

Viewing Vashti: As Victim, as Vilified, and as Venerated

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Article abstract

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Viewing Vashti: as Victim, as Vilified, and as Venerated

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“Vashti never speaks yet her actions speak loud and clear.”¹

Abstract

Viewing the Biblical book of Esther’s Queen Vashti, chiefly through two lenses, traditional rabbinic commentaries, and how some contemporary authors, primarily poets writing in English, Vashti is seen as someone victimized, someone vilified, but also a woman to be venerated.

Keywords: Book of Esther, Queen Vashti, Vashti poetry, Vashti midrash

This article considers how the character Vashti in the biblical Book of Esther is portrayed chiefly through two lenses: traditional rabbinic commentaries about her, and how some contemporary authors, primarily poets writing in English, have presented her.² Both the rabbis and the poets share a common subject, Vashti; otherwise, they are very dissimilar in their approach and presentation. These two areas, rabbinic teachings and contemporary feminist poetry though unlike in scope and purpose approach the text with parallel goals. Each wants to make the biblical narrative about Vashti relevant to their readership. They consider Vashti differently, but their purpose is to inform their audience about who was this woman, and that it is important that you know those matters. The rabbinic material describes the character and actions of Vashti, as does the poetry, but the poetry often also seeks to give Vashti a voice in the world today.³ The rabbinic material was produced literally hundreds of years ago, in antiquity, late antiquity, and the early Middle Ages. The feminist poetry reflects thought in the 21st century. These two approaches complement each other, but otherwise they are not directly related.

The rabbinic material is drawn principally from three sources, the midrash collection *Esther Rabbah*;⁴ the ancient Aramaic translations of the book, *Targum Rishon* (First Translation) and *Targum Sheni* (Second Translation) to *Esther*;⁵ and short selections from the *Babylonian Talmud*. Midrash often moves far from the plain meaning of that text. Adele Berlin writes that “midrashic comments help us see the meaning more clearly, if more imaginatively... The rabbis were not interested in what we call ‘the original meaning of the text.’ They were more intent on the meaning

for their own time, and they engage in obviously anachronistic readings. They thereby lift the biblical story out of its original context and apply it to another context. In so doing, they keep the Bible alive, for the moment that the Bible cannot be read into contemporary life it becomes an antiquarian document, of little import to a living community.”⁶

“Modern readers, especially feminists, tend to view her [Vashti] positively, as a woman who resisted male domination and was victimized by it.”⁷ Yet in its context, Vashti’s indignation is not that of a protofeminist; her response is that of a queen. In the biblical text Vashti is not someone to be trifled with, as the king might do with a concubine.⁸ In the view of some rabbinic teachings, Vashti was trying to save the reputation and possibly the life of Ahasuerus by refusing to attend his banquet unclothed. When Queen Vashti refuses to obey his order, the king is incensed, his fury burns within him. Remarkably, “Vashti does not succumb in the face of this apparent absolute power, instead she confronts it: she refuses the king’s command. She prefers to engage with the danger manifested by her resistance to the king’s orders rather than surrender her agency manifested in her own activities—or her own power base as a queen among women. Her character develops beyond mere superficial beauty to being an autonomous woman who weighs up a complex situation and makes her own decision.”⁹

Vashti – the wife of the legendary King Ahasuerus, he who reigned over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Cush. Even as he gave a special weeklong banquet, “for all the people who lived in the fortress of Shushan, high and low alike,” so likewise “Queen Vashti gave a banquet for women, in the royal palace of King Ahasuerus” (Est 1:5, 9). All appeared to be going well, and then, suddenly, it wasn’t. Vashti’s name appears ten times in the first two chapters of the book.¹⁰ She moves rapidly from the heights of power to effective anonymity. That said, in the post-biblical world Vashti changes from a relatively obscure figure to a person who is portrayed as a victim, as someone who is vilified, and finally she comes into her own, a figure who is venerated. Vashti is at the same time a necessary, though a relatively minor character in the book of Esther. In her royal position she needs to be deposed and dispossessed to create the conditions where Esther will become the reigning queen of King Ahasuerus. The book of Esther itself is an anomaly in the Bible. It does not mention God, nor does it describe religious rituals. On the surface, while the book purports to be a part of Persian history, there is no proof of a queen named Esther. The

book of Esther “is an imaginative story... it is a comedy, a book meant to be funny, to provoke laughter.”¹¹ The book of Esther is purposely written as a farce, using elements of the burlesque including exaggerated caricature types, preposterous situations, broad verbal humor and satire. Yet, on another level, Esther is a very serious work. It is a bleak tale in terms of the characterization of the subjugation of women, and a dark tale about how the Jewish community is at risk from hidden enemies.

In the book of Esther, to the consternation of many from a feminist viewpoint, the main female character, Esther is shown to be the compliant “good wife,” as opposed to the forcefulness of Vashti. “The literary prominence given to Esther at the expense of the self-assertive, dignified Vashti embodies the biblical stance on sexual politics.”¹² Women, this androcentric book seems to say are to be obedient and submissive, not figures who challenge male authority. Vashti refuses to attend to the king under the conditions that he stipulates when she is summoned. She is punished for her reply. Esther, by contrast does go to the king without being summoned, and she is not punished.¹³ Ahasuerus creates an impossible dilemma for Vashti. His “command is contrary to the basic tenets of honor/shame, for he commands his wife to enter masculine space inappropriately, forbidden a woman who values her sense of shame...The degree of clothing accentuates a basic problem. Even fully clothed, Vashti is faced with a dilemma: whether to relinquish her claim to honor through abandoning her modesty in a forbidden masculine space, or defying her husband’s authority. She chooses the latter.”¹⁴ Clearly, in terms of the plotline of the book, Vashti has to refuse the king’s request in order to allow for the introduction of Esther. Yet she is not forced to appear before Ahasuerus at the party. Her non-consent is voluntary, and she chooses agency over compliance, despite the fact that there would be harsh consequences for her decision.¹⁵

Though Vashti disappears from the book of Esther, she is far from a forgotten figure. The rabbis refer to her both in midrashic writings and in statements in the Babylonian Talmud. In those compilations some very different figures are presented, though they basically fall into the categories of victim or villain. A number of contemporary writers view Vashti differently, seeing her as a brave figure, someone to be venerated. It is somewhat ironic that in the book of Esther Vashti does not have a speaking part. She is described and written about, but the net result is that she is silenced. In the biblical book of Esther “which has a far greater proportion of direct address

than most biblical literature, none is given to Vashti. She is rendered silent, without voice.”¹⁶ As shall be shown in the Vashti Venerated section, some of the contemporary authors do present her thoughts, giving her a voice today.

Finally, it is worthwhile to point out that the book of Esther never addresses “the detail of her punishment. What happens to her next? Though traditional commentators of the book often assume that she is exterminated or, at very least, banished from the palace or the citadel, the text itself is not precise at all. The narrative reports merely that she is no longer to appear before the king. Indeed, one might argue that Vashti scores the result she wants. She does not want to come before the king to show herself; now, how fortunate for her that will never again have to do that very action she refuses to do. In sum, this lack of detail, as well as the lack of a reason for Vashti’s refusal, leave a great amount of room for speculation with regard to this character.”¹⁷

Vashti as victim

As mentioned, contemporary “readers, especially feminists, tend to view her [Vashti] positively, as a woman who resisted male domination and was victimized by it.”¹⁸ Certainly, as depicted in the Bible, Vashti is a victim of the reckless and irrational thinking of both King Ahasuerus and his counselors. The book of Esther’s “sympathy toward Vashti emerges from the way she is made the victim of Xerxes’ [i.e., Ahasuerus’] instability and the princes’ insecurity.”¹⁹ The text is clear. For a week he and his guests have been drinking the royal wine and the “rule for the drinking was ‘no restrictions!’” On the seventh day, when the king was *merry with wine*, he orders seven eunuchs “to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman” (Est 1:8, 10-11). “The king wanted to objectify his queen.” Having shown off his opulence for six days, he now wants to “show off his crown worn by his most beautiful woman, the pinnacle of his wealth. The boundaries between the male and female worlds of feasting are trampled down by this demand of the king. His power is stamped not only on his festivities but also on those of Vashti.”²⁰ Vashti, bravely, but with negative consequences for her, refuses this royal command. That denial comes at a heavy price: she is stripped of her position (Est 1:19), and though remembered, she is never seen again.

In the midrash collection, *Esther Rabbah*, compiled about the 6th century CE, and in the Aramaic translations, *Targum Rishon* [First translation/edition] and *Targum Sheni* [Second

translation/edition] probably composed in the 6th to 8th century CE there are examples of views both defending Vashti's actions, and instances which speak ill of her. The rabbis imagine that King Ahasuerus and his guests were behaving like unsophisticated louts, each bragging that his wife was more beautiful than the next man's. Would you like to see her, Ahasuerus asks. Yes, his drunken companions reply, but then they add, yet she must be naked. The ruler acquiesces and demands that she appear unclothed (*Targum Rishon* 1.11).²¹ She replies, but surely wearing a girdle, and the king denies her even that covering (*Esther Rabbah* 3.13). Vashti then forcibly responds, if they find me beautiful, they will want me and will kill you; if they find me plain, I shall bring disgrace upon you. Ahasuerus dismisses her reply (*Esther Rabbah* 3.14). In the *Targum Sheni* to Esther Ahasuerus threatens her life if she does not obey. Vashti replies, "Since I was born until now, no person has seen my body except you, O king" (*Targum Sheni* 1.12). Although this matter of nudity has no basis in the Masoretic Text, and is first mentioned in *Esther Rabbah* and the Targums [*targumim*], it becomes a very popular trope. "Vashti's nudity becomes legendary, and is replicated in numerous writings and artworks."²²

One of the ironies of these commentaries on the book of Esther is that in the Targums and rabbinic writings, while in some cases Vashti is criticized for various behaviors, in other places such as the aforementioned example, Vashti also is portrayed as someone who acted heroically. She actually wishes to preserve the dignity of her husband. She seeks to modify his drunken decree, and even to save him from the possibility of mortal danger. As mentioned, she suggests to him that his guests would find her so desirable they would kill him so to be able to claim Vashti as a prize.

Aside from the verses describing that she be set aside, (Est 1:15-20) the Bible is silent about what happens next, Vashti simply disappears from view. *Esther Rabbah* and the Targums provide answers. Despite no biblical mention of such a fate, these sources indicate that Vashti was executed (*Esther Rabbah* 3.15, 4.11, 5.2. In 4.11 the king gives "the order and they brought her head on a platter.") That Vashti was killed is spelled out in *Targum Rishon* 1.1, and *Targum Sheni* 2.1. The *Targum Rishon* explains that God incited the whole episode with Vashti. "When the king's heart became cheerful through wine, the Lord incited against him the angel of confusion to confound their festivities" (*Targum Rishon* 1.10). A few verses later one reads, "Queen Vashti, however, refused to come according to the decree of the *order of the Lord* and the king, as ordered by the

princes. Whereupon the king became extremely angry and his fury burned within him (*Targum Rishon* 1.12). *Targum Sheni* explains that she was a direct descendant of Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian king who destroyed the Temple, and it “was (decreed) from Heaven, that the descendants of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylonia should come to [an] end” (*Targum Sheni* 2.2).²³ Vashti’s degradation is further noted in that *Targum Rishon* where it explains that she was naked when she was executed (*Targum Rishon* 1.1). The midrashic collection *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*²⁴ (compiled c. 7th-11th cent. CE) also indicates that Vashti was naked when she killed (chap. 49). A more likely situation is that Vashti was, so to say, demoted and returned to the harem as a mere concubine. In a recent novel, it suggests that she escaped with her lover, and presumably lived happily ever after.²⁵

In several places Ahasuerus regrets his actions. After “he had killed her, he began to feel remorse, because he realized that she had acted properly” (*Esther Rabbah* 5.2). In *Targum Sheni* when Ahasuerus is once again sober, he regrets his actions. “He remembered Vashti and (in view of) what she had done, as well as what was decreed against her that she was not worth the decree of death.” He blames others for this matter, excusing himself because he was inebriated (*Targum Sheni* 2.1-2).

Poet Yala Korwin (2000/2001) takes note of Vashti’s refusal, her being victimized by Ahasuerus, and then her disappearance from the biblical text. “Bring Vashti the queen/ before the king/ with the royal crown to show the/ guests/ her grace and beauty. / You refused to come./ ... no scribe recorded/ the name of your daring. / Was the royal castle/ a prison for you?”²⁶ Likewise, Janet Ruth Falon (1996) describes Vashti’s being ill-treated by her husband. “**Vashti**/ said no/ refused the summons/ would not appear/ like a beck-and-call Barbie/ by her husband/ and his cronies/ all of whom stunk of unwashed and old wine/ and were eager to own her with their eyes/ ... she said no/ refused the summons/ would not appear/ ... her husband swelled with rage.”²⁷

Vashti as vilified

“Vashti is such a fascinating figure because she personifies the many fearful aspects of womanhood that are legislated against in cultural configurations of femininity: she is desirable and deplorable, invisible and figured, diseased and, ultimately, disobedient. Despite apparent contradictions, Vashti is ultimately vilified.”²⁸

On a surface reading of the Masoretic Text, Vashti's refusal to appear (clothed or otherwise) is quite reasonable. Ahasuerus' demand is inappropriate. Yet, to create the need for a new queen, and then Esther's filling that position, it requires Vashti's dismissal. Rabbinic tradition is not content to have Vashti's royal status terminated, the rabbis found reasons to speak ill of her.²⁹

They explain that Vashti deserved to be executed for several reasons. Exegeting on a passage found in the prophet Isaiah, one rabbi explains why Vashti was warranted to die. "I will arise against them—declares GOD of Hosts—and will wipe out from Babylon name and remnant, kith and kin—declares God" (Isa 14:22). Rav said, "name" refers to Nebuchadnezzar, "remnant" refers to [his son] Evil-merodach, "kith" refers to his son Belshazzar, and "kin" refers to Vashti, who according to the Talmud was a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar and the daughter of Belshazzar (*Esther Rabbah* Proem 12; *Esther Rabbah* 3.5; see also Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 10b). Vashti is further vilified because she would not allow Ahasuerus to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem – which had been destroyed by her grandfather (or great-grandfather – *Esther Rabbah* Proem 12) Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, so she deserved to "suffer this fate" (*Esther Rabbah* 5.2). She is also disparaged because she made Israelite women work totally unclothed on the Sabbath (*Targum Sheni*, Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 12b, see endnote 21). This is a kind of double affront for the rabbis. Not only is working on the Sabbath prohibited by Biblical and Talmudic tradition, but attention to modesty, and especially female modesty is a prime virtue. Given that female modesty is "an overriding obsession in the rabbinic portrayal of women"³⁰ and that Vashti according to the biblical text rejects Ahasuerus' inappropriate request, presumably because of modesty issues, it is somewhat surprising that nonetheless the rabbis largely disparage her.

According to rabbinic tradition, both Ahasuerus and Vashti were sexually immoral. "Queen Vashti gave a banquet for women in the palace" – Should the verse not have said, "[Vashti gave a banquet for the women in] the women's house?" Raba answered, "Both [Ahasuerus and Vashti] had a sinful purpose [that is, they wanted to sleep with the people at their party]. Thus, people say: "He with gourds and his wife with squash [or with pumpkins and zucchini according to another translation]." (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 12a-b). What those words mean is somewhat ambiguous. Gourds/pumpkins of various sizes might allude to breasts, buttocks or more likely scrota, and squash/zucchini to male genitalia, or some kind of sex toy. The Talmud teasingly hints at the

possible meanings, but leaves these matters uncertain. Another tradition found in the Talmud (*Megillah* 12b) hints that Vashti might have seriously considered the king's request, in fact she may have been receptive to it. Nonetheless, at the last moment she could not comply because she suddenly was afflicted by a skin disease, or alternatively that the angel Gabriel came and somehow affixed a tail, or some kind of growth to her, therefore she was no longer desirable.

In terms of classical Christian thinking, Vashti becomes a symbol for the Jewish people or the synagogue. The Patristic (Church Father) Rabanus Maurus, (early 9th cent. Germany), Archbishop of Mainz, regards Vashti being replaced by Esther, just as the Church replaced the synagogue.³¹ This supersessionist approach to Vashti, and more generally to the book of Esther is addressed by Barry A. Jones when he writes of the “neglect and hostility ... [in] Christian interpretations of [the book of] Esther.” He notes that the book of Esther held a tenuous place in the biblical canon in the early centuries of Christian history. Martin Luther explicitly condemned the book specifically for its popularity with Jewish communities and its emphasis on human responsibility rather than religious piety. Liberal Protestant interpretation of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries showed the same kind of contempt for the book of Esther that was often expressed toward Judaism within circles influenced by Enlightenment rationalism. Bernhard W. Anderson, one of the most well-known Protestant Old Testament scholars of the twentieth century and author of one of the most widely adopted textbooks on the Old Testament in American higher education, wrote in 1950 that Esther was “an uninviting wilderness” for Christian readers, a book “offensive” to Christians.³²

Vashti as venerated

Vashti is the subject of poems and other literary authors. Oftentimes she is praised for her actions. She is viewed sympathetically for her choice to stand up for her principles, even though this means her downfall. These poets commiserate with Vashti. She is a victim of the absurd behavior of her husband Ahasuerus. Yet on the whole, these poets venerate her, for being a strong woman within an androcentric/patriarchal world. Poet Michelle Amira (2020) praises Vashti, even as her poem denigrates the mindset of ancient Persia. Amira terms Vashti as a “shining star.../ They exiled you into the blowing wind/.” Amira posits that “You should be able to say ‘no’ and still be Queen too/. But, they stomped on your soul .../”³³ Connecting Vashti very closely to current feminist protest,

Erika Dreifus (2022) in her poem “Queen Vashti and the #MeToo Movement” writes her poem from Vashti’s viewpoint as a woman whose time has finally come: “You can only go so long/ as obedient servant/ when you are a spouse/ with pride, and self-worth./ I was cast out,/ the royal stage cleared for another/ whose name would live on in light/ while mine receded./ Until now.”³⁴ Dreifus highlights how one byproduct of the #MeToo Movement is to see and speak of Vashti in a new, and deeply sympathetic light.

Bonnie Lyons (2003) who titles her poem “The Book of Vashti” is very critical of Jewish women who have celebrated Esther and either ignored or downplayed Vashti. Think in wider categories, she suggests. Lyons writes: “Yes, you’re Jews/ but you’re also women. / How can you celebrate Esther, / Mordecai’s pawn, / who only rose to the occasion/ when he threatened her personally. / ... But even now/ she blinds you, / binds you/ to your weakness.”³⁵

In another poem by Lyons, “Esther’s Way” written with the voice of Esther, the speaker remembers Vashti ruefully. Here again, the poet raises the issue of the wider category of womanhood. “Reveling in a queen’s power, / Vashti forgot she was a woman. / ... a woman in a man’s world./ Acting openly, directly, / like a man, Vashti/ refused to display herself– / a beautiful queenly gesture. / But what did it get her? / What did it do for other women? / ... Vashti acted in a dream world/ where women have equal power. / I acted in the real world. / Mine was surely the way/ of wisdom. So why am I/ constantly justifying myself/ to her?”³⁶

Naomi Graetz (2005) praises and empathizes with Vashti in the poem “Vashti Unrobed,” for while “Straight and proud she stands/ ... She will not subject herself, / Submit to gazing drunken eyes/ Boring into her ... For the first/ And last time. / The party is over. For her.”³⁷ In a similar fashion, but speaking in the first person, Irene Orgel (2007) in the poem “Vashti” has her protagonist say, “... recall/ that I Vashti/... once briefly asserted sovereignty/ over my own person.”³⁸ These poems celebrate Vashti as a strong and courageous woman, who stands tall and claims her own authority over her life.

In a contemporary short story, Jill Hammer (1998) in a kind of modified modern midrash, presents a very favorable view of the queen. On one hand Vashti is vain, but, as she explains in Vashti’s voice, in “Shushan, vanity was a survival skill, and I possessed it in plenty.” That said, she also spends her “private hours studying books” which included “the legends of the Jews, their prophets

and invisible God.”³⁹ Vashti is aided and advised by the angel Gabriel, traditionally the angel of power (Gabriel in Hebrew means God is my strength). In what turns out to be a suspension of time, Gabriel appears to Vashti and urges her to reject Ahasuerus’ command. If she does so, it will restore her self-respect that was lost and it would win her a measure of freedom. She does refuse the king’s request, and in that moment, she is somehow transported to heaven and takes on the name Ofaniel, “the name delights: ‘wheel of God,’ a reminder that in an hour, everything can change. Now I, like Gabriel, am a symbol of what all people might be.”⁴⁰

While for many authors Vashti is a very sympathetic character, scholar Michael V. Fox correctly reminds readers that in many ways the unsung hero of the book of Esther is usually forgotten. The fact is that “the author of [that book] is something of a profeminist... The book certainly does not align itself with the men’s side in the conflict. Perhaps alone in the Bible, this author is aware of female subservience and is cynical about the masculine qualities that require it.”⁴¹

The role of Vashti in the first two chapters of the book of Esther, her position as Ahasuerus’s reigning Queen is a necessary part of the biblical narrative. She has to be there in order for the monarch to demand her presence. Likewise, it is her refusal to comply with his request that sets in motion the search for a replacement figure as Queen, thereby allowing the introduction of Esther and Esther’s attainment of that position. Like much of the Bible, the book of Esther is written from an androcentric, although not necessarily a misogynistic viewpoint. As just noted, “this author is aware of female subservience and is cynical about the masculine qualities that require it.” Vashti is spoken about in the book, although she has no active speaking role. As Queen she gives a banquet for women, and then she is asked to appear before the king “wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman” (Est 1:11). Vashti refuses this request which results in the king being greatly incensed, and apparently confused, for he seeks advice as how to deal with the fact that she had failed to obey his command (Est 1:12, 15). Although not stated as such, Vashti seems to be, to use a contemporary term, a very popular “role model” for women across the empire, because “the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen’s behavior, will cite it to all of [Ahasuerus’...] officials and there will be no end of scorn and provocation!” (Est 1:18). According to the monarch’s advisors, only if and

when he replaces her, will throughout the empire, “wives treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike” (Est 1:20).

Throughout the book of Esther, it is clear that this is an inventive story, one created to cause laughter. Throughout the ten chapters, the characters are overdrawn, they are larger than life figures. The book of Esther also is part of the canon of the Bible. This fact served as an invitation to the rabbis to create midrashim to provide additional material which offered a deeper understanding of what the text provided. In like manner, contemporary authors seek to give voice to the characters of that book, and to provide scholarly background to the book of Esther. Further, contemporary poets give voice to characters, in this article to Vashti, allowing her to speak to women and men of the 21st century. Vashti is literally voiceless in the book of Esther, but through their efforts, poets bring her to life today.

The book of Esther is a farce, utilizing elements of the burlesque including exaggerated caricature types, preposterous situations, broad verbal humor and satire. This is true in the first two chapters and continues throughout. Those matters notwithstanding, the biblical book of Esther has serious messages. It addresses in dark and stark terms the subjugation of women, and it reminds the readers of how then, and throughout history the Jewish community has been at risk from hidden enemies. Vashti has a brief, although a vital and necessary role in the book of Esther. After less than a dozen references, she disappears from biblical history. Nonetheless, she is a figure who inspires many views, views which present Vashti as Victim, Vashti as Vilified, and Vashti as Venerated.

With deep appreciation to Dr Anat Koplowitz-Breier of the Comparative Literature faculty at Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel, for sharing several poems dealing with Vashti, as well as the essay written by Linda Day.

¹ Alice L Laffey. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) p. 214.

² As an academic search quickly reveals, there are many scholarly works as well as thousands of articles written about the Book of Esther, as well as articles and monographs analyzing such topics as individual characters in the book, the larger themes of the book, its religious character such as it is, and where, why and when it was written. To cite but a few examples, for a discussion of Vashti in literary works in the 19th and early 20th century in

English see Linda Day, “Vashti Interpreted: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literary Representations of the Book of Esther.” Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Studies Presidential Address, 2003. Also see note 7 below. This article is limited to the person of Vashti. It primarily offers two very different perspectives: that of rabbinic thought, and that of the view of contemporary poets.

³ Jill Hammer’s short story “Vashti and the Angel Gabriel” is a kind of modern midrash and appears in Naomi M. Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Source Book*. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), pp. 159-71. Like the poetry cited, however, it is a kind of first-person account, and presents the voice of Vashti, explaining who she is and why she does what she does.

⁴ *Esther Rabbah*, Tr. Maurice Simon. (London: Soncino, 1939).

⁵ *The Two Targums of Esther – Targum Rishon and Targum Sheni. The Aramaic Bible, Vol. 18*. Tr. Bernard Grossfeld. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

⁶ Adele Berlin. “Writing a Commentary for a Jewish Audience.” *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*. Eds. S. W. Crawford and L. J. Greenspoon. (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), p. 15.

⁷ Adele Berlin. *Esther: the JPS Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 2001), p. 14. For example see Madipoane Masenya (ngwana’ Mphahlele) “Their Hermeneutics Was Strange! Ours Is a Necessity! Rereading Vashti as African-South African Women” in (eds. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner) *Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse*. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), pp. 179-94; Ciin Sian Siam Hatzaw: “Reading Esther as a Postcolonial Feminist Icon for Asian Women in Diaspora” <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/opth-2020-0144/html>

⁸ Michael V. Fox. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), p. 168.

⁹ Deborah F. Sawyer. “Queen Vashti’s ‘No’ and What it Can Tell Us about Gender Tools in Biblical Narrative” in Yvonne Sherwood and Anna Fisk, *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 351. [343-354].

¹⁰ Est 1:9, 11, 12, 15, 16,17, 19; 2:1, 4, 17. Only in these first seven verses is she still Queen Vashti. For an analysis of how she is mentioned, see Bea Wyler. “Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen” in Ed. Athalya Brenner. *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*. (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2004 (1995)), pp. 117-18. [111-135]

¹¹ Berlin, *Esther: the JPS Commentary*, p. xvii. See also <https://www.thetorah.com/article/ahasuerus-and-vashti-the-story-megillat-esther-does-not-tell-you>

¹² Fox. p. 206.

¹³ Berlin, *Esther: the JPS Commentary*, p. 15. “Although Vashti is no more disobedient here [Est 1:12] than Esther is later on in refusing to stay away at the king’s command (see iv 11) they provoke a very different response: Vashti raises the king’s anger while Esther stirs his mercy.” Carey A. Moore. *Esther* (Anchor Bible. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. 9, n. 12.

¹⁴ Lillian R. Klein. “Honor and Shame in Esther” in Ed. Athalya Brenner. *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*. (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2004 (1995)), p. 155. [149-175].

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- ¹⁵ Jason Gaines. (2019). But Queen Vashti Refused: Consent and Agency in the Book of Esther. TheTorah.com. <https://thetorah.com/article/but-queen-vashti-refused-consent-and-agency-in-the-book-of-esther> <https://www.thetorah.com/article/but-queen-vashti-refused-consent-and-agency-in-the-book-of-esther>
- ¹⁶ Day, p. 2.
- ¹⁷ Day, p. 3.
- ¹⁸ Berlin, *Esther: the JPS Commentary*, p. 14.
- ¹⁹ Fox, p. 167.
- ²⁰ Sawyer, p. 351.
- ²¹ In the Aramaic translation of Esther, *Targum Rishon*, Ahasuerus orders that Vashti appears in the nude because “she used to make Israelite girls work in the nude on the Sabbath day, therefore it was decreed upon her to be brought (out) in the nude. However, the crown of royalty was on her head.” *Targum Rishon*, 1.11. Vashti’s making Israelite girls work on the Sabbath is also found in the Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 12b. In that Talmudic passage it explains that this is a kind of measure-for-measure matter: as she had demeaned the Israelite girls, so she would be demeaned. See also Grossfeld’s comment on this verse (p. 35, note 54). Scholars debate about when the *Targum Rishon* and the *Targum Sheni* were composed. There is some consensus with the suggestion of the 6th to 8th century CE, although some suggest a later date. Alinda Damsma, “The Targums to Esther,” (2014). https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10133565/1/Damsma_article%20EJ.pdf. See also Frederic W. Bush, *Word Bible Commentary - Ruth Esther*. (Dallas: Word Bible, 1996), pp. 354-55.
- ²² Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p. 62.
- ²³ By whom Vashti is Nebuchadnezzar’s granddaughter is a matter of debate. See Grossfeld’s comment on *Targum Rishon* (p. 28, note 4). This citation both classifies Vashti as a victim, and also, by dint of her grandfather, a villain.
- ²⁴ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*. Tr. Gerald Friedlander. (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1981 (1916)).
- ²⁵ Sandra E. Rapoport, *The Queen and the Spymaster: A Novel Based on the Story of Esther*. (New York: Ktav, 2018/Brooklyn, NY: Penlight, 2019), pp. 53-55.
- ²⁶ Yala Korwin. “Vashti.” *Jewish Women’s Literary Annual*. (New York: Jewish Women’s Resource Center/NCJW, 2000-2001). N.p.
- ²⁷ Janet Ruth Falon. “Vashti.” *New Menorah. The Journal of ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal*. Spring 1996. N.p.
- ²⁸ Carruthers, p. 71.
- ²⁹ Tamar Kadari suggests that the Babylonian rabbis vilify Vashti, as opposed to the rabbis of the Land of Israel. “Vashti: Midrash and Aggadah.” [https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/vashti-midrash-and-aggadah#:~:text=3%3A2\).-,The,Rabbah%203%3A5](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/vashti-midrash-and-aggadah#:~:text=3%3A2).-,The,Rabbah%203%3A5)). Vilifying Vashti remains a trope within Orthodox Judaism. See Tziporah Heller, <https://aish.com/48951881/> Mendel Kalmenson. ‘Was Vashti a Heroine? A Study of Vashti vs. Esther.’ Chabad.org. https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/1239033/jewish/Was-Vashti-a-Heroine.htm. Accessed 4 Sept. 2024. See also David Charles Pollack. <https://forward.com/opinion/395071/vashti-was-the-first-metoo-survivor/>

- ³⁰ Leila Leah Bronner. *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), xvii.
- ³¹ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Old Testament, V. 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*. Ed. Marco Conti with Gianluca Pilara. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), pp. 376-77. See also Carruthers, pp. 28-29.
- ³² Barry A. Jones. "Life in the Diaspora: Christian interpretation of Esther in dialogue with Judaism." *Review and Expositor* 2021, Vol. 118(2) 170–179.
- ³³ Michelle Amira. "A Poem for Purim: Women in the Mikvah (for Vashti)" <https://gatherdc.org/2020/03/09/a-poem-for-purim-women-in-the-mikvah-for-vashti/>
- ³⁴ <https://www.erikadreifus.com/2022/03/and-now-for-something-a-little-different/>
- ³⁵ Bonnie Lyons. "The Book of Vashti." *Jewish Women's Literary Annual. Vol 5*. (New York: National Council of Jewish Women, 2003), p. 239.
- ³⁶ Lyons, "Esther's Way." *Jewish Women's Literary Annual. Vol 5*. (New York: National Council of Jewish Women, 2003), p. 240.
- ³⁷ Naomi Graetz. "Vashti Unrobed." *Unlocking the Garden. A Feminist Look at the Bible, Midrash and God*. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005), p. 171.
- ³⁸ Irene Orgel. "Vashti." *Jewish Currents* Vol. 61, no. 2 (641), March-April 2007, p.8.
- ³⁹ Hammer, p. 160.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 171.
- ⁴¹ Fox, p. 209.

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