of power. Also, as a genre, the Bible is authoritative, and, as Maitland questions the authority and hence the genre, she shifts emphasis onto the way that different literary forms can reinterpret and critically revise other modes of writing. This method not only advocates a thoroughly historicised writing practice, but also encourages a view of writing as an ongoing process, of dialogue and contestation, back and forth in time, which blocks the premature closure of unresolved conflicts.

Maitland makes use of the Jael story in her 1978 novel *Daughter of Jerusalem*. Here, as elsewhere in her writing, Maitland rejects the idea that "woman" is a trans-historical category whose character traits remain more or less fixed, while at the same time affirming a solidarity with women of the past by virtue of certain shared experiences. In *Daughter of Jerusalem*, there is a main story taking place in the present—the ordinary lives of a couple, Liz and Ian—but this is counterpointed by a series of biblical vignettes which appear to have no connection with the story. The narrative voice makes no attempt to assimilate the biblical references into the plot; they simply conclude each chapter. Yet it is the interaction between the main narrative and these scriptural intertexts that is productive, as it asks the reader to examine, or re-examine, both.

The intertextual references remind the reader of those instances in the Bible where to be female in a patriarchal society could lead to persecution (as in the cases of the three female victims of *Judges* studied by Mieke Bal). Through the contemporary context, Maitland shows up the similarities and the differences between the biblical cases and the present-day in specific acts in her narrative. In the so-called "First World", at least, women have won their independence, they are no longer the property of men; but in a new way, female equality poses a serious problematic for some men. In Maitland's story, Liz gives vent to female fury at having been beaten by Ian. Domestic violence has not disappeared with women's new rights, indeed, it accounts for more deaths among women under forty-four, than do either cancer or road accidents. What is not known, however, is whether domestic violence is on the increase or whether more women now denounce it and it is better publicised than hitherto. Whatever the reason for the choice of subject, Maitland enables us to see, through Liz's anger, into the furious mind and body of Jael as she goes about her murderous task:

Back in the tent she does not hesitate: the weight of the hammer is with her now, the pointed stick is no longer alien but part of her person. With her first stroke she breaks the skin, penetrates the bone, the point is finding its own pathway into the depths of the man. He groans once, unable to resist the strength of her stroke, she has heard that groan before. She goes beserk; long after it is necessary, bang, bang, bang, rhythmical, powerful she bangs, in and in; the blood and the flesh flow out over the sheepskin coverlet, over the pillow, she is delighted with her power, her strength. Bang, bang, bang. Her moment in history, her song, her story, her revenge. (1978: 161)

Maitland's Jael appears to be taking revenge on men in general for all the sexual abuse across the ages, and the reader constructs an affinity of feeling between Liz and Jael, as if Liz would like to do to Ian what Jael did to Sisera. Though Liz does not imitate her predecessor, Ian is nonetheless warned of her capacity for action. Maitland's use of phrases like "her song, her story" remind us that the story of Deborah and Jael is a rare celebration in history of female power. Because it celebrates aggression, it is problematic for women, but as long as that aggression is seen as vengeance for previous wrongs done, the progression from victim to victimiser is logical and in some way justified. The term "her story" is resonant with feminist, postmodern meanings which insist upon the historicity and political nature of a woman's circumstances. Furthermore, words like "penetrates" and "groan" refer to that association between violence and sex, which underlies the Brontë, the Melville, and potentially, the Eliot versions. Maitland has seen a parallel between the tent peg and the wooden peg used in Gothic vampire literature. Gasiorek (1995: 138) interprets the murder scene as a reversal of the killing (and symbolic rape) of the female vampire in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). In both *Dracula* and *Daughter of Jerusalem*, the issue of male violence against women is raised, as in "The Bell-Tower", whereas this emphasis is not so strong in the Brontë or the Eliot versions. The phrase used by Maitland, "Her moment in history" (at the end of the last

quotation), suggests two moments distanced in time: that of Jael and that of Liz. The male aggression they are protesting against is perennial, whereas their acts of female anger and violence are seen as anomalous and momentary. According to Maitland, females do not wish to emulate males by becoming aggressive and enjoying power through physical violence; they merely wish to warn males about what they are capable of if pushed to a limit. In stressing her message, Maitland not only makes a rather partial exploitation of the Jael motif, —which, of course, she is free to do— but appears to fall into a trap of her own making, coming close to contradicting herself. On the one hand, she holds out against any essentialism regarding terms such as sex, gender, nature, man, or woman, which, for her and for many feminists, do not denote categories that are givens, but disclose discursive formations that require explanation or negotiation (Gasiorek 1995: 123). On the other, by insisting upon institutional male violence, she is accepting these categories and failing to question them.

8. "JAEI" BY A.S. BYATT

Compared to Maitland, the writer, A.S. Byatt, is a very different kettle of fish. She eschews the type of fictional writing, as in socialist realism, in which message takes precedence over all other aspects. In view of this, we might expect a different treatment of the Jael motif, and, indeed, this turns out to be so. It is so for several reasons, but these are reasons which do not necessarily concern departing from the tradition. On the contrary, Byatt inscribes herself in a long line of female writers concerned with the private and public roles of women. We know that Byatt is especially familiar with the figures of Lucy Snowe and Maggie Tulliver: firstly, because she included the heroine of *Villette* in her conversations with the Brazilian psychoanalyst, Inês Sodré, on literary figures and psychology, published as *Imagining Characters: Six Conversations About Women Writers* (1995); and secondly, because she edited *The Mill on the Floss* in 1979, writing a note on the autobiographical origin of Eliot's scene of Maggie punishing a fetish as a surrogate for herself and her own bad behaviour (1979: 20, 672n). Yet unlike the authors of the accounts of Jael discussed so far, which are isolated incidents in novels or in a short story, Byatt dedicates a complete short story to the subject. The story first appeared in the *Guardian* in 1997, and was later published in a collection of narratives of varying length united by the themes of "fire" and "ice" and related paradigms. Here, Jael's story and the contemporary context in which it is reenacted are seen as moments of passion, yet also of cool calculation; they seem to reconcile those apparent binary opposites of fire and ice.

Byatt's version of Jael evinces both similarities and differences in comparison with the versions of Jael created by her predecessors. Both Byatt's and Maitland's twentieth-century accounts of Jael show women demanding or expecting to be equal with men now that attitudes have evolved. Maitland's Liz/Jael is calling out for the right not to be beaten for sexual or domestic reasons. But twenty years later, Byatt's Jess/Jael is very different in this regard: she no longer needs to fight for equality with men. Byatt has chosen a name for her protagonist which has the same initial

letter as Jael and shares the same number of letters. Just as Jael was independent, so is Byatt's Jess, a film-maker in advertising, who is free to work and travel as she pleases. Along with Lucy Snowe and Maggie Tulliver, she is more like the original Jael than Liz is, for she does not appear to be involved in any sexual relationship. Her chief antagonist is another woman: her assistant, Lara, who is a professional rival rather than a sexual one. The narrative context of the short story "Jael" is a conversation between Jess and her cameraman, Jed, over lunch in a studio in Brussels. They are talking, not about female employment or heterosexual relations, but about memory and its role in creativity. The whole story is an account of acts of remembering and their nature. Like Brontë in her version of Jael, where Lucy remembers her childhood reading of the story through overtones of Wordsworth's "spots of time", Byatt theorises about memory and the past. In this story, it is not that character and past life are reconstituted through a Proustian epiphany, in which the past is elusive and is recaptured through an involuntary memory, but quite the reverse: certain memories are obsessively ever-present, and the past is not necessarily lost, even if certain aspects of it are repressed. Nevertheless, they can often be consciously called to mind through a material object connected to a sensation, as in Proust's linden tea and madeleine. For Jess, Jael is one such memory, and she recalls that, on one occasion, the casual piercing of a piece of paper with a sharp pencil brought to her conscious mind the memory of the creative moment when she coloured the picture of Jael at school. She feels deeply the parallel between the piercing of the paper and the penetration of Sisera's temples with the tent peg (Byatt 1998: 199). In this, Brontë and Byatt participate in the same project as the author(s) of *Judges*: a deliberate act of remembering to keep alive the memories of self, whether self means the Israelite nation, the identity of Lucy Snowe, or the hidden creative life of Jess.

Maggie Tulliver enacted her version of Jael as she saw it in the illustrated Bible, and in a similar way Jess relates to the story through the picture she remembers painting at school. Moreover, Byatt places an illustration of the "School of Rembrandt" drawing, "Jael and Sisera", at the head of the story. For the child Jess, the visual impact is important, yet in her colouring of the "great sheet of blood" (1998: 197), she appears dispassionate, unconcerned about the horror, as if in her childhood immaturity she had not understood, or it were merely a game. She is far less serious than the young Maggie Tulliver. There are also other differences from the Eliot version. Firstly, Jess recalls "the sensuous excitement" of the creative experience, and the sexual attributes of her teacher: red lips and "wickedly pointed very high heels" (1998: 198), which make the reader, if not Jess, relate the teacher to Jael with her tent-peg. Secondly, for Jess, another factor associated with this memory is that of high achievement: the girls at this "high-powered" school (1998: 200) were encouraged to strive to do as well as boys.

As a schoolgirl, Jess felt marginalised. Here, Byatt hints at the sexual undertones of relationships at single-sex schools. In not being admitted to intimacy with the dominant girls, Jess found herself belonging to a "fringe" on the edges of gangs. In this she is like Jael: not directly involved with the conflict, but capable of

inflicting great harm. The damage caused by Jess is even similar to that perpetrated by Jael: by placing a rope across the pathway during a cross-country race, Jess causes the leader of the stronger gang, Wendy, to hit her head on a sharp stone. Thus she gets her revenge for the exclusion.

A further difference that separates Byatt from the nineteenth-century women writers studied here, lies in the fact that, from the point of view from which Byatt writes, there is no question of authorship being equated with repression or madness. There are other pressures, such as different attitudes and standards, in the new, rival generations. From what we know of Byatt, we assume that Jess is closer to the opinions of her author than Lara, and that both Byatt and Jess stand for the preservation of a cultural heritage which is intellectually demanding and helps to form a robust cultural identity. Byatt and Jess are in favour of questioning the ideology of authoritative texts like the Bible, but also of preserving them from cultural loss. As Byatt says: "The great novels of Western culture, from *Don Quixote* to *War and Peace*, from *Moby Dick* to *Dr Faustus*, were constructed in the shadow of the one Book and its story" (2000: 170).

These differences of emphasis indicate that Byatt's use of Jael does not serve the same purpose as in the other writers studied. There is no feminist statement underlying this particular short story, though there may be in other areas of her fiction and critical writing (she herself asserts: "The original impulse for *The Conjugal Angel* was in this sense revisionist and feminist"; 2000: 104). In general terms, Byatt is ambivalent and ambiguous about feminist writing. A recent article by Christien Franken sets out to counteract "a narrow-minded image of the novelist-critic A.S. Byatt as somebody who is traditional, anti-theoretical, highbrow and non-feminist or anti-feminist" (2000: 197). Part of Franken's argument focuses on the "femininity" of Maggie Tulliver and Byatt's views on F.R. Leavis on the matter: "Byatt adopts a feminist view of Eliot's work and character, in explicit opposition to F.R. Leavis" (2000: 209). Franken concludes that there is a structural ambivalence inherent to Byatt's ideas about the concept of "female identity":

On the one hand, she projects her own feminism onto the nineteenth century in idealizing George Eliot as a model to identify with as a woman writer and critic. On the other hand, feminist theorists who emphasize the importance of "gender" to theories of art and concepts of creative identity typically come in for heavy condemnation in Byatt's criticism. (2000: 212)

Byatt, as writer and critic, is therefore a site where different voices jostle together, indicating, in herself, the fragmented, problematic nature of identity in postmodern writing. In the first of the Richard Ellmann memorial lectures Byatt delivered at Emory University, she stated the following on the subject of postmodernism and historical subjects, which partly goes to show and explain her interest in figures such as Jael:

I believe that postmodern writers are returning to historical fiction because the idea of writing about the Self is felt to be worked out, or precarious, or because these writers are attracted by the idea that perhaps we have no such thing as an organic, discoverable, single Self. We are perhaps no more than a series of disjunct sense- impressions, remembered Incidents, shifting bits of knowledge, opinion, ideology and stock responses. We like historical persons because they are unknowable, only partly available to the imagination, and we find this occluded quality attractive. (Byatt 2000: 31)

9. CONCLUSIONS

In our study of the rewriting of Jael over the last one hundred and fifty years, we see how some of the aspects of her story emphasised by Mieke Bal recur in the different versions. Bal prioritised her independence, marginalised status, sexuality, power and sense of vengeance. All of these aspects were anomalous in a patriarchal text like the Bible. Reference to the story sets up a dialogue between a past and present age and between two different types of discourse, particularly in the twentieth-century writers. It is most obvious in Maitland, but important too in Byatt, insofar as she recommends the preservation, not of the patriarchal authority contained in the Bible, but of the beauty of its language and culture-laden richness. The concept of literalization, where the story of Jael is made real again in new characters, is seen in all five versions, with particular emphasis on the mutilated body. The domestic terrain, in the form of a female space or memory of childhood, also forms a motivation for the use of the story.

Ostriker's rhetorics or hermeneutics of biblical revision: of suspicion, desire, indeterminacy, and vision, are present in all five versions. The authority of patriarchy is questioned, and its preeminent text, the Bible, is seen as only one of various cultural models inherited by contemporary society. The transgressive eroticising of the text is seen in all versions: heterosexual in the first four and latently homoerotic in Byatt, who adds the erotic charge as inherent to artistic creativity. The importance of the visual in the process of seeing oneself objectively, and of remembering as part of a reconstruction of identity, are similarly present in most versions. Finally, in terms of visions for the future, they relate, not to a religious community, but either to a feminine one, if only through readership, or, as in Byatt, to the idea of twentieth-century women's freedom to create on equal terms with man, and to their responsibility, along with men, to preserve our culture.

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