Contested Sites:

Interrogating the Bodily Autonomy of Esther and Vashti

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Thesis Submitted for the Award of

Master of Arts

Dublin City University

School of Theology, Philosophy and Music

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August 2026

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Abstract

Princess O'Nika Auguste

Contested Sites:

Interrogating the Bodily Autonomy of Esther and Vashti

This thesis, *Contested Sites: Interrogating the Bodily Autonomy of Vashti and Esther*, examines how age, ethnicity, gender, and imperial power shape female bodily autonomy in the Book of Esther through an intersectional framework rooted in Black feminist thought. The literature review traces the evolution of intersectionality from Black feminist thought into biblical studies while bringing Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality into dialogue with Judith Butler's performativity and Michel Foucault's disciplinary power through a comparative analysis of the Masoretic Text (MT) and Septuagint (LXX). The analysis demonstrates that Vashti's refusal (Esth. 1) is not coerced but enabled by her Persian ethnicity and royal status. Her bodily autonomy emerges from embedded privilege, yet her gender renders it precarious: deposition rather than execution reflects how elite status mitigates her punishment. In Esther 2, the Masoretic Text depicts a young, orphaned Jewish girl (*naʿărāh*) who is passively 'taken' into the Persian imperial harem, with her body subjected to beauty treatments and her identity partially erased through the renaming of Hadassah as Esther. The Septuagint intensifies this erasure by omitting Hadassah entirely and introducing the troubling phrase 'raised her as wife', suggesting Esther's sexual exploitation may begin with Mordecai. However, the Septuagint later complicates this interpretation through Additions C and D. In Addition, C, Esther prays, strips her royal garments, and covers herself with ashes and dung in a liturgical reclamation of her Jewish body. In Addition D, she faints before the king, a performative act of vulnerability that redirects the encounter by eliciting the ruler's compassion. These acts are interpreted not as coerced actions but as strategic negotiations of bodily autonomy. The Masoretic Text's Esther lacks comparable moments of embodied agency. Through comparative analysis, this thesis argues that bodily autonomy takes distinct forms: Vashti's privileged refusal and the Septuagint Esther's liturgical and embodied agency stand as non-coerced acts, challenging binary constructions of victimhood and resistance in biblical literature.

1. Introduction

1.1 Framing Bodily Autonomy in the Book of Esther

The book of Esther recounts the stories of Vashti and Esther, two women who navigate the constraints of life within a patriarchal imperial system. The story portrays the selection and banishment of Vashti as Queen for her refusal to appear before the king when summoned, and it tells of the ascent of Esther to the Persian throne. It serves as an origin story for Purim,[1] as Esther uses her position to avert the destruction of the Jewish people.

This thesis examines how bodily autonomy is enabled or constrained within the imperial system through the narratives of Vashti and Esther. It studies how these women are portrayed in the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint. It demonstrates how age, ethnicity, gender, class, and imperial power intersect to enable or constrain bodily autonomy.

The bodies of Vashti and Esther become contested sites of power within the Persian imperial system, where age, ethnicity, gender, class, and imperial power determine their access to bodily autonomy. Ireti Aderayo Adegbesan characterises bodily autonomy as 'the right of an individual to control their body and withdraw consent from activities involving their body at any time. Bodily autonomy requires respecting boundaries, affirmative consent, and self-defined personal comfort with affectionate touch.'[2] Agency and bodily autonomy, while related, are not synonymous in this thesis. Agency refers to the broader capacity to make choices and take action; bodily autonomy refers specifically to the right to control one's own body. Bodily autonomy refers is therefore best understood as a form of agency, rather than as its equivalent: a person may possess agency, some capacity to act or exert power, without that capacity extending to control over their own body. Bodily autonomy, however, cannot exist without agency since exercising control over one's body is itself an act of agency. Agency is thus the wider category; bodily autonomy is its expression when the object

[1]Purim is a Jewish festival commemorating Esther's role in the deliverance of her people, though some scholars have suggested that it may have developed from a non-Jewish festival rather than from a historical event.
[2]Ireti Aderayo Adegbesan, 'Developing Appropriate, Effective Bodily Autonomy Socialisation Strategies for Young Children', accessed 29 June 2025, https://scholars.org/contribution/developing-appropriate-effective-bodily. While Adegbesan writes from a contemporary human-rights framework, her definition provides a useful heuristic for analysing ancient texts, provided that we recognise that ancient Persia had no equivalent concept of bodily autonomy.

of that choice and action is one's own body. Vashti's royal privilege initially grants her bodily autonomy, but her refusal to obey male authority leads to the removal of her title as queen. By contrast, Esther's marginalised position forces her to comply, eventually allowing her to assert limited agency over her own body. Together, their stories expose how imperial patriarchy simultaneously enables and limits female bodily autonomy.

The Masoretic Text (MT) amplifies Vashti's autonomy, but the Septuagint (LXX) magnifies Esther's, revealing how textual tradition intersects with age, ethnicity, gender, class, and imperial power shape the portrayal of the women's autonomy. For example, in LXX Addition C, where she fasts and prays, Esther chooses to adorn herself with ashes and dung instead of her usual royal adornment. This thesis argues that the Book of Esther presents two models of female bodily autonomy under empire: Vashti's aristocratic refusal is punished, and Esther's compliance is rewarded. Vashti's supposed autonomy results from class and ethnic privilege. Esther's submission, meanwhile, hides an emerging bodily autonomy. The Septuagint amplifies Esther's autonomy, while the Masoretic Text suppresses it.

The thesis applies three methodological approaches: (1) an intersectional framework supported by feminist theory; (2) the historical-critical method; and (3) narrative criticism. Intersectionality provides the theoretical lens; historical criticism helps me to examine the imperial context; narrative criticism exposes the literary mechanics of the text. Kimberlé Crenshaw conceptualises intersectionality as an analytical framework for deconstructing the relationship between identity and power.[3] The historical critical method situates the book of Esther within its imperial context, while narrative criticism reveals how plot and characterisation reflect dynamics of power and agency. These combined methods support close readings of both textual traditions (MT and LXX), with particular attention to how each reframes bodily autonomy within socio-political restrictions.

The structure of the thesis moves from establishing the theoretical frameworks to their application in key narrative moments. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on intersectionality, bodily autonomy, and their application to biblical studies. Chapter 3 analyses Vashti's refusal

[3]Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later', Columbia Law School, accessed 29 June 2025, https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later.

(Esth. 1) as an act of bodily autonomy enabled by aristocratic privilege but punished by imperial patriarchy. Chapter 4 traces Esther's recruitment, beautification, and renaming (Esth. 2), arguing that her marginalisation compels performative submission. Chapter 5 examines Esther's strategic bodily autonomy in Esther 4, 5, 7, and 8, including her fasting and her approach to the king. Chapter 6 concludes by synthesising the Vashti/Esther contrast and reflecting on what an intersectional reading of bodily autonomy contributes to biblical scholarship.

1.2 The Gap: Bodily Autonomy and Intersectionality

Existing scholarship on Esther approaches the text from various angles. Jon D. Levenson reads the book as satire;[4] Jo Carruthers emphasises its oppressive communication structures;[5] and Timothy Beal traces narrative parallels of resistance.[6] However, none centres bodily autonomy as a distinct analytical construct. Neither the Masoretic Text nor the Septuagint present the bodies of Vashti and Esther in comparative perspective or deploy intersectionality to capture how age, ethnicity, gender, class, and imperial power shape each woman's access to her own body. Where feminist readings have celebrated Vashti's refusal or criticised Esther's compliance, they have often treated the two queens as opposing archetypes rather than as figures shaped by different but equally constraining hierarchies.[7] This thesis addresses these gaps by reading both textual traditions through an intersectional lens of bodily autonomy.

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[4]Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 5.
[5]Jo Carruthers, 'Writing, Interpretation, and the Book of Esther: A Detour via Browning and Derrida,' *Yearbook of English Studies* 39, no. 1 (2009): 59.
[6]Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt, *Ruth and Esther*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), xi.
[7]See Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 102. See also Sidnie Ann White, 'Esther: A Feminine Model for Diaspora,' in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 173. See also Linda M. Day, *Esther*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 42.

Bodies at the Crossroads: Mapping Intersectionality, Violence, and Bodily Autonomy in the Biblical Narrative - A Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

An intersectional approach is essential for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of sexual violence, consent, and bodily autonomy, enabling the examination of intertwined systems of power as presented in biblical narratives. By tracing its roots in Black feminist thought and its integration into biblical studies, this chapter demonstrates that while the terminology of intersectionality is relatively recent, its analytical impulse has long been present in the scholarly discourse. This is particularly evident in womanist, feminist, postcolonial, and queer criticism, as demonstrated by scholars such as Gale A. Yee and Marianne Bjelland Kartzow.

The chapter surveys scholarship on sexual violence and consent as the principal discourses for examining bodily autonomy. It highlights debates over the naming of 'rape' in biblical texts and the interpretation of ambiguous encounters. Importantly, it identifies a significant lacuna: although gender and power are central, insufficient attention has been paid to how intersecting factors—such as age, ethnicity, and imperial context—shape bodily autonomy. For example, in the story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13, scholars frequently foreground its gendered dimensions whilst rarely considering how her age and the dynamics of patriarchal familial authority bear upon any understanding of her bodily autonomy. By assessing the relevant literature, this chapter demonstrates that intersectionality reveals how layered marginalisation renders biblical female bodies subject to control through interlocking structures of power and violence.

Methodologically, this chapter combines historical-critical and narrative criticism, drawing on Judith Butler's theorisation of bodies and regulatory norms, as well as an intersectional approach to the Book of Esther. Employing Butler's theory, the chapter analyses how power structures the narrative and the conditions of bodily agency. Through intersectionality, it further explores how overlapping aspects of identity manifest within the text. This integrated methodology deepens understanding of power and bodily autonomy in biblical contexts.

This chapter identifies a gap in existing scholarship concerning how age, ethnicity, and imperial power interact to shape bodily autonomy—a combination not adequately addressed in previous scholarship. By foregrounding these intersections, the discussion critically re-examines consent and bodily autonomy, offering an original perspective on traditional interpretations of biblical narratives. To orient the reader, this chapter outlines the origins and relevance of intersectionality; it explains its role in biblical studies, reviews major scholarship on bodily autonomy, and shows how integrating these topics identifies a distinctive research gap. The chapter is organised into four parts. Section 2 addresses intersectionality, exploring its theoretical underpinnings and application in biblical studies. Section 3 focuses on sexual violence and bodily autonomy, approaching these issues through an intersectional perspective that surfaces the complexities implicit in biblical narratives. Section 4 identifies the research gap. Section 5 provides a synthesis directed toward an intersectional analysis of bodily autonomy. Each section is further divided into sub-sections that guide the reader seamlessly through the structured exploration of these critical themes. While this literature review engages with foundational theoretical and biblical studies scholarship, it is consistently oriented toward its application to the Book of Esther. References to Esther and its

characters throughout are intended to demonstrate how intersectionality will be deployed in the subsequent chapters.

The following research questions guide this investigation:

1. How does intersectionality provide a nuanced understanding of historical power dynamics within biblical narratives?

2. In what ways do age, gender, ethnicity, and imperial power intersect to shape experiences of consent and bodily autonomy in biblical texts?

3. What are the implications of employing an intersectional framework to analyse biblical narratives, and how does this approach challenge traditional interpretations?

2.1 Intersectionality

2.1.1 Conceptual Foundations, History and Evolution

Through this chapter, intersectionality is employed as the guiding conceptual framework for the analysis of sexual violence and bodily autonomy in biblical literature. Before examining its application, it is essential to define intersectionality and trace its evolution, as this framework serves as the primary lens for analysing the subsequent research on sexual violence, consent, and bodily autonomy surveyed here. This working definition will shape the reading of the Book of Esther and the stories of Vashti and Esther undertaken in later chapters, in which the intersecting identities and power dynamics of their narratives will be shown to manifest the complexities of bodily autonomy, as outlined below.

The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by Crenshaw, a Black feminist legal scholar, to theorise the particular and compounded oppression experienced by African American women.

In her influential essay, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,' Crenshaw argues that the experiences of being Black and being a woman cannot be understood independently; rather these identities intersect to create a distinct, compounded form of discrimination.[8]

Although Crenshaw formally named the concept in 1989, the understanding supporting her use of the term 'intersectionality' is much older. Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech, 'Ain't I a Woman?' exemplifies a proto-intersectional critique, challenging prevailing notions of femininity from her position as a former enslaved woman.[9] Similarly, Anna Julia Cooper's 1892 essay, 'The Coloured Woman's Office,' positioned Black women as pivotal agents of social change precisely because of the multiple forms of oppression they confronted.[10] W.E.B. Du Bois's work illuminated how class, nation, and race shaped the Black political economy, though, as Patricia Hill Collins notes, he largely omitted gender and sexuality from this structural analysis.[11] Audre Lorde wrote as a 'Black lesbian woman' to show that racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia inextricably connected.[12] Her work, along with that of other feminists of colour, proved instrumental in developing intersectional theory.

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[8] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139; see also Sheila Thomas and Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Intersectionality: The Double Bind of Race and Gender,' *Perspectives Magazine* (American Bar Association, Spring 2004): 2; and Brittney Cooper, 'Intersectionality,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 385–406.

[9] Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix, 'Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality,' *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5, no. 3 (2013): 75–86.

[10] Anna Julia Cooper, 'The Coloured Woman's Office,' in *Social Theory: The Multicultural, Global, and Classic Readings*, 6th ed., ed. Charles Lemert (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2016), [insert page number]. Originally published 1892.

[11] Patricia Hill Collins, 'Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy,' *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568, no. 1 (2000): 41–53.

[12] Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,' in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 110–114; see also Angelique V. Nixon, 'The Magic and Fury of Audre Lorde: Feminist Praxis and Pedagogy,' *The Feminist Wire* (2014).

Patricia Hill Collins further developed intersectionality as a critical social theory, tracing its genealogy to the activism and scholarship of Indigenous, Black, Asian American, Chicana, and Latina feminists active from the 1960s to the 1980s. Collins observes that while academics had long discussed similar ideas under the rubric of 'Race, Class, and Gender Studies,' the term 'intersectionality' offered a specific lens focused on interlocking systems of power.[13] The evolution of this conceptual framework thus significantly predates its formal introduction.

2.1.2 Coinage and Development of the Term

The core premise is that race, gender, class, and other axes of power are mutually constitutive.[14] This is well illustrated by the historical context of anti-miscegenation laws in the United States, which prohibited interracial marriages and relationships, marginalising individuals based on both race and gender simultaneously. Such legal frameworks reveal how systemic power structures can operate concurrently to oppress and regulate the personal lives of people of colour, particularly women, thereby embodying Crenshaw's theoretical insights and underscoring the need for an intersectional approach.

From its origins in critical legal studies, intersectionality has traversed the humanities and social sciences to become foundational in fields such as sociology, psychology, education, and gender studies. It is fundamentally a conceptual framework for understanding the

[13]Patricia Hill Collins, 'Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas,' *Annual Review of Sociology* 41 (2015): 1–20.
[14]Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,' in *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, ed. Martha Albertson Fineman and Roxanne Mykitiuk (New York: Routledge, 1994), 93–118; and Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' University of Chicago Legal Forum (1989): 139–167; Sumi Cho; Kimberlé Crenshaw and Leslie McCall, 'Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810.

interrelatedness of complex social identities and how they produce distinct arrangements of privilege and discrimination.

As the following section explores, the field of biblical studies has been notably slow to adopt this explicit framework. The subsequent discussion clarifies its usefulness and applicability to the discipline. This understanding of intersectionality as a rigorous analytical concept, rather than merely a fashionable term, is essential for the next stage of this review, serving as the lens through which the chapter assesses scholarship on sexual violence and bodily autonomy**.**

2.1.3 Intersectionality in Feminist Theory and the Feminist Movement

Intersectionality did not emerge in a vacuum but as a necessary critique and expansion of a feminist movement that was historically centred on the experiences of white, middle-class women. The integration of this analytical lens has involved both recovering the overlooked activism of women of colour and transforming feminist theory itself.

Historical Tensions and the Genealogy of Intersectional Thought:

The need for an intersectional perspective is evident in the history of feminism itself. As Nyasha Junior argues, the tensions between gender and racial justice movements are not a twentieth-century phenomenon but date to the first wave of the feminist movement.[15] While some white suffragists drew parallels between their status and that of enslaved African Americans, others actively distanced themselves from racial justice to advance a narrowly defined women's cause.[16] This fracture became institutionalised following the American Civil War,

[15] Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 27.
[16] Ibid., 27

the prioritisation of voting rights for African American men via the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, over those of all women, created a strategic rift within the suffrage movement.[17] This history reveals how political structures have long compelled individuals to choose between gendered or racialised identities. Conversely, African American women, active in both abolition and suffrage, embodied an intersectional reality long before it was theorised.[18]

2.1.4 Womanism and Intersectionality: Parallel and Intertwined Frameworks

The limitations of mainstream feminism led women of colour to develop distinct theoretical frameworks. Alice Walker coined the term womanism in 1983, defining it as rooted in Black women's cultural and historical experience.[19] Womanism, as Layli Phillips notes, seeks not only social justice but also the restoring the balance between people and the environment and the reconciliation of human life with the spiritual dimension.[20]

The relationship between womanism and intersectionality is one of profound affinity and distinct emphasis. Intersectionality provides the overarching conceptual framework for analysing interlocking systems of power—race, gender, class, and other related categories—whilst womanism offers a specific, foundational, and culturally grounded framework born from the lived experiences of African American women. As Mitzi J. Smith notes, the

[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Alice Walker, 'Womanist,' in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 19.
[20] Layli Phillips, ed., *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), xix–xx.

centrality of intersectionality to womanist and Black feminist thought follows directly from the multiple, overlapping forms of oppression that Black women confront.[21]

It may be said that womanism is the cultural embodiment of the intersectional analysis, where the primary lens of identity is a specific cultural heritage—often summarised as a woman's blackness and womanness. The United Nations' definition of intersectional feminism, which centres the voices of those experiencing overlapping, concurrent forms of oppression, readily encompasses womanist principles.[22] Both frameworks are essential for this analysis: intersectionality provides the overarching methodological framework, whilst womanist scholarship serves as a culturally grounded precedent for its application to biblical texts. By bringing these frameworks into dialogue, the analysis draws on intersectionality's broad approach to power systems alongside womanism's culturally specific insights, offering a more nuanced understanding of biblical narratives.

2.1.5 Global and Diasporic Intersectional Feminisms

Intersectional analysis extends beyond the United States context. Caribbean feminist scholar Patricia Mohammed argues that gender identity in the region is always constructed in dialogue with 'race, class, nation, and masculinity' through complex, culturally-coded struggles.[23] Similarly, the foundational anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, centred the intersectional experiences of Chicana and Latina

[21] Mitzi J Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 3–4.
[22]UN Women, 'Intersectional Feminism: What It Means and Why It Matters,' June 2020, https://www.un-women.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters
[23] Patricia Mohammed, 'Towards Indigenous Feminist Theorizing in the Caribbean,' *Feminist Review* 59, no. 1 (1998): 7–8.

feminists, expanding the conversation to include ethnicity, language, and colonialism.[24] Asian American feminists have further nuanced the framework by analysing unique forms of oppression, such as the fetishisation and hyper-sexualisation of East Asian women, which constitute a form of racial depersonalisation.[25] These developments highlight how intersectionality is not theoretically uniform but rather an adaptable mode of analysis arising from specific geopolitical and cultural locations. Additionally, examining ancient Near Eastern contexts further emphasises the global adaptability of intersectionality in biblical studies. For instance, ethnic stratification in ancient Persia highlights not only the convergence of ethnicity and class but also illuminates the complex intersection of imperial power and religious identity, emphasising the framework's relevance across diverse historical and geographical contexts.

2.1.6 Key Analytical Dimensions: Crenshaw and Collins

The advantage of intersectionality lies in its concrete analytical categories. Crenshaw notably defined three key types: structural intersectionality (how the location of women of colour in society shapes distinct experiences of violence), political intersectionality (how policies designed for broader groups can render specific vulnerabilities invisible), and representational intersectionality (how cultural narratives obscure lived realities).[26]

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[24]Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th ed. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), xxii; see also Nisha Agarwal, 'This Bridge Called My Back: A Retro Look at Women of Color and Power,' *Huffington Post*, January 11, 2010.
[25]Jin Young Choi and, Mitzi J Smith, *Minoritized Women Reading Race and Ethnicity: Intersectional Approaches to Constructed Identity and Early Christian Texts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 112; see also Sameena Azhar, Antonia R. G. Alvarez, Anne S. J. Farina, and Susan Klumpner, "'You're So Exotic Looking': An Intersectional Analysis of Asian American and Pacific Islander Stereotypes,' *Affilia* 36, no. 3 (2021): 282–301.
[26] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,' *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299.

Patricia Hill Collins expanded this further by framing intersectionality as a critical social theory with three interconnected branches: (1) examining its foundational ideas and debates; (2) employing it as an analytic strategy to interrogate institutions; and (3) utilising it as a tool for critical praxis and social change.[27] Collins's work was instrumental in extending intersectional analysis beyond a focus on Black women to a broader matrix of power relations involving race, gender, class, and ethnicity, while maintaining its roots in Black feminist thought.[28]

In summary, the integration of intersectionality and feminism represents a paradigm shift from a singular focus on gender to a multifaceted analysis of intersecting power structures. This scholarly evolution encompassing historical tensions, womanist thought, global applications, and formal analytical categories provides the essential theoretical toolkit for the subsequent analysis of biblical scholars.

2.1.7 The Intersectional Turn in Biblical Studies

The development of intersectionality from its origins in critical legal studies and social theory into biblical studies has been notably slow and uneven, as stated above. As Gale A. Yee observes, its application remains sparse, particularly outside the work of scholars of colour.[29] Despite its growing acceptance across the humanities, the biblical studies discipline has historically favoured singular analytical lenses, often failing to account for the complex interactions between gender, race, class, and other categories.[30] However, growing

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[27] Susan A Mann and Douglas J. Huffman, 'The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism and the Rise of the Third Wave,' *Science & Society* 69, no. 1 (2005): 56–91. doi:10.1521/siso.69.1.56.56799,
[28] Collins, 'Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy,' 41–53; see also Collins, 'Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas,' 1–20.
[29] Gale A Yee, 'Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Race, Class, and the Etceteras of Our Discipline,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139, no. 1 (2020): 9. doi:10.1080/1070289X.2025.2476300.
[30] Yee, 'Thinking Intersectionally,' 16.

recognition of the need for more nuanced, socially engaged readings has spurred academic interest in how intersectionality can deepen the comprehension of biblical texts.

The recent interest should not overshadow a longer history of biblical analysis by womanist, feminist, postcolonial, and queer critics, who were engaging its core principles long before the term gained currency. Their work provides a crucial foundation for the recent, more explicit methodological turn. The foundational insight of intersectionality, namely that systems of oppression are interlocking and must be analysed, has informed significant strands of biblical interpretation for decades, particularly through the work of pioneering scholars on the margins of the field.

Womanist Biblical Interpretation as Foundational Practice

Womanist biblical criticism, by its very nature, constitutes a pioneering form of intersectional analysis. Delores S. Williams's influential *Sisters in the Wilderness* scrutinises Hagar's story through the inseparable lenses of enslavement, gender, and motherhood, while Williams also applying a womanist lens to themes of virginity and sexual exploitation in the portrayal of Mary.[31] Similarly, Renita Weems reads the relationship between Hagar and Sarah as one fundamentally structured by ethnic prejudice and power imbalance.[32] The 2016 anthology *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible* exemplifies this tradition, featuring essays that explore overlapping identities including race, gender, sexuality, and childhood.[33]

[31] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God* Talk, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 179—181.
[32] Renita J. Weems, *Just A Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the* Bible (San Diego: Lura Media, 1988).
[33] Vanessa Lovelace and Gay L. Byron, 'Introduction: Methods and the Making of Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics,' in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 5–13.

Feminist, Queer, and Trans Hermeneutics

This implicit intersectional logic also underpins other critical approaches. Feminist scholar Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*, while centred on gender, examines narratives like Hagar's where social status and ethnicity are constitutive of her victimisation.[34] Queer biblical criticism extends this approach by deconstructing fixed categories of sex and gender. Scholars such as Caryn Tamber-Rosenau employ gender performance theory to critique essentialist searches for 'male' or 'female' voices.[35] Trans hermeneutics, as seen in Katy E. Valentine's work, continues this project by challenging biological determinism and offering non-binary readings of creation narratives.[36]

Postcolonial and Global Feminist Criticisms

Furthermore, postcolonial, and global feminist criticism have long practised an intersectional methodology without naming it thus. Kwok Pui-lan surveys approaches—from Latin American liberation theology to Asian and African feminist readings—that interpret scripture through the overlapping realities of culture, empire, and gender.[37] Steed V. Davidson, a Caribbean Hebrew Bible/Old Testament scholar, applies this to specific texts by analysing how power in the Book of Esther operates at the intersection of diaspora identity,

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[34] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist readings of Biblical narratives*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.), 9—35.
[35] Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, 'A Queer Critique of Looking for 'Male' or 'Female' Voices in the Hebrew Bible,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Susanne Scholz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 469–491.
[36] Katey E. Valentine, 'Examining Scripture in Light of Trans Women's Voices,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Susanne Scholz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 510–516.
[37] Kwok Pui-lan, 'Reading the Christian New Testament in the Contemporary World,' in *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, ed. Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and David A. Sánchez (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024), 6–18.

gender, and imperial context.[38] These diverse schools of thought, though not always naming their method, have collectively established a robust pre-history of intersectional engagement. Postcolonialism and global feminist criticism highlight that intersectionality is not a monolithic theory, but rather an adaptable mode of analysis arising from specific geopolitical and cultural locations.

For the analysis of biblical narratives situated within imperial contexts—such as the Persian court of the Book of Esther—this necessitates the explicit incorporation of imperial power as a core category. Imperial systems generate unique intersections, where ethnicity, gender, and status are reconfigured through the logic of domination, patronage, and state control. The body, particularly the female body, becomes controlled under the imperial court: a symbol of royal prestige, a tool for diplomatic alliance, and a commodity within a political economy controlled by the sovereign. An intersectional analysis thus provides a critical lens for examining how empire operates, not merely as a setting, but as an active, structuring force that co-produces identities and dictates the possibilities for bodily autonomy.

Intersectionality as a Named Hermeneutic

In recent years, a decisive shift has occurred as scholars begin to explicitly adopt and theorise intersectionality as a deliberate framework. This work moves beyond implied practice to formal methodological innovation.

Gale A. Yee's Model:

Yee provides a model through her analysis of the widow in 2 Kings 4:1-7. She

[38] Steed V Davidson, 'Diversity, Differences and Access to Power: The Case of the Book of Esther,' *Word and World* 29, no. 3 (2009): 281.

employs this narrative to demonstrate how gender and class intersect within what she terms 'domains of power': the structural, disciplinary, and hegemonic.[39] Her analysis shows how intersectionality moves beyond identifying overlapping identities to analysing how they function within systemic power relations. Yee advocates for an 'intersectional hermeneutic' that interrogates the social locations of both biblical writers and contemporary readers.[40]

Marianne Bjelland Kartzow's Integrated Approach and Elisa Uusimäki's Socio-Historical Inquiry:

Marianne Kartzow, a Norwegian biblical scholar, similarly advances application of intersectionality in an explicit way. In her work on the Pastoral Epistles, she insists that categories like 'women' and 'slaves' must be analysed together, asking pointedly about 'the gender of slaves' and 'the social status of women.'[41] This approach directly challenges the previous approaches that have historically characterised biblical studies.

Elisa Uusimäki, a Finnish biblical scholar, applies the framework to socio-historical inquiry concerning mobility of Jews in the ancient world. She argues that an intersectional perspective is crucial because a woman's capacity for movement and agency was determined not by gender alone but by its intersection with social status, ethnicity, and other factors.[42] Together, these scholars represent the forefront of those formally integrating intersectionality into the biblical studies toolkit.

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[39] Yee, 'Thinking Intersectionally,' 16.
[40] Ibid., 17.
[41] Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, 'An Intersectional Approach to Early Christian Memory: The Case of the Pastoral Epistles,' *Journal of Early Christian History* 1, no. 2 (2011): 119–120.
[42] Elisa Uusimäki, 'An Intersectional Analysis of Ancient Jewish Travel Narratives,' ERC Starting Grant Proposal (2020). [is there an article version related to this you could cite?]

2.2 Conceptualising Bodily Autonomy, Sexual Violence and Consent

2.2.1 Defining a Theoretical Framework: Bodily Autonomy

Yet, bodily autonomy remains comparatively underexamined within intersectional biblical scholarship, particularly in relation to age and imperial power. Building on the intersectional framework from Section 2, this section discusses the concept of bodily autonomy. Bodily autonomy is not merely theoretical but a crucial matter of life and death, as illustrated by Esther's decision to risk her life by appearing unsummoned before King Ahasuerus (Esth. 4:16). This modern idea is central to human rights and feminist debates. Ruth Miller purports that bodily autonomy is a fundamental right for people to choose freely and be empowered to make decisions regarding their bodies. Violations of bodily autonomy are regarded in human rights discourse as intrusive, untruthful, and at times criminal. Miller further argues that having the right to decide on one's life and future is empowering, and essential to defining bodily autonomy.[43] Bodily autonomy is key to interrogating narratives of embodiment and power, in which groups such as women, children, and enslaved persons lacked recognition as autonomous legal subjects.[44] Gail Weiss notes that bodily boundaries have historically defined personhood.[45] Today, this concept appears in the feminist slogan 'My Body, My Choice.' The phrase often relates to women's reproductive rights and autonomy.[46] At its core, bodily

[43] Ruth A. Miller, *The Limits of Bodily Integrity: Abortion, Adultery, and Rape Legislation in Comparative Perspective* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 114–115.
[44] Jonthan Pugh, 'The Child's Right to Bodily Integrity and Autonomy: A Conceptual Analysis,' *Clinical Ethics* (2023): 1–2; see also Ursula Barry, 'What Do We Mean by Bodily Autonomy? And What Does Bodily Autonomy Mean for Women in Particular?' (2018).
[45] Gail Weiss, 'Intertwined Identities: Challenges to Bodily Autonomy,' in *Perspectives: International Journal of Philosophy*, ed. Anna Nicholson, Luna Dolezal, Seferin James, and Sheena Hyland (Dublin: UCD School of Philosophy, 2009), 22.
[46]Suzannah Weiss, '5 Things That Are #MyBodyMyChoice,' September 25, 2015, https://www.bustle.com/articles/113094-5-things-that-are-mybodymychoice-because-respecting-them-is-essential-for-creating-a-culture-of-consent

autonomy refers to the capacity to make free decisions concerning one's own body. This study draws its definition of bodily autonomy from three theorists: Judith Butler, Anne Phillips, and Joel Feinberg.

Judith Butler provides a foundational account in which bodies are 'materialised' through regulatory norms, meaning that social and political systems shape how bodies are controlled, understood, and permitted to act, while agency emerges through moments that destabilise those norms.[47] Before turning to Esther, it is important to clarify how Butler develops autonomy and bodily agency. For Butler, norms are not simply external constraints imposed upon bodies but are also integral to how bodies become recognised, valued, or excluded within a given social order. Materialisation occurs as dominant discourses and institutions repeatedly enforce certain bodily identities and practices, creating the illusion that such arrangements are natural or inevitable. However, Butler emphasises that these regulatory frameworks are never wholly seamless; there are always points at which they may be disrupted or exceeded. Autonomy, in this sense, does not mean acting outside or beyond all norms, but rather seizing opportunities to rework or challenge the terms through which one's body is governed. Agency thus emerges in moments of rupture or instability, when the norms that define intelligibility or legitimacy are put into crisis by unexpected acts or claims.

Esther's decision to appear unsummoned before King Ahasuerus (Esth. 4:16) represents a moment of bodily autonomy wrested from a context in which her body is otherwise strictly regulated by royal protocol. In the Persian court, a specific norm dictated that no person, not even the queen, could approach the king without being summoned, under penalty of death,

[47] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

unless the king extended his golden sceptre. Esther's unsummoned appearance starkly destabilises this norm, illustrating Butler's theory of agency emerging through the instabilities of established power structures. This bold action challenges the royal decree, highlighting the risks and resistance inherent in acts of autonomy.

Anne Phillips frames autonomy not as a construct but as a political claim: the assertion of 'it's my body' against violation.[48] Before examining her analysis, it is crucial to acknowledge the risk of anachronism when applying modern concepts to ancient texts. This awareness helps prevent the uncritical imposition of contemporary frameworks on historical contexts. However, in the case of Judith Butler, her framework is itself explicitly attentive to historical contingency and the constructed nature of categories such as gender and autonomy. Butler's approach often interrogates the boundaries of historical and conceptual application, which may make her less susceptible to the pitfalls of uncritical anachronism. To address these concerns, interpretive safeguards will be employed by clearly defining the differences between ancient context and modern theory, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in historical accuracy while drawing relevant parallels responsibly.

Phillips argues that 'it's my body' is grounded in bodily integrity, not property or self-ownership: 'we do not need to assert property in the body...'; property frameworks, therefore, are unhelpful.[49] For Phillips, the key issue is the right to prevent others from acting upon the body without consent.[50] This is highly relevant to Esther, as it shifts the focus from 'Who owns Esther's body?' to whether her bodily integrity is asserted or violated. Phillips's

[48]Anne Phillips, 'It's My Body and I'll Do What I Like with It: Bodies as Objects and Property,' *Political Theory* 39, no. 6 (2011): 745.
[49] Phillips, 'It's My Body,' 728.
[50] Phillips, 'It's My Body,' 728–734.

discussion of the commodification of bodily labour, arguing that all labour involves the body, offers a lens for examining Esther's status within imperial structures of exchange, complicating binaries of coercion and choice.

Joel Feinberg defines bodily autonomy as the 'self-governing awareness and ability to control' one's physical being.[51] This definition invites a crucial comparative question central to the analysis: in which textual tradition does Esther demonstrate greater 'self-governing awareness and ability to control?' In the Masoretic Text, her actions often appear as a direct execution of Mordecai's instructions. In the Septuagint, particularly the additions, Esther takes charge; her prolonged prayer (Add. C) articulates a profound self-awareness of her risk, her identity, and her deliberate choice to act. This variance allows the reader to probe how different textual traditions construct the very possibility of a woman's autonomous control within an imperial narrative.

Building upon these definitions, my working definition is as follows: Bodily autonomy consists in one's capacity to assert a claim over her body and enact self-determined physical actions that disrupt social norms. This thesis is concerned with how Esther and Vashti assert, challenge, or negotiate power through bodily autonomy in relation to social norms. These disruptive acts create a 'crack in the system,' a moment of crisis where the old rules no longer apply smoothly. To clarify this process, specific indicators are employed to assess bodily autonomy in the Book of Esther. These indicators include: 1) moments of vocal or silent resistance against imperial or patriarchal authority, 2) instances where Esther exercises choice or agency despite restrictive norms, 3) the extent of personal and bodily

[51] Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law, vol. 3: Harm to Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 87.

decision-making depicted in each narrative tradition, and 4) the degree to which Esther's and Vashti's actions influence or challenge existing power dynamics.

To assess these indicators effectively, this study employs close textual analysis and identifies moments of decision-making and actions in Esther's and Vashti's narratives that suggest bodily autonomy. This approach aims to identify patterns across the narrative. Close reading further enables a detailed exploration of specific textual instances through an examination of how language and context reveal acts of bodily autonomy. Together, these methods ensure methodological transparency and depth in assessing how Esther and Vashti navigate and challenge the constraints imposed on them.

This definition, when brought into dialogue with the intersectional framework from Section 2, allows for a nuanced analysis of how overlapping aspects of identity and power structures create the conditions for, or foreclose, the possibility of such assertion. The critical questions this combined framework raises, such as whether enslaved people can consent, when childhood ends, or if a woman in the biblical text can consent to marriage or sex, are central to this research. As this thesis focuses on the Book of Esther, these questions converge in a comparative analysis of the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, examining how Esther's and Vashti's bodily autonomy, potential youth, and imperial status shape the textual representation of their capacity to assert claims over their bodies.

2.2.2 Mapping the Terrain: Sexual Violence in Biblical Scholarship

The development of bodily autonomy is therefore inextricably linked to scholarship on sexual violence, where violations of bodily integrity are most stark. Phyllis Trible's Texts of Terror (1984) fundamentally shaped the field through empathetic analyses of narratives

like Hagar's and Tamar's refused to justify their horror.[52] She honoured the women's experiences and pointed out a challenging revelation: the biblical narrators do not condemn these acts. Trible thus established a methodological precedent for reading against the grain, a technique that informs this study's approach throughout this work. Trible's work can be seen as an example of intersectional research, highlighting Hagar's identity as an enslaved Egyptian noting that her story survives only 'through the oppressor's perspective in bits and pieces.'[53] *Texts of Terror* brought the study of sexual violence to the forefront and paved the way for further expansion of the discourse by scholars such as Susanne Scholz and Johanna Stiebert.[54]

Subsequent scholarship grapples further with these significant hermeneutical challenges. A primary issue is terminology: Biblical Hebrew lacks a direct equivalent for the modern concept of **'**rape**.'** Scholz defines it in her book *Rape Plots: A Feminist Cultural Study of Genesis 34*: 'Rape can be defined as the uninvited physical attack on a woman, a child, or a man by one or several men. Rape lacks consent.'[55] By contrast, take the Hebrew word *anah,* as used in Genesis 34:2, where Shechem 'took' Dinah and 'violated' her, illustrates the complexity of the issue. This term, *anah*, traditionally translated as 'humiliated' or 'mistreated',[56] indicates an unresolved semantic struggle that challenges direct equivalence with modern terms like 'rape.' However, its semantic range is debated, especially in reference to Dinah in Genesis 34.[57] The semantic complexity is further reflected in the rape of Tamar in

[52] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 9–29.
[53] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 9–29.
[54] See also Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); and Johanna Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).
[55] Susanne Scholz, *Rape Plots: A Feminist Cultural Study of Genesis 34*, 2nd ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 4.
[56] Alexander Rofé, 'Defilement of Virgins in Biblical Law and the Case of Dinah (Genesis 34),' *Biblica* 86, no. 3 (2005): 369–375.
[57] Rofé, 'Defilement of Virgins,' 369–375.

2 Samuel 13:9–22 .[58] Lyn Bechtel argues that the root *nh*, often translated in discussions of rape, more accurately conveys shame; according to Bechtel, this interpretation is supported by Jacob's final words to Simeon and Levi at the end of the narrative.[59] Such instances draw attention to the interpretive puzzles faced when aligning ancient texts with contemporary understandings.

For clarity, this study defines 'rape' as non-consensual sexual intercourse or sexual assault, specifically physical violation of a woman, child, or man; 'consent' is understood as voluntary, informed, and mutual agreement. Moreover, scholars such as Scholz and Frank Yamada have shown that sexual violation was often framed as a socio-economic offence against a male guardian, reflected in bride-price laws, rather than as a violation of the woman's personhood.[60]

This logic is evident in laws like Deuteronomy 22:23—29,[61] which focuses on the location of the act and the woman's audibility, centering property, and social order over personal violation. Yamada remarks that outside of this text, there appear to be no laws against rape in Mosaic law.[62] This approach leads scholars like Scholz to suggest the Bible reflects a 'rape culture', notably where Dinah can be blamed for 'going out' (Gen. 34).[63]

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[58] Bruce C. Birch et al., 'Samuel,' in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 1304.
[59]Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 75.
[60] Frank M. Yamada, *Configurations of Rape in the Hebrew Bible: A Literary Analysis of Three Rape Narratives* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 22, 47; see also Susanne Scholz, *Rape Plots: A Feminist Cultural Study of Genesis 34*, 2nd ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 4.
[61] Deut 22:23–29.
[62] Yamada, *Configurations of Rape*, 22.
[63] Scholz, *Rape Plots*, 4.

Rhiannon Graybill notes that the Hebrew Bible contains many examples of sexual violence: rape, rape threats, sex trafficking, gender-based violence in warfare, and femicide.[64] Graybill mentions the major biblical texts frequently examined in studies of sexual violence, including the rape of Dinah (Gen. 34), Tamar (2 Sam. 13), the Levite's concubine (Judg. 19), Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11), and the rape of Daughter Zion (Lam.).[65] Research has largely focused on these narratives, but the concepts developed by scholars through analyses of these passages of overt sexual violence are essential for analysing more ambiguous texts.

In particular, the Book of Esther presents a critical case. Although neither the Masoretic Text nor the Septuagint explicitly states that either Esther or Vashti was raped, the narrative is structured within a system of imperial sexual exploitation. Esther's abduction into the king's harem, her subjection to a year-long beautification process, and her presentation for the king's approval frame her body as an object of state control and male consumption. Vashti's deposition for refusing the king's command to display her body highlights the absolute lack of recourse for women within this system. When applying the hermeneutical insights of Trible, Scholz, and Graybill, the story of Esther operates within the logic of a rape culture, where female autonomy is violated and women's bodies are treated as property within a political economy of power.

However, it is important to acknowledge interpretive limitations when considering the concept of rape culture within these texts. Some scholars argue against this framing, suggesting that it imposes modern conceptions on ancient narratives and potentially overlooks the unique cultural, social, and legal norms of the time. Michael V. Fox for example, uses

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[64] Rhianon Graybill, 'Sexual Violence and the Hebrew Bible,' *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0293.xml
[65]Graybill, 'Sexual Violence and the Hebrew Bible.'

Vashti to make the point. Fox cautions: 'It is anachronistic to make Vashti into a sort of feminist, a defender of women's independence and their right to refuse to be sex objects.' We have to look to attitudes native to her own society and time.[66] This does not negate the presence of imperial sexual exploitation, but requires a distinction between the text's ancient reality and the modern lenses. By recognising these counterpoints, the discussion is enriched, enabling a nuanced examination of the complexities of bodily autonomy in the context of the Book of Esther.

Sexual violence research has been largely focused on the Hebrew Bible; however, the New Testament also contains significant, often metaphorical depictions, most notably in the Book of Revelation. While Revelation is unique within the New Testament for its extended and vivid sexual violence metaphors, these images draw heavily on traditions from the Hebrew prophets. The author of Revelation is deeply steeped in Hebrew prophetic literature, directly echoing their use of sexual violence imagery to convey divine judgment or accusations of unfaithfulness. This intertextual influence shapes the way Revelation adopts and amplifies these metaphors, while also resonating with wider Greco-Roman associations between conquest, power, and sexual violation. As Meredith Warren argues, Revelation uses the threat of sexual violence (against 'Jezebel' in Rev. 2:22–23 and the 'Whore of Babylon') as a mode of divine judgement, reflecting these ancient associations.[67] Feminist scholar Tina Pippin refers to the death of the Whore of Babylon as the most sexist passage in the New Testament, arguing that such metaphors reflect hatred towards women.[68] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and

[66]Michael V. Fox (2015). The Women in Esther. TheTorah.com. https://thetorah.com/article/the-women-in-esther
[67] Meredith Warren, 'Sexual Violence and Rape Culture in the New Testament,' *The Shiloh Project*, https://www.shilohproject.blog/sexual-violence-and-rape-culture-in-the-new-testament/.
[68]Tina Pippin, 'The Heroine and the Whore: Fantasy and the Female in the Apocalypse of John,' in *From Every People and Nation*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 134–141.

others believe that Pippin takes the metaphor too literally. Pippin, in response to Fiorenza, asks readers to imagine the Whore as the perpetrator of sexual violence and a man as the victim, questioning whether such imagery would be considered acceptable in any circumstance.[69]

Rather than viewing this as a settled controversy, the debate underscores Revelation's use of sexual violence, both literal and rhetorical, as a deliberate biblical motif expressing power and violation. This ongoing exchange highlights the complexities of interpreting these passages and illustrates the importance of feminist critique in surfacing the ethical stakes of such imagery.

2.2.3 The Central Hermeneutical Problem: Consent

The modern concept of consent—affirmative, voluntary, and mutual agreement[70]—poses a major challenge when applied to biblical texts. These texts use legal and social frameworks that did not recognise women as full subjects. Here, 'consent' means freely, knowingly, and willingly agreeing to a specific act.[71] As Johanna Stiebert shows, biblical law structurally excludes women's consent, regulating only the rights of fathers and husbands. The legal 'solution' in Deuteronomy 22:28–29 for the rape of an unmarried woman—mandating marriage to the rapist—is, as Stiebert notes, 'virtually an invitation for men to forcibly rape a woman

[69]Lisa M. Ewing, *'Dangerous Feminine Sexuality: Biblical Metaphors and Sexual Violence Against Women'* (PhD diss., Wright State University, 2013), 10–11.
[70]Indiana University, 'Consent,' https://stopsexualviolence.iu.edu/policies-terms/consent.html .
[71] J. A. Roffee, 'No Consensus on Incest? Criminalisation and Compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights,' *Human Rights Law Review* 14, no. 3 (2014): 541–572; see also 'No Still Means 'No': Editorial,' *Toronto Star*, November 13, 2015.

in order to marry her.'[72] This legal logic treats violation as a transaction between men over damaged property and is therefore relevant to royal power narratives.

Robert S. Kawashima asks: if women were not full legal subjects, can their experiences be described as 'rape' in a modern sense without anachronism? Kawashima contends that without legal subjecthood, women 'could never constitute victims of a legally prosecutable crime.'[73] This position aligns with Johanna Stiebert's analysis, which shows that biblical law is structured in ways that disregards women's agency and consent, addressing only the interests of male guardians. Both scholars highlight how the legal and social frameworks in biblical texts erase women's experiences as legitimate subjects. Furthermore, Graybill extends this line of inquiry by exploring how these frameworks are embedded in court narratives, particularly where royal power negotiates women's sexual and social status. Taken together, these perspectives emphasise that consent and subjection in biblical law is inseparable from ongoing negotiations of power and that analysing these interconnections is vital for understanding how women's bodies are constructed and controlled in biblical narratives.

Rhiannon Graybill's framework of *fuzzy, messy, and icky* consent provides a vital hermeneutic for navigating this impasse. Instead of imposing clear modern categories, her model describes the ambiguity, trauma, and institutional obfuscation that characterise sexual violence.[74] Graybill's work focuses on narratives like Bathsheba and Tamar (2 Sam.), arguing

[72] Johanna Stiebert, 'Brother, Sister, Rape: The Hebrew Bible and Popular Culture,' in *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, and Religion: Biblical Perspectives*, ed. Caroline Blyth and Emily Colgan (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2018), 24.
[73] Robert S. Kawashima, 'Could a Woman Say 'No' in Biblical Israel? On the Genealogy of Legal Status in Biblical Law and Literature,' *AJS Review* 35, no. 1 (2011): 2–3,
[74]Rhiannon Graybill, *Texts after Terror: Rape, Sexual Violence and the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 10-11.

that their lack of consent remains unsettling within the broader biblical narratives because there is no resolution or catharsis.[75]

Graybill also discusses *messy* consent in regards to Proverbs 31, comparing the Strange Woman with Lady Wisdom, as well as examining menstruation, messiness, and the female body in the Hebrew Bible.[76] She applies the framework of *fuzzy* consent to the Book of Esther, identifying Vashti's deposition as a classic case of institutional *fuzziness*, where her refusal and subsequent erasure mirror how violation is obscured.[77] Her final framework is *icky* consent, which describes the discomfort, creepiness, shame, and ambiguity surrounding situations where terms such as rape or sexual assault are resisted, functioning as a descriptor of sexual shame and thereby complicating definitive boundaries between choice and coercion.[78]

Graybill's analysis opens a critical pathway for examining Esther's story. The narrative frames her entry into the king's harem not as a violent assault but as a state-sanctioned process. This situates her experience within what Graybill's model would term a *fuzzy*, *messy*, and *icky* system of institutionalised control, where traditional binaries of coercion and choice break down. Her pivotal declaration in Esther 4:16, therefore emerges as crucial for applying this *fuzzy*, *messy*, and *icky* consent hermeneutic. Taken together, these frameworks encourage readers to reconsider simplistic definitions of sexual violence and consent in biblical literature. By foregrounding complexity, discomfort, and unresolved tensions, Graybill's approach

[75]Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 15.
[76] Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 15—16.
[77]Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 14.
[78]Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, 16—18.

encourages a more nuanced reading that acknowledges ambiguity and institutional factors, rather than forcing narratives such as Esther's into neat interpretive categories.

2.2.4 Age and Enslavement as Structures that Diminish Autonomy

The theoretical problems of consent and autonomy become concrete and absolute when examined through the intersecting lenses of childhood and enslaved status. These social locations, central to an intersectional analysis, diminish the legal and social possibility of self-determination. This requires an understanding of the ancient worldview that limited full personhood to a select few. In Greco-Roman society, foundational philosophical thinkers such as Plato believed the body hindered knowledge, and concern for it was seen as feminine.[79] Full personhood was closely associated with the possession and exercise of *logos*, a term signifying reason, rational speech, and the capacity for logical thought. *Logos* was considered the defining feature of humanity, and those thought to possess it most fully—adult free men—were granted the rights and recognition of personhood. Conversely, those who were seen as lacking *logos*, including women, enslaved people, children, so-called 'barbarians', and other socially marginalised groups, were excluded from full participation in society and denied legal and social autonomy.[80] Additionally, the Hebrew Bible often presents bodies, particularly women's bodies, primarily as vessels for reproduction within a patriarchal economy, as Jennifer Wright Knust notes in her discussion of Sarah and Hagar.[81] This biblical

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[79]Elizabeth V. Spelman, 'Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views,' in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 35–37. See *Plato, Phaedo* 66b–c for the argument that the physical body actively hinders the soul's acquisition of true knowledge; see also *Plato, Timaeus* 42b–c and 90e, where failure to master bodily passions and fears results in reincarnation in a female form.

[80]O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 22–24.

[81] Jennifer Wright Knust, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions about Sex and Desire* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 187–189.

portrayal reinforces a hierarchy of autonomy in which women's bodies are not regarded as the loci of independent agency but as resources for the continuity of lineage and family. The reduction of women's bodies to reproductive functions undercuts the possibility of meaningful consent or self-determination and illustrates how scriptural perspectives can inform broader social and legal attitudes toward autonomy.

Age and Childhood as a Structure of Subordination:

In the ancient Mediterranean, childhood was a period of subordination rather than a protected status. Scholars such as T.M. Lemos suggests a model of 'graduated personhood' in ancient Israel, where children accrued social value with maturity and were seen as extensions of paternal authority.[82] Naomi A. Steinberg, however, drawing on Judges 11, argues that virgin daughters were not granted full personhood within this framework.[83] A girl's 'marriageable age'—at or soon after puberty (around 12–15 years old)—was a social fact defined by biological utility and economic alliance, not by any recognised capacity for autonomous consent.[84] As Ross Kraemer notes, marriage meant girls left their natal home for their husband's family, a transition marking their passage from one form of patriarchal control to another.[85] This scholarship is directly relevant to the Book of Esther, where Esther is repeatedly referred to as a *na'arah*—a term associated with youth and unmarried status.[86] Her youth is not an incidental detail, but a critical component of her social location, positioning her within this

[82] Tracy M. Lemos, 'Did the Ancient Israelites think Children were People: Personhood in the Hebrew Bible,' *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March 2023. https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bible-interpretation/ancient-israel-children-personhood/;
[83]Lemos, 'Did the Ancient Israelites Think Children Were People'; see also Naomi A. Steinberg, *The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible*, 44–58.
[84] Ross S. Kraemer, 'Jewish Mothers and Daughters in the Greco-Roman World,' in *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, ed by. Shaye J.D. Cohen (Atlanta: Brown Judaic Studies, 1993), 103—104.
[85]Kraemer, 'Jewish Mothers and Daughters,' 104.
[86]Naomi A Steinburg, *The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 51 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 29.

system of personhood and rendering her vulnerable to abduction and control by imperial and familial male authority.

Enslaved Status as the Nullification of Bodily Integrity:

For enslaved individuals, the concept of bodily integrity was legally null. As Jennifer Glancy states, 'enslavers had unrestricted access to their slaves.' [87] The enslaved body was fungible property, valued for its labour and reproductive capacity. Margaret Aymer details how enslaved people were subject to humiliation and sexual exploitation.[88] Delores Williams analyses Hagar's forced surrogacy, noting she 'had no control over her body or labour.'[89] Marianne Kartzow clarifies that 'only free or freed women' were part of the protected gender system; enslaved women were property, and their children belonged to the enslaver.[90] This research establishes a foundational truth: enslaved status absolutely foreclosed the legal and social possibility of autonomy, transforming the body into an object for another's use.

An intersectional lens thus reveals that these categories are not merely additional variables, but rather foundational structures that actively constitute the (im)possibility of bodily autonomy. They transform the ambiguous terrain of consent explored in the previous section into a legally and socially foreclosed space. While chattel slavery is not directly applicable to Esther's narrative, the logic of property and use explored in this scholarship provides a crucial analogue for analysing her status in the Persian court. She is taken into the king's possession (Esth. 2:8), subjected to a year-long regimen of preparation, and presented for his

[87]Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 7–12.
[88]Margaret Aymer, 'Outrageous, Audacious, Courageous and Wilful,' in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 270–273.
[89] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Oribis Books, 1993), 60—65.
[90] Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, 'An Intersectional Approach to Early Christian Memory: The Case of the Pastoral Epistles,' *Journal of Early Christian History* 1, no. 2 (2011): 122–123.

approval. Her situation, while not one of legal enslavement, operates within a parallel political economy of the female body, where her value is determined by the king and her agency is constrained by imperial domination. Age and enslavement in ancient contexts are not simply factors but underlying structures that define the terms of autonomy and consent. Examining how these intersect and shape the experiences of figures such as Esther clarifies how legal and social recognition of personhood was tightly controlled and often denied. This analysis highlights the importance of considering both social location and systemic power in any assessment of agency, autonomy, and consent in ancient texts.

2.3 Identifying the Gap

The trajectory of intersectional thought and its application within biblical studies is clear: it has been moving slowly, yet importantly, into the mainstream. Credit for the early development of intersectional thought is given to scholars of colour, and feminist and womanist scholarship. The relevance and utility of the intersectional framework are growing among biblical scholars as they recognise its ability to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of bodily autonomy and the ways in which intersectionality shapes it. However, a noticeable gap remains. While a growing number of biblical scholars have adeptly analysed intersections of race, ethnicity, enslaved status, gender, and class, and while womanist scholars have long centred on marginalised figures like Hagar, there has been insufficient examination of intersectionality that considers the important concept of bodily autonomy described in Section 3.0.

This gap concerns the specific convergence of age and imperial power in structurally diminishing bodily autonomy and constraining the possibility of consent. The significance of this gap becomes evident in comparisons between a child bride and an adult queen. A child

bride's bodily autonomy and capacity for consent are severely constrained by age, adult authority, and imperial power structures, resulting in a fundamentally different experience from that of an adult queen, who may possess comparatively greater agency despite operating within similar power dynamics. These contrasting scenarios illustrate how age and imperial structures shape the negotiation of bodily autonomy, thereby broadening and enriching the analysis of biblical narratives, especially those involving marginalised figures negotiating imperial structures.

2.4 Toward an Intersectional Analysis of Bodily Autonomy

This literature review demonstrates a critical evolution in biblical studies: from documenting violation (Trible) to applying intersectionality (Yee), and from theorising the ambiguity of agency and consent (Graybill) to analysing structures that negate personhood (Glancy, Williams). However, the critical gap remains. While scholars have adeptly analysed sexual violence and theorised ambiguous consent, there has been insufficient analysis of how intersecting social vulnerabilities of social location (e.g., age and ethnicity) structurally exclude or include the very conditions for bodily autonomy within specific power structures. This gap can be formulated into the guiding research question: How do these key intersecting vulnerabilities impact, diminish, or cancel bodily autonomy under the power structure of empire? The Persian court, as a nexus of imperial ideology, patriarchal privilege, and ethno-political hierarchy, provides the ideal test case for this analysis.

By asking how the specific intersectional identities of a deposed queen (Vashti) and a diasporic Jewish *na'arah* (Esther) shape the fragile possibilities for bodily autonomy under the Achaemenid imperial rule, this thesis uses intersectionality as a framework to reveal the

complex, intersecting operations of power that determine who, in the biblical world, can effectively assert, *'This is my body.'*

The Crown and the Body: Deconstructing Power, Gender, and Refusal in Esther 1

3.0 Introduction

Queen Vashti's refusal of the king's summoning in Esther 1 functions as a pivotal act of bodily autonomy that challenges and momentarily disrupts the Persian imperial patriarchal order, only to be suppressed through her erasure from power and the narrative. This chapter argues that Vashti's intervention exposes how intersecting dynamics of gender, power, age, and social status structure both the possibilities and the limits of female bodily autonomy within the imperial context. Her punishment is inseparably linked to her intersectional position. Rather than reading Vashti solely as Esther's foil. merely as a victim of textual erasure, she emerges as both as a catalyst for gender discourse and a casualty of imperial power. Her removal introduces the control of women's bodies as the narrative's central problem, establishing the stakes for Esther's subsequent actions.

Drawing on Crenshaw, the analysis examines how Vashti's layered identity as Persian noble, royal consort, and possibly a young bride converges to enable her defiance while simultaneously shaping its consequences. These intersecting positions generate both agency and vulnerability within the imperial system. Michel Foucault's analysis of power and the disciplinary gaze illuminate how the king's command attempts to render Vashti's body a spectacle of male authority, while her refusal exposes and disrupts this mechanism of control. Visibility in the court is therefore not neutral but a technology of domination. Similarly, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity frames Vashti's refusal as a rupture in the expected performance of wifely submission.

Her 'no' interrupts the repetition through which gender norms are sustained, revealing their constructed and therefore unstable nature within the imperial context. The discussion unfolds in three stages: first, I am going to argue Vashti's position within the Persian court is established using historical evidence, including the Persepolis Fortification Tablets and

selected classical sources, to reconstruct the potential agency of Achaemenid royal women.[91] This section remains deliberately concise, providing only the necessary historical grounding. Second, a close reading of Esther 1:9-22 focuses on three key moments: Vashti's independent banquet, the king's summons, and her refusal. Third, the consequences of Vashti's defiance are analysed. Her deposition rather than execution reflects an intersectional dilemma: her assumed Persian ethnicity mitigates her punishment even as her gender necessitates it. This approach foregrounds Vashti not as a disposable narrative device but as a figure whose brief appearance exposes the fragility of imperial patriarchy and establishes bodily autonomy as one of the book's prominent themes.

3.1 Previous Scholarship on Vashti

Scholarly discussions of Vashti's refusal have largely focused on whether she functions as a narrative device or as a figure of resistance, yet insufficient attention to how her specific social location – Persian, royal, and possibly young – shapes both her bodily autonomy and its consequences. This section therefore reorients the discussion by foregrounding this gap, rather than reproducing existing debates at length. The following overview selectively engages key positions to clarify the interpretive problem: does Vashti's significance lie in her narrative function and in the disruptive potential of her refusal?

3.1.1 Vashti as a Narrative Device

Queen Vashti's refusal has often been read primarily in terms of narrative function. In Esther 1, she hosts a banquet for women while the king entertains his own guests; when summoned to display her beauty before a drunken court, she refuses and is subsequently deposed. Within this framework, her role is defined less by characterisation than by narrative necessity. Adele Berlin interprets Vashti as a literary foil[92] whose primary function is to exit and make

[91] Maria Brosius, 'Women in Pre-Islamic Persia,' Encyclopaedia Iranica, accessed 23 July 2025, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/women-i/; Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, 'Resources for the Study of Persepolis Fortification Tablets,' Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, University of Chicago, accessed 23 July 2025, https://isac.uchicago.edu/research/projects/persepolis-fortification-archive; see also Yazdan Safaee, 'Achaemenid Women: Putting the Greek Image to the Test,' Talanta 48–49 (2016): 109–10.

[92] The term 'foil' refers to a character whose traits contrast with those of another character, such as Vashti's open defiance versus Esther's strategic compliance.

way for Esther.[93] Her significance, in this reading, lies in what her removal enables rather than in what her refusal means.

Similarly, David Clines and Michael Fox identify her deposition as a structural turning point that sets the narrative in motion.[94] This approach rightly recognises the narrative importance of Vashti's removal, yet her absence ultimately proves more significant than her brief presence. While this reading highlights the importance of Vashti's removal, it risks reducing her to a purely functional role. Such readings prioritise plot over agency, leaving unexplored the implications of her refusal as an act of bodily autonomy.

3.1.2 Vashti as a figure of Resistance

In contrast, other scholars interpret Vashti as a figure of resistance. Beal critiques readings that treat her merely as a narrative device, arguing that such interpretations replicate the very erasure enacted within the text.[95] He further observes that Vashti is frequently overlooked because she is read through formalist approaches that prioritise narrative function over character.[96] Her removal, on this view, exposes how patriarchal power responds when confronted with female refusal. [97] Correspondingly, Sarojini Nadar argues that reducing Vashti to a plot device forecloses the possibility of recognising her as a subject. To read her only in relation to Esther is to participate in the narratives silencing of her.[98] Rachel Adelman further characterises Vashti as a proto-feminist figure whose refusal, though often maligned, invites reassessment of gendered expectations.[99] These readings recover the significance of Vashti's

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[93] Adele Berlin, *Esther*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), lv-lvi; see also Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 9.
[94] David J. A. Clines, 'The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story,' *The Scroll of Esther*, ed. David J.A. Clines, Journal of the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 30 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 10–12. See also Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 18–22, where he states that banquets function as literary plot devices.
[95]Timothy K. Beal, 'Tracing Esther's Beginnings,' in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).
[96]Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (Biblical Limits) (London: Routledge, 2002), 16, quoting Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 15. A formalist biblical scholar focuses on literary form and function.
[97] Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (Biblical Limits) (London: Routledge, 2002), 15.
[98] Sarojini Nadar, 'Gender, Power, Sexuality and Suffering Bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the Characters of Esther and Vashti for the Purpose of Social Transformation,' *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 1 (2002): 118.
[99]Rachel Adelman, ''Passing Strange': Reading Transgender across Genre: Rabbinic Midrash and Feminist Hermeneutics on Esther,' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 2 (2014): 85.

refusal, yet they tend to universalise her resistance without sufficient attention to the social conditions that make it possible.[100] Her act is not simply resistance in the abstract but is shaped by her position within the Persian royal hierarchy.[101]

A middle ground position is offered by Linda Day, who recognises both the narrative function of Vashti and the significance of her refusal.[102] This chapter similarly recognises the significance of Vashti's refusal while acknowledging her narrative function in paving the way for Esther and driving the plot. Her absence structures the narrative, yet her defiance exposes the mechanisms of male control. These divergent readings share an inattention to Vashti's layered identities and to how they influence her bodily autonomy, or to the text's presentation of her bodily autonomy. Neither those who read her as a foil nor those who champion her as a resistor fully explore how her identities as Persian, royal, and young shape both her bodily autonomy and its consequences. Having discussed these scholars' debates, the chapter now turns to the Masoretic text itself, reading Esther 1 through the lens of intersectionality to examine how Vashti's layers of identity intersect in her moment of bodily autonomy.

3.1.3 Reframing the Debate

Despite their differences, these approaches share a common limitation: they do not fully account for how Vashti's intersecting identities shape both her capacity for autonomy and the form of her punishment. While Day gives greater attention to gender, her reading likewise stops short of examining how Vashti's intersecting identities shape her bodily autonomy and its consequences. Whether treated as a foil or as a resistor, her social location remains underexamined.

An intersectional reading shifts the question. Rather than asking whether Vashti is a narrative device or a resistant figure, the focus turns to how her identity as Persian, royal, and possibly young produces specific configuration of power and vulnerability. Her refusal is neither purely functional nor universally resistant; it is situated.

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[100]Sarojini Nadar, 'Gender, Power, Sexuality and Suffering Bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the Characters of Esther and Vashti for the Purpose of Social Transformation,' *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 1 (2002): 119.
[101]Ericka Shawndricka Dunbar, *Trafficking Hadassah: Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, and Identity in the Book of Esther and in the African Diaspora*, 19.
[102]Linda M. Day, *Esther*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 42.

3.2 Vashti's Intersectional Autonomy and the Imperial Patriarchy in the Masoretic Text of the Book of Esther

The Masoretic Text's account of Queen Vashti's refusal in Esther 1 presents a tightly constructed narrative of power and resistance. Rather than functioning merely as narrative prelude, this episode concentrates on the tension between imperial authority and female bodily autonomy. Vashti's eleven-verse appearance (Esth. 1:9–19) has historically marginalised her as a prelude to Esther's rise.[103] Yet this brevity intensifies her significance, bringing into focus the mechanisms through which power is asserted and contested. The analysis proceeds by examining how Vashti's ethnic background, royal status, and possible youth intersect within Achaemenid power structures.

Vashti's identities do not simply accumulate but interact to produce both authority and vulnerability. Her Persian ethnicity and royal status afforded her a degree of bodily integrity, yet her gender positions her within a system that seeks to regulate and display women's bodies. Vashti's refusal to appear disrupts this system at a critical moment. By withdrawing from the economy of visibility through which imperial authority is enacted, she interrupts the performance of royal power. Her act therefore exposes the instability of a system dependent upon the controlled display of women's bodies.

The narrative response to this disruption is equally significant. Vashti's erasure restores order, yet it does so by removing the figure who revealed its fragility. Her removal is not incidental but constitutive of imperial control. Thus, the Masoretic Text positions Vashti as both a product and casualty of Achaemenid gender politics, her intersectional position enabling her autonomy while simultaneously determining its consequences.

3.2.1 Status and Age: The Foundations of Autonomy

Esther 1:9 (MT):

'*Gam Vashti hamalkah asetah mishteh nashim beyt hamalkhut asher lamalekh Achashverosh.*'

[103]Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 9. He suggest that Vashti's banquet is her last, while Esther's marks the story's next chapter, implying that Vashti functions as a plot device.

‘And Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace, which belonged to King Ahasuerus’ (NRSV).

This section begins with the foundations of Vashti’s autonomy: her probable youth, as women in the period were usually married by the age of fifteen,[104] her ethnicity, and her status. The translation choice ‘belonged to’ requires closer scrutiny, as it frames the palace as patriarchal property and subtly limits Vashti’s authority within it. The underlying Hebrew, *beit ha-malkhut*, leaves open the question of control rather than resolving it. This tension is supported by Fox, who notes that the 'spacious description' of the venue functions like a 'cinematographer' scanning the palace. He argues that the separate banquet in the ‘royal house’ establishes a deliberate segregation of the sexes, which 'makes Vashti’s refusal more understandable'.[105] By hosting within this specific royal space, Vashti is not merely occupying the King’s property alone, but is maintaining a distinct sphere of dignity; the King’s command for her to leave this protected venue to appear before a ‘mass of men' thus represents a breach of the very royal order the physical layout of the palace was meant to uphold.[106] By tying the beit ha-malkhut exclusively to Xerxes, the translation subtly delegitimises Vashti’s banquet before her conflict with the King even begins. If the Hebrew retains its ambiguity, the text allows for a version of the palace where Vashti is not merely a guest in her husband's house, but a ruler within her own designated sphere.

The text introduces Vashti without explanation or genealogy only her name, title, and action.[107] Vashti's name, possibly derived from Old Persian *vaištī* (‘beloved’ or ‘beautiful

[104]Mohammad Akvan and Mahnaz Babaei Tooski, ‘Changes in the Iranian Families During the Achaemenid Era’ (paper presented at the 22nd International Academic Conference, Lisbon, 22 March 2016), 252. Although Zoroastrian tradition suggests that girls were married from the age of nine, see also Martha T. Roth, ‘Age at Marriage and the Household: A Study of Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian forms,’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987): 715–747, esp. 737, where she discusses Achaemenid Babylonian girls marrying between the ages of fourteen and twenty. See also Ariadne Puchner-Malamitsi and M. Ioannis Konstantakos, ‘Evidence, Hints and Assumptions for Late Pregnancy in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near East,’ *Acta Paediatrica* 112, no. 7 (2023): 1371–1377, esp. 1375. They note that girls in ancient Zoroastrian societies were married at nine, while also acknowledging a later maternal age for childbearing. Although the biblical text does not specify Vashti’s age, the limited historical evidence suggests that Persian girls were married young and consummated marriage around the age of fifteen.

[105]Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther: With a New Postscript on a Decade of Esther Scholarship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 15.

[106]Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 16–18.

[107]The LXX refers to Vashti as Astin

woman'),[108] may signal Persian heritage, though the text itself leaves her ethnicity unnamed. This ambiguity encourages assumption rather than certainty, shaping how her identity is later interpreted. This contrasts with Herodotus's account of Xerxes's wife, whom he names Amestris (*Hist.* 7.114), suggesting either literary renaming or symbolic characterisation within the biblical text.[109]. In Herodotus's account, Amestris's identity is clearly established and detailed, whereas the biblical text leaves Vashti's background largely undefined. This absence of detail invites readers to make assumptions about Vashti's identity in ways that Herodotus's portrayal of Amestris does not.

Although Achaemenid marriage practices generally favoured unions within noble families, the text itself does not explicitly confirm her background, requiring such assumptions to be carefully qualified.[110] Vashti is nevertheless likely a Persian noblewoman, as Persian rulers typically married within elite families.[111] This reflects Persian practices, in which non-Persian women, particularly concubines, could hold status but not become queen.[112] Vashti's refusal, therefore, emerges from embedded privilege rather than marginality, and must be read accordingly. Her ethnicity and status are not incidental details; they structure the conditions under which her autonomy becomes possible. Vashti is therefore best understood as an elite insider rather than an outsider within the Persian court.

Evidence from the Persepolis Fortification Tablets suggest that Persian royal women held documented authority, including control over land and labour forces. This historical context situates Vashti's banquet within known patterns of elite female agency rather than treating it as exceptional.[113] Evidence from the Achaemenid period, including the Persepolis Fortification Tablets (PFAT 1795, 1857), records royal women such as Irdabama overseeing land

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[108]J. Dyneley Prince, 'Note on Vashti,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 33, no. 2 (1914): 89. See also Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, 'Esther, Drag, and Agency: Gender, Ethnicity, Power, and Queer Time in the Book of Esther and Its Jewish Interpretations,' *Hebrew studies* 63, no. 1 (2022): 99–118; and Karen H. Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).
[109]Karen H. Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 69.
[110]See Maria Brosius, 'Women in Pre-Islamic Persia,' *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (2008), https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/women-i/. She discusses Persian marriage practices.
[111]Daniel T. Potts, *Aspects of Kinship in Ancient Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 57. See also Maria Brosius, 'Women in Pre-Islamic Persia,' *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (2008), Encyclopaedia Iranica article.
[112]Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 24.
[113]See Maria Brosius, 'Women in Pre-Islamic Persia,' *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (2008), https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/women-i/.

allocations and labour forces, a reality obscured in Greek accounts, where figures like Amestris are portrayed as scheming.[114]

From this position, her refusal reflects not marginal resistance but the exercise of status-based authority. This distinguishes her from Esther's later position as a Jewish orphan, whose identity reflects a different and more precarious configuration of power. At the same time, the text's silence regarding her motivations leaves room for ambiguity, preventing any definitive claim about the extent of her agency. The Masoretic Text introduces Vashti hosting a *mishteh ishah* ('woman's banquet') in parallel to the king's feast (Esth. 1:3–4). The banquet offers the first evidence of Vashti's power. Some scholars argue that the banquet reflects separation rather than authority, emphasising women's marginality and continued subordination within the court.[115] This mirroring, as Levenson notes, establishes her 'equal but separate' royal status.[116] The particle *gam* ('also') signals correspondence between the two events, suggesting spheres of authority rather than simple separation.[117]

The Masoretic Text's Vashti, hosting her own banquet (Esth. 1:9), aligns with this Persian tradition of elite women's administrative roles. Although the tablets do not mention Vashti directly, they demonstrate that royal women could exercise the kind of authority her banquet implies. Read against this background, Vashti's banquet resembles less a segregated gathering and more a parallel court in which the queen exercises political influence.[118]

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[114]Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. A. D. Godley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), Perseus Digital Library, http://data.perseus.org/texts/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0016.tlg001.

[115]Timothy K. Beal, 'Tracing Esther's Beginnings,' in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 92.

[116]Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 24; see also Daniel T. Potts, *Aspects of Kinship in Ancient Iran* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023), 57, accessed 29 June 2025, https://uplopen.com/chapters/300/files/a65afd78-0d9e-4fbe-bd2f-6de9c8a0d0ed.pdf; see also Caryn Tamber- Rosenau, 'Esther, Drag, and Agency: Gender, Ethnicity, Power, and Queer Time in the Book of Esther and Its Jewish Interpretations,' *Hebrew studies* 63, no. 1 (2022): 99–118. Tamber-Rosenau argues that Vashti is left ethnical unmarked, leading readers to assume she is Persian. See also Christopher Tuplin, 'The Seleucids and Their Achaemenid Predecessors: A Persian Inheritance?' in *Ancient Greece and Ancient Iran: Cross-Cultural Encounters*, 1st International Conference (Athens, 11–13 November 2006), 117; cf. Maria Brosius, *Women in Pre-Islamic Persia*,' (2008).

[117]Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 24.

[118]Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, 'Resources for the Study of Persepolis Fortification Tablets,' Institute for the Advanced Study of Ancient Cultures, University of Chicago, accessed 23 July 2025, https://isac.uchicago.edu/research/projects/persepolis-fortification-archive; see also Yazdan Safaee, 'Achaemenid Women: Putting the Greek Image to the Test,' *Talanta* 48–49 (2016):109–110.

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality highlights the complexity of this arrangement.[119] However, this authority remains bounded. Vashti presides over women, while the king presides over the empire. Her autonomy is therefore both real and constrained, illustrating how gender and status operate simultaneously as enabling and limiting forces. In Esther 1:9, the phrase *asah mishteh* ('gave a banquet') frames Vashti as an active agent. She initiates and controls the event, mirroring the king's actions without collapsing the distinction between them.

Vashti's bodily autonomy is further evidenced by the king's need to formally summon her (Esth 1:10). The use of seven eunuchs, signals protocol and acknowledges her status, even as the command attempts to override it. The question of Vashti's age, however, must be approached with caution. The text provides no explicit information regarding her age, and any claim remains inferential. Achaemenid marriage practices suggest that noblewomen married young, yet such evidence cannot be directly mapped on to Vashti's without qualification.

If read as a young queen, her refusal becomes more striking. A young woman deploying status-based authority to resist royal command introduces an additional layer of tension within the imperial hierarchy. However, this possibility should be framed as interpretive rather than definitive, avoiding overextension beyond the textual evidence. One must read that Vashti hosting a banquet demonstrates the power that she has as a queen and as an assumed Persian royal woman. This banquet gives her soft power. While it is separate from the king's banquet, Vashti wields authority over the women, who may have been the wives of the king's advisors and ministers. The historical record suggests that Persian women had profound influence over their husbands and thus the women's banquet could be a space where the women can exert power. Vashti's elite status affords her agency, yet her gender and possibly her youth renders that agency precarious. Her autonomy is therefore not absolute but contingent, shaped by the same structures that enable it.

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[119]Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,' in *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 93–118; see also Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 'Why Intersectionality Can't Wait,' *The Washington Post*, 24 September 2015; Judy Fentresss-Williams and Melody D. Knowles, 'Affirming and Contradicting Gender Stereotypes,' in *The Hebrew Bible: Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives*, ed. Gale A. Yee, 142; and Ericka Shawndricka Dunbar, *Trafficking Hadassah*, 19.

3.2.2 The King's Command: Drunkenness and Objectification

On the seventh day of the banquet, when the king is described as merry with wine, he commands seven eunuchs to bring Vashti before the royal court wearing the royal crown so that her beauty might be displayed before the officials and subjects of the empire. Vashti refuses the command delivered through the eunuchs, provoking the king's anger (Esth. 1:10–12). The king's command represents a critical juncture where imperial power attempts to reclaim control over the queen's body. This section examines how that command operates through intoxication, spectacle, and enforced visibility, before turning to Vashti's refusal as a disruption of these mechanisms. The king's drunken state ('when his heart was merry with wine') frames the command as emerging from excess rather than measured authority. This detail is not incidental; it marks a shift from deliberative rule to performative display, where power is exercised through spectacle. The demand to display Vashti's beauty positions her body as an object of public consumption, recasting the queen from sovereign subject into visible commodity.[120]

The command further specifies that Vashti appear wearing the *keter malkhut* ('royal crown'), a symbol ordinarily associated with authority. Here, however, the crown is reoriented as part of the spectacle, transforming a sign of sovereignty into an instrument of display.[121] Iain Duguid suggests that the command for Vashti to appear wearing the royal crown may imply a heightened form of display; while this interpretation is speculative, it underscores how the command renders her body subject to public evaluation.[122]

The command represents an instance of what Foucault terms the disciplinary gaze, the mechanism by which power renders bodies visible and thereby subject to control.[123] Foucault argues that disciplinary power operates not primarily through violence but through surveillance: the ability to see and be seen structures hierarchical relationships, producing bodies that are 'docile' and compliant. Authority is not removed, but reconfigured, functioning through the exposure of the body rather than its protection. At this point, the narrative

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[120]See Genesis 12:11 and 2 Samuel 11:2.
[121] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200–221.
[122]Iain M. Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, ed. Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 10.
[123]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200–210.

foregrounds the relationship between power and visibility. The king does not merely summon Vashti: he summons her to be seen. Visibility here functions not merely as exposure but as regulation, producing bodies that conform to the expectations of the courtly hierarchy.[124]

Vashti's refusal marks a decisive interruption of this dynamic. Her refusal is not simply disobedience but a withdrawal from the system that seeks to define her through display.[125] But to read her only as a foil or a plot device misses what her refusal accomplishes. Such a reading erases her as a subject within the narrative. The king's anger that follows signals more than personal offence. It exposes a breakdown in the assumed alignment between command and obedience upon which imperial authority depends.[126] If the queen can refuse, authority is revealed as contingent rather than absolute. This disruption also unsettles the gendered expectations embedded within the court. The command requires Vashti to perform a specific femininity: the beautiful queen displayed for male consumption. By refusing to appear, she refuses to perform this role, exposing it as constructed rather than natural.[127]

Many interpretations position Vashti as a narrative precursor to Esther. While this structural role is important, it should not diminish the force of her refusal within this scene.[128] Her removal from the narrative is therefore not incidental. It becomes necessary precisely because her refusal exposes the limits of imperial control over the body.[129] Rather than functioning solely as an order, it operates through visibility, in which the body is constituted and regulated through being seen.

The seven eunuchs extend this gaze, carrying the king's authority into Vashti's space. Her refusal interrupts this process, preventing her body from being constituted through that visibility.[130] The Hebrew verb *vattəmaʾen* ('refused') signifies the deliberateness of Vashti's

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[124] Berlin, *Esther*, lv–lvi.
[125] Berlin, *Esther*, lv–lvi.
[126]Sarojini Nadar, 'Gender, Power, Sexuality and Suffering Bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the Characters of Esther and Vashti for the Purpose of Social Transformation,' *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 1 (2002):121.
[127]Judith Butler, 'Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics.' *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 4, no. 3 (2009), 7.
[128] Linafelt and Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, 1. See also David J. A. Clines, 'The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story,' in *The Scroll of Esther*, ed. David J. A. Clines, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 30 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 10–12; and Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther: With a New Postscript on a Decade of Esther Scholarship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 18–22, where he argues that banquets function as literary plot devices.
[129]Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, 10.
[130]Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, 9–10.

action. Unlike Pharaoh's refusal in Exodus, which is framed as resistance to divine authority, Vashti's refusal is not explicitly condemned within the narrative.[131] The term may be read as signalling intentionality rather than impulse, allowing Vashti's refusal to appear as controlled rather than reactive.

Berlin cautions against romanticising Vashti's refusal as either radical defiance or simple disobedience, instead interpreting it as the action of a queen preserving her dignity.[132] Vashti's refusal, however, ultimately exposes the limits of imperial authority, revealing that its power is neither absolute nor secure, but dependent on the compliance it seeks to enforce.

3.2.3 The Consequences: Punishing Female Autonomy

The king's reaction to Vashti's non-compliance marks a shift from spectacle to crisis. What begins as a moment of courtly display escalates into a perceived threat to imperial order. The narrative turns from the attempted control of the Queen's body to broader implications of that failed control within the structures of power.

The king's anger, 'his wrath burned within him' (Esth. 1:12), signals more than personal humiliation. It transforms what might have remained a contained court incident into a matter requiring a formal response. The king's reaction initiates a process through which the event is reinterpreted and managed at the level of imperial governance. The consultation with advisors marks this transition. What begins as a moment within the royal court is reframed as a problem with implications beyond the palace.

The presence of counsellors shifts the scene from reaction to deliberation, situating the event within the mechanisms of policy rather than personal response. Memucan's intervention is decisive. His speech redirects attention away from the queen and toward the wider social order, recasting the incident as a precedent rather an exception. This shift reflects the regulation of gendered behaviour, in which norms must be reinforced when they are perceived to fail.[133] The concern is no longer the singular act, but its potential to circulate: 'the

[131]Exodus 7:14; 10:3
[132]Berlin, *Esther*, lv–lvi.
[133]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 25. See also 'Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler,' *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy* 67 (Summer 1994): 32–9.

queen's behaviour will become known to all women.' Memucan's warning that Vashti's act will 'become known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands,' (Esth. 1:17).[134] The language anticipates spread, framing behaviour as something that can move across social boundaries if left unaddressed.

This shift introduces the logic of containment. The response is not limited to addressing what has occurred but extends to regulating what might follow. The proposed solution therefore operates pre-emptively, seeking to stabilise a system perceived to be at risk. In this way, the narrative reflects a broader pattern in which authority responds to disruption not only through correction but through expansion of control. What terrifies Memucan is not the act itself but its reproductivity. If Vashti can refuse the performance of wifely submission, other women might recognise that they too are performing rather than *being* submissive. The 'contempt' Memucan fears is not mere disrespect but a fundamental seeing through, wives recognising that their husbands' authority depends on their continued performance of deference. Once that performance is exposed as performance, the entire gender hierarchy becomes unravelled.

The decree that follows formalises this response. By extending the implications of the event across the empire, the text transforms a courtly moment into a universal directive. The instruction that all women should honour their husbands (Esth. 1:20) relocates the issue from the royal household into the domestic sphere, embedding it within everyday social relations. This movement from palace to province is significant. It demonstrates how a single incident becomes the basis for wider regulation, revealing the extent to which imperial authority depends on the management of gendered behaviour at every level of society. The response does not isolate the event; it generalises it. At the same time, the removal of Vashti is integral to this process. Her displacement functions as both consequence and example, marking the limits of what the system will tolerate. The decision to replace her ensures that the narrative does not leave the disruption unresolved but instead incorporates it into a broader restoration of

[134]Susan Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority,' in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 26–46.

order. As Susan Niditch observes, Vashti's removal serves as a cautionary tale: women who defy objectification are silenced.[135]

What emerges is not simply punishment, but a reassertion of structure through visibility and example. The system responds by eliminating the immediate source of disruption while simultaneously reinforcing the norms that have been called into question. The narrative, however, allows for multiple readings of this moment. For readers both ancient and modern, Vashti's brief appearance preserves a record of a woman who chose withdrawal over objectification. That choice, however costly, remains inscribed in the text. Her position within the Persian elite makes such an action possible, yet that same position ensures her removal from the narrative.

The need for such an extensive response suggests that the issue cannot be contained at the level of a single individual. The preservation of her story indicates that the event exceeds its immediate consequences, continuing to resonate beyond her disappearance from the court. The Masoretic Text does not resolve the tension it introduces; rather, it leaves space for competing interpretations of the act and its meaning.

The anxiety reflected in Esther 1:16–21 makes this clear. The advisers' concern extends beyond the queen herself to the possibility that her actions might unsettle established hierarchies across the empire. Her behaviour is presented as a threat capable of spreading if left unchecked.[136] The decree that follows must therefore be read as an act of containment. It does not simply address what has occurred but seeks to regulate what may follow. The instruction that 'all women will give honour to their husbands' (Esth. 1:20) extends the implications of the event into the domestic sphere, embedding the response within everyday structures of authority.[137]

The decree states that, according to the irrevocable laws of Persia, Vashti is no longer permitted to appear before the king (Esth.1:18–19). The language of the decree formalises her removal, transforming a moment of disruption into a legal resolution. The phrase *lō᾽-tāḇô* ('she will come no more') signals exclusion rather than annihilation, indicating separation

[135]Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority,' 26–46.
[136]Esther 1:16–17 (NRSV).
[137]Esther 1:19–20 (NRSV).

from royal presence rather than execution. This distinction is significant. Within the narrative world of Esther, execution is a known and immediate possibility (Esth. 4:11; 7:9–10), yet it is not enacted here. Instead, the response takes the form of deposing her from royal power.

Bea Wyler suggests Vashti may have been executed or reduced to concubinage.[138] Such readings assume a more extreme outcome than the text itself supports. The absence of explicit reference to death or degradation, combined with the emphasis on exclusion, points instead toward removal from courtly power. The nature of this removal is revealing. Given the king's authority, a lethal outcome remains narratively plausible; that it is not depicted suggests that other factors shape the response. Tamber-Rosenau's observation is instructive: the text's silence regarding Vashti's ethnicity encourages the assumption that she belongs to the Persian elite.[139] If this is the case, her status operates as a limiting condition on the form of punishment available. A woman of noble standing cannot be treated in the same manner as a concubine or outsider without broader political consequence. Her removal therefore becomes a calculated response, visible, decisive, but not excessive.

What emerges is not the elimination of the individual, but her exclusion from power. She is removed from the king's presence, from her title, and from the narrative's forward movement. The act does not erase her entirely, but it removes her from the structures in which authority is exercised. This outcome reflects the broader logic of the system. The response must be severe enough to prevent imitation yet measured enough to avoid destabilising existing hierarchies. The solution is neither forgiveness nor destruction, but controlled displacement.[140]

The resulting decree reflects the broader mechanisms of patriarchal control, in which women who challenge imperial authority are removed to maintain the social order and discourage further dissent. The legal framework depicted in the Book of Esther functions to restrict female behaviour and suppress dissent. While the reason for Vashti's actions is not

[138]Bea Wyler, 'The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen,' in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 117.
[139]Tamber-Rosenau, 'Esther, Drag, and Agency,' 99–118. Tamber-Rosenau states that Vashti is left ethnically unmarked, leading readers to assume that she is Persian.
[140]See Beal's analysis of *gāzar* ('cutting off') in Linafelt and Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, 19.

explicitly stated, her conduct challenges the assumption that women's bodies are subject to male authority.[141]

Lillian Klein observes that the king's reliance on advisers at this moment exposes a lack of decisive authority, in contrast to the independent action taken by the queen. Klein states, 'When Vashti acts autonomously and refuses, the king again does not manifest his royal control or leadership in his response; he asks for judgment of his wise men.'[142] The contrast highlights a reversal in agency: the figure expected to embody control requires consultation, while the figure expected to comply acts independently.

Susan Niditch interprets the removal as part of a broader literary pattern in which the banished wife serves as a cautionary example, reinforcing expectations of female compliance.[143] Yet such a reading does not fully account for the narrative's preservation of the event itself. The text does not simply erase; it records. The result is a narrative that both suppresses and preserves. The system reasserts order through removal, yet the account of what necessitated that response remains. Vashti's absence thus performs a structural function. Her removal creates the conditions for what follows, while her prior presence continues to shape the narrative's trajectory. As Clines notes, her banishment functions as a pivotal narrative turning point that structures the emergence of Esther and sets the stage for what follows.[144] The response to this event is therefore not only corrective but generative. It produces new narrative possibilities while simultaneously reinforcing the limits within which those possibilities must operate.

3.2.4 Silencing One, Elevating Another: Vashti's Exit and Esther's Emergence

The transition between Vashti's deposition and Esther's rise is not merely a change of queens, but a reconfiguration of how imperial power regulates female bodies. The Masoretic Text's use of *zākar* ('remembered') signals that Vashti is not fully erased from the king's

[141]Sidnie White Crawford, 'Esther,' in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 208.
[142]Lillian R. Klein, 'Honor and Shame,' in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 155.
[143]Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority,' 26–46.
[144]David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 10–12; see also Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 18–22, where he states that banquets function as literary plot devices.

consciousness. Even after her banishment, she remains present as memory,[145] an unresolved disruption within the imperial order. Beal's reading of the king's threefold remembrance of Vashti, what she had done, and what had been decreed against her highlights a patterned escalation that reflects this instability.

The structure moves from person, to act, to consequence, mirroring the narrative's attempt to contain what cannot be fully resolved. Vashti is removed from the court, yet the effects of her actions persist beyond her absence.[146] This structure mirrors the layers of Vashti's defiance: her body (refusing display), her action (rejecting the king's command), and the system's violent retaliation.

The verb *gzr* ('decreed' or 'cut off') sharpens this transition. The language does not merely indicate dismissal but suggests severance.[147] Vashti is not only removed from the king's presence but from the narrative itself. This linguistic framing presents her elimination as both political and textual: she is cut off from power and from continued representation. Beal's observation that the decree seeks to 'cut her out of the story itself' captures the extent of this erasure, even as the narrative paradoxically preserves her memory. Beal notes its violent connotations: Vashti is severed from the narrative as decisively as from the throne.[148] Against this removal, Esther's introduction marks a shift in how bodily autonomy is negotiated. Levenson notes the structural irony: Vashti does not appear when summoned, whereas Esther later appears without summons, risking death.

The contrast does not simply oppose disobedience and compliance; it reveals two different modes of navigating the same system. Where Vashti's position enables direct confrontation, Esther's position requires strategic accommodation. Levenson observes the irony: Vashti resisted the king's summons; Esther risks death by approaching him unsummoned.[149]

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[145]MT Esther 2:1. The king's memory becomes a site of tension between his authority and Vashti's indelible act of refusal.

[146] Linafelt and Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, 18. Their analysis of the Hebrew's poetic structure reveals how Vashti's defiance is linguistically entangled with her punishment.

[147]Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), s.v. *gāzar* ('to cut off, decree'), Logos Bible Software.

[148] Linafelt and Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, 19. Their emphasis on *gzr* as 'cutting off' aligns with my argument about bodily erasure.

[149]Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 48; see Esther 4:15–5:1.

This contrast conveys a critical transformation rather than a repetition. Vashti's position within the court allows for visible bodily autonomy but results in removal. Esther, by contrast, operates within the constraints of the system, using its expectations to her advantage.

The shift from one figure to the other does not resolve the tension between bodily autonomy and control; it reconfigures it. The silence surrounding Vashti's fate further intensifies this dynamic. Unlike Haman's execution, which is graphically narrated, Vashti's end is left undefined. This absence is not neutral. It reinforces the nature of her punishment as erasure rather than spectacle. Vashti's fate contrasts sharply with the grotesque execution of Haman. She disappears without narrative closure, a removal that reflects both her gendered vulnerability and her elite status.[150] Crenshaw's intersectional framework clarifies this divergence. Vashti's position as a Persian royal woman enables a form of bodily autonomy that is visible and disruptive, yet that same status necessitates her removal once she destabilises the system. Esther's marginality, as a Jewish, orphaned woman limits her initial bodily autonomy but allows her to remain within the structure long enough to act. Their trajectories do not oppose one another; they expose how different configurations of identity produce different forms of constraint and bodily autonomy.

The transition from Vashti to Esther therefore functions as more than narrative progression. It demonstrates how imperial power responds to disruption. Vashti's removal restores order at the level of appearance, but her absence continues to shape what follows. Esther's emergence does not replace Vashti's significance; it is made possible by it. Beal proposes that the decree sought to 'cut her out of the story itself,'[151] yet her absence lingers as a spectre of bodily autonomy.

Esther's triumph is bittersweet: she saves her people, but the system that destroyed Vashti remains intact. The result is a narrative in which suppression and autonomy operate simultaneously. Vashti is removed from the court yet retained within the text. Her absence becomes structurally productive, creating the conditions for Esther's rise while preserving the memory of the event that necessitated it.

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[150]Haman's execution: Esther 7:9–10.

[151] Linafelt and Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, 20. Their phrasing here directly supports my claim about narrative violence.

3.3 Conclusion

Vashti's brief presence in Esther 1 establishes the terms through which bodily autonomy is negotiated within the Persian imperial court. Her position as a Persian royal woman enables a form of agency that is both visible and consequential, yet that same position renders her vulnerable to removal once that bodily autonomy disrupts established hierarchies. Her elimination is therefore not incidental but structurally necessary, preserving the appearance of order while exposing the instability that necessitated it.

This reading has demonstrated that Vashti's actions cannot be reduced either to narrative function or to symbolic resistance alone. Rather, her significance lies in how her intersecting identities as Persian, royal, and plausibly young produce a specific intersectionality of power and risk. These identities do not operate independently but converge to shape both the possibility of her bodily autonomy and the form of its suppression. Her removal, as deposition rather than execution, reflects this intersectional positioning: her gender demands punishment, while her status constrains its severity.

The close reading of the Masoretic Text has shown that the narrative does not simply depict control but reveals the mechanisms through which that control is maintained. The king's command, the advisers' response, and the subsequent decree together illustrate how authority operates through regulation, visibility, and legal reinforcement. The transition to Esther does not resolve these tensions but reconfigures them. Where Vashti's position allows for direct confrontation, Esther's requires a strategy. The contrast between them is not one of opposition but of different forms of adaptation within the constraints of imperial patriarchy. Esther's success is therefore contingent upon the conditions produced by Vashti's removal, even as it operates within the boundaries that removal reasserts.

An intersectional reading clarifies that bodily autonomy within this narrative is neither absolute nor universally accessible. It is contingent, shaped by social location, and subject to recalibration by the structures it challenges. Vashti's actions demonstrate that bodily autonomy can be exercised, but not without consequence; Esther's trajectory demonstrates that survival within the system requires a different mode of engagement.

The narrative ultimately preserves what it seeks to contain. Vashti is removed from the court, yet her actions remain embedded within the text, continuing to shape its trajectory. In this way, the text does not simply silence her; it records the limits of the system that silences her.

The Making of a Queen: Coercion, Beauty, and Identity

4.0 Introduction

The deposition of Queen Vashti in Esther 1 does more than create a vacancy in the Persian court: it establishes the foundational principle that the female body is the property of imperial patriarchy, subject to removal and replacement. Chapter 2 of the book of Esther initiates this process of replacement, shifting the narrative focus from an act of defiant bodily autonomy to systematic exploitation. This chapter contends that Esther's entry into the king's harem represents a foundational moment of intersectional coercion, in which her layered identities as a young, orphaned, Jewish girl converge to enable her total bodily reconstruction; forcible recruitment, beautification, and symbolic renaming by imperial and patriarchal power. The Book of Esther is, at its core, a narrative about bodies and the mechanisms by which imperial power controls them.[152]

[152]Drora. Oren, 'Esther—The Jewish Queen of Persia.' *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 18 (2009): 140.

Unlike Vashti, whose Persian nobility afforded her a platform for refusal, Esther embodies a nexus of vulnerabilities that render her uniquely susceptible to this process of exploitation. Caryn Tamber-Rosenau notes that Esther does not have the privilege to pass as Persian nobility.[153] Her story, therefore, is not a fairy-tale but an archetype of subjugation, revealing the mechanisms by which empire manufactures compliant subjects. Through a comparative close reading of the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX), the following analysis examines each of these three stages in turn, tracing how specific linguistic and narrative techniques, when read through an intersectional lens, expose how age, gender, and ethnicity are leveraged to erase bodily autonomy.

The divergence between the Masoretic Text and Septuagint versions provides a critical lens for the present enquiry. While both texts participate in narrating Esther's coercion, they employ different lexical and thematic emphases, for instance, contrasting the Hebrew *tamrūqeyhā,* ('cosmetics') with the Greek *smēgma* ('ointment/purification'). These variations are not mere translational quirks but represent distinct cultural and theological interpretations of the violence inherent in the harem system. Examining these differences demonstrates how each tradition grapples with, and at times sanitises, the process of turning a marginalised girl into a queen.

The chapter is structured in five parts, each advancing a key aspect of the central argument. The first highlights varied interpretations of Esther's agency and the complexities of reading her story as either passive or subversive. The second closely analyses the imperial decree and the semantics of girlhood through the terms *naʿărāh* and *korasion*, establishing that Esther's entry into the royal harem is better understood as human trafficking rather than a fortuitous opportunity. The third part examines the harem's beauty treatments, demonstrating how these regimens serve to standardise and discipline the female body for the royal gaze, furthering Esther's disempowerment and commodification. The fourth part investigates the act of identity erasure through Esther's renaming from Hadassah to Esther, emphasising how this marks the culmination of her bodily and social transformation under imperial and patriarchal control. The fifth section provides a conclusion. Taken together, these sections

[153]Tamber-Rosenau, 'Esther, Drag, and Agency,' 99–118.

demonstrate that Esther's queenship is established not through acts of bodily autonomy but through processes of sexual exploitation.

4.2 Complexities in Reading Esther: Total Bodily Reconstruction by Imperial and Patriarchal Power

Academic readings of Esther have been polarised around a single question: is Esther a heroine or a pawn? Early interpreters tended to exalt Mordecai as the true hero, downplaying Esther's role entirely. Others went further, insisting that Esther actively sought the harem for wealth and power, or that she won her victories through beauty alone, with no skill of her own. Even when granted heroic status, Esther's agency is often framed as limited—she merely pleases others, obeys without protest, or lacks the depth for readers to identify with her.[154]

Many feminist scholars cannot embrace Esther; they consider her a handmaiden of patriarchy; one whose story demonstrates that women should be obedient and submissive. Such feminists characterise Esther as a manipulative woman who achieves her ends by means of placatory language and ingratiating formulas. While scholars like Lillian Klein contend that Esther is merely obedient and lacks autonomy[155], the Septuagint complicates this reading by granting Esther a degree of bodily autonomy, suggesting her obedience is not passive but politically calculated. Feminist critics have been deeply divided; some regard Esther as complicit in the patriarchy, as she obeys and does not protest. For other scholars, she challenges oppression only in ways that ensure the oppressor's comfort, reinforcing rather than subverting power. Sidnie White Crawford proposes Esther as a model for diaspora existence, observing that, 'By accepting the reality of a subordinate position and learning to gain power by

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[154]Sidnie Ann White Crawford, 'Esther,' in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 133. Mordecai is known as Mardochaios in the LXX; I use 'Mordecai' generally but 'Mardochaios' when referencing the LXX. See also Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), liii–liv. Moore in his later work retracts that Esther had a limited role and that Mordecai performed all significant actions. See also Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 96; Crawford, 'Esther,' 133; and Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (Sheffield: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1995), 40.

[155]Michael V. Fox, 'Three Esthers,' in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon and Sidnie White Crawford, LHBOTS 380 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2009), 50. See also Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 102.

working within the structure rather than against it, the Jew can build a successful and fulfilling life in the Diaspora, as Esther does in the court of Ahasuerus (Xerxes)Yet other feminist scholars argue that the text fails to challenge patriarchal structures at all, and that Mordecai ultimately benefits most from Esther's efforts.[156]

What unites these readings is their shared assumption that bodily autonomy is either present or absent, complicit, or subversive. These binary framings failed to register what a comparative analysis of the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint reveals: that Esther's body undergoes what the present chapter terms *bodily reconstruction* by imperial and patriarchal power. The question is not whether bodily autonomy was ever available to Esther, but whether she was ever able to exercise it. It is this question and the intersecting vulnerabilities of age, gender, and ethnicity that rendered her uniquely susceptible to coercion that the present chapter now addresses.

4.3 Imperial Decree, Semantics of Girlhood, Kidnapping, Human Trafficking

4.3.1 The Gathering of the Virgins: Intersections of Gender, Age, and Imperial Power

The narrative progression in Esther 2 moves rapidly from Vashti's deposition to Esther's introduction, precipitated by the king's decree to gather young women from across the empire. This section focuses on the Masoretic Text's phrasing and literary detail; although its basic plot elements align with those of the Septuagint, the latter text will be examined in full later in this chapter. In Esther 2:2, both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint depict the king's advisors calling for the assembly of beautiful young virgins.[157] The edict that leads to

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[156]Tamber-Rosenau, 'Esther, Drag, and Agency,'103. See also Susan Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority,' in *Esther, Judith, and Susanna, A Feminist Companion to the Bible Series 7* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 33; Sidnie Ann White, 'Esther: A Feminine Model for Diaspora,' in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 173; Nicole Duran, 'Who Wants to Marry a Persian King: Gender Games and Wars and the Book of Esther,' in Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, ed., *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible*, Semeia Studies 44 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 81; and Itumeleng J. Mosala, 'The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa,' *Semeia* 59 (1992): 136. These scholars argue that Mordecai benefits the most from Esther's actions.

[157]Hebrew: *naʿărāh bĕtûlāh* ('young woman/girl, virgin'); Greek: *korasion parthenos* ('girl, virgin'). See also Randall C. Bailey, 'That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!': The Interse(ct)/(x) ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther.' *They Were All Together in One Place: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2020), 226. Bailey refers to the virgins as young girls.

Esther's arrival in the harem establishes the framework of imperial control and patriarchal dominance. This method of queen selection was unprecedented in antiquity, as Persian queens were typically chosen for noble lineage or political alliances, not for beauty. The process mirrors concubine recruitment, and it clashes with Persia's rigid class hierarchy, where practices of royal incest, such as brother-sister marriage that preserved bloodline purity.[158]

The Vashti episode thus sets the stage for what feminist scholars have characterised as the institutionalised sexual exploitation of young women through the harem system.[159] The Hebrew *yəpaṯ-tō'ar* ('beautiful, pleasing in appearance')[160] emphasizes the objectification inherent in this gathering. Physical beauty is prioritised over all other attributes. The text makes no mention of her bravery, loyalty, or wisdom. It conveys that she is aesthetically pleasing or lovely. It appears that Vashti's beauty is all that the king and his advisors need from her. This lexical choice appears in multiple biblical narratives that emphasise female beauty, and occasionally male beauty, under male scrutiny.[161]

The empire exercised absolute control over these women: their consent was neither sought nor required. Daughters of subjects were drafted into royal harems, just as sons were taken and made eunuchs both forced into service for the interests of the state. Their bodies were not their own but that of the king's, subject to his will. Michel Foucault's theorisation of disciplinary power is instructive here: he demonstrates that imperial structures exercise control over such bodies by subjugating them, compelling those within the harem to perfect their techniques and remake themselves in order to please the king.[162] Through this process, their

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[158] Anthony Tomasino, *Esther*, EEC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 178–179. See also Maria Brosius, 'WOMEN i. In Pre-Islamic Persia,' *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, published 1 January 2000, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/women-i/ ; cf. 1 Kings 1:2–4.

[159]Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), s.v. *ṭôb* ('good, pleasant'), Logos Bible Software.

[160]Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (BDB; Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), s.v. *yāpēh (*'beautiful, pleasing'*),* Logos Bible Software

[161]Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (BDB; Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), s.v. *ṭôb* ('good, pleasant'), Logos Bible Software. See also the depictions of Rebecca's desirability (Gen. 26:7), Bathsheba's bathing as observed by David (2 Sam. 11:2), and Daniel's attractiveness (Dan. 1:4).

[162]Magdalen Ki also notes that the beauty contest emphasises how the Persian imperial system controls the girls' bodies, and she likewise recognises Foucault's disciplinary gaze. See Magdalen Ki, 'Governmentality and Abuse in the Book of Esther,' *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 21, no. 2 (2023): 196.

bodies become what Foucault terms 'docile bodies.'[163] Foucault's framework illuminates how the harem's twelve-month regimen produces subjects who internalise their own subordination. Yet Foucault alone cannot explain which bodies are targeted; Crenshaw's intersectionality supplies the missing analytical dimension.[164] Esther's vulnerability is multilayered: she is a child, orphaned, Jewish, and female. These layered identities do not simply accumulate, they multiply, producing a compound vulnerability that forecloses bodily autonomy entirely. The modern mantra 'my body, my choice'[165] would be nonsensical in this context. Children are among the most systematically exploited class. In imperial systems age functions as an intersectional identity that compounds vulnerability in ways that gender alone cannot capture. Esther's orphaned status removes any protection a family might have provided.

In Esther 2:2–3, the term *yəpaṯ-tō'ar* ('pleasant, beautiful, good')[166] further emphasises the objectification of women in the harem selection process. The semantic range of *naʿărāh* ('maiden') encompasses both young women and girls, as evidenced in 1 Samuel 1:9, where the term describes young women drawing water, and 2 Samuel 13:18, which references Tamar wearing a virgin's robe before her assault.[167] In narratives such as that of Tamar, the portrayal reveals how young women are treated as property: regarded only for their bodies, which are rendered disposable and exist primarily for the male gaze and gratification. Esther Brownsmith observes that *naʿărāh* is also used for the Levite concubine in Judges 19 and asserts that although the word carries a broad semantic range, it can refer to an unmarried woman or a new wife.[168] The Levite's concubine is referred to as a *naʿărāh*.[169] Judges 19 does contain the Levite's concubine being thrust outside to be gang-raped represents a qualitatively different order of violence. Yet both narratives share a structural feature: the girl's body

[163]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.
[164]See Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Why Intersectionality Can't Wait,' *The Washington Post*, 24 September 2015; and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,' in *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, 93–118 (New York: Routledge, 2013).
[165]Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, 19.
[166]Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. . *ṭôb* ('good, pleasant'), Logos Bible Software.
[167]Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. *naʿărāh* ('young woman, girl'), Logos Bible Software. See also Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), s.v. *naʿărāh*, Logos Bible Software.
[168] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. *naʿărāh* ('young woman, girl'), Logos Bible Software.
[169] Esther Brownsmith, *Gendered Violence in Biblical Narrative: The Devouring Metaphor* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 50.

becomes the place at which male gratification supersedes her dignity and personhood. The book of Esther conveys Esther's vulnerability without explicitly depicting an assault.

This lexical and thematic link reveals how Esther's narrative both participates in and subverts biblical patterns of female vulnerability. Like the *naʿărâh* in Judges 19 and Deuteronomy 22, Esther's body is controlled by male systems: namely, Mordecai's guardianship and the king's harem. The *beyt hanna'arah* ('house of young women') in Esther 2:9 institutionalises this control, mirroring Deuteronomy's framing of women as property requiring male oversight. Unlike the Levite's concubine (Judg. 19) or the captive brides (Deut. 22), Esther uses her position to save her people (Esth. 8:3–8). She is unable to speak clearly and never objects or refuses, yet she is still able to act strategically. She employs timing, royal favours, and banquets to accomplish her objectives. However, Esther learns to use the king's desire as a weapon, in contrast to the Levite's concubine, who is permanently silenced.

While Esther's sexual exploitation is erased by the narrative, this dissonance exposes how imperial power reframes oppression as privilege. Deuteronomy 21:10-14, which explains the taking of 'beautiful captive women', offers a close parallel. Here, a foreign bride's body is subjected to a one-month mourning period before the soldier 'goes into her', a legal framework of consent that mirrors Esther's preparation ritual. Deuteronomy 21 gives these captives a month to grieve, which is very different to what Esther gets. Esther does not any time to grieve, instead for one year she receives beauty treatments. The empire implies that she has nothing to lament. Deuteronomy 21 also implies that these female captives are of a different ethnicity and therefore they lacked bodily sovereignty; this is similar to Esther not being Persian and her body being controlled by empirical figures.

Esther's subjugation reinforces the argument that women's bodies in the Book of Esther exist solely for the scrutiny and pleasure of male power. The harem 'contest' was not a voluntary competition, but a lifelong sentence imposed on the women involved. Randall C. Bailey argues that the so-called contest was in reality a sexual ordeal in which each of the young virgins, after being prepared in cosmetics and perfumes, was required to have sex with the king: with the one who performed the most to his satisfaction being selected as queen. Bailey bases this interpretation on the narrative structure of Esther 2 itself, in which the king's advisers order the gathering of young virgins into the royal harem, subject them to

extended bodily preparation through cosmetics and perfumes and present them before the king individually prior to the selection of a queen. Esther 'wins' in this grim sense, Bailey characterises this as nothing less than sexual exploitation of adolescent girls.[170]

While palace life offered material comfort, it meant perpetual confinement as part of the king's 'collection.' Many women subjected to this system likely interpreted this as a privilege akin to winning a lottery, a perception that reveals how imperial systems reframe oppression as opportunity.[171] The absence of any female refusal in the book of Esther does not imply that silence equates to consent. A woman's rejection might not have been worth documenting.

The narrative's folkloric elements, such as parallels to *A Thousand and One Nights* and to Chinese and Byzantine harem systems, stress its thematic critique of power rather than any claim to historical precision.[172] Caution is required here, however, not to replicate Orientalist tropes that exoticise 'Eastern harems' as paradigmatic places of female subjugation. The Persian harem system, while coercive, also offered women forms of political agency documented by scholars such as Maria Brosius[173]; an agency that Esther herself later exercises, though such agency does not necessarily amount to bodily autonomy. Esther's story epitomises the erasure of female bodily autonomy under an empire. Her body, like those of other women gathered, is commodified, prepared (Esth. 2:12–14), displayed, and chosen for male pleasure. Even her queenship hinges on compliance, not consent, mirroring systems where marginalised bodies serve power.

This discussion proposes that the emphasis on virginity in verse two reflects a cultural fixation on female sexual purity as a form of transactional value. In Esther 2, the women's virginity serves as a marker of desirability, and biblical texts more broadly frequently normalise the abduction of beautiful young virgins for the benefit of men, Esther 2:2-4 packages the

[170]Randall C. Bailey, 'That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!': The Interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther,' *They Were All Together in One Place: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2020), 239.
[171]Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, 19–20.
[172]Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 25–26.
[173]Maria Brosius, 'WOMEN i. In Pre-Islamic Persia,' *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, published 1 January 2000, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/women-i/.

gathering as an administrative process, thereby, masking the violence of the harem.[174] This pericope illustrates how women's bodies are used as instruments of exchange, their autonomy traded for material luxury.

4.3.2 Translating Girlhood, Kidnapping and Human Trafficking: Linguistic and Cultural Constructions of Marriageable Age

The Masoretic Text of Esther 2:7 describes Esther as a *naʿărāh*, while the Septuagint of Esther 2:7 employs *korasion* (a term that in Mark 5:41 refers to a prepubescent child). In the Septuagint, the Greek word *korasion* ('a little girl, maiden, or damsel') signals a subtle lexical shift from the Hebrew *naʿărāh*,[175] a shift which suggests a somewhat younger age range.[176] In Mark, *korasion* is used for Herodias's daughter; Jesus likewise uses *korasion* when referring to Jairus's daughter. The shared use of *korasion* in Mark 6 and Esther 2 carries similar connotations of youth and vulnerability in both literary contexts; simultaneously reinforcing its association with unmarried girls in limited social roles.[177]

Kidnapped and compelled into sexual servitude, the young women gathered for the king's harem embody the intersection of age and gender that strips them of bodily autonomy. Hence, Esther's ascent unfolds within a framework of systemic sexual exploitation. The Septuagint presents Esther as a young girl shaped by sexual exploitation at the hands of men, whereas the Masoretic Text, while not explicitly depicting such abuse, nonetheless reveals her profound lack of autonomy and control. The ambiguity of *naʿărāh* is not a translation problem but a performative one. Judith Butler contends that gender categories such as 'girl and 'woman' are not natural states but repeated acts of performance.[178] Esther's age is left

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[174]Like Genesis 12, when Pharaoh takes Sarah, and 2 Samuel 11, when David sends for Bathsheba, female beauty in biblical narrative is often linked to male acquisition and control. Handsome men may also become objects of desire and appropriation; cf. Joseph in Genesis 37 and Daniel in the Book of Daniel.

[175]Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *The Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), s.v. *naʿărāh* ('young woman, girl'), Logos Bible Software.

[176]The term appears in Ruth 2:8, Ruth 2:22, Ruth 2:23, Zechariah 8:5, Mark 5:41, Mark 6:22, and Mark 6:28.

[177]The similarities between Esther and Salome are worth exploring. *Korasion* also appears in the Septuagint, which predates the New Testament, including in Ruth 2:8 and Zechariah 8:5. See also Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. *korasion* ('girl, maiden'), Perseus Digital Library, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=kora/sion&highlight=maiden%2Cgirl. Ruth is described as a *korasion* while working in the fields, and Zechariah 8:5 uses the term in depicting young girls playing in the streets of Jerusalem.

[178] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 45.

unclear because the text does not need it to be clear: it needs her to be available for the role of 'girl' when that role serves the empire, and 'woman' when that role permits sexual consumption. The fluidity of the terminology is not a flaw, but the mechanism through which power is able to define her as needed. At the same time, this remains only one possible reading of the term's ambiguity. The ambiguity itself may also allow for multiple interpretations of Esther's identity and function within the narrative.

In the Masoretic Text, Esther is unmistakably deprived of agency and autonomy, as her body is solely under the control of men. Scholars have noted how Esther 2:7 emphasises this patriarchal dynamic, beginning and ending with Mordecai's actions (fostering and taking Esther) while framing her *wəṭôḇaṯ mar'eh* ('physical beauty') within the context of her orphaned status. This narrative arrangement centres male control while reducing Esther to a sexualised object.[179] This narrative structure does not merely invite questions about Mordecai's motives; it reinforces the broader pattern of male ownership that permeates Esther's story. The text's insistence on her *wəṭôḇaṯ mar'eh* ('physical attractiveness') reveals how the biblical narrative participates in the commodification of women's bodies, constituting a form of textual violence rather than mere characterisation.

This can be illustrated by verse 7 of the Masoretic Text, which reads: *ûḇəmôṯ 'āḇîhā wə'immāh ləqāḥāh mordḵay lô ləḇaṯ* ('…and Mordecai adopts Esther as 'his own daughter'.'). In contrast, the Septuagint of verse 7 reads *epaideusen autēn heautō eis gynaika* ('and he raised her as his wife').[180] In the Septuagint, Mordecai's role emerges not merely as that of a guardian but as that of a figure who raises a young girl he has adopted with the implicit intention of making her his wife the Masoretic Text, however, gives no such connotation. Michael Fox notes that, even if Mordecai adopts her as his own daughter, a marital relationship between them remains a possibility.[181] This dynamic complicates traditional portrayals of Mordecai as a purely protective father-figure, revealing underlying power structures and challenging assumptions about agency and familial boundaries within the narrative.

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[179]Linafelt and Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, 27.
[180]Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, s.v. *gynē* ('woman, wife'), Perseus Digital Library, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=gunh/. The term may also mean 'woman.'
[181]Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 51.

Beal claims in his commentary that Esther was adopted by Mordecai as his daughter[182], a reading that stands in tension with the Septuagint, which amplifies Esther's sexual exploitation by suggesting that her abuse began long before she entered the harem. In the Septuagint, Esther is stripped of any agency and is portrayed as fundamentally a victim of exploitation, whereas the Masoretic Text implies that she is controlled but does not present her as a victim. Both versions make one thing evident: Esther's body is subject to the control of others, not her own will. The term *gynaika*[183] can be interpreted in different ways. While *gynē* (from *gynaika*) can mean 'woman,' the context of Mordecai raising Esther *heautō eis gynaika* ('for himself as a wife') suggests a marital or betrothal relationship, a reading that casts Esther's later actions in a more complex and unsettling light.

William Loader likewise recognises the Septuagint's emphasis on Esther's sexual exploitation, interpreting the relationship with Mordecai as a betrothal rather than marriage; but as Loader himself acknowledges, the distinction between the two is legally negligible in this context.[184] By contrast, the Masoretic Text identifies Esther as Mordecai's adopted daughter, an identity that strongly suggests her youth, with several narrative cues positioning Esther as a child caught in dynamics of control and exploitation.

Ericka Dunbar critiques translations that render *naʿărâh* as 'young woman,' claiming that the term more precisely denotes an adolescent girl.[185] The ambiguity in language mirrors Esther's equally ambiguous position, as she is compelled to hover between childhood and womanhood.[186] Terms like *na'ar* and *yeled* are often translated as 'child,' yet they lack the semantic precision to define childhood as a distinct age category, reflecting instead a broader and more fluid understanding of youth, shaped by gender, social roles, and power dynamics rather than fixed developmental stages.[187] Esther is positioned as a child because of her

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[182]Linafelt and Beal, *Ruth and Esther*, 27.
[183]The Greek word *gynaika* can refer to a woman of any age, but it may also denote a betrothed woman or wife.
[184]William Loader, 'Sexuality in Apocrypha,' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Apocrypha*, ed. Gerbern S. Oegema (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 516–33, accessed 12 June 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[185]Ericka S. Dunbar, *Trafficking Hadassah: Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, and Identity in the Book of Esther and in the African Diaspora* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2021), 12.
[186]Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. *naʿărāh* ('young woman, girl'), accessed 17 July 2025, Logos Bible Software.
[187]Naomi A. Steinberg, *The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 51 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 29–30. Steinberg notes that a range of Hebrew terms may convey concepts associated with childhood, including naʿar (young boy/servant), naʿărāh (young girl/maidservant), yeled (child, boy), yaldah (girl), ṭap (children), ʿalmah (girl, young woman), and ʿelem (boy, youth), though none fully correspond to modern concepts of childhood.

unmarried status and because she resides under the guardianship of Mordecai.[188] While evidence from Early Judaism offers some indication of customary marriageable age, comparable data for the Persian empire (Achaemenid Period) remains limited. In Greco-Roman contexts, the Greek term *korasion* further complicates these age distinctions, frequently referring to a girl not yet of marriageable age, thereby underlining the blurred boundaries between childhood and womanhood in ancient cultural frameworks.

Taken together, this semantic ambiguity is not merely a matter of translation but a narrative feature that heightens Esther's vulnerability. The absence of a consistent or fixed term for 'girl,' 'child,' or 'young woman' functions to destabilise her social category, leaving her exposed to the shifting requirements of male guardianship, imperial desire, and cultural expectation. The uncertainty surrounding her age contributes to the erasure of her bodily autonomy by rendering her simultaneously old enough to be subject to sexualised state power and yet perpetually suspended in a condition of dependence. Tracing the terminology reveals how Esther is constructed as an object available for the desires of others, without protections that might be afforded to a clearly defined 'child.' The fluidity of these terms exposes the instability of her position and intensifies the sense of her as a body controlled by, and vulnerable to, the intersecting forces of patriarchy and empire. Gender cannot be analysed in isolation from race, class, and age. In Esther's case, her youth is a precondition for sexual exploitation that an older woman might resist; a married woman might have a protector; a woman with living parents might be ransomed; Esther has none of those protections. Her age intersects with her status as an orphan to produce what Crenshaw terms 'structural intersectionality.' [189] In what follows I address the critical issue of what 'girlhood' meant in this cultural context.

4.3.3 When is a Girl Old Enough? Marriage, Power, and Patriarchy

In the ancient Mediterranean world, childhood and marriage were not distinct phases of life, but closely intertwined, especially for girls. Marriage functioned as a socially

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[188]Caryn Tamber-Rosenau states that Esther enters the harem as either a girl or a trafficked body. See Tamber-Rosenau, 'Esther, Drag, and Agency,'104.

[189]See Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, 'Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810; and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,' in *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, 93–118 (New York: Routledge, 2013). Crenshaw's framework highlights the specific vulnerability produced by occupying multiple marginalised positions simultaneously.

sanctioned transfer of a girl from one household to another, often disrupting maternal bonds and reinforcing patriarchal structures. Ross S. Kraemer, in her essay, 'Jewish Mothers and Daughters in the Greco-Roman World,' observes that this transition estranged mothers from their daughters, as brides were typically required to leave their parental homes and live with their husband's family. This removal not only consolidated the husband's authority, but reoriented the girl's primary allegiance away from her natal kin.[190] The Greeks delayed marriage until puberty, whereas most Jewish girls married around fifteen.[191] The difference therefore lies less in whether girls married young and more in how female maturity was culturally defined. Greek traditions more closely linked marriage to physical puberty, while Jewish customs often treated marriage around the mid-teen years as socially appropriate. Within these structures, girls' bodies became sites of social regulation, where age, sexuality, and kinship intersected to enforce male control over female lives.

If Esther was twelve to fifteen then the Septuagint's *korasion* signals not childhood but the lower boundary of marriageability. The ambiguity surrounding Esther's age allows those in power to justify her treatment regardless of whether she is understood as a girl or a woman. In this sense, ambiguity functions less as an absence of power than as a mechanism through which imperial authority can evade fixed social or moral accountability. If Esther is understood as Mordecai's wife or betrothed, then her age would likely align her with ancient expectation of marriageability, thus old enough by cultural standards. Esther has no autonomy, no authority over her body, and no ability to give or withhold consent. Her girlhood is marked not by agency but by vulnerability; her body thereby becomes a site of power enacted by others.

What remains unasked in the text, and what the present discussion seeks to ask, is whether Esther ever consented. The narrative's silence on her age is not neutral; it is the silence of the archive that records only what power finds useful to remember. She is taken to

[190] Ross S. Kraemer, 'Jewish Mothers and Daughters in the Greco-Roman World,' in *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen, Brown Judaic Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 103–4. Kraemer notes that Roman girls were often married at around age twelve.
[191] Kraemer, 'Jewish Mothers and Daughters in the Greco-Roman World,' 104. Rabbinic literature similarly reflects marriage practices that typically place girls at around age twelve.

the royal harem without consent; Esther's age thus creates an 'intersectional bind.'[192] If she is understood as a *korasion* ('child'), she is too young to consent; if she is understood as *naʿărāh* ('marriageable'), the empire can frame her taking as lawful. Esther is simultaneously young enough to be controlled and old enough to be used. The narrative has Esther performing age a la Butler when the situation demands obedience to Mordecai and wifely submission before the king. These are not authentic expressions of self but performances of age for survival.

4.3.4 The Politics of Esther's Body: Ownership, Consent, and Control

Esther 2:5–10 depicts the interplay of imperial power and patriarchy in stripping Esther of bodily autonomy. In the Masoretic Text, verse 8 records that she is *til·lā·qaḥ* ('taken') into the harem, her body treated as imperial property, and verse 9 presents her *tamrûqehā* ('beauty treatments'), provisions, and 'seven maidens' along with relocation to the best place in the house of the women, allowing her situation to be framed as one of privileged favour. The Septuagint follows the basic sequence but alters the tone: verse 9 describes ceremonial *smēgma* ('ointments') rather than cosmetics, the Hebrew's cosmetics implying beauty and make-up, whereas the Greek's ointments are used in a more ritual sense, and language that suggests a ritual and purification stage in the royal harem system. These lexical choices cloak Esther's coerced relocation as ceremonial propriety, transforming a scene of dispossession into one of apparent elevation, thereby masking the absence of her agency. Both texts participate in the erasure of Esther's agency, using different tools to legitimise her dispossession.

Esther is doubly colonised[193], subject to the power of the empire as a colonised subject and to the authority of the patriarchal system. Her identity is shaped through the multiple layers of subjugation, and at this point in the narrative, her roles as orphan, Jew, virgin, and captive converge to intensify her vulnerability. These intersecting oppressions do not merely

[192] Also described as a form of double bind, see Annalena Oppel, 'Intersectionality and the Politics of Metaphor and Framing Concepts, Categories, Discrimination,' *LSE Inequalities*, 17 March 2026, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/inequalities/2026/03/17/intersectionality-and-the-politics-of-metaphor-framing-concepts-categories-discrimination/.

[193] Double colonisation here refers to the multiple forms of oppression women experience simultaneously, particularly through both patriarchy and colonisation.

silence her voice they define the terms of her existence.[194] This insight indicates that the systems do not operate separately but constitutively. Esther cannot appeal to her Jewish identity to escape patriarchy, nor to her gender to escape empire. She is trapped at the intersection, where each system reinforces the other. Foucault affirms that power does not merely act on bodies; it produces bodies as kinds of subjects.[195] Esther's body is not a natural body that the empire then modifies; it is a body produced by the empire, through diet, cosmetics, clothing, and confinement as a body fit for royal consumption.

4.3.5 Taken, Not Chosen: Esther's Forced Relocation

In Esther 2:8, this same verb is a Niphal form that conveys a passive action affecting Esther, consistent with the broader context of her removal to the king's harem. The Septuagint renders this with the Greek verb *ēchthē* ('was brought/led'), [196] a common term for being conducted or escorted to a location. While both verbs depict Esther's transfer from Mordecai's household to the palace, the Septuagint does not carry the same overtly forcible nuance as the Masoretic Text's passive construction. This difference may reflect translation convention rather than a deliberate softening, but it nonetheless shifts the tone of the scene. The Septuagint's choice of 'was brought' is more insidious than the Masoretic Text's 'was taken.' The language of 'brought' sounds almost polite, resembling an escort to a dinner party, which makes the violence harder to see. The Masoretic Text's blunt 'taken' at least names the coercion. Despite these lexical differences, both texts still frame Esther's relocation within a coercive imperial system that treats female bodies as objects of control. While the verb does not explicitly signal abduction, it nonetheless reinforces the commodification of women's bodies.

Kristin De Troyer translates the terms *til·lā·qaḥ* and *ēchthē* in both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint text as 'brought.' She maintains that, regardless of the nuances in language, the movement of Esther and the other girls remain coercive. Although these

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[194]Ritu Tyagi, 'Understanding Postcolonial Feminism in Relation with Postcolonial and Feminist Theories,' *International Journal of Language and Linguistics* 1, no. 2 (December 2014): 45.
[195]Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power,' *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 778; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 25.
[196]The form *ēchthē* is the aorist passive indicative, third person singular of *agō* ('to lead, bring'). Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, rev. and aug. by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. *agō* ('to lead, bring'), Logeion, University of Chicago, accessed 17 July 2025, https://logeion.uchicago.edu/ἄγω.

distinctions do not alter the fundamental meaning, they shape the narrative tone.[197] Carol M. Bechtel points out a striking similarity between the taking of Esther and the other girls are taken and the gathering of the Jews[198] in the Masoretic Text. She writes: 'The fact that the relevant verbs ("were gathered" and "was taken") are in the passive form is crucial. Neither the virgins nor the Jews had much to say in the matter of their captivity. This is particularly important for interpreting the subsequent verses.'[199] Bechtel's parallel is powerful; the Jews at least knew they were captives. Esther seems not to know, or is unable to name, what is happening to her. The system does not ostensibly take her body; it takes away her ability to name her own violation.

This process of Esther's relocation, as Dunbar has argued, is best understood within the framework of trafficking.[200] As what occurred to Esther and the other girls meets the very definition of human trafficking, this framework fits the narrative closely. Dunbar's examination of Esther as a victim of sexual trafficking demonstrates the ways in which the forced gathering and relocation of young girls for the service of the king aligns with both ancient and contemporary definitions of trafficking. The removal of agency, the coercive context, and the transfer of girls into a system designed for the pleasure of elite males defines the narrative as one of trafficking rather than voluntary migration or consensual courtship. Dunbar identifies Esther's experience as trafficking, yet the text never names the violence directly. The narrative's silence is itself a form of complicity. The narrative's silence is a form of complicity, training readers to accept as normal an ancient form of what we would today call human trafficking. Although the term 'human trafficking' is modern, applying it retrospectively highlights the structural similarities between Esther's experience and broader patterns of gendered exploitation and commodification.

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[197]Kristin De Troyer, 'An Oriental Beauty Parlour: An Analysis of Esther 2:8–18 in the Hebrew, the Septuagint, and the Second Greek Text,' in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 49–53.
[198]See Esther 2:8 regarding the gathering of the virgins into the royal harem, and Esther 2:6 concerning the captivity of the Jews and their deportation to Babylon.
[199]Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 31.
[200]Ericka Shawndricka Dunbar, *Trafficking Hadassah: Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, and Identity in the Book of Esther and in the African Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2021), 12.

4.4 Examination of the Harem's Beauty Treatment: Disciplining the Female Body for the Royal Gaze and Disempowerment

4.4.1 The Violence of Beauty: Imperial Regulation of Female Bodies

Esther's favourable reception by Hegai results in accelerated *tamrûqehā* and *smegma* ('beauty treatments'), special provisions, and elevated placement within the harem. The narrative therefore depicts Esther as both privileged and controlled within the mechanisms of the Persian Court. The beauty treatments mark the beginning of a process that disciplines and reshapes her body to conform to the demands of imperial and patriarchal power. Her physical transformation is an intersectional process of domination and resistance; while the empire seeks to mould her into an object of aesthetic and political value, Esther's performative compliance ultimately lays the groundwork for subversion. Central to this dynamic is the Hebrew term *tamrûqehā,*[201] which appears exclusively in Esther 2:9 and 2:12. The term centres the use of cosmetics, signalling an imperial fixation on visual appeal and the commodification of the female body. By contrast, the Septuagint employs the Greek word *smegma*, shifting the focus towards ritual purification rather than aesthetic enhancement.[202] This lexical divergence is significant because it introduces a spiritual dimension that reframes Esther's bodily transformation through the language of ritual preparation, as in Greek usage, *smegma* can refer to ointments or substances associated with ritual cleansing and preparation, framing Esther's treatment in terms that evoke purification rather than mere cosmetic adornment, masking the coercive reality of imperial control.

Before examining Quick's argument, it is necessary to clarify the lexical meaning of this term. The Hebrew noun *tamrûq* is derived from the root *māraq*, meaning 'to scour, polish.' The Brown lexicon defines the noun as 'a scraping, rubbing,' and in the context of Esther 2, its plural construct forms *tamrûqêhen* (Esth. 2:3), *tamrûqêhā* (Esth. 2:9), and *tamrûqê hannāšîm* (Esth. 2:12) denote 'cosmetics' or 'purification treatments. The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon similarly identifies the term as referring to 'cosmetic treatment' or 'ointment,' with the sense deriving from the physical action of rubbing or polishing the body.

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[201]Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. *tamrûq* ('beautification, cosmetics'), accessed 17 July 2025, Logos Bible Software.
[202]Modern translations vary: the NRSV, NASB, and ESV render the term as 'cosmetics,' while the NIV prefers 'beauty treatments.'

The related noun *māraq* appears in Esther 2:12, describing 'the days of their (bodily) rubings,' i.e., the year's preparation of girls for the harem.[203] This lexical foundation reveals that the term inherently denotes a process of physical scouring and refinement.

Quick interprets *tamrûqehā* as evidence of a 'Persian beauty-industrial complex,' in which women's bodies were systematically groomed, refined, and regulated for royal consumption.[204] Quick understands the mandated twelve-month regimen of oils, perfumes, and cosmetic treatments as part of a broader imperial system that disciplined and reshaped female bodies for the king's pleasure. Esther's participation in this process enhances her beauty and sexual desirability, enabling her to secure the king's favour and later resist and reveal Haman's plans, even as her performative submission to the male gaze continues to reinforce patriarchal imperial control. The Septuagint centres ritual and purification, recasting the beauty regimen as something sacred and divinely sanctioned. In doing so, it reframes Esther's experience through a sanctimonious portrayal, attempting to obscure the exploitative nature of her situation. Each application of *tamrûqehā* ('cosmetics') reshapes Esther's body toward an imperial ideal.

The Masoretic Text nevertheless does not veil the coercion to the same extent. It presents Esther's reality more starkly, without the theological gloss that obscures the stripping of her agency. Where the Septuagint masks imperial control in ritual terms, the Masoretic Text lays bare the dynamics of exploitation and domination: employing euphemisms like 'she carried favour in his eyes' rather than explicitly stating the king's sexual desire for her. Both texts veil the violence, but they do so differently. The Masoretic Texts conceals it through poetic idiom, whereas the Septuagint conceals it through ritual language. Neither text states that Esther is reduced to a sexual object; instead, the reader is expected to infer it from the narrative framework.

When Esther is presented to the king, the narrative is sanitised, shaping the English translation to read as though the girl pleased him and found favour. The Masoretic Text uses

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[203] Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, s.v. *māraq*, accessed via Bible Hub, BDB 4838; Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, s.v. *tamrûq*, accessed via Bible Hub, BDB 8562; *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. *tamrûq*; Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, s.v. *māruq*, accessed via Bible Hub, BDB 4795.

[204] Laura Quick, 'Decorated Women: A Sociological Approach to the Function of Cosmetics in the Books of Esther and Ruth,' *Biblical Interpretation* 27, no. 3 (2019): 356.

the phrase *wattiśśāʾ ḥesed bəʿênāyw* (‘she carried favour in his eyes.’) It employs *ʿênāyw* (‘his eyes’) idiomatically, paralleling divine favour in Genesis 6:8 and Exodus 33:12. However, when applied to King Ahasuerus, this ‘favour’ takes on a sexualised dimension. English translations often insert ‘pleased’ (as in the NRSV), obscuring the Hebrew’s ocular metaphor, which more literally reads, ‘she was good in his eyes.’ The optical metaphor ‘in his eyes’ is crucial because it turns Esther into a spectacle. She does not please him through anything she does or says. She pleases him by being seen; hence her value is visual. This is not favour but fetishisation and the translations hide this.

The Sacred Gaze: Visual Discourse in the Septuagint

The Greek word *areskō* (‘to please, to strive’), used in the Septuagint in Esther 2:9 to describe how Esther ‘pleased’ the king, derives from *areskō* (‘to satisfy’). This word appears in Mark 6:22 and Matthew 14:6, where Herodias’s daughter (later known as Salome) dances before Herod and *ēresen* pleases him resulting in a violent promise of reward. It also appears in 1 Corinthians 7:34, where a woman’s desire to please is limited to her husband within marriage. The Septuagint’s use of *ēresen* in Esther 2 aligns Esther with female figures, whose worth is filtered through male pleasure and patriarchal evaluation. This wording further sexualises Esther’s role, portraying her not as an agent but as a performer within a system that values women according to their ability to gratify male desire. The comparison to Salome highlights the exploitation embedded in both narratives[205]: Esther’s enforced beauty regimen parallels Salome’s dance before Herod.[206]

It is worth noting that Salome’s story in the Gospel of Mark was written around 70 CE.[207] While there is debate about when the Masoretic Text was written, some scholars such as Berlin and Carey Moore suggest that the book was written in the early Persian period, stating that the book had detailed knowledge of Persian court life and its inclusion of Persian

[205]Robert Beekes and Lucien Van Beek, eds., *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 753.
[206]The connections between Esther and Salome, particularly regarding bodily autonomy and performance, warrant further exploration.
[207] Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "The Gospel of Mark," in *Women's Bible Commentary: Twentieth Anniversary Edition, Revised and Updated*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 478.

vocabulary.[208] Fox dates the book to the third century BCE.[209] He suggests that the book was written after the Maccabee period. Other scholars like Bailey suggest that it was written in the Hellenistic period. He states that there are certain things in the text, like the expansion of the empire, which align with a Hellenistic date.[210]

Unlike the Masoretic Text, some scholars suggest that the dating of the Septuagint is more straightforward. Two events establish its range: Josephus's retelling of the Additions in his *Jewish Antiquities* (93-94 CE) provides the latest possible date, while the Septuagint's apparent dependency on the Masoretic Text places the earliest possible date in the late Persian to early Hellenistic period (400-200 BCE). The colophon[211] appended to the Septuagint narrows this further, dating the translation to the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra: it states, 'Dositheus, who said that he was a priest and Levite, and his son Ptolemy brought to Egypt the preceding Letter about Purim, which they said was authentic and had been translated by Lysimachus son of Ptolemy, one of the residents of Jerusalem' (Est.Add.F.11). The Septuagint is thus most likely dated to 78/77 BCE — considerably predating the Gospel of Mark.[212]

A key distinction remains, however. Salome is advanced by her mother, Herodias, whereas Esther is entirely advanced by male guardians: Mordecai, Hegai, and the king. Esther therefore lacks a female intermediary, rendering her more isolated than Salome. Esther is

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[208]Adele Berlin, "The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 1 (2001): 6. Berlin's position is shared by Carey A. Moore; see Carey A. Moore, "Archaeology and the Book of Esther," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 38, nos. 3–4 (1975): 62–79. Jon D. Levenson likewise argues that Esther was written in the third or fourth century BCE; see Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 26.

[209]Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 140.

[210] Randall C. Bailey, "That's Why the Book Is Not Called Haddasheh," in *They Were All Together in One Place?: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 227; Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Yale Bible 7B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), ix.

[211] A colophon is a brief note at the final section of the Greek additions to Esther, Addition F (or, in some Bibles, Esther 11:1). It provides the date, translator's name, and other details.

[212]Hanna Kahana, *Esther: Juxtaposition of the Septuagint Translation with the Hebrew Text*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 30 (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2005), xxvii; and M. Stone, *Empire and Gender in LXX Esther*, Early Judaism and Its Literature 48 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 17, both cited in Rosy Kandathil, "Trends in Recent Esther Scholarship (2000–2025)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 24, no. 3 (2026): 202, https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993X261428475.

even more isolated than Salome. At least Salome has a mother, however awful; Esther has no one. She experiences not simply exploitation but erasure of kinship.[213]

This 'erasure of kinship' is demonstrated by Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality.[214] A gendered reading alone might suggest that both women are similarly sexualised; intersectionality instead asks which systems of power converge upon each body to produce this effect? For Salome, class, empire, and kinship converge to produce a form of exploited belonging. For Esther, ethnicity, legal status, and imperial gender hierarchy intersect to produce structural invisibility. She is not merely 'more oppressed' but structurally isolated in a way Salome is not. Herodias's presence therefore functions not as consolation but as a marker of Salome's relative intersectional privilege: she has a family to betray her; Esther, by contrast, has no family able to protect her, and Mordecai ultimately remains implicated within the same imperial structures that render her vulnerable. In each case, the female body becomes a spectacle, moulded for the gratification of male power. The Septuagint's use of *areskō* meaning 'to please,' draws a comparison between Esther and Salome as young women with objectified value within patriarchal systems of evaluation. This lexical shift strips Esther of agency, reducing her to a tool of imperial strategy. Pushing back against this interpretation, does 'stripping agency' imply that Esther possessed bodily autonomy to begin with? The text never grants her such autonomy. She is an orphan, a minor, and a captive. Therefore, the real violence lies in the narratives suggestion that she may ever have possessed it. The language of 'favour' functions as a narrative veil that softens the brutality of what has occurred.

Her selection is not grounded in autonomy or voice, but in her perceived compliance, virginity, and aesthetic appeal, qualities that reinforce normative ideals of femininity.[215] What

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[213] Esther's only familial connection, Mordecai, functions primarily as guardian and intermediary within the imperial system, ultimately relinquishing her to the royal harem. Removed from her community and lacking maternal or female advocates within the court, Esther becomes increasingly isolated from meaningful kinship structures.

[214]Salome displays structural intersectional privilege, meaning that her kinship ties partially soften her exploitation by providing, however perversely, a degree of social visibility and belonging. For structural intersectionality, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,' *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1245; see also Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, 'Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 797.

[215]Camille Hernandez, *The Hero and the Whore: Reclaiming Healing and Liberation through Stories of Sexual Exploitation in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 204.

unfolds is not liberation, but a complex narrative of coerced participation, shaped by the pressures of gendered subjugation.

Before examining Esther's selection further, it is necessary to consider the role of Hegai and the sacred gaze. Fox interprets Hegai's intervention as a form of benevolent foresight, a gesture of kindness ensuring Esther's survival and success within the palace system.[216] Yet framing this as kindness obscures the deeper violence at work: a system for cultivation, control, and preparation to satisfy the demands of empire. Esther's so-called favour is inseparable from her compliance with an aesthetic ideal, and her bodily autonomy is surrendered in service of pleasure. Hegai, the eunuch overseeing the king's harem, is immediately pleased with Esther. As a result, she is granted 'special' treatment: extensive beauty preparations, seven female palace attendants, the finest rooms in the harem, and enhanced food, likely richer, more nourishing, and intended not only to indulge, but to alter her physical appearance. Hegai functions here as the proxy of the king's sacred gaze, acting as an early extension of the monarch's desires. The repeated use of *ēresen* further collapses the distinction between Hegai's favour and the king's anticipated sexual appraisal. Esther's body, subjected to daily observation and control, begins its transformation to fit the desirable mould of empire.

The enhanced diet implies more than luxury; it signals the deliberate cultivation of a body ready for royal consumption. It is possible that, if Esther had not yet reached puberty, such treatment may have been intended to encourage visible signs of female maturity: the development of breasts, widening of the hips, the accumulation of body fat associated with sexual maturity, and the onset of menstruation.[217] The text is silent about puberty, but ancient medical knowledge suggests that this interpretation, while circumstantial, remains plausible. These changes would mark her as reproductively viable, positioning her as a suitable vessel for bearing imperial heirs. Because Esther's age is omitted, the logic of the system, particularly the twelve months of preparation for the king, suggests that she was not yet physically mature; the empire was accelerating a girl's puberty for the purpose of rape.

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[216] Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 31.

[217] Hippocrates, *Aphorisms* 5.59–60, trans. Francis Adams, Internet Classics Archive, accessed 9 August 2025, https://classics.mit.edu/Hippocrates/aphorisms.5.v.html. Hippocrates observes that 'women who are very lean have miscarriages … until they become in better condition'. This may reflect ancient medical assumptions in which diet and bodily condition were managed to promote reproductive readiness, aligning with the argument that Esther's enhanced diet may have been intended to hasten visible signs of sexual maturity.

Within this coercive framework, some scholars argue that Esther plays no active role in becoming queen; she is not chosen for royal lineage or wealth, but solely for the king's gaze.[218] However, a closer reading suggests that, within the very limited agency available to her, Esther may have desired to become queen. This assessment, while accurately capturing the coercive framework, may nevertheless underestimate the constrained but real agency Esther exercises within it.

Sarojini Nadar offers a more complex reading, arguing that Esther is not simply a passive victim but learns to navigate the patriarchal system. Nadar argues that Esther's body is the only power she has within the 'male gaze,' and that she strategically uses it, not only to survive, but also to ultimately 'checkmate' Haman and destabilise the very structures of male honour and shame that seek to contain her.[219] Nadar's reading is compelling because it refuses to see Esther as merely a pawn, instead highlighting her rhetorical skills and political acumen. However, pushing back against Nadar's argument, describing Esther's body as 'the only power she has,' risks romanticising survival as agency. A hostage who sleeps with her captor to stay alive has not 'used her body strategically,' she has survived. Survival under coercion should not be mistaken for power. Power would entail being able to say no without dying. Esther never gets that choice; thus, it is not power, but bodily autonomy within the system.

Esther does not have full bodily autonomy, however; she had no real opportunity to resist the forced transformation imposed on her body. Such resistance might have risked dire repercussions. The twelve-month period of preparation can thus be understood as a time of survival labour, during which Esther's compliance was necessary for her continued existence. Further support for the view that Esther was acted upon rather than acting independently lies in the presence of Mordecai at the harem court, which implies his ongoing control over her even after she became the king's possession (Esth. 2:11). In this light, Esther's performative

[218]Alice Bach, 'Mirror, Mirror in the Text: Reflections on Reading and Rereading,' in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 82.
[219]Sarojini Nadar, 'Gender, Power, Sexuality and Suffering Bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the Characters of Esther and Vashti for the Purpose of Social Transformation,' *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 1 (2002): 127–128.

submission during this survival labour becomes strategic groundwork for her eventual subversion of Persian power in Esther 4.

Concealed Identity and the Burden of Double Colonisation

Esther conceals both her people and her ancestry at Mordecai's command (Esth. 2:10), not as an act of free choice but as a condition of survival within the Persian court. The narrative, therefore, presents concealment as something imposed through intersecting imperial and patriarchal pressures. Esther's identity as a Jew puts her in a precarious and marginalised position within the Persian Empire, marking her as an 'othered' member of a minority group. This status profoundly shapes her lack of bodily autonomy. Both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint reveal that Esther is taken to the king's harem without consent, demonstrating how imperial power could pressure the concealment of ethnic and religious identity.

Esther 2:10 (MT) states that Esther *lo-higgidah esteret-ammah* 'did not reveal her people' because Mordecai commanded her to remain silent. The verb *higgîd* ('to reveal, declare') implies an active withholding of speech. Esther must not only *be* unrecognizable as a Jew; she must *perform* non-Jewishness each time she is asked about her origins. Randall Bailey notes that the Hebrew term *am* 'people' could signify religious, national, or ethnic identity[220]; but this ambiguity only intensifies the violence of the concealment.

Esther is not hiding a single fact about herself; she is suppressing her entire lived reality. The empire demands that her body be hyper-visible as a sexual object, and yet Esther finds herself completely invisible as a Jew. This paradox: consume the body, erase the person; is the logic of imperial patriarchy applied to colonised women. Unlike Vashti, who refused to appear at all, Esther must appear *as someone she is not*. Here, her identities diverge and converge at the same time. Her concealment is therefore not a strategy for advancement but a structural requirement of survival. The cost of remaining in the king's presence is the continuous erasure of her identities. As the following section will demonstrate, this erasure culminates in the loss of her very name. The empire decides which parts of you must go and what parts you can keep. That is the horror of double colonisation: you do not get to decide which

[220]Randall C. Bailey, 'That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!': The Interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther,' in *They Were All Together in One Place: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2020), 229.

part of you is dangerous; the empire decides for you. Through the intersection of imperial authority and patriarchal familial power, these structures, embodied in Hegai, Xerxes, and Mordecai, control Esther's body and identity. Esther's hidden ethnicity and genealogy serve dual purposes: first, they enrich the plot by setting the stage for her later actions, and second, they explain why there is a Jewish presence in Persia.[221]

In Esther 2, her ethnicity and gender intersect to eliminate her control over her own body. Navigating the harem under Mordecai's guidance, she must carefully negotiate a space where her body becomes a link of overlapping imperial and male control. Esther has no bodily autonomy, not simply restricted autonomy. Esther's body is not simply a location where these controls interact, but the object upon which their power was exercised. Esther's body therefore also becomes a paradox: if the body is understood as a site, then, power is enacted through it; yet, as a subjugated body, power is simultaneously enacted upon it.

Butler's theory of performativity usually concerns the production of gender and other forms of identity, but concealment is also performative, not as a single act but a repetition.[222] Butler recognises that such repetition does not simply hide an authentic self; it produces a new self, in this case, 'Esther,' whose Jewishness becomes increasingly inaccessible, even to herself. The command lōʾ-*taggîd* ('do not tell') is not a request for silence but an instruction to become someone else. Before there was Esther, there was Hadassah: a girl who began to cease to exist the moment she accepted the command. In addition to her concealment being performative, Esther's concealment makes her invisible to the empire as a Jew, but hyper-visible as a woman. Crenshaw would ask: which identities can be hidden, and which cannot? Esther can hide her ethnicity and religion through silence and concealed practices. She cannot hide her gender, her youth, or her body. The empire permits the concealment of Esther's Jewishness while demanding the visibility of the identities that enable her exploitation: girl, child, and virgin. In Butlerian terms, Esther emerges not as a self-fashioning subject but as

[221]Judy Fentress Williams, 'Esther,' in *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The Old Testament and Apocrypha*, eds. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 487–488. Williams discusses the Babylonian captivity as the historical context shaping Esther's Jewish identity and diasporic vulnerability.
[222]Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,' *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 520.

one compelled into repeated performance under imperial power. She does not choose concealment, the harem, or even her own renaming. Her body is rendered docile.

From Hadassah to Esther: Identity and Erasure

In the Masoretic Text, Hadassah's renaming as Esther (Esth. 2:7–8) demonstrates her lack of bodily autonomy under the dual colonisation by patriarchy and empire.[223] The dual name reflects Esther's doubly colonised identity. However, describing this 'dual name' suggests two equal options. But Hadassah is not equal to Esther; Hadassah is erased after only one mention (Esth. 2:7) and then never mentioned again. That is not duality; that is replacement. The empire gives her a new name and buries the old one; this is not just colonisation, but a form of erasure and ethnic annihilation through the suppression of visible Jewish identity. Hadassah, meaning *'myrtle',* connects Esther to her Jewish heritage.[224] This dual status reveals her fragmented identity, caught between her Jewish heritage and imperial assimilation,[225] while the name Esther places her firmly within Persian dominance. [226] Esther functions as both a means of survival and a symbol of erasure. [227] The myrtle is a humble plant, low-growing, fragrant, and used in booths for Sukkot (Neh. 8:15). It is not a royal tree like the cedar; therefore, Hadassah's name already tells us she comes from ordinary, even lowly, origins. The empire renames her Esther, linking her to a goddess (Ishtar) and a star. They do not just change her name; they deify her to justify their use of her. That is not honour. That is theft of identity wrapped in gold. Her bodily autonomy is limited first by Mordecai's patriarchal authority (she appears only after him, with his Jewish identity emphasised)[228] and then by the empire's control over her body through the harem system.

The Septuagint intensifies the erasure of Esther's Jewish identity by omitting Hadassah altogether. In Septuagint Esther 2:7, she is identified only with the name *Esthēr*. There is no Hebrew name, no myrtle, no trace of her origin. This is not an accident but a

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[223]Adele Berlin, *Esther: A Commentary*, 3; Carey A. Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, xxxi.
[224]Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 36. See also Abraham S. Yahuda, 'The Meaning of the Name Esther,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 78, no. 3–4 (1946): 174; BDB, 213; Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997), 34. Myrtle is mentioned multiple times in the Hebrew Bible, including Isa. 41:19; 55:13; Zech. 1:8, 10–11; and Neh. 8:15.
[225]Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, 56.
[226] Berlin, *Esther*, 12
[227]Levenson, *Esther : A Commentary*, 58.
[228]Wyler, 'Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen,' 113.

theological and ideological choice. The Greek tradition, which adds prayers and speeches that grant Esther a degree of bodily autonomy, simultaneously erases her Jewishness. Hadassah disappears, replaced by a name that Greek readers would associate with Persian royalty, not with a Jewish orphan. Intersectionality insists that identity is multilayered. Esther's name change operates at the intersection of three layers: her ethnicity, age, and gender. *Hădassāh* marks her as Jewish and female, while Mordecai's guardianship and her designation as *na'arah* position her as a child. *Esthēr* marks her as Persian (derived from Ishtar) and as royal (queen) and as hidden (s-t-r, 'to hide'). The name change is not merely cultural assimilation; it is the replacement of one intersectional identity with another. Crenshaw would ask: which identity does the empire find useful, and which must be destroyed?

The resulting paradox gives way to the question: which version is more violent? The Septuagint, which gives Esther more bodily autonomy, yet strips her of the very name that connects her to Judaism? Or the Masoretic Text, which preserves Hadassah as a ghost that haunts the text like a memory of what was lost? The Septuagint simultaneously provides Esther with a voice while ignoring her Jewishness; on the one hand, she is assimilated, but on the other, she displays her bodily autonomy through prayer and fasting despite her stolen name. In contrast, the Masoretic Text demonstrates her loss of identity through the lens of survival. Somewhere beneath all the cosmetics, we know that Hadassah exists, even as we sit with the loss of her through erasure. Drawing again on Judith Butler's concept of performativity, Esther's renaming from Hadassah can be read not only as an act of coercion but also as the enforced enactment of a new identity.

While Butler does not comment on Esther, her framework demonstrates how renaming can function as a performative act that produces and sustains a transformed role.[229] Butler argues that performativity requires repetition. Esther must perform 'Esther' every day, every time she answers to that name, every time she does not correct someone, every time she uses Persian cosmetics instead of Hebrew ones. In this, Esther is performing Persian gender; the beauty treatments, the cosmetics, and the emphasis on appearance and the female body all

[229]Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,' *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 520.

function as repeated acts of gender performance.[230] Anne Wetter agrees that Esther experiences repeated performances of gender, but she believes it goes deeper than that. She states that the girls depicted in this narrative undergo a radical transformation not just in their appearance but also in their interior lives: they are cut off from social ties, placed under a stranger's guardianship, and given a new status as royal concubines.[231] In other words, in addition to repeated acts of gender performance, the identities of Esther and the other virgin girls are erased. Nevertheless, these repeated acts of gender performance are not freedom; they are a cage built through survival because the alternative is death. Butler helps us see the cage, but she does not tell us how to name it for what it is: survival. Just as gender is constituted through repeated acts, Esther's Persian name, likely derived from Ishtar, the Mesopotamian goddess,[232] requires the silencing of Hadassah, the unspoken self. This echoes the experiences of other colonised figures, such as Daniel, who is assigned the Babylonian name *Belteshazzar* (Dan. 1:7).[233] Unlike Esther, however, Daniel retains his Hebrew identity throughout the narrative, although his Babylonian name is rarely used, and he continues to be referred to primarily by his Hebrew name. This erasure intensifies the tension between Esther's identities: she is both the humble Hebrew 'myrtle' and a figure echoing gentile divinity.[234] Esther undergoes full performative assimilation, not only through the loss of her name, but the physical changes of her body (Esth. 2:12). Esther's name change resembles Joseph's: as she rises to power her name is changed, much like Joseph's.[235] Daniel, however, is not sexualised as Esther and Joseph are, and consequently he retains his Hebrew name.[236]

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[230]Judith Butler states that gender is 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance.' Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.

[231]Anne-Mareike Wetter, 'An Unexpected Place: Ritual and Religious Belonging in the Book of Esther,' *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 3 (2012): 125.

[232]Adam Silverstein, 'The Book of Esther and the Enūma Elish,' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 69, no. 2 (2006): 209. See also Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 30.

[233]Moore, *Esther*, 14.

[234]Bechtel, *Esther*, 30.

[235]See Gen. 41:45. It is also worth noting that both Joseph and Esther are described as physically attractive figures who are relocated into foreign imperial courts under coercive circumstances.

[236]See Gen. 39:6–7, where Joseph is described as physically attractive and becomes the object of sexual attention. It is notable that both Esther and Joseph experience name changes upon entering foreign courts, whereas Daniel predominantly retains his Hebrew name. While this does not suggest a direct causal relationship between sexualisation and renaming, these narratives nonetheless associate imperial assimilation with the reshaping of bodily and cultural identity.

The Septuagint exacerbates this tension by omitting Hadassah entirely while paradoxically amplifying Esther's agency, as Clines observes in his analysis of the Greek version's reshaping of the narrative.[237] As mentioned above, the Septuagint gives Esther prayers and speeches, something that the Masoretic Text does not provide. Thus, the question emerges, which is more violent, naming the erasure (MT) or erasing the name while giving voice (LXX)? Perhaps both are violent, but in diverse ways. The Septuagint's version feels like a trade-off: give up your identity, and you can speak. Perhaps this is not bodily autonomy, but survival disguised as agency.

In the Greek additions, she prays, fasts, and acts decisively (Add Esth 14:1–19), reclaiming Esther as Hadassah and becoming a person of resistance. While her Hebrew name is never revealed, the likely Hebrew root of *Esther*, *s-t-r* ('to hide'), preserves the theme of concealment that, as Fox notes, defines her journey.[238] Thus, in Berlin's reading, the Septuagint reconfigures Esther from a marker of suppression into a vehicle of subversion; her assimilation becomes the very means through which imperial power is destabilised.[239] Yet, this connection is uneasy and problematic. Suggesting that Esther is 'divine' because her name may derive from Ishtar risks participating in the same imperial patriarchal logic that commodifies her body. She remains a vessel for royal pleasure whether her name is divine, or Esther herself is imagined divine. Divinity does not restore her personhood; it only elevates the value of the body being consumed. She is still trafficked, abused and surviving.

As Beal notes, Esther manoeuvres within the very system that seeks to suppress her, exposing the fragility of the empire.[240] Her body, like her name, becomes imposed on, but through repeated performance she challenges the narrative.[241] Through the lens of intersectionality, Esther's position reflects overlapping systems of gender, ethnicity, and imperial domination.[242] Intersectionality tells us that Esther's oppression is not just based on gender, ethnicity, or age; it is all three at once. Performativity also conveys that her resistance is not

[237]Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, 39.
[238]Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 36.
[239]Berlin, *Esther*, 12.
[240]Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 47.
[241]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 145.
[242]Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139.

about refusing the role but about performing it so well that for a moment, the system destabilises itself.

This chapter has demonstrated that Esther's journey from Susa to the throne of Persia is not a narrative of liberation, but a carefully documented process of systemic erasure. By tracing the three-stage regimen of the queen's 'making': forcible recruitment, coercive beautification, and symbolic renaming, it has shown how the intersection of Esther's age, gender, ethnicity, and orphaned status rendered her uniquely vulnerable to what this chapter has termed 'total bodily reconstruction.' The comparative analysis of the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint has proven essential to this argument. While the Masoretic Text lays bare the mechanics of imperial and patriarchal domination through its use of *tamrūqeyhā*, the Septuagint's lexical choices, *smēgma*, *ēresen*, and the troubling *eis gynaika*, reveal an alternative tradition that both amplifies Esther's exploitation and, paradoxically, provides the theological language that can sanitise it. In this light, Esther's queenship is founded not on the bodily autonomy that Vashti so defiantly preserved, but on the violent commodification of a colonised girl. The Hadassah who enters the harem is systematically unmade, her body and identity refashioned into Esther, a vessel for imperial desire and, as the subsequent narrative will show, a potential instrument for its undoing. The very process designed to produce a compliant subject thus sows the seeds for the empire's destabilisation, a paradox that the following chapter will explore through Esther's eventual exercise of (limited) bodily autonomy.

Two Esthers, One Body: Agency, Erasure, and Resistance in the Masoretic Text and Septuagint

5.0 Introduction

Esther 2 chronicles the systematic dismantling of Hadassah's body and identity: her recruitment, beautification, and renaming under imperial and patriarchal coercion. Chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8 narrate the paradoxical emergence of bodily autonomy from the very structures designed to erase it.[243] The divergence between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint becomes pronounced in these chapters. The Masoretic Text presents an Esther whose bodily autonomy is grudging, reactive, and constrained, a queen who negotiates power through tears, strategic collapses, and carefully timed silence. The Septuagint expands her role through additions that foreground prayer, ritual protest (acts of prayer and lament that assert agency through invoking divine authority), and theological defiance enacted through liturgy that functions as intentional resistance. In the Greek version, Esther does not merely fall at the king's feet; she first falls before God, stripping away the garments of her imperial glory and covering herself with ashes and dung. Her act of liturgical resistance (resistance carried out through the language and gestures of worship rather than political action) reconfigures the terms of her bodily autonomy: her power is no longer derived from proximity to the throne, but from proximity to the divine.

The present discussion examines the ambiguous territory between obedience and bodily autonomy, asking whether a subject forged by empire can ever truly act freely, or whether her choices are always shaped by the conditions that made her. The question is not whether Esther acts; she clearly does, but how her actions should be understood when they emerge from a body commodified, regulated, and claimed by others. The discussion traces Esther's transformation across three pivotal moments. First, it examines Mordecai’s coercive appeal in Esther 4, analysing how his rhetoric, whether interpreted as threat, prophecy, or pragmatic warning, functions to narrow Esther's options while paradoxically opening space for her to assert limited authority. Second, the discussion turns to the Septuagint's prayer addition, arguing that this scene constitutes a radical expansion of Esther's agency, reframing her body as a

[243] Chapter 6 is not addressed here, as it deals primarily with Xerxes, Haman, and Mordecai, and does not feature Esther or demonstrate her exercise of bodily autonomy.

site of sacred protest rather than imperial display. Third, it analyses Esther's approach to the king in Esther 5 and 8, attending to the divergent sexual politics of the Masoretic Text and Septuagint and the ways each text positions her body in relation to power. Finally, the discussion examines the ascendency of the two Esthers.

Esther's agency is best understood not as liberation from constraint, but as coerced autonomy, a form of action that emerges under duress, shaped by fear, obligation, and the constant negotiation of survival. Her famous words, 'if I perish, I perish' (Esth. 4:16), capture this paradox: they are at once a surrender to fate and a declaration of intent, an acceptance of death and a precondition for life. This ambiguity reveals how the body fashioned by empire becomes the very instrument of its undoing.

5.1 The Ambiguity of Obedience

In both the MT and Septuagint, Mordecai warns Esther that silence will not save her. Although deliverance for the Jews will arise 'from elsewhere,' Esther and her father's house will perish if she refuses to act (Esth. 4:13–14). The climactic question whether she has attained royal status 'for such a time as this' reframes Esther's position within the empire as one of historical and communal responsibility. The Septuagint sharpens this emphasis slightly by stating, 'for this time you were made queen' (Esth. 4:14, LXX), foregrounding Esther's elevation as something shaped by forces beyond her own agency.

In Esther 4:1–7, Haman secures a royal decree to annihilate all Jews, plunging Mordecai into deep distress. Throughout the Masoretic Text, Mordecai exerts significant influence over Esther: first, he commands her to hide her identity in Esther 2:10; then, in Esther 4:6-8, he sends Esther word of the impending threat and insists that she approach the king to plead for her people. Berlin notes that while Esther and Mordecai work as a team, it is Esther who orchestrates and executes the plan that ultimately saves the Jewish people.[244] However, her act of heroism is complicated by the coercive influence Mordecai holds over her. Mordecai's directive forces Esther to transition from reluctant obedience to active agency. Her earlier compliance with his instructions (Esth. 2:10–2:20) aligns with her position as a marginalised woman navigating patriarchal power structures.

[244]Berlin, *Esther: A Commentary*, xxiii–xxiv.

Consequently, when faced with the threat of genocide, Mordecai's appeal (Esth. 4:13–14) reframes Esther's obedience as a moral imperative linked to communal survival. Modern commentators such as Fox similarly read Esther's response as an ethical act grounded in collective responsibility rather than blind submission.[245] Reflecting on this via Crenshaw's intersectionality, the threat of genocide lands on Esther differently than it would on a male Jew, as she is an orphaned girl. There is no one left in her father's house except Esther and Mordecai; her father's house is empty, yet Mordecai threatens it. This is not persuasion but the exploitation of precarity.

Some scholars read Mordecai's warning as pragmatic, arguing that she will face retribution if she remains silent, whether divine, communal, or political, which casts her compliance as a strategy of self-preservation rather than altruism.[246] Mordecai's words operate as *a scare tactic*, intensifying the stakes and narrowing Esther's options. While Mordecai does not explicitly threaten violence, his declaration that 'you and your father's house will perish,' personalises the danger. The emphasis on the threat of retribution is more persuasive than pragmatism, but neither fully captures the element of *emotional* coercion at work. Mordecai is not threatening Esther with divine punishment; he is exploiting and manipulating her; Mordecai is her father's house. He is telling her that *he* will die if she does not act, preying on her familial duty towards him. Berlin acknowledges the logical inconsistency here: 'Who was left of Esther's father's house except perhaps Mordecai?'[247] This reflects the intersectional pressures she faces as both a woman and a Jew, while her youth further intensifies her vulnerability within the palace power structure.

Esther's body is regulated by patriarchal authority and imperial law. Fox contends that Esther is not coerced but internally stirred by Mordecai's words; the intensity of the appeal makes clear that refusal is not a viable option.[248] Esther does not control her body; her choices are constrained by patriarchal authority and imperial decree. Mordecai's appeal in

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[245]Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 208.
[246]Ronald W. Pierce, 'The Politics of Esther and Mordecai: Courage or Compromise?' *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 2 (1992): 66. See also Bruce William Jones, 'Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther,' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1977): 176.
[247]Berlin, *Esther: A Commentary*, 49. See also Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 127. Van Wijk-Bos suggests that Mordecai's goal is to compel Esther by making the danger feel immediate and personal.
[248]Fox, 'Three Versions of Esther,' in *Character and Ideology*, 254.

Esther 4:13-14 begins to shift the narrative from silent obedience to a complicated development of Esther's agency. Esther's response unfolds in stages: hesitation (Esth. 4:11), bargaining (Esth. 4:16), and finally, acceptance of risk (Esth. 4:16). While Mordecai's rhetoric, whether interpreted as a threat or a call to duty, coerces her into action, Esther begins to deliberate.

In verse 11, Esther tells Mordecai of the danger she faces: 'Anyone who approaches the king unsummoned will surely die.'[249] This hesitation has been critiqued as historically implausible, since Persian queens such as Atossa and Amestris are known to have wielded political power without such fatal consequences.[250] Yet Esther's expression of fear is strategic; by invoking the law, she asserts a boundary against Mordecai's pressure. Her eventual capitulation in 4:16 reveals not passive submission but a constrained autonomy shaped by survival; agency emerges within structures of coercion that limit, but do not entirely erase, Esther's capacity to act.

Esther responds by ordering a three-day fast for herself and the Judeans before announcing her intention to approach the king unsummoned, despite the mortal danger involved (Esth. 4:15–17). Her pivotal statement, *im ʿāḇaḏtî ʿāḇaḏtî* ('if I perish, I perish'); *ean kai apolesthai me ē*, ('even if I must die') in Esther 4:16, reflects a complex posture of reluctant surrender. While the Hebrew emphasises perishing as an existential annihilation, the Greek introduces the nuance of being lost, implying a broader spectrum of loss: identity, safety, or belonging. This subtle shift underscores the tension between Esther's bodily autonomy and her erasure; her choice remains constrained, shaped by fear, obligation, and patriarchal coercion. In the Masoretic Text, Esther stands at the crossroads of patriarchal coercion (Mordecai), imperial threat (from Haman and the king), and communal obligation toward the Jews in Susa. Yet there is a subtle reversal of authority: Esther issues commands, and Mordecai obeys. Her agency remains coerced because refusal would carry grave consequences. Whether driven by fear of retribution, loyalty to Mordecai, or concern for her people, her autonomy emerges not from freedom but from necessity. She commands: *lēk knôs ʾet-kol hayyĕhûdîm wĕṣûmû ʿālai* ('Go, gather all the Jews… fast for me,'). The once-compliant girl

[249]Esther 4:11.
[250]Narcis Mehr Afshan, 'Role of Women in Ancient Persia,' *Advances in Environmental Biology* 8, no. 12 (2014): 1295.

of Chapter 2, abducted, renamed, and silenced, now directs Mordecai. This moment of authority paradoxically reinforces her marginalisation; her empowerment is contingent upon self-effacement, fear, and surrender. It is not liberation, but survival under pressure. As scholars have noted, she challenges the chain of command precisely by obeying it.[251]

The Septuagint aligns closely with the Masoretic Text in this instance. Esther's voice, though momentarily forceful, still emerges only when she has no other option. Her bodily autonomy is not triumphant, but reluctant, reactive, and deeply entangled in systems of coercion. When Esther commands Mordecai, she is performing *queenship*. Butler would recognise this as a citational act[252]: Esther cites the speech acts of rulers, including the king's decrees and Mordecai's earlier commands, but repeats them in her own voice. Performativity does not require originality; it requires iteration. Esther becomes queen not because she has an essential royal nature, but because she acts queenly under conditions of duress. The command to fast is not a spontaneous expression of agency; it is a repetition with a difference that slowly constitutes her as a subject who can command.

Yet the nature of her command to fast deserves closer scrutiny. Anne Wetter offers a compelling insight, arguing that the fast functions as a ritual counter-movement to the beauty treatments of Esther 2.[253] If the earlier regimen of *tamrūqeyhā* ('beautification treatments') was a rite of separation that 'set apart' Esther from her people, moulding her body to fit the requirements of a Persian queen and necessitating the concealment of her identity, then the fast can be read as an attempt to reverse this process. It is, in Wetter's words, an embodied act aimed at undoing the effects of those treatments and making 'a movement back to her people.' Wetter stops short of asking: does the fast actually work? The fast does not magically reverse the beauty treatments; it tells the reader that Esther is trying to reverse them. The text cannot show her becoming Hadassah again; that would break the plot. It can, however, reveal her longing to become Hadassah again. That longing marks the first flicker of bodily autonomy the Masoretic Text has allowed her since Chapter 2.

[251]Berlin, *Esther: A Commentary*, xxiii–xxiv.
[252]Sandhya V. and Harini Jayaraman, 'Citationality of Gender: Judith Butler and Kamala Das,' *IUP Journal of English Studies* 14, no. 2 (2019): 32–41.
[253]Wetter, 'In Unexpected Places,' 321–22.

This reading is significant because it locates resistance not in explicit bodily autonomy, but in the reappropriation of the body as a site of ritual reconnection with Esther's Jewish identity and community. The fast, like the beauty treatments, is aimed at the body, but with the opposite intent: to reclaim the identity that the harem had sought to erase. Wetter rightly notes the ambiguity of intent here. It is unclear whether Esther consciously orchestrates this fast as a deliberate counter-ritual, or whether the text simply presents an Esther who becomes 'determined and purposeful, almost as if the effects of the fast can be felt even before its implementation.'[254] This ambiguity, however, does not diminish the act's significance. Whether or not Esther fully apprehends the ritual logic of her command, the fast functions narratively to re-establish the bonds of kinship and ethnicity that her earlier compliance had severed. In the Masoretic Text, then, the fast itself becomes a form of bodily autonomy, implicitly anticipating the liturgical agency that the Septuagint later draws out more explicitly. The Septuagint, however, takes this reclamation a step further, introducing a prayer that expands Esther's bodily autonomy in a new direction.

Anne Wetter argues that the fast reverses the beauty treatments. Foucault's theory, however, adds a crucial nuance: the fast is still a disciplinary gaze. Esther is not escaping bodily reconstruction; she is substituting one regimen of cosmetics, diet, and confinement for another of fasting, ashes, and prayer. Her body remains a docile body, reshaped and reconstructed. The difference is who controls the regimen: the empire or Esther herself. In this instance, Esther controls the gaze rather than the empire, demonstrating bodily autonomy and bodily reconstruction on her terms.

5.2 From Silence to Supplication: Expanded Bodily Autonomy through Prayer

In Chapter 4, the Septuagint introduces a significant addition to the Masoretic Text: Esther's prayer (Add. Esth. 4:17b–17z). This addition constitutes of not merely a narrative expansion but a textual amplification of Esther's agency. The Septuagint presents Esther actively turning to God: 'Esther the queen fled to the Lord, seized with the agony of death' (Add. Esth. 4:17b). She removes her royal garments, replacing them with mourning, ashes, and dung, and 'utterly humbled her body' (Add. Esth. 4:17c–d). Esther also prays directly and

[254]Wetter, 'In Unexpected Places,' 321–22.

intensely: 'I am alone and have no helper except you' (Add. Esth. 4:17e). Unlike the Masoretic Text, where her agency emerges in response to Mordecai's instruction, the Septuagint foregrounds Esther's ritual and theological initiative. She chooses to pray and fast before she acts thus challenging the empire. Her declaration, 'You alone are our king, our help' (Add. Esth. 4:17j), further challenges Persian sovereignty by locating ultimate authority in the God of Israel rather than the Persian court. Esther's body consequently becomes not merely an object of imperial regulation but a locus of theological resistance. Addition C therefore not only advances the plot but also renders Esther and Mordecai more emotionally accessible to the reader.[255]

The prayer signals a deliberate rejection of her imperial identity. Esther removes her royal garments and adornments, replacing them with *spodos* ('ashes') and *kopria* ('dung'). (Esth. 4:17 LXX),[256] a stark contrast to the luxurious cosmetics of Esther 2. This ritual act signifies grief, mourning, and embodied protest. The inclusion of *kopria* ('dung'), rare in biblical ritual expression, underscores her total renunciation of courtly artifice and imperial femininity. Intertextual parallels deepen the resonance: like Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:19, who dons *spodos* ('ashes') and tears her garments after rape, Esther embodies a rejection of the patriarchal power structures imposed upon her. While Esther is not explicitly portrayed as a victim of sexual violence, the nature of her rise to queenship complicates notions of consent. Her embodied protest thus functions not only as a rejection, but as a denunciation of gendered exploitation. Esther's prayer is not merely private devotion.[257] Foucault's concept of pastoral power,[258] a form of power that seeks both individual and collective salvation through self-examination, can help us to explain why the Septuagint adds this scene. The Greek translators transform Esther from a subjugated subject into one with power, who lays bare her soul before God on behalf of her people. This is not a rejection of power but a transfer of allegiance from the king's gaze to God's, undertaken by Esther of her own accord. She removes her body

[255]Moore, 'On the Origins of the LXX Additions,' 391.
[256]*koprion* ('dung'), *Logeion*, University of Chicago, accessed 23 July 2025, https://logeion.uchicago.edu/κόπριον.
[257]Sanrie M. de Beer, 'The 'Coming-Out' of a Hero: The Character of Esther in LXX-Esther Revisited,' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 2 (2018): 9. Here de Beer argues that Esther covering herself with dung and ashes demonstrates her hatred of the king's bed.
[258]Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78* (New York: Springer, 2007), 88.

from the king's gaze and transfers it to God, demonstrating her bodily autonomy is of her choosing. Even in surrendering herself to God, the choice remains hers.

When Esther removes her royal garments and covers herself with dung, she is not merely grieving. She is rejecting the intersectional identities that the empire has assigned to her: Persian queen (imperial), beautiful girl (patriarchal), silent body (colonised). Her embrace of ashes and dung gestures toward Hadassah, the self that existed before the empire's intersecting systems reshaped her.

Still, this protest is not a return to an authentic, pre-imperial self. As Judith Butler notes, drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, empires produce precarious, disenfranchised populations for whom there is no return to a monolingual or monocultural homeland. The borders of the state 'divide populations from one another but also force populations together who do not share linguistic or cultural ties.'[259] Instead, the demands of the empire reproduce a new identity, not through a single transformation, but through the continuous pressures of imperial power, pressures that 'disperse the very notion of the subject.'

Esther cannot strip away her Persian garments and simply become Hadassah again. The world of a Jewish girl raised by Mordecai in a Jewish household is now lost, through exile, orphanhood, and the irreversible experience of the harem. Even in her prayer, she translates her Jewish grief into Greek ritual language.[260] The ashes and dung are not rooted purely in Jewish tradition, but reflect ritual practices shaped by the diasporic context from which Esther emerged. The use of *spodos* and *kopria,* recalls biblical mourners such as Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:19[261] filtered through Hellenistic and Ancient Near Eastern sensibilities.

Butler via Spivak demonstrates that Esther's bodily autonomy is not about recovering a lost self, but about performing under duress. The Septuagint's Esther is no more 'authentic' than the Masoretic Text's Esther. She is simply different, her subjectivity dispersed across Persian royalty, Jewish memory, and Greek piety. The prayer does not return her to her origins; it gives her a new language in which to petition God and destabilize empire. This is not

[259]Judith Butler, 'Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics,' *AIBR: Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 4, no. 3 (2009): ix.
[260]The LXX was written for Greek-speaking Jews.
[261] Obiorah M. Jerome and Favour C. Uroko, "Tearing of Clothes: A Study of an Ancient Practice in the Old Testament," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39, no. 1 (2018): 3–4, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v39i1.1841.

liberation from empire, but it is a form of bodily autonomy: acting within the empire with the only language available, knowing that no language is ever fully one's own.

In this scene, Esther's bodily autonomy is no longer purely reactive or coerced. She asserts sacred bodily autonomy, a theological defiance enacted through liturgy that functions as intentional resistance, invoking divine authority, lament, and self-abasement. Her transformation from passive subject to prophetic intercessor reconfigures power itself: it is no longer derived from proximity to the king, but from proximity to God.

When considering Esther's prayer before acting on behalf of her people, notable comparisons can be drawn with Judith. Like Esther, Judith prays prior to acting in Judith 9:2–14, though Judith's prayer explicitly calls for violent retribution. Both women engage in ritual mourning, covering themselves in ashes and donning sackcloth, signifying a rejection of imperial adornment and a return to sacred vulnerability,[262] Both defy empire, but in diverse ways. While the Septuagint addition to Esther gives her expanded bodily autotomy, it reframes that agency through a priestly lens, where autonomy is exercised through surrender to God.

The Esther of the Masoretic Text does not seem to have bodily autonomy; any bodily autonomy she may have is enacted under patriarchal and imperial pressure. By contrast, the Esther of the Septuagint appears to move beyond some of these limitations through her acts of prayer and ritual protest, which offer a new form of agency and self-determination. However, even in the Septuagint, Esther's autonomy remains conditioned by her circumstances: she still acts within the constraints of imperial power, communal obligation, and the expectations placed on her as a woman and as a Jew in exile. Her resistance, though theologically and ritually powerful, does not constitute full liberation from the structures that shape her identity and choices. Rather, the Septuagint presents a more expansive but still bounded form of bodily autonomy, in which agency is exercised within, rather than entirely outside, the intersecting forces of empire and patriarchy.

[262]Clarke Phillip van der Walt, 'A Literary and Socio-historical Comparison between the Prayers of Esther (LXX) and Judith' (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2005), 32.

Based on this analysis, I understand the Greek Esther in the following way: Her use of dung and ashes is not merely an expression of grief, but a symbolic undoing of imperial identity. She reclaims her body from the king's gaze and dedicates it to God. She demonstrates bodily autonomy in the Septuagint's Esther through prayer and ritual protest. Where the Masoretic Text portrays her as obedient and reactive, the Septuagint presents her as powerful, independent, and responsive to the Divine. This is bodily autonomy reimagined, not as mastery or control, but as holy disobedience. Esther's removal of her royal garments and adornment with ashes and dung is a Butlerian parodic performance[263]of grief:gender is constituted through repeated stylised acts. Here, Esther performs anti-gender: she refuses the feminine adornment that marked her entry into the harem through cosmetics, fine clothing, and the seven maids. Yet this refusal is itself a performance, one that cites the script of biblical mourners such as Tamar and Judith while subverting the script of Persian queenship. The Septuagint's Esther does not escape performativity; she performs differently.

5.3 The Unsummoned Approach

5.3.1 Risk, Delay, and the Performance of Patience (Esther 5 and Addition D of the LXX)

Esther 5:1-2 (MT) records her unsummoned approach, an act that, as established earlier, carried the penalty of death unless the king extended his sceptre: 'On the third day, Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace.' The Masoretic Text presents a queen who performs queenship; she wears the garments that mark her as imperial property. Esther's royal robes are not a natural expression of her identity but a citational act, she uses the language of the Persian empire to make her presence legitimate, demonstrating her gender and status are tools to be used to navigate it.[264] Yet this repetition is never identical. When the king extends the golden sceptre, she touches its tip (Esth. 5:2). This touch is her first autonomous bodily act.

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality allows us to explore both the possibility and the limits of this touch. Esther approaches the king as a body marked by overlapping

[263]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 25.
[264]Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 178–79.

identities. The touch of the sceptre is only made possible, because she has been rendered acceptable by every axis of imperial evaluation. This is the intersectional bind:[265] Esther can only act within the narrow space where the empire's gazes converge. The touch of the sceptre is a small transgression, possible only because she has been rendered acceptable by every axis of imperial evaluation.

Then comes the narrative delay. Esther does not reveal her request. Instead, she invites the king and Haman to a banquet, and at that banquet, she invites them to another banquet (Esth. 5:8). This delay has puzzled commentators. However, I contend that Esther's delay is not hesitation but a strategy. She is performing gender,[266] while stalling for Mordecai's honour to be elevated (Esth. 6) and for Haman's arrogance to peak. Esther repeats the script of the obedient, patient, and pleasing queen, with a twist: her compliance is a mask for working within the system. It is a subversive performance that uses the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.[267]

The king's anticipation, 'What will she ask? Why is she waiting?' increases his investment in her request. By the second banquet, he is no longer granting a favour; he is relieved to finally know what she wants. Esther has manipulated the disciplinary gaze of the court. Foucault theorises that power operates not only through visible surveillance, but through the organisation of time: waiting, scheduling, and delaying.[268] Esther, who once had no control, now controls the rhythm of revelation. She has learned that patience is not passivity; it is a weapon.

The Septuagint (Esth. Add. D: 6–12) follows the same basic plot but introduces a striking difference. In the Masoretic Text, Esther stands, touches the sceptre, and remains composed. In the Septuagint, however, the scene unfolds very differently. The Septuagint Esther describes the king's anger: 'And having raised his face resplendent with glory, he looked

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[265]See Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' in *Feminist Legal Theories*, ed. Katharine T. Bartlett and Rosanne Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2013), 141–143.
[266]Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 178–79.
[267]Esther proves Audre Lorde's observation that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.' Rather than destroying the master's house, she secures a place within it. See Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' (1979), accessed 23 July 2025, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/audre-lorde-the-master-s-tools-will-never-dismantle-the-master-s-house.
[268]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 149–83.

with intense anger: and the queen fell and changed her colour as she fainted; and she bowed herself upon the head of the maid that went before.'[269] Carey A Moore conveys that addition D is the dramatic climax of Greek Esther.[270] This moment marks the point at which Esther becomes powerful and begins to claim bodily autonomy.

In the Masoretic Text, the king is not angry, and there is no fear or tension; he simply extends out his sceptre. In, Addition B, Esther is fearful and has her maid help her, then Esther faints. Sidnie White Crawford expresses that in this moment, the reason for the additions of Esther is revealed. She declares, 'Then God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and he rushed to comfort her' (Add. Esth. 15:8). For the Septuagint Esther, the real moving force behind all the events is God, and the reader is reassured of a positive outcome.[271] While the Septuagint Addition gives the power to God, Esther nevertheless demonstrates bodily autonomy not only by approaching the king, but also through fainting. In the Septuagint, fainting becomes a powerful tool that Esther wields, whereas in the Masoretic Text, patience becomes her instrument of power.

At first glance, fainting appears to be the opposite of bodily autonomy: a loss of consciousness, a collapse of the body. Esther's body is already marked as vulnerable: female, young, and colonised. She uses the empire's expectation of female weakness as both a shield and a weapon. Fainting is not a loss of control; it is a calculated display of bodily autonomy that demands the king's attention and mercy.[272]

Foucault would recognise the fainting as a form of reverse disciplinary power. The harem trained Esther to regulate her body, suppress signs of distress, and present a calm, beautiful surface to the royal gaze. By fainting, Esther refuses that training. She allows her body to betray the very composure the empire demanded. Fainting becomes a bodily act that the empire cannot control.

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[269] Add. Esth. D.
[270] Moore, 'On the Origins of the LXX Additions,' 393.
[271] Sidnie White Crawford, 'Additions to Esther,' in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 426–27.
[272] Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 197.

The fainting is a performative disruption of the scene's expected narrative. The king expects a supplicant: kneeling, begging, and speaking. Instead, he gets a body that literally collapses, cannot speak, and must be carried. This rupture in courtly protocol forces the king to respond not as a ruler receiving a petition, but as a man witnessing his wife in distress. Fainting shifts the balance of power; Esther gains an advantage that no amount of eloquent speech could provide.

The difference between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint is therefore not merely textual but reflects two different models of bodily autonomy itself. The Masoretic Text's Esther touches the sceptre in a minimal, deliberate, conscious act of bodily autonomy. The Septuagint's Esther faints, a maximal, seemingly uncontrollable, yet strategically deployed act that uses the very appearance of powerlessness as power. Some scholars argue that the Masoretic Text grants Esther greater agency because God is absent, whereas the Septuagint foregrounds divine intervention.[273] However, the presence of God in the Additions enables Esther to demonstrate bodily autonomy in ways unavailable to the Masoretic Text. Divine presence becomes a source of resistance rather than a limitation upon agency. Where the Masoretic Text presents a queen who has learned to act within the system's smallest spaces, the Septuagint presents a queen who has learned to use the system's expectations of female weakness as a weapon, thereby gaining greater freedom within the imperial system. Through the religious imagery of prayer and fasting that pervades the Septuagint, when Esther demonstrates her bodily autonomy, it is shown to be sanctioned by God: God approves of it, legitimising it as a holy act, and a sign of God's intervention.

5.4 Unbidden and Undone: Esther's Rise from the Ashes

Esther's approach to the king in Esther 8:3 marks a critical moment of physical vulnerability and strategic supplication. The Hebrew text reads: *wattippol lipne raglayw* 'and she fell at his feet.' The Septuagint renders this as *kai prosépesen pros tous podas autou*, 'and she fell to his feet.' Both languages describe the gesture in terms of prostration, yet the Hebrew term *raḡlāyw* ('feet') carries additional weight. In biblical Hebrew, 'feet' can function as a

[273]Heidyn von Bose, 'The Different Esthers of the Septuagint and Masoretic Text: How the Inclusion of God Changes the Character of Esther,' *Studia Antiqua* 22, no. 1 (2023): 33.

euphemism for male genitals, introducing a subtext of bodily exposure, danger, or sexual vulnerability that the Greek term *podas* lacks, since it denotes feet in a strictly literal sense. The Hebrew euphemism *raḡlāyw* ('feet') for genitals is not just a linguistic paradox.

Esther's fall at the king's feet is a performance of vulnerability that reveals her layered identities. Foucault's insight that power produces knowledge and that knowledge produces subjects applies here.[274] Esther has learned the truth of the Persian court: that the king's honour is more valuable than Jewish lives, and that her body's proximity to Haman will be read as transgression. She does not resist this truth; she uses it. She has internalised the regime's truth[275] and operates within it, not as a colonised victim, but as a skilled practitioner.

In the Masoretic Text, Berlin understands Esther's physical gestures in verse 3, her weeping, standing, and falling at the king's feet, as strategic and staged, showing that, even within constrained circumstances, she has learned to manoeuvre within the language of power. This fall, however, cannot be disentangled from the earlier image of her in Esther 2, where her body is beautified and displayed for the king's delight (Esth. 2:1–12, Esth. 2:15–17). Where she once stood before the monarch as an object of erotic evaluation, she now collapses at his feet in a dramatic act of supplication. Such a gesture carries a potential erotic charge, heightened when placed alongside Ruth 3:7–8, where Ruth lies at Boaz's feet in a scene often read as sexually charged.[276] The narrator of the Hebrew text frames the moment not as seduction but as political theatre, though Esther's earlier objectification continues to haunt this physical encounter with the king.

Esther's tears do not merely express grief; they function as a calculated rhetorical move aimed at stirring the king's compassion while maintaining a measured sense of vulnerability. Some scholars, such as Lewis Paton, believe that Esther possesses no political skill and instead relies upon her beauty.[277] However, some, such as Nadar, contend that Esther deliberately uses her beauty because she understands its power to influence the king. Esther demonstrates both intelligence and strategic awareness, having learned how to operate within the

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[274]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 194.
[275]Daniele Lorenzini, 'What Is a 'Regime of Truth'?', *Le Foucaldien* 1, no. 1 (2015). See also Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
[276] Berlin, *Esther*, 87.
[277]Lewis B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 96.

structures of empire through the use of beauty.[278] Yet in the Masoretic Text, Esther's only recognised asset remains her physical beauty, and she continues to be used by men within a patriarchal empire.

When the golden sceptre is extended, she rises not just physically, but politically, assuming the role of a negotiator. Esther is given a voice, allowing her to present her case and influence the fate of her people. This moment is significant because she acts rather than being acted upon, asserting herself in a space where she had previously been presented as an object of male desire and imperial display.

The Septuagint, however, strips the scene of sexual subtext. Esther also falls at the king's feet, but here she faints; her collapse is rendered less as a seductive performance and more as a moment of total physical surrender. This absence of erotic charge is especially striking given the Septuagint's prior focus on her preparation for the harem, which foregrounded her beauty and desirability. Whereas the Masoretic Text permits her body to carry symbolic weight shaped by past sexualisation, the Septuagint moves to sanctify her body.[279] Understanding Esther's body as directed toward divine petition rather than imperial allure builds on and extends Fox's analysis. When she recovers and stands 'near' the king, *parestē*,[280] the closeness is not sexual but spiritual. This nearness carries overt theological resonance, yet it is inseparable from ethnic identity, since her appeal is explicitly bound to the survival of her people. In this way, the Greek text reshapes Esther's bodily history, moving her from a figure bound to imperial seduction to one who operates as a vessel of theological intent (a vessel for the divine).

5.5 Esther's Ascendancy

After appearing before the king in both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, Esther invites the king and Haman to two intimate banquets designed to dismantle the threat posed by Haman. Rather than provoking the king's wrath prematurely, Esther waits until the second

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[278]Sarojini Nadar, 'Power, Ideology and Interpretation(s): Womanist and Literary Perspectives on the Book of Esther as Resources for Gender-Social Transformation' (PhD diss., University of Natal, 2003), 127.
[279]Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 89.
[280]Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. and aug. by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. *paristēmi* ('to stand beside, approach'), accessed 24 July 2025, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=παρέστη&la=greek#Perseus:text:1999.04.0057:entry=pari/sthmi-contents.

banquet to disclose her Jewish identity and denounce Haman as a political saboteur. This decision is carefully timed: in Esther 6, the king is reminded of Mordecai's loyalty and commands Haman to honour him, while Haman, assuming continued favour, constructs gallows for Mordecai's execution. The contrast is deliberate. Nadar's reading of Esther's strategic agency is particularly illuminating here. Nadar argues that Esther, having been 'caught in the gaze' of male power, learns to 'use whatever power the game has given her' to achieve her ends.[281] Yet an important question remains: does using power granted by the oppressor constitute bodily autonomy? A prisoner who negotiates better food has not escaped prison. Esther's beauty, access to the king, and knowledge of court protocol are all gifts of empire. Her bodily autonomy here is the product of empire.

Esther understands that her power within the patriarchal structures of the court flows not from overt authority, but from her ability to manipulate the king's perceptions of honour and shame. This is what Nadar, drawing on James C. Scott, terms the 'hidden transcript' of the dominated. She performs compliance while quietly orchestrating Haman's downfall. So, when Esther finally exposes Haman, the king storms out in fury. Perhaps to compose himself and decide on a course of action. Upon his return, the king finds Haman collapsed on Esther's couch[282] or bed,[283] his proximity to the queen crossing into dangerous intimacy. Regardless of the Masoretic or Greek text, the scene is laden with dramatic irony: the king interprets Haman's pleading as a sexual transgression.

In the Masoretic Text, Haman is described as falling on the *mittah* ('bed')[284] where Esther is reclining (Esth. 7:8). The word choice is significant: *mittāh* denotes a place of sleep, intimacy, and sexual activity, not merely a dining couch. When the king returns and sees Haman in this position, his words, 'Will he even violate the queen in my presence, in my own

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[281]Sarojini Nadar, 'Power, Ideology and Interpretation(s): Womanist and Literary Perspectives on the Book of Esther as Resources for Gender-Social Transformation' (PhD diss., University of Natal, 2003), 127–28.
[282]In the Septuagint, the Greek word *klinē* ('couch, reclining place') is interpreted to mean 'couch' or 'reclining place', often associated with banquet and dining settings in Hellenistic usage. See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. and aug. by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. *klinē*, accessed 24 July 2025, https://logeion.uchicago.edu/κλίνη.
[283]In the Masoretic Text, the Hebrew word *miṭṭāh* ('bed') is interpreted to mean 'bed.' See *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible* (Logos Bible Software), s.v. *miṭṭāh*, accessed 24 July 2025, https://app.logos.com/books/LLS%3ALXHEBANLEX/headwords/%D7%9E%D6%B4%D7%98%D6%BC%D6%B8%D7%94?headwordLanguage=he.
[284] *Lexham Analytical Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible*, s.v. *miṭṭāh* ('bed').

house?' reveal the lens through which he interprets the scene. Haman's desperate plea for his life is instead recast as a threat to royal honour. Significantly, the king's fury is directed less toward Haman's genocidal plot than toward the perceived violation of what belongs to him.

The Septuagint offers a subtle but telling variation. Here, Haman collapses on the *klinē*, a term that can mean couch or reclining place and is often associated with banquet settings rather than bedrooms.[285] The sexual charge is somewhat downplayed, though the king's accusation, 'Will he even violate the queen in my presence, in my own house?' remains. The Greek text retains the core dynamic: a king's honour is at stake in the control of a woman's body. Yet the shift from *mittah* to *klinē* may reflect a Hellenistic sensibility less concerned with the specific intimacy of the bed and more with the public shame attached to a woman's exposure within the banquet hall.[286]

When Haman collapses on Esther's couch (*mittah*/*klinē*), the king reads his proximity as sexual violation. Butler maintains that bodies do not have intrinsic meanings; meanings are inscribed on bodies through performative acts. Esther's body has been reconstructed twice: first as desirable (Esth. 2), and now as violated (Esth. 7). Neither reconstruction of her body is true in any essential sense. Rather, the repeated reconstruction of her body, first by the empire and then by the king's misinterpretation, produces the effect of a body that is always already sexualised. Esther cannot escape this; she can only orchestrate the terms.

Sarojini Nadar's analysis of the honour-shame matrix is indispensable for understanding the king's reaction. She observes that the king's concern is not primarily for Esther's violation, but for his own honour: 'This violation questions not the honour of the woman but the honour of the man.'[287] Foucault's ideas on power suggest that the king's wrath emphasizes the precarious nature of sovereign authority. Rather than something inherently possessed, the

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[285] Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. *klinō* ('to recline'), https://atlas.perseus.tufts.edu/dictionaries/entry/urn:cite2:scaife-viewer:dictionary-entries.atlas_v1:middle-liddell.perseus-eng2-n18121/.

[286] Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 193. While this linguistic shift may suggest that the sexual charge of the scene is reduced, Day argues that 'all of the narratives attribute a sexual aspect to Esther's character' in this episode. She maintains that, despite textual variations, Esther is consistently 'viewed by other characters according to her sexuality' and remains a 'victim of unwanted' advances.

[287] Sarojini Nadar, 'Power, Ideology and Interpretation(s): Womanist and Literary Perspectives on the Book of Esther as Resources for Gender-Social Transformation' (PhD diss., University of Natal, 2003), 124–25, 161–63.

king's honour is a role that demands perpetual validation. Haman's supposed mistake puts the king's image as a man at greater risk than Esther's safety. The king's inability to control the meaning attached to his queen's body compels him to violently reassert dominance. Esther's body remains trapped within competing male interpretations: first as desirable, then as violated. She cannot escape these inscriptions; she can only manipulate their terms. She places Haman's body close to hers and lets the king's suspicious perception take care of the rest.[288]

The king is not mortified by the possibility of Esther's violation, but by the dishonour done to him in his own house. The Hebrew phrase *imi babayit* ('in my own house'), as Nadar points out,[289] becomes almost absurd in its prioritisation of royal status over a woman's bodily integrity, especially in the shadow of genocidal violence against the Jews. Esther's body, once again, becomes the scapegoat for the power struggles between men.

Still, this reading also reveals the sophistication of Esther's strategy. She has positioned Haman not merely as a political enemy, but as a man whose desperation can be made to appear as sexual transgression.[290] She does not need to accuse Haman of assault; she needs only to create the conditions in which his proximity to her body can be misinterpreted. The king's rage, fuelled by wounded honour, does the rest. Once displayed for the king's pleasure (Esth. 2), Esther's body becomes the instrument through which Haman is ensnared. She uses the terms of her objectification to destroy her enemy.

This moment represents the culmination of Esther's transformation. In Chapter 2, her body was acted upon, beautified, displayed, and chosen. In Chapter 4, her body was risked: 'If I perish, I perish.' Now, in Chapter 7, her body becomes a trap. She does not need to raise a weapon or issue a threat. Instead, her presence creates the conditions in which the king's

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[288]Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible 7B (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 72. Moore notes that 'in antiquity very strong laws and strict regulations centred on the harem', meaning that 'had Haman knelt as much as a foot away from the queen's couch, the king's reaction could still have been justified.' See also Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997), 111–12.
[289]Nadar, 'Power, Ideology and Interpretation(s),' 161–63.
[290]For a similar reading of Esther's strategic use of her objectified position, see Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997), 105–14. Drawing on Judith Butler, Beal argues that Esther's leverage derives from an 'exploitation of identity convergences', as she navigates competing social roles—obedient daughter, pleasing wife, loyal Jew, and law-abiding Persian—to effect a 'complex reconfiguration and redeployment' of imperial power. From this perspective, Esther's success lies not in escaping patriarchal structures but in turning their assumptions and expectations to her advantage.

patriarchal panic can be turned against Haman. The body that was made by empire becomes the instrument of its agent's undoing.[291]

Though Haman is executed and Mordecai elevated, Esther's people remain threatened. With the immediate threat eliminated and the king's rage appeased, Esther must again appeal to him, this time not for herself, but for collective survival. Moore argues that, contrary to some interpretations, this is not a second unsummoned audience with the king, but a continuation of the same encounter. Esther has not departed from the king's presence, nor has he from hers; Mordecai now joins them (Esth. 8:2).

The continuity of the scene underscores that Esther continues within the same bodily and political framework established earlier in the narrative. Esther's collapse at the king's feet is not a gesture of helplessness, but of calculated advocacy. When the golden sceptre is extended once more, it signals encouragement, not pardon. In the Masoretic Text, his extension of the sceptre, *šarbîṭ*, mirrors its earlier use during Esther's approach (Esth. 5:2), a tacit acknowledgement that Esther's power still flows through the same channels of bodily approval established in Esther 2. Esther is transformed into a strategic advocate acting on behalf of her people.[292]

5.6 Conclusion

This analysis has traced the arc of Esther's bodily autonomy across chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8 in both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint. Esther's bodily autonomy is understood here not as liberation from patriarchal empire, but as a form of bodily autonomy that emerges under duress and is shaped by patriarchal authority, imperial law, and communal obligation. The comparative analysis of the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint has proven essential to this argument, revealing two distinct yet related portraits of a queen navigating the impossible space between erasure and emergence.

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[291]Textual support for this reading may be found in Esther's calculated use of banquets to build tension (Esth. 5:8) and her framing of the crisis around her own physical survival (Esth. 7:3). Together, these actions suggest an awareness of how the king's emotions and loyalties might be directed against Haman.

[292] Carey A. Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 7B, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 82–83.

In the Masoretic Text, Esther's journey is one of grudging, reactive bodily integrity. Mordecai's appeal in Chapter 4 narrows her options until compliance becomes the only viable path. Yet within these constraints, she begins to assert herself: she bargains, fasts, and issues commands. Her willingness to risk death in Esther 4:16 (MT) captures the paradox of her position. It is at once a surrender to fate and a declaration of intent, an acceptance of death as a precondition for life. Anne Wetter's interpretation of Esther's fast as a ritual reversal of Chapter 2's preparations deepen this analysis, demonstrating how Esther negotiates bodily agency even within the Masoretic Text's restrictive framework. When Esther later falls at the king's feet in Esther 8:3, her body carries the weight of its history. The Hebrew text's euphemistic potential in *raḡlāyw* ('feet') recalls her earlier display as an object of imperial desire. Now it collapses before him in supplication, but never fully free from the sexual politics that haunt it.

The Septuagint offers a different trajectory. Before approaching the king, Esther first turns to God. The prayer addition (Add. Esth. 4:17b–17z) transforms her from a reactive subject into a liturgical agent. She exchanges imperial adornment for ritual mourning, rejecting the bodily presentation demanded by the harem. This act of holy disobedience reclaims her body from the king's gaze and reorients it toward the divine. Where the Masoretic Text's Esther negotiates power through tears and strategic collapses, the Septuagint's Esther asserts a sovereignty that precedes and exceeds the Persian Empire. Her fainting in Esther 8:3, stripped of the Masoretic Text's sexual subtext, signals not seduction but surrender, not to the king, but to the gravity of her people's survival. The nearness she achieves (*parestē*) is spiritual before it is political.

Yet the differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint persist even here. The Masoretic Text's *mittah* ('bed') carries connotations of intimacy and sexual activity that the Septuagint's *klinē* ('couch') softens. True to its broader pattern, the Greek text moves to sanctify rather than sexualise, framing Esther's body within the logic of divine purpose rather than imperial desire. Both texts ultimately return to the same body: the body of a girl who was taken, renamed, and remade, and who learned to become an agent of her own survival and her people's deliverance.

The discussion thus demonstrates that Esther's bodily autonomy, such as it is, never emerges from outside the structures that sought to erase her. It is forged within them and

exercised through them. The intersectional lens has highlighted how Esther's overlapping identities as a young, female, Jewish, orphaned, and colonised position her within a unique form of vulnerability, where each aspect of oppression compounds the others. The fast, the prayer, the fall at the king's feet, the trap set for Haman are all performative acts that cite prior scripts while simultaneously rewriting them.

In the Greek, Esther appears to exercise a significant degree of bodily autonomy even within the empire, though it is important to clarify what is meant by this. By 'full' bodily autonomy, this analysis does not mean an absolute freedom to act without limits or consequence, a condition arguably unattainable within oppressive systems of power. Rather, the term describes the relative extent to which Esther's actions in the Septuagint reflect agency, self-determination, and meaningful choice regarding her body, independent of compulsion by others. In the Greek narrative, the fasting, fainting, praying, and the use of dung and ashes are all presented as deliberate acts Esther chooses to perform, despite the risk to her life. Unlike Vashti, she lacks the privilege of Persian ethnicity, which might have rendered dethronement, rather than death, the likely consequence of disobedience. By contrast, Masoretic Esther, in Chapters 4 and beyond is exercising a more constrained and coerced form of bodily autonomy under Mordecai's direction. The Septuagint offers a different possibility: an expanded, though still contextually bounded, bodily autonomy realised despite imperial consequences and without compulsion.

Vashti's defiance preserved her autonomy but cost her the crown; Esther's compliance and negotiation within the system secured hers and, with it, her people's future. The central question of this analysis has been whether the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text grant Esther bodily autonomy. The answer is unequivocal. Greek Esther exemplifies bodily autonomy despite her layered identities; Masoretic Esther, by contrast, is denied true bodily autonomy, any semblance of it is through coercion. Ultimately, the distinction between the two Esthers extends beyond textual variation to a sharp divergence in what survival, agency, and body signify under empire.

Conclusion

A survey of Esther 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, and 8:3 demonstrates how Vashti's and Esther's bodily autonomy is shaped by ethnicity and gender within the Persian royal court. Vashti's refusal constitutes an act of bodily autonomy; however, her avoidance of death and subsequent banishment indicates the extent to which royal women's bodies are regulated by imperial authority. If Vashti is read as Persian, and it is not entirely clear that she should be, then her ethnicity and status afforded her some ability to resist, but these factors are overridden by gender expectations. Esther, selected for her beauty and virginity, is subjected to scrutiny, modification, and regulation by male authority figures. Her Jewish identity functions both as a vulnerability and a source of leverage. Control over her body is externally imposed until Chapters 4 and 5, particularly in the Septuagint, and again in Esther 8:3, when she assumes command over her physical presence. Between Chapter 2 and the later chapters, through fasting, ashes, and the Septuagint's fainting scene, Esther transitions from a figure shaped by external forces to a political agent.

Vashti's refusal stands as a rare demonstration of a woman's bodily autonomy, but her erasure exposes the disposability of royal women's bodies. Nonetheless, her defiance remains a significant act of resistance against patriarchy and imperial authority. Some argue that Esther exhibits greater agency in the Masoretic Text, while the Septuagint attributes full agency to God.[293] However, the Septuagint not only emphasises God's involvement but also expands Esther's active role, particularly through the Additions, where she is far from passive. The Septuagint grants Esther greater scope for decisive action, even as divine credit is foregrounded. As Butler's performativity and Foucault's theories of power suggest, bodily autonomy is not possessed but performed, and Esther's fasting and fainting are precisely such performances through which she asserts bodily control.

The Persian court reduces women's bodies to sites of control, yet both Vashti and Esther attempt to transform their bodies into spaces of resistance. Their identities both enabled and constrained their bodily autonomy. Their bodies emerge as battlegrounds for authority. Vashti and Esther demonstrate that bodily autonomy under imperial patriarchy remains

[293]Sara Parks, 'Women and Gender in the Apocrypha,' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Apocrypha*, ed. Gerbern S. Oegema (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 47

conditional and disputed, shaped by the intersection of power, ethnicity, gender, and age rather than by any single identity marker. In navigating this complex landscape, Vashti and Esther reveal the violent boundaries imposed on female bodily autonomy, while also redefining how power is exercised through the body.

This dissertation has not treated the Alpha Text tradition[294] nor traced reception history; these remain avenues for future research. Beyond Esther, the framework developed here—bodily autonomy read through intersectionality—can be tested on other Second Temple narratives. Judith offers a compelling case: her beauty is weaponised, but her bodily autonomy, expressed through entering Holofernes's tent, eating and drinking his food, and ultimately beheading him, operates through the deliberate performance of compliance, echoing Esther's own performed obedience. Does Judith's widowhood grant her greater autonomy than Esther's virginity? Susanna presents the inverse: her body is threatened by the elders' gaze, yet her refusal to consent, followed by Daniel's intervention, raises questions about whether bodily autonomy can be restored by male legal authority or only by direct divine vindication. Applying an intersectional lens would reveal how age, ethnicity, marital status, and textual tradition shape each woman's right to control her body.

The significance of the approach in this study is twofold. First, it refutes readings that turn Esther into either hero or victim and Vashti into a mere foil. Instead, it exposes how empire, gender, and ethnicity co-produce bodily vulnerability and agency, a reading with implications for how biblical scholarship assesses power in diaspora literature. Second, this thesis makes a novel contribution: no previous research focusses on bodily autonomy as a category in Esther, nor has any study applied intersectionality to compare the Masoretic Text and Septuagint. This analysis demonstrates that the Greek Esther, particularly through Addition C and D, gives Esther more embodied agency than the Hebrew text, while Vashti's elite ethnic status protects her from death but not from erasure. This work exposes how empire, gender, age, and ethnicity co-produce bodily vulnerability and agency. It invites us to re-read every biblical narrative where a woman's body is a contested site of power.

[294] The Alpha Text is an alternative Greek textual tradition of the Book of Esther. It is shorter than the Septuagint (LXX) and is generally understood to be a revised version of the Esther narrative.

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Appendix A:

Genre, Dating and Textual Traditions

This appendix states my positions on the three foundational issues of text, date, and genre that underpin the intersectional reading in this thesis, and it provides a fuller survey of scholarly debates.

A.1 My Positions

Textual traditions: I read the Masoretic Text (MT) as my primary source. I compare it to the Septuagint (LXX) when there are major differences in the portrayal of Esther. I focus on sections where these differences affect how Esther's bodily autonomy or power appears in the story.

Dating: I adopt the scholars who assign the MT to the Hellenistic period (third–second century BCE). The exact date of the book of Esther remains debated, with proposals ranging from the fourth to the second century BCE. The LXX Additions were made later.

Genre: I read Esther as a work of fiction, specifically as a diasporic novella, rather than a historical work. This framing supports a close reading of character, plot, and narrative silence as literary constructions. While most scholars agree that Esther is not historiography, debates concerning its genre persist, with classifications including satire, wisdom tale, court narrative, and historical romance.

A.2 Detailed Scholarly Survey

The exact date of the book of Esther remains the subject of scholarly debate, with dates ranging from the fourth to the second century BCE.[295] Some scholars, such as Berlin and Moore, argue for an early Persian-period composition, citing the book's detailed knowledge of Persian court life and its inclusion of Persian vocabulary.[296] Fox dates the book to the third

[295]Sidnie White Crawford, 'Esther', in *Women's Bible Commentary*, rev. and updated ed., ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 202.
[296]Berlin, 'The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling,' 6. Berlin's position is shared by Moore; see Moore, 'Archaeology and the Book of Esther,' 62–79. Levenson likewise argues that Esther was written in the third or fourth century BCE; see Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, 26.

century BCE.[297] Moore, in his Esther commentary, argues that the final form of the Hebrew version of the book of Esther was likely completed before the Maccabee period.[298]

Others, like Randall C. Bailey, suggest a later dating because the conflict depicted in the text aligns more closely with a Hellenistic date. Bailey cites textual elements including the expansive reach of the Persian Empire in Esther 8:9, which align with the additions to the Greek text.[299] H. Neil Richardson notes the discovery of a cuneiform text mentioning a prominent official named Marduk, which may suggest that historical figures inspired the characters in the book of Esther, while acknowledging the uncertainty regarding the origins of Purim.[300] Richardson suggests that John Hyrcanus (134–104 BCE) may have commissioned the Greek translation of the book of Esther during the Maccabean period, thus concurring with Bailey's suggestion that the book is post-Persian. Finally, Karen Jobes explains that it is difficult to date the book, but it was probably composed between the fifth century and third century BCE.[301]

The Greek Text B, the Septuagint, diverges from the Masoretic Text. Scholars such as Adele Reinhartz assert that the Greek Esther is a translation derived from a Hebrew text that is analogous although not identical to the Masoretic Text, likely postdating it, though this remains uncertain.[302] Moore further contends that it is a literary translation.[303]

Scholars such as Moore, Roland Murphy, and Berlin, agree that the book of Esther should be read as a work of fiction rather than a historical account.[304] Moore emphasises that since the eighteenth century, claims regarding Esther's historicity have been increasingly rejected.[305] Berlin indicates that although the text functions as fiction, ancient audiences may

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[297]Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 140.
[298]Moore, *Esther*, ix.
[299]Moore, *Esther*, ix.
[300] H. Neil Richardson, 'Esther,' in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick, 12 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1976), 3:256.
[301]Karen H. Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 29.
[302]Adele Reinhartz, 'The Greek Additions to Esther', in *Women's Bible Commentary*, 20th Anniversary ed., rev. and updated, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 396.
[303]Moore, *Esther*, Ixi.
[304]Berlin, *Esther*, xv. See also Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, 154; and Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, xlv.
[305]Moore, 'Archaeology and the Book of Esther,' 63.

have perceived it as fact.[306] Murphy explores a wide range of genre classifications but ultimately concludes that Esther is best understood as historical fiction.[307] Some believe that the book came from a midrash source, particularly *The Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia*, which is mentioned in Esther 10:2.[308] Jean-Daniel Macchi and other scholars consider the book of Esther to be a diasporic novel because of the literary techniques used to depict Jewish diasporic life outside of their homeland. These scholars also note that the book of Esther is like other diasporic books: Daniel, Tobit, and Judith.[309]

The book's complex textual history further complicates this diasporic reading. Variation across textual witnesses not only reveals compositional layers but also underscores how different communities reinterpreted Esther's story to address their own diasporic realities. As Martien Halvorson-Taylor and Macchi point out, the book of Esther exists in at least three distinct textual traditions: the Hebrew Masoretic Text and two Greek versions (the Septuagint and the Alpha-Text).[310] Macchi further remarks that the Hebrew form of Esther is a reworking of an earlier proto-Esther, from which the Greek version may be reconstructed.[311] Together, these perspectives highlight that the diversity of textual witnesses is not merely a matter of preservation but a key to understanding the book's compositional and reception history.

The Greek versions of the book of Esther include six passages not found in the Masoretic text, including Addition B, the text of the king's edict authorising the destruction of the Persian Jewry; Addition C, the prayers of Mordecai and Esther; and Addition D, Esther's unauthorized approach to the king.[312] The presence of these Greek additions raises important questions concerning the origins and development of the text. Scholars and early translators have long debated which additions were composed in Greek and which preserve Semitic roots,

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[306]Berlin, 'The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling,' 7–8. See also Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 131; and Berlin, *Esther*, xv.
[307]Murphy, 'The Forms of the Old Testament Literature: Volume XIII: Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, Esther,' 154.
[308]Moore, 'Archaeology and the Book of Esther,' 62–79.
[309]Macchi, 'The Book of Esther,' 62. Berlin likewise conveys that the Book of Esther is diasporic; see Berlin, 'The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling,' 7. See also Carol Meyers, 'Esther,' in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 324; Reinhartz, 'The Greek Book of Esther,' 396; and Berlin, *Esther*, xv.
[310]Halvorson-Taylor, 'Secrets and Lies,' 467; Macchi, 'The Book of Esther,' 62.
[311]Macchi, 'The Book of Esther,' 62.
[312]Berlin, 'Additions to the Book of Esther.' Reinhartz, 'The Greek Book of Esther,' 396–97. See also Bechtel, *Esther*, 1–2.

shedding light on the relationship between the Greek and the Hebrew versions of Esther. A later, post-Persian dating remains plausible in light of Additions C and D. Additionally, Esther is comparable to other diasporic texts, such as Maccabees, Judith, and Daniel, which may also support a later date of composition.

In the Septuagint, Additions B and E are recognised as of Greek origin, a view supported by the Coptic and Ethiopic versions, as well as early Church historians, Origen and Jerome.[313] While there is scholarly debate about whether Addition A is Semitic or Greek, Carey A. Moore believes that Addition A, as well as C and F, are Semitic and Palestinian, while stating that Addition D is originally Greek.[314] These differences reveal how scribes reshaped the narrative to address evolving communal concerns, offering a window into the interpretive priorities of Jewish diaspora communities, whether emphasising divine hiddenness (MT) or overt divine intervention (LXX). The Greek additions expand and reinterpret the narrative through theological and dramatic insertions; the Masoretic Text maintains a more compact and cohesive literary structure, one that scholars such as David Clines have analysed in detail.

The Masoretic Text has a clearly defined beginning, middle and end. David Clines', *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, divides the Masoretic Text of Esther into three parts: Chapters 1 and 2 as exposition, Chapters 3-9:19 as the main action, and Chapters 9:20-10:3 as the conclusion.[315] While structural analyses, such as that of Clines, offer insight into the literary composition of the text, previous readings of the book of Esther often focused less on the narrative form and more on the cultural, moral, and theological implications for the characters, especially Esther and Vashti. These readings frequently raise questions about gender, power, and agency within the text, reflecting the broader interpretive concerns of scholars.

The dating, genre and textual traditions of the book of Esther remain subjects of scholarly debate with proposed compositions ranging from Persian to Hellenistic periods. The Masoretic and Septuagint versions present distinct literary and theological emphases, particularly through the additions that expand on the narrative with dramatic and theological elements.

[313]Moore, 'On the Origins of the LXX Additions to the Book of Esther,' 384.
[314] Carey A. Moore, 'On the Origins of the LXX Additions to the Book of Esther', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, no. 3 (1973): 393.
[315]David J. A. Clines, *Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies (Sheffield UK Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2009), 9.

Scholars generally classify Esther as historical fiction or a diasporic novel, reflecting Jewish experiences outside the homeland while engaging with themes of power, survival, and identity. The textual variations, especially the Greek additions, highlight evolving interpretations of agency and resistance, subtly intersecting with questions of bodily autonomy, particularly in Esther's and Vashti's defiance of royal authority. These differences in textual traditions not only illuminate the book's complex transmission history but also invite deeper analysis of how cultural and political contexts shaped its reception and meaning. The Masoretic Text's compact drama and the Septuagint's theological expansions together demonstrate how Esther's story was continually reimagined to affirm diasporic identity—whether through subversion of power (MT) or explicit divine rescue (LXX).