Jael’s Gender Ambiguity in Judges 4 and 5.

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# **Abstract**

I argue that in Judges 4 and 5, Jael is better understood as a gender ambiguous character, rather than as a woman. My thesis addresses how Jael’s gender ambiguity has been erased or overlooked due to biblical scholars’ reliance on dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender. Judges 4 and 5 includes a range of gender markers (objects, spaces, language) that suggest Jael’s femininity and masculinity and thus indicates Jael’s gender ambiguity. Such gender ambiguity is evident throughout Jael’s narrative. Jael performs roles and behaviours which have been constructed as feminine (mother, seductress, nurturer) as well as performances identified as masculine (violence, warrior, killer). Moreover, Jael performs femininity and masculinity simultaneously throughout their narrative. Despite such evidence of gender ambiguity, scholarly interpretations of Jael identify Jael unproblematically as a woman, ignoring this character’s non-normative performances of gender. In this thesis, I contribute an original reading of Jael by interpreting the text from a non-binary perspective, employing queer methodologies combined with a holistic approach. Encouraging biblical scholars to look beyond hetero-binarised expectations, my investigation reveals Jael, not as a woman, but as a gender ambiguous character.

# **Word Count**

70,954

# **Thesis Introduction**

The focus of this thesis is Jael’s gender. In what follows, I present a gender ambiguous interpretation of the biblical character Jael, reading Judges 4 and 5 from a nonbinary perspective, to argue that Jael performs in ways that disrupt the feminine label that scholarship ascribes to them. I argue that Jael is not best understood as a woman but as a nonbinary character, one who performs gender ambiguously. I employ the phrase ‘gender ambiguous’ throughout my thesis as a synonym for nonbinary gender in order to highlight a theme of ambiguity regarding Jael.[[1]](#footnote-1) When using the term nonbinary I reference individuals or characters whose gender (or lack of gender) is not represented by an either/or option of femininity or masculinity.[[2]](#footnote-2) The verses central to this study are Jdg. 4:17-21 and Jdg. 5:24-27,[[3]](#footnote-3) the verses which make reference to Jael:

Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him.He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’”But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:17-21).

Most blessed of women be Jael,  
    the wife of Heber the Kenite,  
    of tent-dwelling women most blessed.  
He asked water and she gave him milk,  
    she brought him curds in a lordly bowl.  
She put her hand to the tent peg  
    and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet;  
she struck Sisera a blow,  
    she crushed his head,  
    she shattered and pierced his temple.  
He sank, he fell,  
    he lay still at her feet;  
at her feet he sank, he fell;  
    where he sank, there he fell dead (Jdg. 5:24-27).

I draw upon these verses throughout my thesis in order to demonstrate that interpreting Jael’s gender as ambiguous is supported by the text. I also employ a limited number of other verses, some from Judges 4 and 5 and some from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, in order to build context or draw attention to key themes in the text that reinforce my gender ambiguous reading of Jael.

This research analyses the biblical text primarily from a literary perspective and endeavours to contribute a new reading regarding the gender of the character Jael by applying a genderqueer critical approach. Whilst maintaining that this study is primarily a literary one, in this study I also recognise that all texts are a product of their context. This is most readily observable in this study where discussions of different gender markers give weight to the gender markers socio-cultural contexts, not just their narrative contexts. Undertaking this literary study, with a consideration of historical context, disrupts dominant interpretations of Jael in current scholarship and presents an alternative perspective. Interpreting Jael’s gender in such a manner involves an exploration of the biblical text for what it can reveal rather than attempting to decipher authorial intent.

I read Jael’s narrative as it appears in its final form, with the prose account of Judges 4 being followed by the poetic account of Judges 5. As is common in studies of Jael, I read Judges 4 and 5 as a single unit that tells the same story from different perspectives. Pamela Tamarkin Reis regards Judges 4 and 5 as an intentional unit, commenting that both chapters are “synchronous and sequential,”[[4]](#footnote-4) a view supported by other scholars such as Robert H. O’Connell, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, to name a few.[[5]](#footnote-5) The two Judges chapters provide the same core information and thus clearly recount the same event, yet have some differences.[[6]](#footnote-6) As Athalya Brenner states, differences between Judges 4 and 5 are “literary rather than historical, a matter of narration rather than different versions.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In the same vein, Robert Boling comments:

it is impossible to discuss this prose account of the Sisera crisis, without frequent reference to the Song of Deborah, an older poetic celebration of the same cluster of events in Ch. 5.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Thus, the prose (Judges 4) and the poetry (Judges 5) account each add different information to the overall narrative of Jael’s encounter with Sisera. Consequently, it is not uncommon for scholars to treat Jael’s narratives in Judges 4 and 5 together as a unified account, as I do.[[9]](#footnote-9) I consider Judges 4 and Judges 5 as equally valuable when analysing Jael’s gender, since scholarship has recognised that both chapters are required for a full understanding and nuanced interpretation of the text.[[10]](#footnote-10) The differences between Judges 4 and 5 are considered significant for my interpretation, rather than problematic, and feed into my multifaceted interpretation of the character of Jael as nonbinary, especially when divergences between the two accounts suggest that different genders can be attributed to Jael.

In the interest of disclosure, I identify as a “straight with a twist,”[[11]](#footnote-11) ciswoman with no affiliation to a particular religion. I have chosen to pursue a queer reading of the biblical character Jael in order to disrupt the common assumption that there are no—or not many—queer characters in the Hebrew Bible.[[12]](#footnote-12) My thesis not only highlights that queer characters are present in the Hebrew Bible and are celebrated characters, but also, through the use of a holistic approach and a queer methodology, I make apparent that there is the potential for more queer characters to be present in the Hebrew Bible than may have been initially thought. I demonstrate that queerness has been subsumed under dominant discourses of hetero-binary norms and thus makes invisible much non-normativity.

Fundamental to the originality of this study is its challenge to scholarship’s attribution of Jael as a feminine character;[[13]](#footnote-13) I argue that Jael should not be understood as a woman, but as a gender ambiguous character. Biblical scholars have commented that within the Book of Judges, especially in Chapters 4 and 5, there is a theme of gender, with frequent scholarly references to gender play or gender reversal.[[14]](#footnote-14)The passages that are the focus of this study (Jdg. 4:17-21 and 5:24-27) demonstrate this clearly. Jael’s performances alone are evidence of this theme since Jael undertakes behaviours commonly ascribed to more than one gender.[[15]](#footnote-15) Jael’s encounter with Sisera is particularly illuminating regarding Jael’s gender ambiguity since in order to overcome Sisera Jael embodies characteristics expected of men andwomen, simultaneously, in a gender ambiguous manner.

Jael’s narrative has lent itself to a number of other ambiguous readings which scholars have readily accepted; this suggests that my claim that Jael can be read as having ambiguous gender is not out of place in Judges 4 and 5. I use the language of ambiguity, especially the phrase ‘gender ambiguous’ in reference to Jael, in order to highlight wider ambiguities running throughout Judges 4 and 5, making evident a theme of ambiguity, of which Jael’s gender is a part. For example, there is ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of the Hebrew term *bəraqqātow,*[[16]](#footnote-16)commonly translated as “into his temple”:

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple [*bəraqqātow*],[[17]](#footnote-17) until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:21).

Studies on Jael recognise ambiguity regarding whether Jael hammered the tent peg into Sisera’s mouth, throat, neck, temple or elsewhere around his head with opinions diverging.[[18]](#footnote-18) There is also a lack of clarity regarding whether an offer of hospitality existed between Jael and Sisera.[[19]](#footnote-19) Also commonly discussed as an ambiguity is whether Jael’s interaction with Sisera can be framed as a sexual one. Although the majority of commentators interpret Jael’s narrative as including a sexual encounter, some query whether this interaction should be understood as consensual sex or as “reversed” rape[[20]](#footnote-20) due to the violent phallic penetration involved.[[21]](#footnote-21) Jael and their narrative are thus at the centre of numerous scholarly discussions, with these examples being only a select sample of the academic conversations regarding ambiguities in this text.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Despite the various ambiguities in Judges 4 and 5,[[23]](#footnote-23) biblical scholars are not divided regarding Jael’s gender, even with Jael’s gender being central to a number of studies.[[24]](#footnote-24) While Jael is described as a woman who acts “in defiance of traditional gender expectations,”[[25]](#footnote-25) commentators are, nevertheless, in agreement that Jael’s character is “a woman.”[[26]](#footnote-26) I have found no studies on Jael that label this character as gender ambiguous and no studies that demonstrate that labelling Jael as a woman is not the only way—or that it is not the most suitable way—of representing Jael’s gender, as this study does. There are, however, a few studies of Jael that draw attention to Jael’s “complex” or “liminal” gender, which are discussed at various points in this thesis. These studies take steps towards identifying Jael’s gender ambiguity, yet, continue to binarise Jael as a woman. Even more frequently, Jael’s femininity is perpetuated by referring to Jael as ‘her’ and ‘she.’ Gendering Jael as a man or as gender ambiguous through pronouns and direct expressions of gender does not occur in scholarship on Jael.[[27]](#footnote-27) An interpretation that aims to present Jael with liminal gender is at stake when Jael’s femininity is labelled as their principal (or only) gender through the use of feminine gendered pronouns. Jennie Barnsley argues that personal pronouns are words that construct a particular “gender landscape.”[[28]](#footnote-28) By this she means that commonly used pronouns such as she/her and he/him, as well as binary gender labels like man/woman, construct a situation in which it appears that those two are the only available pronouns, and therefore the only existing genders.[[29]](#footnote-29) In order to avoid labelling Jael in a way that erases their masculinity while reinforcing binary femininity, I refrain from using gendered pronouns to refer to Jael. Instead, I use Jael’s name and gender-neutral pronouns where appropriate, excluding direct quotations, in order to allow Jael to embody femininity andmasculinity in an ambiguous manner.

As well as labelling Jael as a woman/wife (4:17), the Hebrew of Judges appears to label Jael as a woman through feminine pronouns and thus has been assumed by the majority of scholars to designate Jael as a woman. Drawing such a conclusion is problematic since Hebrew, as a language, is limited in its expression of sex and gender. The Hebrew language is limited to cis pronouns, meaning that the language of pronouns does not distinguish between sex and gender and provides no option for a non-cis individual to be referred to through singular pronouns. Thus, when the English translates the Hebrew as “she” and/or “her,” in reference to Jael, it is unclear whether this references Jael as a female or a woman. The rigidity of the Hebrew language, much the same as English until the relatively recent introduction of neopronouns,[[30]](#footnote-30) does not provide the option to label Jael as a nonbinary female since it does not disentangle sex from gender. Since the text goes to great lengths to portray Jael as a character that disrupts the gender binary, the pronouns used to refer to Jael can be interpreted as indicating that Jael is female, with no comment nor bearing on Jael’s gender.

The pronouns used to refer to Jael do not carry much weight in comparison to their use to refer to other characters, in particular Deborah.[[31]](#footnote-31) David J. Zucker and Moshe Reis recognise that there is emphasis in the “literal Hebrew words” stressing Deborah’s femininity and femaleness[[32]](#footnote-32) which does not occur with regards to Jael. Trent Butler comments that “the writer does everything the Hebrew language allows to emphasize that [Deborah] is a female, not a male”.[[33]](#footnote-33) Colleen M. Conway draws on Butler’s work to make the same point about Deborah being stressed as a woman and as a female.[[34]](#footnote-34) Conway explains that,

Deborah’s introduction includes two occurrences of the noun for “woman” (‘*ishah*), the use of female form of the noun for “prophet,” (*nebi’ah*) and two occurrences of the independent female pronoun (*hi’*).[[35]](#footnote-35)

Her comment demonstrates that the Hebrew stresses Deborah’s sex/gender in a way that it does not do with regards to Jael. Similarly, Amy Kalmanofsky comments that “[b]y referring to Deborah as a *woman* prophet אִשָּׁ֣ה נְבִיאָ֔ה, as opposed to the simple נְבִיאָ֔ה, the female form of the word for prophet, the text emphasizes that Deborah[‘s]” femininity/femaleness.[[36]](#footnote-36) Also, Rachel C. Rasmussen notes, “[t]he Hebrew stresses her sex, saying literally, ‘Now Deborah, *woman* prophet*ess woman* of Lappi*doth* was judging Israel at that time,”[[37]](#footnote-37) Deborah is also explicitly called a “mother” (5:7).[[38]](#footnote-38) Thus, the Hebrew which is frequently translated into English as gendering Jael as a woman does not disrupt an interpretation of Jael as a nonbinary character since it is limited by the Hebrew language’s binary nature. Further, despite the limitations of the Hebrew language, Jael’s femaleness and/or femininity is not stressed in the way Deborah’s femaleness *and* position as a woman *is.*

The binary label of femininity attributed to Jael by commentators goes unchallenged in existing scholarship.[[39]](#footnote-39)Studies interested in Jael’s gender frame only Jael’s femininity as significant. Scholarship acknowledges that Jael performs in a variety of ways constructed as feminine, such as mothering and nurturing,[[40]](#footnote-40) whilst also recognising that Jael performs a range of roles and behaviours that are constructed as masculine and thus expected to be performed by men, such as violence and killing.[[41]](#footnote-41) When Jael’s masculinity is noted it is commonly framed as gender reversal and is constructed as temporary or as secondary to Jael’s femininity.[[42]](#footnote-42) Despite Jael’s femininity *and* masculinity being widely noted, the potential for Jael to be interpreted as a character with nonbinary gender is not explored in scholarship while interpretations of Jael’s binary femininity are widespread.[[43]](#footnote-43) I identify Jael’s feminine performances andtheir masculine performances as previous studies have done. However, my analysis of Jael’s performances of more than one gender treats their different performances of gender as equally significant for understanding Jael’s gender. Consequently, I contribute an alternative interpretation, one which demonstrates that Jael can be understood as a nonbinary character. This contribution accepts what the text presents, including its disruptions of heteronormative binary gender. As such, I treat Jael’s femininity as equally significant for understanding the character as their masculinity and in doing so evidence the multiplicity of characters represented in the Hebrew Bible.

Below, I outline the methodology applied throughout my thesis and discuss a number of concepts that are foundational to this study. These foundational concepts include my understanding of gender as performative, as Judith Butler has argued, and thus not as binary.[[44]](#footnote-44) I will also explain how I understand the binary terms femininity and masculinity and how I use the phrase gender ambiguous. I then move on to analyse the concept of gender reversal—which I show to be problematic—before explaining what I refer to when discussing gender markers. I address gender markers as a general concept as well as more specifically in relation to a group of gender markers that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has coined as “woman’s weapons.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Within this discussion of gender markers I make clear why they are vital for my interpretation of Jael as gender ambiguous. I end this section on foundational concepts with an explanation of my application of a holistic approach. The final section of this introduction presents summaries of my thesis’s four chapters.

## Methodology

I employ a genderqueer theoretical framework in order to undertake a nonbinary interpretation of Jael’s gender, demonstrating the potential to recognise Jael as having ambiguous gender. As with many queer interpretations of the Bible, my reading interacts with the Bible primarily as a literary text and understands Jael as a literary character, not as a historical figure, despite historical contextual elements feeding into interpretations of both Jael’s gender and the narrative more widely. While the term queer has commonly been associated with queer people and communities,[[46]](#footnote-46) grouping together those “who identify as non-normative in terms of th55eir gender or sexuality,”[[47]](#footnote-47) here it is employed as a deconstructive tool that uncovers the constructed nature of gender in all situations, not just in regards to people who identify as or are labelled as queer.[[48]](#footnote-48) Thus, here it is used to highlight queer performances or queer relationships as well as to address queer aspects of Jael’s narrative. As such, a genderqueer approach is useful for adopting a nonbinary reading of Jael to disrupt scholarship’s feminine binarisation of Jael’s gender.[[49]](#footnote-49)

A genderqueer approach resists constructed hetero-binaries in favour of diversity. According to Deryn Guest, instead of perpetuating a binary sex/gender system, queer methodologies focus on deconstructing regimes of normalcy by “focusing on the fissures that expose their constructedness.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Queer theory regards sex and gender as separate categories that, while socially intertwined, are not exclusively dependent on each other. Rather than expectations of females as feminine and males as masculine, queer methodologies perceive a range of sexes which can be attached to any of a variety of genders. As noted by June L. Reich, queer methodologies permit a matrix of ways to perform gender without the anchor of the sexed body.[[51]](#footnote-51) A genderqueer approach embraces discontinuity between bodies and gender, dismantling the limitations inherent in a binary sex/gender system.[[52]](#footnote-52) Subsequently, I use the terms man and woman, masculine and feminine, to refer to gender categories without inference regarding sex. Since this methodology does not conform to heteronormative expectations, it can be employed to expose queer aspects of a text, especially queer aspects that may have been overlooked in previous studies, validating difference and non-conformity.[[53]](#footnote-53) Consequently, it is the most appropriate methodology for this study as it aims to challenge what is normalised,[[54]](#footnote-54) as Jael’s binary femininity is in scholarship. It is also the most useful methodology for this thesis as it encourages the visibility of queerness as well as the exploration of queerness for what it can offer to an interpretation of Jael’s gender. This is achievable since a genderqueer framework enables me to seek out “non-normative”[[55]](#footnote-55) and “norm-critical”[[56]](#footnote-56) elements regarding Jael’s gender and actively explore the ways in which these elements are significant for understanding Jael’s gender in a manner that is attentive to the text rather than reliant on dominant discourses of hetero-binary frameworks of gender. Employing a queer framework means that my interpretation of Jael’s gender does not assume that every aspect of the narrative does or should conform to hetero-binary notions of gender.[[57]](#footnote-57) Thus, queer theory helps me uncover a new way of understanding Jael’s gender.

The majority of previous studies on Jael are written from a feminist perspective. It is not within the remit of these studies to frame Jael other than as a woman because it is Jael’s position as a woman that they take as their focus. Also, many of the previous feminist studies on Jael pursue different lines of enquiry to this study due to their methodological approaches and many studies on Jael appear not to have considered the possibility that Jael can or should be interpreted in a way other than as a woman. Older feminist works on Jael are almost unanimously “essentialist regarding sex, gender, and sexuality.”[[58]](#footnote-58) They assume that gender is a stable marker of identity, which is a key way in which my study differs. While this thesis aims to shift the focus regarding what is central in the text as opposed to what is marginal and engages with socio-cultural power imbalances regarding the expectations of men and women, as feminist studies often do,[[59]](#footnote-59) the questions I pose do not aim to further the feminist endeavour of bringing women from the margins to the centre, nor does this study aim to give women a voice as many feminist studies attempt. Instead, the questions addressed in this thesis are grounded in the assumption that gender is not a stable marker of identity and that gender is not binary. Consequently, I ask questions that seek to understand aspects of Jael’s character that have previously been addressed from a perspective of hetero-binary gender. Regardless of the difference in perspective and divergence of our aims, these feminist studies have been important in developing my own interpretation; I engage with many of their perspectives regarding Jael’s gender and build upon many of their conclusions resulting in an interpretation of Jael as a nonbinary character.

My choice to engage with a genderqueer methodology encourages a more nuanced and multidimensional interpretation of Jael’s gender than previous studies on Jael have offered. I address queerness—elements understood as queer since they do not conform to a binary perspective—aspects that have gone largely unexplored in previous studies of Jael. I resist the assumption that the text adheres to hetero-binary frameworks[[60]](#footnote-60) and thus my queer interpretation of Jael’s gender may “startle and surprise,” as Ken Stone expects queer biblical interpretations to do.[[61]](#footnote-61) What is not surprising, however, is that the Hebrew Bible includes characters that do not fit neatly into a binary framework of man/woman, since evidence of gender fluidity is abundant in the Ancient world. For example, numerous scholars of the Hebrew Bible recognise the first human (Adam) as being presented as having ambiguous sex and gender and since the first human is made in the “image” of God, as God’s “likeness” (Gen. 1:26-27), God too can be viewed as having sex and gender that do not conform to a binary framework.[[62]](#footnote-62) As Richard H. Bell comments, “an androgynous Adam was created in the image of an androgynous God.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Irit Ziffer points out that in Genesis 5 Adam’s creation is mentioned, in the Hebrew, as including both sexes and genders and thus Adam “represented [the] unified wholeness” of male and female and man and woman.[[64]](#footnote-64) *Adam*, in the Hebrew refers to ‘the man,’ or ‘the human’ and is not used as a proper name until Gen. 4:25, “Adam lay with his wife again,” highlighting that the first meaning of *adam* is as ‘the man’ or ‘the human,’ encompassing more than one gender.[[65]](#footnote-65) It is only when Adam was split, and Eve was formed, did the distinct male/masculine and female/feminine identities come into being.[[66]](#footnote-66) This understanding of an ambiguous human being separated into different sexes and genders is often discussed as an explanation for Gen. 2:21-22, the second creation story, where Eve is created from Adam’s rib. Mark Crosby notes that “Adam must have contained a female principal within his initial nature to have the first woman formed from ‘one of his ribs’” stressing the perception of sex and gender as not adhering to a strict binary in the creation stories of the Hebrew Bible.[[67]](#footnote-67) Elsewhere in the Bible characters who do not conform to a binary framework of gender are apparent. For example, Nokuphiwa S. Langeni refers to Joseph as “zir,”[[68]](#footnote-68) to aid their interpretation of Joseph as a character who does not fit into a binary framework of gender. Also, Lori Hope Lefkovitz discusses “Jacob masquerading as Esau as one origin story of Jewish gender ambiguity and performative masculinity,” making clear that there are multiple masculinities evident in the Hebrew Bible and a lack of rigidity and distinct binaries.[[69]](#footnote-69) Similarly Amy Kalmanofsky considers passages which exhibit “Jeremiah’s gender flexibility,”[[70]](#footnote-70) and more generally, Adrian Thatcher notes that “there are many references to [eunuchs] in the Hebrew Bible. They were of course gender ambiguous,” stressing that the ancient world recognised more than two genders.[[71]](#footnote-71)

There is also evidence outside of the Hebrew Bible that in the Ancient Near East gender was not perceived as a strict binary model. For example, Innana, an ancient Mesopotamian goddess also worship by the Assyrians and Babylonians later as Ishtar, is recognised as having “ambiguous” and “androgynous” gender, “betwixt and between,” by Rivkah Harris, who also states:[[72]](#footnote-72)

Their [Inna-Ishtar’s cultic followers] transvestism simulated the androgyny of Inanna-Ishtar. It was perhaps the inversion of the male/female binary opposition that thereby neutralized this opposition. By emulating their goddess who was both female and male, they shattered the boundary between the sexes. Thus, at her festival time the full range of human emotions might be freely manifested without regard to the stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Harris stresses that “[o]ver and over again the texts [Inanna-Ishatar’s stories] juxtapose the masculine and feminine traits and behaviour of the goddess.”[[74]](#footnote-74) In the goddess’s narratives she is framed as a gardener, “In male-dominated Mesopotamia, a king usually held the title ‘Gardener’… Indeed, gardening and ploughing could be metaphors for taking the male part in sexual intercourse.”[[75]](#footnote-75) Innan-Ishtar was also a seductress, depicted as often looking for men to seduce,[[76]](#footnote-76) as well as “compassionate, supportive, and nurturing and assertive, aggressive, and strong-willed.”[[77]](#footnote-77) This nonbinary presentation of Inanna-Ishtar is in line with Carole Fontaine’s analysis of the Sumerian stories of Inanna. She uses a folkloristic methodology and notes that "Inanna fills with ease the typical action roles ascribed to male characters in traditional compositions.... At the same time, Inanna resists total 'masculinization' and retains her feminine nature."[[78]](#footnote-78) Thus, Fontaine is highlighting that Inanna is both masculine and feminine and does not adhere to a binary framework of gender.[[79]](#footnote-79)

It is important to acknowledge that much of the language I use in relation to sex, gender and a gender binary would not have been meaningful terms in the ancient world, since what is understood by these terms and their related concepts is grounded in a given culture.[[80]](#footnote-80) However, these brief examples of gender ambiguity in the ancient world demonstrate that, while discussing gender through the use terms such as ‘masculine,’ ‘feminine,’ ‘nonbinary’ and ‘gender ambiguous’ can be labelled as anachronistic, ideas of gender that go beyond a binary framework are evident in many of our sources of understanding for the ancient world. As such, the world in which the Hebrew Bible was composed and edited, as well as the literary texts which influenced that process, evidence gender as going beyond a binary model. While constructs relating to gender change over time and are culturally determined, there are crossovers and similarities which evidence gender as “a map of intersecting similarities and differences”[[81]](#footnote-81) that allows today’s scholars to continue to discuss such topics. My discussions of gender and a binary are considered in relation to the ancient world while being tempered with an awareness of the fluidity and changeability of these concepts over time and space.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Returning to my consideration of Jael, despite a long history of nonbinary gender presentations in the Hebrew Bible and the wider Ancient Near East and its literature, Jael is still unusual in that they perform femininity andmasculinity simultaneously throughout their narrative, not just momentarily at key junctures, but at all points. Jael’s performances of femininity and masculinity are even more unusual since Jael performs behaviours relating to both binary frameworks of gender concurrently; Jael presents as both feminine andmasculine simultaneously throughout their narrative. Central to this thesis is the concern that Jael, a character who exhibits femininity as well asmasculinity, is labelled as a woman; only a single facet of their gender is represented by this label. Consequently, Jael’s gender ambiguity has thus far been overlooked in scholarship.

A holistic approach, which is explained in the following subsection ‘Foundational Concepts,’[[83]](#footnote-83) is particularly useful in my endeavour to present a more nuanced and multifaceted interpretation of Jael’s gender. This holistic approach brings together various perspectives, acknowledging the ways in which Jael performs femininity as well as masculinity, showing that Jael cannot be defined by merely one binary category since they perform more than one, simultaneously, in a gender ambiguous manner. Thus, I work with binary constructions of gender to highlight that an individual who performs femininity as well as masculinity can—and should—be defined in ways other than by a single binary label. A holistic approach employs all of Jael’s gender markers, even if contradictory according to a binary schema of gender, to inform the way Jael’s gender is understood, whether these be performances, language choices, items or spaces, allowing them to equally contribute to a well-rounded interpretation of Jael’s gender. The outcome is that my interpretation represents Jael’s gender as being more complex than a hetero-binary framework of gender can represent.

My contribution to the literature on Jael is significant as it brings togetherJael’s gender markers under a gender label that represents all facets of Jael’s gender, rather than privileging only those that suggest Jael’s femininity. My approach allows Jael’s gender to be recognised as complex and represented as multifaceted in a way that other methodologies, such as many feminist methodologies,[[84]](#footnote-84) often eschew.[[85]](#footnote-85) By employing a queer-theoretical framework this thesis works to unsettle what is presumed in past interpretations of Jael and to disrupt what is assumed regarding the way Jael’s gender is perceived. The implications of this study and my approach to interpreting Jael’s gender for the field of biblical studies is that many characters heteronormative genders have been assumed with disruptive performances being historically interpreted as momentary or temporary. My approach demonstrates that when a character’s performances do not fit expectations of their assumed gender there may be a more nuanced way of perceiving their gender. These characters can be read in a way that does not restrict gender to an either/or framework and one that accepts as significant all gender indicators relating to said character in a manner which brings queerness to the fore. My thesis draws attention to the existence of nonbinary characters in the Hebrew Bible and presents an interpretation that results from reading queer and heteronormative elements of a character’s gender concurrently as equally significant.

## Foundational concepts

Concepts that are foundational to my thesis and thus my nonbinary interpretation of Jael’s gender, discussed here, are threaded throughout my thesis and thus reoccur in numerous chapters. Each of the following concepts are informative for perceiving Jael as gender ambiguous and are significant tools for recognising the manner in which Jael’s gender has been addressed in current scholarship.

### Gender Performativity

A foundational concept for this thesis is that gender is performative. Gender as performative is supported by gender scholars such as John Beynon, Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville who state that femininity, like “masculinity[,] is a performance.”[[86]](#footnote-86) Drawing from Butler’s work, I acknowledge that any individual, regardless of whether they are sexed or how they are sexed, can identify as any gender.[[87]](#footnote-87) This is because I understand gender to be constructed through the repetition of social discourses[[88]](#footnote-88) by which individuals become the conveyors of socio-cultural structures; I do not perceive gender to be “pre-existing.”[[89]](#footnote-89) Butler claims that gender is not “pre-existing” and the theory of performativity rejects the idea of a natural gender and binary gender that is not based in repeated socialised performances.[[90]](#footnote-90) According to Butler, nothing regarding an individual’s identity is fixed; gender is fluid and constructed rather than static and inherent. Thus, gender as performative and fluid is an understanding which is in direct opposition to binary gender.[[91]](#footnote-91) Gender as performative is central to my argument, as I analyse gender markers, in particular Jael’s performances of gender, as indicative of how Jael’s gender can be understood. I do not assume that the binary label of femininity which scholars ascribe to Jael is appropriate, nor do I allow that attributed label to limit my reading of Jael’s performances of more than one gender.

Butler’s work on performativity theory is useful for this thesis as she argues that naming something can create what it names.[[92]](#footnote-92) Butler uses the example of the process by which labelling a baby as a boy or a girl establishes whether that baby is socially constructed as a boy or as a girl.[[93]](#footnote-93) This highlights that gender is not fixed or natural but something created which is then attributed to an individual.[[94]](#footnote-94) Ascribing a name or a label—particularly in relation to gender—sets a boundary around that which is named. That boundary dictates socio-cultural ways that an individual is expected to behave and which of their behaviours is accepted. Through a process of naming, an individual is assigned a gender and is thus expected to adhere to the boundaries that the gender associated with that name designates.[[95]](#footnote-95) This is reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”[[96]](#footnote-96) Beauvoir’s statement highlights that what is constructed as expected of a woman is not a natural phenomenon grounded in biological determinism, but a cultural creation.[[97]](#footnote-97) In this way gender is revealed to be a learned script that is normalised through repetition rather than being natural.[[98]](#footnote-98)

That language has the power to create what it names is a particularly relevant concept for my thesis, as throughout I claim that Jael has been labelled in biblical scholarship as a woman and thus constructed as such.[[99]](#footnote-99) As discussed in Chapter 1, Jael appears to have been named as feminine by scholars because the text introduces Jael as a woman/wife (Jdg. 4:17). Naming Jael according to this label, placing feminine boundaries on Jael, and thus constructing the character of Jael as feminine based on this label in the text is problematic because Jael is also named by the text through the use of a masculine name despite a feminine form of the same name being available.[[100]](#footnote-100)As Ellen van Wolde states, Jael’s“name is a yiqtol third person *masculine* singular. She [Jael] is not called [*tā‘ēl*] (third person feminine singular), but [*yā‘ēl*].”[[101]](#footnote-101) Biblical scholars name, and thus construct, Jael as feminine without acknowledging Jael’s masculine name in the text. Thus, Jael’s masculine name does not influence their interpretations of Jael’s gender. The text labels Jael as a woman as well as naming Jael in a masculine way; that a naming process can create what it names leads me to perceive Jael as gender ambiguous. Although biblical scholars perpetually name Jael as a woman and thus continually frame Jael as such by imposing boundaries relating to women and femininity, I highlight that this is not the only way of perceiving Jael’s gender nor is it the way Judges 4 and 5 names, and thus constructs, Jael. The consequences of scholarship labelling Jael as woman, despite Jael being introduced with a feminine label anda masculine name, are serious: that process results in the erasure of masculinity attributed to Jael in the text and in this way the potential to interpret Jael as gender ambiguous is made invisible.

As well as Butler’s work on gender, Jack Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* contributes a useful concept for interpreting Jael as gender ambiguous.[[102]](#footnote-102) Halberstam comments that masculinity should not be considered as a “synonym for men.”[[103]](#footnote-103) By this, I understand Halberstam to argue that an individual’s performance of masculinity does not designate them as a man, following the principle that gender is fluid rather than fixed. Assigning a masculine label based on performances of masculinity would potentially erase much of that individual’s identity and many of their gendered performances which are not constructed as masculine, thereby reinforcing a binary framework of gender and forcing that individual to be labelled in a binary manner. Halberstam’s claim that masculinity does not equate only to men is useful when considering Jael because, although Jael performs masculinity I do not argue that Jael should be understood as a man since they also perform femininity. Halberstam’s study underscores that there are more than two binary ways of ‘doing gender’ and thus that there are more ways of labelling individuals than just as a man or as a woman.[[104]](#footnote-104) Approaching Jael’s gender with these concepts in mind allows me to highlight that the Hebrew Bible includes a diverse array of characters, such as Jael, that do not always conform to hetero-binary frameworks.

### Binary Gender and Gender Ambiguity

Recognition of gender as performative—and with this the fluidity of gender—brings me to my next foundational concepts, binary gender, and how this dichotomy can be disrupted in favour of a multiple ways of performing gender, including gender ambiguity. I understand the construction of gender as only presenting binary options to be problematic since the diversity of ways in which gender can be performed are not presented. Binary gender erases a number of gender identities and thus does not represent all individuals. I do not introduce a new framework for understanding gender as such a framework would merely place a new set of boundaries on how gender should be perceived. Instead, I understand gender simply as not binary, but maintain that masculinity, femininity and other expressions of gender exist. This perspective allows me to continue to engage with the concepts of femininity and masculinity without reinforcing a binary framework of gender.

Despite undertaking a nonbinary interpretation of Jael’s gender, where I address simultaneous performances of femininity andmasculinity, I continue to use the binarised terms of feminine/femininity and masculine/masculinity. I do so because this thesis does not attempt to challenge what is socially constructed as feminine or masculine.[[105]](#footnote-105) Rather, my nonbinary interpretation of Jael’s gender demonstrates that masculinity and femininity, while constructed as oppositional, are embodied simultaneously by Jael as an exhibition of gender ambiguity. Consequently, the gender categories of femininity and masculinity are vital concepts for understanding Jael’s gender and are engaged with throughout my thesis.

My understanding of femininity and of masculinity acknowledges that while there are many common features among women there is not a single common feature of all women or all feminine performances with the same being true of men and masculinity. There is, however, a complex system of similarities converging and crossing.[[106]](#footnote-106) I adopt Nicholson’s way of understanding the term ‘woman’ (and thus also the term ‘man’) which is worth quoting at length:

[Woman is] a word whose meaning is not found through the elucidation of some specific characterisation but is found through the elaboration of a complex network of characteristics. This suggestion certainly allows for the fact that there might be some characteristics—such as possessing a vagina and being over a certain age—that play a dominant role within such a network over long periods of time. It also allows for the fact that the word may be used in contexts where such characteristics are not present, for example, in English-speaking countries prior to the adoption of the concept of *vagina*, or in contemporary English-speaking societies to refer to those who do not have vaginas but who still feel themselves to be women, that is, to transsexuals before a medical operation. Moreover, if our frame of reference is not only the English term *woman* but also all those words into which *woman* is translatable, then such a mode of thinking about the meaning of *woman* becomes even more helpful… this way of thinking about meaning works on the assumption that such patterns are found within history and must be documented as such.[[107]](#footnote-107)

Nicholson’s argument highlights that there is no particular set of characteristics shared by all women, nor is there any need for there to be such shared features. Instead, she stresses that the commonality expected among members of a particular gender can be framed as “a map of intersecting similarities and differences.”[[108]](#footnote-108)

In the same way that those who are feminine or those who are masculine do not share a set of features, those who are gender ambiguous do not share a set of features. It seems appropriate that gender ambiguity is difficult to define and as such resists being normalised, struggling against categorisation.[[109]](#footnote-109) This is evident from scholars’ attempts to define or explain what is meant by gender ambiguity and their difficulty in pinning down expectations of a nonbinary individual. Their definitions, whilst useful, remain vague and largely outline what gender ambiguity is not rather than what it is. Guest, when discussing the biblical character Samson, understands gender ambiguity to refer to an individual who is “neither one gender nor the other,” as an individual “who confounds our gender categories.”[[110]](#footnote-110) Halberstam’s understanding of gender ambiguity describes an individual who is “[n]ot-man and not-woman… also not androgynous or in-between.”[[111]](#footnote-111) These attempts at defining make clear that gender ambiguity disrupts the constructed notion of binary gender as fixed, separate and distinct. The difficulty of specifying what is denoted by gender ambiguity may explain why there have been so few attempts in existing studies to define its usage or apply it in interpretations of biblical characters.

When used in this thesis, gender ambiguity and nonbinary gender are terms that highlight the absence of a clear binary gender and positively signal a form of gender that does not conform to a binary framework. My use of the phrases gender ambiguity and nonbinary gender can refer to performances that mix or blur acts of femininity and masculinity or to a single act that can be simultaneously constructed in differently gendered ways, as relating to multiple genders.[[112]](#footnote-112) Drawing on Nicholson’s explanation of the term woman, I understand gender ambiguity as an “elaboration of a complex network of characteristics, with different elements of this network being present in different” people.[[113]](#footnote-113) Thus, I understand nonbinary individuals as exhibiting “characteristics” and “elements” of femininity and masculinity but in no fixed or predetermined way. It is my intention that the phrases nonbinary gender and gender ambiguity maintain some of their ambiguity. Any effort to define what is, by definition, unclear would inevitably enforce a new set of boundaries that by their very nature gender ambiguity and a nonbinary label work to disrupt.

Gender ambiguity is a foundational concept for this thesis as, due to Jael’s mixed performances of gender, I argue that Jael does not perform in line with gendered expectations of women, as laid out by gender scholars.[[114]](#footnote-114) Nor does Jael, as I will show, adhere to gendered expectations of men.[[115]](#footnote-115) Rather, I argue that Jael performs according to the expectations of men as well as women. Binary gender frames masculinity and femininity as mutually exclusive opposites; to be a woman is to not be a man and vice versa.[[116]](#footnote-116) The gender indicators evident throughout Jael’s narrative are, at best, contradictory when read against a binary schema of gender. Labelling Jael as a woman is only possible if many of Jael’s masculine gender indicators are purposefully ignored and the many and varied ways Jael performs more than one gender simultaneously are disregarded. Consequently, despite Jael being historically characterised as a woman in biblical scholarship, Jael’s performances of more than one gender support my argument that Jael is better understood as a gender ambiguous character.

Some commentators have acknowledged that Jael embodies femininity andmasculinity. They refer to Jael as a ‘manly woman,’ which recognises Jael’s performances of more than one gender.[[117]](#footnote-117) However, such a phrase gives supremacy to one gender over the other and reinforces binary gender. By calling Jael a ‘manly woman,’ the ‘woman’ part of the label represents Jael’s authentic gender and the ‘manly’ part is represented as an addition to Jael’s femininity, an artificial aspect of Jael’s gender. Butler’s example is particularly useful in illustrating this:

If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the “reality” of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks “reality,” and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion.[[118]](#footnote-118)

In order to represent Jael’s embodiment of multiple genders, where each of Jael’s differing facets of gender are considered ‘real’ rather than as “mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion,” I choose to label Jael as gender ambiguous instead of as a ‘manly woman’ or ‘feminine man.’ Depicting Jael as nonbinary disrupts the notion that there are only two genders. While the expectation that Jael performs according to masculinity and femininity is included in a label of gender ambiguity, so too are other ways of expressing gender such as blurred gender, fluid gender and merged or mixed gender. Gender ambiguous, I will demonstrate, is a more fitting way of representing Jael’s exhibition of more than one gender.

### Gender Reversal

Gender reversal is not a fundamental concept for my study, but is a fundamental concept for existing studies of Jael’s gender and informs scholars’ interpretations of Jael’s gender. Gender reversal presents performances of gender as temporarily “shifting the ground from one to the other” binary gender, notes Guest.[[119]](#footnote-119) As such, it reinforces a framework of binary gender which I aim to disrupt through applying a genderqueer methodology. Consequently, I address gender reversal as a problematic concept in a number of my thesis chapters.

Gender reversal has many of the same problematic consequences as referring to Jael as a ‘manly woman’: it is grounded in a binary framework and represents one binary gender as ‘real’ and the other as artificial. However, unlike labelling Jael as a ‘manly woman’, gender reversal does not present Jael as embodying both binary genders at one time, albeit with one being given primacy over the other. Gender reversal is pervasive in scholarship on Jael and is used as a method of framing Jael as switching between binary genders. Thus, while referring to Jael as a ‘manly woman’ is problematic, gender reversal is arguably more so and is applied to Jael far more frequently in scholarship.

Gender reversal is commonly used by scholars to address Jael’s performances of masculinity. Scholars’ use of gender reversal in studies of Jael is only employed when Jael embodies masculinity; gender reversal is not noted as occurring when Jael performs femininity since Jael is understood to ‘really’ be a woman. Suggestions of Jael’s femininity are given more legitimacy in scholarship than Jael’s masculinity which is presented as being temporary and unnatural.[[120]](#footnote-120) Each of my chapters demonstrate how gender reversal has been repeatedly applied to Jael’s various performances of masculinity by biblical scholars, since Jael is understood as a woman. Scholar’s use of gender reversal when Jael, whom they perceive to be a woman, performs in ways expected of men, results in Jael’s femininity being reinforced despite Jael’s actions going beyond the constructed boundary of femininity or contradicting commentators’ expectations of femininity.[[121]](#footnote-121)

The concept of gender reversal is problematic because it reinforces a binary gender system. As Guest notes:

gender reversal has been part of the accepted—acceptable?—commentarial language for Judges 4–5 and the figure of Jael for years… The terminology of gender reversal reinforces the two-sex, two-gender binary of male/female and masculine/feminine. It simply shifts the ground from one to the other.[[122]](#footnote-122)

Gender reversal presents an individual’s gender as temporarily changing from one binary gender to the other binary gender. This perception of gender reversal is supported by Nicole J. Ruane who comments that, “[w]hen feminist readers advance the notion of ‘transgression’ or ‘reversal’ they affirm the binary view of gender.”[[123]](#footnote-123) Thus, understanding gender performances through a lens of gender reversal maintains that there are only two genders and that they are separate and distinct. Gender reversal presents a ‘real’ or ‘original’ gender—in Jael’s case femininity—that is temporarily replaced by masculinity before then returning to the ‘real’ and ‘original’ gender of that person or character. As such, gender reversal allows only one gender to be recognised at one time. Butler argues that through labelling an individual as momentarily or temporarily taking on the ‘other’ gender, supremacy is created for what is constructed as the individual’s ‘first’ or ‘real’ gender with the ‘other’ gender being framed as “mere artifice.”[[124]](#footnote-124)This way of framing gender strengthens a binary notion that an individual is either masculine *or* feminine and erases the potential for them to be both simultaneously.

Prominent scholars in gender studies and biblical studies have called for a move away from gender reversal as it is grounded in, and supports, binary gender.[[125]](#footnote-125) For example, Butler, supported by gender scholars such as Chris Beasley and Armour and St. Ville as well as biblical scholars such as Guest, Ruane and David Tabb Stewart,[[126]](#footnote-126) dispute the heteronormative binary’s “claim to naturalness and originality”[[127]](#footnote-127) and encourage other scholars to distance their writing from gender reversal.[[128]](#footnote-128) Butler instead supports a move towards causing ‘gender trouble’—to challenge how femininity and masculinity are understood.[[129]](#footnote-129) Troubling gender can include disrupting what is understood by masculinity and femininity, blurring the boundary between masculinity and femininity, or unsettling the notion that binary genders are separate, distinct and mutually exclusive.[[130]](#footnote-130) My claim that Jael’s gender is ambiguous resists gender reversal and challenges the constructed separation of binary genders; arguing that Jael can be understood as nonbinary causes gender trouble. This is because gender ambiguity accepts that an individual can perform femininityand masculinity and can perform them concurrently. Working from a perspective that ruptures constructed norms opens up nonbinary interpretations and makes possible a queer, nonnormative interpretation of Jael’s performances of gender. Importantly for my claim that Jael is gender ambiguous, a queer perspective moves away from the problematic binarisation that gender reversal reinforces.

### Gender Markers

Gender markers play a significant role in each of my thesis’s chapters, as they underpin my interpretation of Jael as gender ambiguous. A gender marker can be anything that implies an individual’s, or group of individuals’, gender. Something becomes a gender marker through its repeated associations or close connection with a particular gender. According to Julia M. Asher-Greve and Joan Acker, specific tasks, roles and behaviours can imply gender along with a host of other things such as dress, occupation and language choices.[[131]](#footnote-131) These markers can include the things a person does as well as the things a person uses and even the spaces a person inhabits.[[132]](#footnote-132) Although a gender marker may have a widely assumed gender association, the gender it indicates can change based on its socio-cultural indications and its contextual implications.[[133]](#footnote-133) Consequently, a single gender marker, framed in different ways based on perspective and context, can suggest more than one gender.

My analysis of Jael’s gender markers considers common socio-cultural gendered connotations as well as contextual gendered associations. Cooking is a useful example to show how I will analyse gender markers in Jael’s narrative. Cooking has no gender but, as a gender marker, carries connotations of femininity. Cooking is associated with women through its link to the domestic sphere, a space constructed as feminine, and through its connection to providing for the needs of others, which is an expectation attached to women.[[134]](#footnote-134) Thus, cooking can be understood as a marker of feminine gender based on socio-cultural associations. However, the context of a gender marker can change and with this change of context, the marker’s implications of gender can change. Cooking can change from a feminine marker to a masculine marker if its context changes and the act of cooking is framed as barbecuing, despite barbecuing being a form of cooking.[[135]](#footnote-135) The context has changed from indoors to outdoors and from a routine chore to a leisure activity, among other things.[[136]](#footnote-136) Changes in context allow cooking, in the form of barbecuing, to be associated with masculinity despite cooking being imbued with strong implications of femininity. This example highlights that a gender marker may carry particular socio-cultural connotations, but that these connotations, and thus the gender indicated by the marker, can change based on context.

Many of the gender markers that appear in Jael’s narrative carry gendered indications that differ when considered socio-culturally or contextually. For example, it is later discussed that the tent peg and hammer as gender markers indicate feminine gender according to their socio-cultural use as nomadic women’s tent-pitching items. However, the gender they indicate includes masculinity because of the context in which they are used. They are used as weapons of war: items that violently kill, with the tent peg and hammer being framed as phallic penetrators. The result is that the tent peg and hammer simultaneously indicate more than one gender suggesting the user’s, in this case Jael’s, gender ambiguity.

“Woman’s weapons,” named as such by Schüssler Fiorenza, are a set of gender markers that are particularly significant for interpretations of Jael’s gender and as such appear in numerous chapters.[[137]](#footnote-137) Schüssler Fiorenza has coined this term due to the frequent use of a particular set of roles, items and behaviours by biblical characters understood as women. In her discussion of Judith she comments that Judith is “a woman who fights with a woman’s weapons… [for] her own ends.”[[138]](#footnote-138) These women’s weapons include food and drink, care and nurture, sex and seduction[[139]](#footnote-139) and are widely noted in biblical scholarship as being used by characters perceived as women and used against characters understood as men. In support of Schüssler Fiorenza’s understanding of women using particular feminised weapons is Shira Weiss:

in several isolated narratives, biblical women become the primary characters by employing traditional female weapons to achieve lofty goals… Even with such sexual weapons, biblical women needed to find subtle opportunities for enticement in which they could maintain deference and submission to male authority, rather than overt sexual invitations.[[140]](#footnote-140)

Here Weiss highlights that sexuality and deception are feminine behaviours used as weapons against men. Similarly, Nicole Duran engages with the concept of women’s weapons, focusing on food and drink as items wielded as weapons by women to control, assault or kill men:

The few women killers in the Bible kill with fascinating frequency in the context of, and/or by means of a meal… [Biblical women] use the power of food and drink, the banquet with its implications of pleasure and seduction, to kill men or to determine who the dining men kill.[[141]](#footnote-141)

Duran makes clear that those femininised items and roles, food and drink and food preparation and feeding, are amongst the catalogue of what is included in Schüssler Fiorenza’s women’s weapons and can be used against men.

As with all gender markers, such roles, items and behaviours have become gendered as feminine through frequent association with women and expectations of femininity. In the case of women’s weapons, that gendered association has been strengthened given that these particular roles, behaviours and items are not only being used by women but are also related to femininity, particularly through domesticity, a concept constructed as feminine.[[142]](#footnote-142) Women’s weapons are thus grounded in heteronormative and binary expectations of feminine gender and as such can be understood as feminine gender markers. Women’s frequent use of what is available to them and expected of them wielded to their advantage, especially against men, has led to the trope of “woman’s weapons” in Hebrew Bible studies.[[143]](#footnote-143) Thus, when Jael engages with women’s weapons, with the connotations of femininity that these imply, the inference is drawn in scholarship that Jael is a woman.

### Holistic Approach

One significant difference between my thesis and previous work on Jael is that I employ a holistic approach. This approach brings together various gender markers, regardless of any potential contradictions based on a hetero-binary framework, and considers them all equally valuable for an interpretation of gender. Indications of different genders to a single character are interpreted collectively as parts of a whole resulting in a multifaceted interpretation.

A holistic approach not only considers all gender markers as significant but also refuses to analyse these in isolation from their wider cultural context in the Hebrew Bible. When gender markers are discussed without consideration of both their socio-cultural and narrative context, they are isolated from potential ways of being interpreted; only one facet of their significance is made available. Addressing gender markers in isolation is thus reductive. In contrast, a holistic approach gives attention to potential queerness, accepting and exploring queer aspects as informative to an interpretation of gender since binary gender is not assumed.

Past studies have commonly limited their interpretations of a gender marker to one facet of their context.[[144]](#footnote-144) Either the gender marker’s narrative context or its socio-cultural context are explored, but not both. Studies that isolate Jael’s gender markers from other indicators of gender and from their contextual connotations inadvertently offer a narrow view. They present a limited understanding in which many queer and disruptive readings are not readily apparent. It is only when a gender marker’s socio-culturally gendered implications and its contextual or thematic connotations are addressed together that multiple genders can become evidently indicated by a single gender marker.

A major benefit of applying a holistic approach to Jael’s gender is that previous readings that have contradicted each other can be brought together and reconfigured to allow a gender ambiguous reading to emerge. For example, when discussing the tent peg that Jael uses to kill Sisera, which I understand as a gender marker that implies Jael’s ambiguous gender, Stone and Mieke Bal gender the peg differently. Stone stresses the masculinity of the tent peg, calling it a “ravaging phallus,” while Bal argues that the tent peg is a woman’s tool due to its link to the women’s role of tent pitching and its connection to the domestic space.[[145]](#footnote-145) A holistic approach considers both interpretations as simultaneously applicable to interpretations of the tent peg as a gender marker allowing ambiguous gender to be inferred from the marker.[[146]](#footnote-146) The result of these differently gendered interpretations, when considered holistically, is that Jael is presented as having ambiguous gender inferred by the marker.[[147]](#footnote-147) My interpretation of Jael as nonbinary draws on well-established perceptions in academic literature as well as evidence in the biblical text.

## Chapter summaries

### Chapter 1. Jael’s Gender

My thesis begins by drawing attention to biblical scholars’ attribution of binary femininity to Jael and challenges that attributed gender. Here, I argue that Jael has been binarised as a woman based on dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender and that this attribution is not the most fitting interpretation of Jael based on their gender markers in the text. I emphasize that Judges introduces Jael simultaneously as masculine and as feminine, by using the masculine form of their name[[148]](#footnote-148) and through referring to them as woman/wife (Jdg. 4:27). The implication of this, as I will argue, is that Jael is both feminine andmasculine and thus nonbinary. This chapter provides the first of many demonstrations that Jael can be understood in ways that disrupt the binary feminine label ascribed to them by scholarship.

To illustrate the influence that dominant discourses of hetero-binary gender has had on biblical commentators’ interpretations, I make evident the way in which some of the queer aspects in Jael’s narrative have been addressed in studies on Jael. Aspects of the text that do not support Jael’s hetero-binary femininity are considered queer and are dealt with in a range of ways that I consider problematic.[[149]](#footnote-149) Commonly, biblical scholars propose explanations which present queer aspects as errors and manipulate them to conform to a hetero-binary interpretation—regularly queer aspects are overlooked altogether.[[150]](#footnote-150) Thus, existing interpretations are predominantly biased in favour of binary gender and heteronormativity rather than being grounded in the text and drawing directly from the gendered evidence. Consequently, the opportunity to recognise Jael’s gender ambiguity is rejected and a hetero-binary framework of gender is reinforced.[[151]](#footnote-151)

### Chapter 2. Killing Sisera

My second chapter interprets a range of Jael’s gender markers that relate directly to Sisera’s death. I outline that, despite the widespread binarisation of Jael as a woman, existing literature does acknowledge that Jael performs in ways expected of men—namely through killing Sisera.[[152]](#footnote-152) However, scholarship on Jael employs a range of methods which perpetuate Jael’s binary femininity. This includes the consistent use of feminine pronouns, a refusal to label Jael as a man or as masculine—instead representing Jael’s performances as manly or masculine but not Jael themself—and through framing Jael’s masculine performances as temporary gender reversal. Consequently, Jael’s gender is binarised as feminine in a manner which relies on dominant discourses of hetero-binary gender and as such does not highlight the potential for Jael to be understood as a nonbinary character.

The body of this chapter explores Jael’s space and Jael’s tools, specifically the gender ambiguity that these markers suggest and Jael’s gender ambiguous use of them in relation to Sisera’s death. When discussing the gender markers that relate to Sisera’s death, I articulate my own approach to Jael’s gender, one that equally values Jael’s femininity and masculinity, one that considers a range of Jael’s gender markers—especially their performances—and one that holistically accepts readings that, according to a hetero-binary framework of gender, are contradictory.

### Chapter 3. Jael’s Motherhood

In this chapter I argue that Jael can be read as performing motherhood gender ambiguously. Despite motherhood being framed as a feminine role, my chapter shows that Jael performs mothering behaviours in a gender ambiguous manner. I draw on a common interpretation in scholarship on Jael—that Jael behaves as a mother. Biblical interpretations present Jael as a symbolic mother to Sisera because of Jael’s apparent care and comfort, among other things, while Sisera is in their tent. I, however, demonstrate how the feminine roles of woman, wife and mother are often conflated or become mingled and thus claim that Jael’s behaviours, which scholars interpret as motherly, are actually performances of false motherhood: feminine performances perceivable as motherly that result in Sisera’s death. To reinforce that Jael’s motherhood towards Sisera is false, I highlight that Jael uses motherly behaviours not to care for Sisera but to lead him to his death—antithetical to concepts of motherhood. Jael can, however, be read as a mother—as a symbolic mother to the Children of Israel—since their acts are undertaken in order to care for and protect the Israelites and to ensure their wellbeing and prosperous future. I thus interpret Jael as a mother in Israel.

To articulate my reading of Jael’s nonbinary performances of motherhood, I draw on the two existing frameworks of motherhood evident in the text—those of Deborah and of Sisera’s mother. Both women exhibit a range of performances that highlight the complexity of motherhood. These characters have garnered much attention in scholarship on Judges and as such I am able to draw from existing research which frames Deborah as a masculine mother and Sisera’s mother as a feminine mother. These women evidence that motherhood can be performed through differently gender behaviours; I address a range of Jael’s behaviours that draw from the existing frameworks of motherhood in Judges 4 and 5. Such behaviours make evident that Jael performs motherhood in a gender ambiguous manner, through femininity as well as through masculinity.

### Chapter 4. Sexual Assault of Sisera

The final chapter of this thesis focuses on Jael’s gender ambiguity in light of their sexual assault on Sisera, which I claim takes place through gender ambiguous performances. I argue that Jael sexually assaults Sisera through feminine performances, recognised in the literature as seduction,[[153]](#footnote-153) and through masculine performances, labelled as rape in scholarship on Jael.[[154]](#footnote-154) Jael’s femininised sexual assault of Sisera—sexual seduction—and their masculinised sexual assault of Sisera—rape—are both performed gender ambiguously.

This chapter first addresses sexual seduction and rape as forms of sexual assault within the context of the Hebrew Bible outlining that understandings of rape are grounded in penetration and the use of or threat of physical force.[[155]](#footnote-155) Since the elements expected of rape are grounded in masculine concepts, rape is masculinised. Differently, sexual seduction can employ behaviours more closely related to femininity rather than masculinity; feminine methods, such as soothing behaviour, through care and nurture, as well as gentle persuasion can be used to gain access to a sexual encounter through seduction.[[156]](#footnote-156) Sexual seduction relies on psychological force rather than physical force to coerce the victim’s consent.[[157]](#footnote-157) Since both sexual seduction and rape are demonstrated to be grounded in controlling behaviour, where the desires and gratification of the victim are of no concern, both can be framed as differently gendered acts of sexual assault. I go on to highlight that Jael is widely viewed as both a seductress and as a rapist, but that these roles are seen as separate and distinct. They are not viewed as differently gendered performances of a single act of sexual assault, as I perceive them.

## Conclusion

This study contributes an original interpretation of Jael as a nonbinary character. In doing so it challenges existing interpretations and reframes material from the text which has been previously used in scholarship to binarise Jael as a woman. Despite arguing against a binary feminine interpretation of Jael’s gender, I do not disregard Jael’s femininity when interpreting that Jael is better understood as nonbinary—on the contrary—I acknowledge Jael’s femininity as significant but equally value Jael’s masculinity in my reading. All elements that play a part in gendering Jael, including spaces, speech, tools and performances, are brought together to form a complex, multifaceted nonbinary interpretation of Jael’s gender.

By taking a character that is unanimously considered as a woman in scholarship, albeit one who is said to occasionally upset heteronormative expectations, it becomes clear that many studies have overlooked key elements of Jael’s gender in order to present heteronormative readings. This highlights that in the same way that Greenough suggests that the Bible “has, in some way, always been queer,” I make the same claim regarding the biblical character Jael.[[158]](#footnote-158) This is not a feminist study; however, much like a feminist study, in this thesis I work to bring an aspect of the text that was once marginalised—Jael’s nonbinary gender—to the fore and in doing so challenge previous studies of Jael. I suggest that future studies, regardless of their hermeneutic approach, should work with all that is offered in a given text and accept what the text presents, even when that appears unclear or unusual according to dominant discourses of hetero-binary frameworks. Such an approach matters, as this method of reading evidences the multiplicity of characters represented in the Hebrew Bible and celebrates diversity. Queer studies, such as this one, demonstrate that queerness and queer characters are present in the Hebrew Bible and that dominant discourses, until recently, have caused such queerness to be subsumed in scholarship that is grounded in hetero-binary discourses. Although the focus of this thesis is Jael’s gender such a genderqueer holistic approach can be applied to other characters and other elements of a character’s identity.

A genderqueer holistic approach challenges current thinking regarding ambiguity in biblical texts. Ambiguity can be considered a form of queerness in that it is an absence of clarity; something is lacking or cannot be pinned down or fully grasped. However, rather than viewing such ambiguity as in need of clarification, I suggest that ambiguity be accepted as a valid form of information about a person, place or thing. Rather than reading ambiguity or queerness as problematic—as a gap in the text, as requiring information to be added, as an element in need of explanation or correction—my approach claims that ambiguity is informative in itself in conveying a lack of definiteness. Ambiguity and queerness are valid and, when analysed for what they do offer rather than what they are lacking, can add insight and shed light on undiscovered interpretations. Here, such an application of queer methodology alongside a holistic approach allows a reading where Jael is a nonbinary character to emerge.

# **Chapter 1. Jael’s Gender**

This chapter aims to explore how and why the existing research on Jael labels Jael as a woman, despite widespread recognition of Jael’s masculine performances. I challenge binary interpretations through which Jael’s femininity is perpetuated while their masculinity is undermined, overlooked or erased, arguing that Jael is better understood as gender ambiguous rather than as a woman. Labelling Jael in a binary manner, as a woman, does not fully represent their performances of gender and disguises their gender ambiguity.

Judges’ label of Jael as a wife/woman (Jdg. 4:17) is foundational to existing interpretations of Jael’s gender. This is made particularly clear by Baruch Halpern who claims that interpretations of Jael as the wife of Heber, and thus as a woman,[[159]](#footnote-159) have “programmed all subsequent views” of Jael.[[160]](#footnote-160) The Judges text reads:

Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite (Jdg. 4:17).

Labelling Jael in this way has resulted in the feminisation of Jael at the expense of their masculinity. I will demonstrate how Jael need not be interpreted as a woman nor as a wife, but instead as a nonbinary character who disrupts heteronormative and binary constructions of gender. I challenge interpretations that force Jael to conform to hetero-binary frameworks by applying a holistic approach. As asserted in the ‘Thesis Introduction’,[[161]](#footnote-161) this approach perceives Jael’s femininity andJael’s masculinity as equally important aspects of Jael’s character that co-exist, and thus should both be represented in interpretations of Jael’s gender. Consequently, my interpretation of Jael as gender ambiguous is a more “nuanced, plural, and proximate” approach to Jael’s gender than previous interpretations and is one which recognises Jael as a nonbinary character.[[162]](#footnote-162)

I begin this chapter by reviewing existing scholarship on Jael. I identify that past studies binarise Jael as a woman and I then explore, what I perceive to be, the main reasons for scholars interpreting Jael as a woman focusing on academics’ work being grounded in dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender which have gone largely unquestioned.[[163]](#footnote-163) It becomes evident that hetero-binary assumptions impact interpretations of Jael’s gender.[[164]](#footnote-164)

Following this introduction, the chapter is divided into three sections, each of which addresses the impact of heteronormative and binary discourses of gender in the scholarship on Jael. First, I consider how scholars have used Jael’s textual introduction (Jdg. 4:17) to ground Jael’s gender in femininity. I challenge assumptions that Jael is introduced with a husband and thus as part of a heteronormative marriage. Linda Tatro Herzer notes that we often only see what we expect to see, or what we are looking for;[[165]](#footnote-165) this manifests in the scholarship. It becomes clear that what is accepted and allowed to influence an interpretation are only those aspects that conform to binary gender and heteronormativity. The second section of this chapter focuses on Jael’s masculinity, demonstrating that biblical scholars perceive that Jael embodies masculinity but reject its significance for Jael’s character, maintaining a binary label of femininity. Here, I evidence some ways in which assumptions of binary gender and heteronormativity impact scholars’ interpretations when Jael’s masculinity does not conform to their binary and heteronormative ways of viewing gender. The third section focuses on Jael’s performances of femininity. I suggest that Jael’s performances of femininity are explicit in order for Jael to alleviate any anxiety that Sisera may have and to encourage him to let his guard down. However, masculinity remains evident in Jael’s performances. Jael’s performances of femininity have been framed by scholars as what Schüssler Fiorenza calls “woman’s weapons”[[166]](#footnote-166) which leads to the binarisation of Jael despite their performances of femininity as well as masculinity. These sections demonstrate that current interpretations are not illustrative of the text’s portrayal of Jael since they are grounded in discourses of hetero-binary gender and consequently do not represent Jael’s nonbinary gender.

I argue that Jael’s narrative presents Jael as a queer character, one who disrupts constructions of binary gender. Jael can be read as a queer character if interpreters desist forcing a binary and heteronormative label of femininity onto a character who performs more than one gender. I use the same material as previous commentators, but do so in a manner that supports a nonbinary reading of Jael, reframing material in a way that brings to the fore Jael’s ambiguous gender. My reading of Jael’s gender does not allow heteronormative and binary assumptions to have the final say on how Jael is gendered.

## Scholarship’s Interpretation of Jael as a Woman.

This review highlights that existing biblical scholarship categorises Jael’s gender as feminine. The core studies that are used to interpret Jael’s gender in this chapter, indeed throughout this thesis, are Brenner’s feminist study of the Book of Judges and Zucker and Reiss’s article on subversive women in Judges 4 and 5.[[167]](#footnote-167) Susan Ackerman’s study on Jael, women and the Book of Judges and Bal’s numerous studies on Jael and the Book of Judges are also key texts used throughout this and following chapters.[[168]](#footnote-168) I use these texts to demonstrate that Jael is feminised despite acknowledgement of Jael’s masculine performances as well as feminine ones. Jael’s femininity is so widely established that it goes unchallenged in the vast majority of studies. This is evident from the lack of discussion regarding why Jael is gendered as a woman and an absence of other ways of labelling or interpreting Jael’s gender.

Brenner observes Jael’s masculinity but labels Jael as a woman. She says that “[t]here is no doubt that smiting is a symbol of masculinity,”[[169]](#footnote-169) stressing that Jael’s killing blow (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26) is an act of masculinity:

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:21).

She put her hand to the tent peg  
    and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet;  
she struck Sisera a blow,  
    she crushed his head,  
    she shattered and pierced his temple (Jdg. 5:26).

Brenner genders Jael’s act of violence towards Sisera as masculine in line with binary understandings of masculine gender.[[170]](#footnote-170) She also observes that Jael demonstrates behaviours of care and “nurture” as she claims is expected of women.[[171]](#footnote-171) Brenner calls Jael a “woman” and labels Jael as “her” and “she” showing that she maintains Jael’s binary femininity, despite Jael’s masculine performances.[[172]](#footnote-172)Brenner further grounds Jael’s gender in femininity by noting, in multiple studies, that in addition to being a woman, “[s]he is also a wife,”[[173]](#footnote-173) “a married woman.”[[174]](#footnote-174) Brenner’s comments perpetuate Jael’s femininity directly through the label of ‘woman/wife’ and through the use of feminine gendered pronouns. Brenner’s understanding of Jael as a wife leads her to give primacy to Jael’s femininity over their masculinity. In doing so she draws from dominant discourses of binary gender which lead to Jael—as a married woman—being framed as adhering to heteronormative expectations. Brenner’s work further feminises Jael through a focus on Jael’s feminine behaviours and occupation of feminine space. She understands Jael’s tent to be a feminine space since it is framed as the domestic space, a space that is closely related to women and femininity.[[175]](#footnote-175) This is evident through her references to the “domestic framework” that Jael appears to be restricted to.[[176]](#footnote-176) For Brenner, Jael’s link to “‘feminine’ qualities,” like the domestic space and sexuality, binarises Jael as a woman.[[177]](#footnote-177) Brenner argues that, by contrast:

Deborah, despite the efforts of the commentators, is sadly lacking in these ‘feminine’ qualities. Therefore, a complimentary figure is required. Jael, who is represented as Deborah’s complement, spends her whole life inside the domestic framework. She uses hospitality—a traditional virtue—and sexuality as devices for winning the battle.[[178]](#footnote-178)

Brenner’s comment shows that she supplements her feminisation of Jael by comparing Jael to Deborah.[[179]](#footnote-179) For Brenner, Jael is the balancing feminine figure to the masculine, military figure of Deborah. Much more attention is given to Jael’s femininity than their masculinity, likely due to the feminist focus of Brenner’s study which leads her away from questioning Jael’s gender as a woman as it is from this premise that she works. An additional reason for Brenner not feeding elements of Jael’s masculinity into an interpretation of Jael’s gender is that her aim in this study is to show that Judges 4 and 5 can, and perhaps should, be read as one integrated text. She draws on gendered themes to tie the two chapters together as a unit but has no need, nor interest, in analysing Jael’s gender as this would not add to her overall aims. Thus, despite Brenner’s recognition of Jael’s masculine “smiting” she labels Jael as a woman, erasing Jael’s masculinity and limiting the possibility of labelling Jael’s gender ambiguity.

For Ackerman, who also writes from a feminist perspective,

[e]ven more remarkable are the ways in which Judges’ women can be depicted in defiance of traditional gender expectations. While many are identified using the typical female epithets of wife, mother, mistress, daughter, sister, and bride, others are described in ways not usually associated with the female sphere. Deborah, Jael, and the woman of Thebez, for example, are all noteworthy for the actions they take within the traditionally male domain of battle.[[180]](#footnote-180)

Ackerman’s study works to broaden the understanding of ‘woman’ but does not aim to disrupt binary gender as queer methodologies do.[[181]](#footnote-181) Thus, when Ackerman notes that Jael does not perform in accordance with “gender-appropriate behaviour” for a woman, according to a binary schema,[[182]](#footnote-182) she acknowledges that Jael does not perform according to expectations of women. Despite this acknowledgement, she, nevertheless, perpetuates Jael’s femininity by interpreting Jael as a “woman” and referring to Jael using feminine pronouns throughout her study.[[183]](#footnote-183) While she stresses Jael’s nonconforming behaviour as a noteworthy part of Jael’s character she maintains Jael’s ascribed feminine label, which is more useful for her feminist study of women in Judges than a label of gender ambiguity. Evidently, Jael’s performances of multiple genders do not inform Ackerman’s interpretation of, nor labelling of, Jael’s gender.

Similarly, Zucker and Reiss explicitly call Jael a woman whilst in the same sentence stressing Jael’s (and Deborah’s) performances of masculinity:

[a]s the principal women of Judges chapters four and five display traditional manly virtues (strength, courage, leadership) so the principal men of those chapters, Baraq and Sisera, reflect traditional womanly characteristics (fear, subservience, need of protection, frailty).[[184]](#footnote-184)

Their study focuses on subversive behaviour, but rather than dismantling or unsettling a binary framework, their study remains grounded in a binary framework of gender, evident from their portrayal of Jael as a woman who performs “reversal” through manly behaviours.[[185]](#footnote-185) Zucker and Reiss discuss Jael’s gender-disruptive behaviours using the problematic language of “reversal.”[[186]](#footnote-186) Jael’s (and Deborah’s) “reversal” of expected behaviours leads Zucker and Reiss to note that in Judges 4 and 5 “[w]omen are manly.”[[187]](#footnote-187) This phrase simultaneously highlights Jael’s performances of masculinity whilst perpetuating the feminisation of a character who performs masculinity andfemininity in a manner that limits Jael’s multifaceted gender to femininity. Not only does the comment of Zucker and Reiss—quoted above—suggest gender reversal through claiming that the women act like men and the men act like women, but it also highlights that for these scholars when Jael undertakes masculine performances Jael does so as a woman, rather than as a gender ambiguous character. Zucker and Reiss frame Jael’s femininity as being a fixed element of Jael’s character, while their masculinity is presented as temporary and secondary. They begin their comments on Jael’s masculinity with “[b]oth women” and “Israelite women,” explicitly labelling Jael as a woman on multiple occasions.[[188]](#footnote-188) They binarise Jael as a woman, despite masculine performances, but never binarise Jael as a man.

As is evident from the studies of Brenner, Ackerman and Zucker and Reiss, Jael is depicted in scholarship as a woman who performs masculinity as well as femininity. However, Jael’s feminine gender is perpetuated and their masculine gender is often negated through scholars’ use of the language of gender reversal in discussions of Jael. Biblical scholars use of gender reversal is pervasive and effectively maintains Jael’s femininity. For example, Stone labels Jael’s interactions with Sisera as “gender reversal.”[[189]](#footnote-189) Jael’s masculine constructed position “above” Sisera, their masculine act of penetration, and their masculine act of killing do not lead to Stone questioning Jael’s supposedly feminine gender since he understands these performances as temporary reversals of Jael’s feminine gender.[[190]](#footnote-190) Similarly, Conway as well as Fewell and Gunn frame Jael as performing “reversed” gender when they discuss Jael raping Sisera, since men are expected to rape women, not the other way around.[[191]](#footnote-191) Rather than exploring the possibility that a character who performs feminine and masculine behaviours is understandable as nonbinary, Jael’s masculine performances are reduced to temporary exhibitions of the ‘other’ gender and their binary femininity is perpetuated and framed as their ‘real’ gender. Framing Jael’s performances of masculinity as gender reversal erases Jael’s gender ambiguity by placing Jael within a binary framework. These studies’ use of gender reversal and heteronormative, binary perspectives is representative of scholarship on Jael.

Bal has written extensively on Jael and Judges, interpreting Jael as a woman who takes on unexpected roles and behaviours through gender reversal.[[192]](#footnote-192) Bal does discuss gender in Judges 4 and 5, including Jael’s gender. However, her interest in gender is primarily as a theme rather than as questioning or analysing individual characters’ genders. She writes from a literary critical perspective and focuses on the Book of Judges’ ideological and political coherence, taking a particular interest in gender as a subversive theme. When Jael performs in masculine ways, such as behaving independently, exhibiting controlling behaviour and killing,[[193]](#footnote-193) Bal frames these performances as occurrences of “reversed” gender.[[194]](#footnote-194) In multiple studies she notes that Jael’s and Sisera’s “roles are reversed,” for example, when Jael is the one controlling the situation.[[195]](#footnote-195) It is Jael who wields the power, despite Sisera being the character that Bal genders as a man and associates with power.[[196]](#footnote-196) However, even during these performances of masculinity Bal does not interpret Jael as a man or as having ambiguous gender. In fact, she explicitly labels Jael as a woman, commenting that “[t]hat which she [Jael] did, she did *as* a woman, a woman in the tent.”[[197]](#footnote-197) Bal stresses that Jael is a woman, not discussing their performances of femininity but their being feminine, differently to their discussion of Jael’s performances of masculinity, which she frames as temporary performances. Bal understands Jael to be a woman and Bal’s reference to Jael’s domestic space, which is commonly constructed as feminine, emphasises and strengthens her attribution of Jael’s femininity.[[198]](#footnote-198) This recognition of Jael’s masculinity yet perpetuation of only femininity evident in Bal’s work is common among the literature on Jael. By framing Jael’s femininity as primary and legitimating it through gender reversal Jael’s masculinity is placed as secondary. Consequently, Jael’s nonbinary gender is overlooked.

The potential to interpret Jael’s gender as nonbinary is obscured by scholars framing Jael as performing gender reversal. They present Jael as moving from one gender to another, switching between femininity and masculinity, before returning to femininity. This is evident in Bal’s work when she comments that, regarding Jael and Sisera, “[t]he roles are reversed: here, it is the woman who controls, who gives—and who kills. She gives life and then she takes it back.”[[199]](#footnote-199) This quotation indicates that Jael performs femininity by giving Sisera life through nourishment. The phrase “and then” marks Bal’s perception of Jael’s switch from femininity to masculinity, supported by her comment that the “roles are reversed.” Jael “then,” after giving life, “takes it back” through the masculine behaviour of killing. Jael’s apparent switching between genders is most commonly evident in scholarly analysis when they perceive Jael as performing in ways that are not in line with their expectations of femininity. Thus, when they comment upon Jael performing in masculine ways, they frame such masculinity as gender reversal because Jael is understood to be a woman. For example, Bal, Stone, Jo Ann Hackett, Conway and Fewell and Gunn all perceive Jael as switching between binary genders, framed as reversal when they address Jael’s masculine acts, roles and behaviours.[[200]](#footnote-200) I agree with these studies’ acknowledgements of Jael’s performances of masculinity, however, I perceive Jael’s performances of masculinity as taking place alongside their performances of femininity. Consequently, I interpret Jael in a way that represents their performances of more than one gender at one time instead of perpetuating Jael’s femininity and erasing their masculinity through gender reversal. In my reading of Jael, Jael does not switch nor reverse their gender; Jael does not shift from one binary gender to the other but performs multiple genders continuously, simultaneously and ambiguously.

While mainstream studies on Jael label them as a woman, there are a few studies that take steps towards challenging, or at least questioning, Jael’s assigned label of femininity. Guest’s research on Jael is notable[[201]](#footnote-201) as their two main works on Jael approach the text and the characters from a genderqueer perspective, informed by queer theory and feminist hermeneutics.[[202]](#footnote-202) Guest avoids the use of gender reversal and does not work from a binary perspective noting that “commentators generally… read from a relentless two-sex paradigm that does not recognize all gender as performative”[[203]](#footnote-203) and that “existing scholarship has been insufficiently aware of its own reproduction” of the gender binary through the use of gender reversal.[[204]](#footnote-204) Guest’s enlightening study on Jael’s non-normativity, especially with regards to their sexuality and relationship to Deborah, also draws attention to Jael’s gender performances to support their analysis of Jael as non-normative. However, Guests notes that Jael’s performances are an element of the character that are not fully explored in their work, commenting on their own choice to not celebrate Jael as

a monolithic unified ‘woman’… but [as] one who breaks the borders between male and female and reveals that all gendered acts are performative (though there has not been space in this paper to develop this later aspect).[[205]](#footnote-205)

Guest’s comment makes it clear that their work disrupts hetero-binaries as well as highlighting that it is not within the remit of their study to address Jael’s performances of gender, as my thesis does. Guest disrupts hetero-binaries and draws attention to the gender confusion evident in Judges’ presentation of Jael, but since it is not within the remit of Guest’s study to challenge Jael’s gender they maintain a femnine gendered label for Jael, saying that “the narrator does signal that Jael is a woman even while he disrupts this with the rape imagery.”[[206]](#footnote-206) Here, regarding Jael’s rape of Sisera,[[207]](#footnote-207) it is enough to say that Guest binarises Jael as a woman, despite highlighting Jael’s performances of masculinity through their reference to Jael’s rape of Sisera.

In my study of Jael’s gender ambiguity, I build on Guest’s vital work on Jael which upsets hetero-binary frameworks, if not directly disrupting Jael’s femininity. There are two key differences between Guest’s study and this one. First, while we both use queer theory, Guest gives primacy to “lesbian perspectives” in their queer interpretation whereas I focus more fully on Jael’s performances of gender.[[208]](#footnote-208) Secondly, I use the term “gender” in reference to the socio-cultural construction of gender only, whereas Guest uses “gender” in relation to sex *and* gender,[[209]](#footnote-209) identifying that these categories are socially intertwined despite being separate. Only Jael’s gendered performances—their socio-culturally constructed behaviours of masculinity and femininity—are addressed in my thesis. Due to the limitations on space and the aim not to detract from Jael’s performances, I explore Jael’s performances of gender without consideration of their sex or socio-cultural gendered expectations of sexed bodies. Thus, while this thesis shares some common themes with Guest’s work, specifically that we both engage with queer methodologies and disrupt heteronormative binaries, Guest explores Jael’s performances in light of Jael’s sexed body; I focus on gender performance alone. My focus on Jael’s gender complements Guest’s work on Jael but by analysing Jael’s gender as separate from their sex, the gender ambiguity with which Jael is presented becomes more readily apparent.

Noteworthy studies, in addition to Guest’s, that take steps towards questioning Jael’s feminine label are Gale A. Yee’s study on the “Woman Warrior”[[210]](#footnote-210) and Langeni’s study on “Gender Ambiguity in the Bible.”[[211]](#footnote-211) However, these studies stop short of labelling Jael as nonbinary and refer to Jael as ‘she’ and ‘her.’ Yee names Jael as among those she understands as a “Woman Warrior.” For Yee, the “Woman Warrior” is a “liminal” character who is “anomalous.”[[212]](#footnote-212) Theyneither fall completely into one binary category, nor the other,[[213]](#footnote-213)but embody qualities of both.[[214]](#footnote-214) Yee’s study goes further than others by distinguishing that because Jael performs masculinity and femininity, Jael does not belong to only one binary category of gender. Yet, despite Yee’s recognition of Jael’s “liminality”[[215]](#footnote-215)she grounds warriors such as Jael in femininity by referring to them as women warriors. Yee also persistently uses “her” and “she” to refer to Jael. Consequently, the “liminality” that Yee has outlined is undercut by her binary labels of Jael’s femininity.

Similarly, Langeni draws attention to Jael’s “complex” gender and “blurring of gender,”[[216]](#footnote-216) yet continues to call Jael a “woman.”[[217]](#footnote-217) Langeni raises the issue of the difficulties of discussing nonbinary gender using binarised language:

Trying to discuss gender fluidity and crossing over gender boundaries while using gendered pronouns circles right back to gendering that which is beyond gender in the way our language allows. Language, then, keeps us bound, in some ways, to the idea that gender occurs in only two flavours: masculine/male and feminine/female.[[218]](#footnote-218)

Langeni highlights that the language available binds characters in and to a binary notion of gender, yet, Langeni nevertheless continues to use feminine pronouns to discuss Jael’s “complex” gender.[[219]](#footnote-219) With Langeni’s note on Jael’s “complex” gender in mind, coupled with their use of “zir”[[220]](#footnote-220) to refer to the biblical character Joseph later in the same study, it seems odd that Langeni frames Jael as performing ambiguously yet labels Jael as a woman without explanation.[[221]](#footnote-221) The result is that the image of a nonbinary character is erased when Langeni calls Jael a woman and uses feminine pronouns to refer to Jael. Jael’s binary feminine gender is thus reinforced and perpetuated despite an initial recognition of gender ambiguity.

While Yee’s and Langeni’s studies go further than others’ by indicating Jael’s ambiguous gender, they nonetheless binarise Jael as a woman. Jael’s “liminality” and gender ambiguity cannot be maintained if Jael is constantly binarised and referred to using feminine gendered pronouns. As noted in the ‘Thesis Introduction’, it is for this reason that I use Jael’s name, and sometimes gender-neutral terms to refer to Jael. Even though some scholars read Jael’s gender as liminal, many have not had available—due to their time of writing—the queer strategies that I apply and as such—perhaps inadvertently—perpetuate Jael’s binary femininity. I build upon earlier work and previous references to Jael’s liminality and demonstrate that Jael’s gender can be understood as nonbinary by approaching the character of Jael and their narrative from a genderqueer perspective. I go further than the studies that have noted Jael’s complex or liminal gender by labelling Jael’s gender as ambiguous and referring to Jael accordingly without the use of gender-binarising pronouns.

This representative selection of literature on Jael is reviewed here to establish that academics frame Jael as a woman who performs behaviours expected of men and behaviours expected of women. When Jael’s masculinity is discussed such conversations are frequently grounded in gender reversal which ties Jael to a binary framework of gender. Studies of Jael perpetuate Jael’s femininity without explaining their reasons for doing so. I understand such absence of explanation to be based on the likelihood that these scholars have not considered the possibility that Jael can be gendered differently. In part this is owing to the positions from which other studies on Jael have been written, especially feminist writings which have no reason to consider Jael in any way other than as a woman. I suggest that one reason that the opportunity to interpret Jael’s gender as nonbinary has not been taken up is due to interpreters’ perspectives and their readings of Jael being grounded in dominant discourses of binary gender and heteronormativity as well as them not having had the methodological tools available to them to do so. Thus, an absence of explanation regarding Jael’s feminine gender and a lack of consideration of alternate ways of perceiving Jael’s gender is also, in part, attributable to queer theories being a more recent development in biblical studies: the queer methodologies applied here were not established in this field when many of the studies I cite were written. My use of a queer approach thus opens up a new reading of the character of Jael.

## Dominant Discourses of Binary Gender and Heteronormativity

Scholarship on Jael applies a framework where there are only two ways of performing gender and presents these binaries as mutually exclusive, resulting in an “either/or” way of understanding gender.[[222]](#footnote-222) Such a binary reinforces heteronormative understandings of gender, which presents man and woman as distinct and oppositional as well as naturally related to (constructed) binary sex categories and naturally paired together within a sexual relationship.[[223]](#footnote-223) In *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*,Asher-Greve discusses how most scholars use “dualism” that results in a “bipolar gender theory”:

[b]ecause such paradigms and categorizations are used by most scholarly colleagues, including myself, I began to systematically re-examine my own work. I realized that I had relied on tacit knowledge, such as bipolar gender theory, which I had never questioned. My study of women in ancient Sumer was based on the either/or model... Depictions of persons whose dress and features were apparently ambiguous were still pressed into a two-gendered system, or the visual object was interpreted as of low artistic quality, perhaps of provincial origin.[[224]](#footnote-224)

Here Asher-Greve notes that she employed an “either/or model” of gender in her own work and that this binary discourse had significant influence on the way she interpreted her sources. Nonbinary representations were overlooked in favour of forcing individuals to fit binary gender categories.[[225]](#footnote-225) Asher-Greve argues that she is not alone in approaching texts with binary assumptions of gender, but that this is a widespread practice in academia that should be addressed.[[226]](#footnote-226) Her movement away from a binary framework of gender adds weight to my claim that dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender have restricted ways in which Jael’s gender has been interpreted by previous studies.

Guest agrees with Asher-Greve’s recognition that many academics approach texts from a heteronormative and binary perspective. Guest notes that biblical texts and the majority of commentators enforce heteronormative pairings when presenting their interpretations.[[227]](#footnote-227) Heteronormativity, according to Guest, influences assumptions and expectations regarding an individual’s sex, gender and sexuality.[[228]](#footnote-228) For Guest, heteronormativity naturalises binarised ways of viewing characters and texts, so much so that without a clear label of queerness all characters are considered to heteronormatively conform to a sex/gender/sexuality binary, even if this may not be the case. An individual need not be explicitly marked as queer to be queer, but unless marked as such dominant discourses of heteronormativity prevail in leading to hetero-binary assumptions.[[229]](#footnote-229) In this way, while Judges 4 and 5 do not say that Jael is feminine, female or cisgender, translations include feminine pronouns which gender Jael as a ciswoman and commentators refer to Jael as a ciswoman, although they do not use such terminology.[[230]](#footnote-230) This study agrees with Guest’s assertion that heteronormativity naturalises binary frameworks in a problematic way, and demonstrates that even when indications of queerness are evident, dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender are given primacy over evidence of queerness. Guest stresses that a binary and heteronormative perspective prevents interpreters from identifying an individual’s potential possibilities relating to sex, gender and sexuality.[[231]](#footnote-231) The result is that many nonbinary identities are made invisible by being forced to conform to a binary understanding of gender.

Dominant discourses of binary gender and heteronormativity restrict the way queer characters can be interpreted.[[232]](#footnote-232) Constructions of binary gender accept no middle ground nor the potential for more than one gender to be embodied at one time since heteronormativity presents sexed/gendered/sexual pairings that individuals are expected to conform to as being distinct.[[233]](#footnote-233) Employing an “either/or model” of gender provides no label to identify individuals whose performances fall between or outside of binary genders.[[234]](#footnote-234) When commentators are faced with a gender ambiguous individual, that individual is pressed “into a two-gendered system” through the use of a binary model of gender.[[235]](#footnote-235) When scholars binarise an individual who demonstrates gender ambiguity,[[236]](#footnote-236) they choose to represent some gender markers and repress others.

In order to resist forcing Jael into a binary category my analysis adopts a genderqueer perspective, which understands gender as performative.[[237]](#footnote-237)Thus, any gendered behaviour can be performed by any individual. A character whose performances do not adhere to hetero-binary frameworks should not be designated by a binary label since this reduces the visibility of part of their gender identity through legitimating a single binary gender. Although I acknowledge and work with binary constructions of femininity and masculinity, I do not understand these two ways of performing gender as being exhaustive or mutually exclusive. I appreciate that there is an array of ways in which gender can be performed. Such a recognition allows nonbinary expressions of gender to be represented despite employing language grounded in binary constructions of gender.

My nonbinary interpretation of Jael’s performances of gender draws on the existing scholarship but yields a different reading. Each of the following discussions demonstrate the ways in which biblical scholars’ reliance on discourses of binary gender and heteronormativity have impacted interpretations of Jael’s gender. I address scholarship’s feminisation of Jael and offer divergent arguments which demonstrate that Jael as a woman need not be the prevailing reading.

### Jael’s Gendered Introduction (Jdg. 4:17)

A key reason for biblical scholars gendering Jael as a woman is due to the way the text introduces Jael:

Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite (Jdg. 4:17).

Such an introduction appears to binarise Jael’s gender as feminine and place them in a heteronormative relationship as a “wife.”[[238]](#footnote-238) Many scholars accept these binary and heteronormative indications because Jael’s binary label of femininity, in their introduction, seems explicit. Jael is referred to as [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm),woman/wife (Jdg. 4:17).[[239]](#footnote-239) The designation of gender in the Hebrew and English translations is explicit as woman/wife is almost indisputably an indicator of femininity. This label, like a name, marks Jael’s identity.[[240]](#footnote-240) In this case Jael is marked as feminine—but not only as feminine, since Jael performs according to expectations of men as well as women and, as is explored later in this chapter, is also labelled as a man through their masculine name.[[241]](#footnote-241)

Jael’s feminine label of woman/wife is frequently referenced in scholarship and leads to Jael being feminised, since [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm) is an overt indicator of femininity. When presented with a character labelled as “wife” biblical scholars understand that character to be a woman—according to a binary framework—who is married to a man—according to heteronormative expectations. However, due to marital ambiguity in the text coupled with Jael’s masculine performances, the text’s indication of heteronormativity and a binary gender can be disrupted; Jael need not be understood as a woman nor as a wife, but as a character who has an ambiguous marital status and who performs gender ambiguously.

#### Marital Ambiguity

Many biblical scholars base their arguments and discussions on Jael being the wife of Heber, leading to assumptions of Jael’s femininity.[[242]](#footnote-242) The common English translation of Jael’s introduction explicitly labels Jael as a wife, thus as a married woman (Jdg. 4:17). Such an explicit label of femininity suggests a character who appears to conform to binary gender and heteronormativity as a woman who is married to a man. Jael’s position as woman/wife “has programmed all subsequent views about [Jael].”[[243]](#footnote-243) Despite the widespread reliance on Jael’s introduction for understanding Jael, some have noted the ambiguity of Jael’s marriage in the narrative. In particular, J. Cheryl Exum and Berit Olam acknowledge that Jael’s marriage to Heber is unclear in the text.[[244]](#footnote-244) It has been suggested that Jael may not have a husband at all. Thus, interpretations that rely on a heteronormative marriage have weak foundations since the marriage is ambiguous at best.

For Exum, Jael is ambiguously presented as a “wife” because Heber has no impact in the text nor on Jael’s behaviour; he does not make an appearance in the narrative. Exum recognises that Jael acts as if there is no man to turn to for direction. Jael acts independently and does not appear to consider the impact their actions may have on Heber, indicating that such a man/husband may not exist.[[245]](#footnote-245)

Olam also believes that Jael’s position as “wife” is questionable:

Heber’s group is first introduced without any information regarding the size of his group, how many generations and people fall under the title, or even how many wives he had, there are hints in the story, and by the way it appears in Judges, that a husband/wife relationship should be questioned. Jael and Heber are never depicted together; in fact, Heber never appears.[[246]](#footnote-246)

The text reflects Heber’s absence not merely through his lack of appearance in the text but also through Jael’s behaviour. Olam also notes that Judges presents Jael as one of several “women not defined by marriage” such as “Deborah, whose marriage to an actual person named Lappidoth is suspect,” strengthening his claim that the marriage between Jael and Heber is ambiguous.[[247]](#footnote-247) The recognition of a husband’s absence from the narrative challenges scholars’ heteronormative interpretations of Jael as a woman and a wife. Jael’s ambiguous marriage can be read as supporting an interpretation that Jael is not a woman since as unmarried Jael lives independently more in line with expectations of men than women. Jael’s masculinity, through independent living, is more apparent once their marriage is viewed as “suspect.”[[248]](#footnote-248)Jael lives their life according to binary expectations of men, rather than of women. For the purposes of this subsection it is enough to note that Jael’s ambiguous marriage demonstrates commentators’ willingness to overlook Heber’s narrative absence and the ambiguity of the Hebrew, making evident dominant discourses of heteronormativity at work that they read into the text and into interpretations of Jael. Exum’s and Olam’s acknowledgment of the marital ambiguity are uncommon; the vast majority of the existing biblical scholarship on Jael does not address the ambiguity of this marriage, but interprets a heteronormative marriage between Jael and Heber as foundational for understanding Jael’s position as a woman in the text.

Biblical scholars’ use of Jael’s apparently hetero-binary introduction is evident from their frequent repetition, reference to, or paraphrasing of this verse (Jdg. 4:17). For example, Brenner paraphrases and directly references Judges 4:17, saying, “Jael is a married woman, the wife of Heber the Kenite.”[[249]](#footnote-249) Others such as Eric S. Christianson explicitly refer to Judges 4:17 calling Jael “the wife of Heber the Kenite.”[[250]](#footnote-250) Zucker and Reiss too call Jael the “wife of Heber”[[251]](#footnote-251) and John Gray considers Jael a “discarded wife of Heber,”[[252]](#footnote-252) clearly drawing on Judges 4:17’s designation of Jael as a wife. If not for Jael’s introduction labelling them as a wife/woman, commentators would have little from the text to draw on to support their claim that Jael is a woman rather than a nonbinary character.

The dominant discourses of heteronormativity evident in many biblical scholars’ studies have not questioned the marital ambiguity evident in the text, despite an alternative, nonheteronormative translation of Jael’s introduction existing. As Olam notes:

Most scholars do not question the translation “wife” for Jael’s relationship to Heber, though another possible translation is, “woman of,” meaning any woman of his family or clan.[[253]](#footnote-253)

The common English translation, “Jael wife of Heber the Kenite” from the Hebrewhaqqênî *h*eber’ešetyāêl, (Jdg. 4:17) can be translated as “Jael a woman of the Kenite group,” where Heber is understood as a kinship reference.[[254]](#footnote-254) The resultant translation presents Jael as unmarried, supporting the ambiguity of the marriage evident in the common English translation. This alternative translation, where Jael is not said to be married, relies on [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)being translated into English as ‘woman’ rather than as ‘wife.’ This is possible since [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)can mean ‘woman’ or ‘wife’ interchangeably, depending on the context in which it appears.[[255]](#footnote-255) The basic meaning of the Hebrew word is ‘woman,’ with ‘wife’ being a secondary meaning. The heteronormativity of the Hebrew Bible and its translations are made evident by Gravett and her co-authors. They comment that within the context of the Hebrew Bible distinct terms relating to ‘woman’ and ‘wife’ are unnecessary. This is because “to be a ‘woman’ is to be a ‘wife’… And remaining single never receives attention in the Hebrew Bible as an option.”[[256]](#footnote-256) The heteronormative expectations are evident since women are assumed to be or become married to men. Thus, according to this understanding, ‘woman’ and ‘wife’ can be used interchangeably in the Hebrew Bible. Thus, where [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)is translated into English as ‘wife,’ a translator has decided to render [’[eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm), as ‘wife’ rather than as ‘woman.’ This alternative translation is one that is devoid of added heteronormative implications and biases.

The English translation of ‘wife’ reflects a secondary and potential meaning based on the translator’s perception of marriage, a perception and translation which may or may not be correct. For example, in the following biblical passages [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)is used to mean ‘woman,’ and is translated as such. The women mentioned in these verses are not married:

When you go out to war against your enemies, and the Lord your God hands them over to you and you take them captive, suppose you see among the captives a beautiful woman [[’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)] whom you desire and want to marry… (Deut. 21:10-11).

And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman [[’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)] (Rth 3:11).

Then Saul said to his servants, “Seek out for me a woman [[’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)] who is a medium, so that I may go to her and inquire of her.” His servants said to him, “There is a medium at Endor” (1 Sam. 28:7).

The choice to translate [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)as ‘wife’ is usually based on the translator understanding the text as implying that the woman in question is married.[[257]](#footnote-257) In Judges 4 and 5, if Jael has a husband he is absent from the narrative and has no impact in it. Thus, the translation of Jael’s introduction is an example of where heteronormative and binary assumptions influence the translation rather than the context of the narrative directing the translation. Instead of choosing to translate [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)using its primary meaning, ‘woman,’ the translator has added a heteronormative layer to Jael’s introduction by rendering them as married to a man.[[258]](#footnote-258)

The alternative translation, Jael as a woman of the Kenite clan, also relies on translating heber differently to the common translation. Commonly translated as a man’s name and the husband of Jael in Jael’s introduction (Jdg. 4:17), heber can also be translated as a term that indicates a kinship “group,” “some sort of a community unit, a clan, a band, or a tribe,” rather than as an individual.[[259]](#footnote-259) Ackerman, drawing from Abraham Malamat’s study on the Mari, summarises this well:

in texts from the Bronze Age city of Mari on the Upper Euphrates, the term *hibrum* describes some sort of a community unit, a clan, a band, or a tribe... this suggests that *heber*, which is the Hebrew cognate of *hibrum*, should be similarly translated, not as a proper name but as a common noun referring to some sort of bonded-together group.[[260]](#footnote-260)

Malamat understands the Hebrew term heber as a community group since heber *“*is the Hebrew cognate of the term *hibrum*,” which is a common noun relating to a bonded group.[[261]](#footnote-261) In agreement with Ackerman’s interpretation and Malamat’s translation, J. Alberto Soggin understands Jael as “a woman of the Kenite group,” translating heber as “an ethnic unit.”[[262]](#footnote-262) Malamat and Soggin’s translation of heber,as a community group, is supported by the use of the term, heber, elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible with the meaning of a “band” or “company” of priests:[[263]](#footnote-263)

As robbers lie in wait for someone,  
    so the priests are banded together [heber];   
they murder on the road to Shechem,  
    they commit a monstrous crime (Hos. 6:9).

Evidently, heber need not be translated as a man’s name. Therefore, Jdg. 4:17 can be translated as “Jael a woman of the Kenite clan,” in a way that recognises heber as a community group rather than as a person, and certainly not as Jael’s husband.[[264]](#footnote-264) This translation resists the heteronormative marriage that has been seen as a foundational part of Jael’s character and Jael’s binary feminisation.

While only a few biblical scholars discuss the Hebrew of Jael’s introduction, those who do discuss it choose to translate Jael’s introduction without the presence of a heteronormative marriage.[[265]](#footnote-265) I too understand Jdg. 4:17 as introducing Jael as “a woman of the Kenite clan,” not as “wife of Heber the Kenite.”[[266]](#footnote-266) Such a conclusion is strengthened by the above arguments that ‘woman’ is the basic translation of [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm),[[267]](#footnote-267) that Jael’s marriage is ambiguous at best since they act independently of a husband, one who has no narrative presence,[[268]](#footnote-268) and also since heber can be translated as a close-knit group, as it is elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.[[269]](#footnote-269) Thus, I understand Jdg. 4:17 as potentially introducing Jael as a woman of the Kenite clan, unmarried and living autonomously.

The existence of a nonheteronormative translation of Jael’s introduction that goes largely overlooked is suggestive of the reliance on dominant discourses of heteronormativity and gender binary in existing scholarship. Many biblical scholars readily accept unusual aspects of the text if these aspects conform to dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender.[[270]](#footnote-270) Translating Jael as being married to a man called Heber adheres to hetero-binary assumptions. That scholars will accept that Jael is a wife without questioning such a categorisation when evidence to the contrary is present in both the common English translation and the alternativetranslation is problematic. This raises the issue that if exegetes only present interpretations that conform to their expectations of heteronormativity, Jael is not really being represented. Instead, scholars are presenting an interpretation in which Jael is forced to conform to exegetes’ pre-existing assumptions and expectations, assumptions regarding heteronormativity and binary frameworks which queer methodologies disrupt.[[271]](#footnote-271)

The alternativetranslation, “Jael a woman of the Kenite group,”[[272]](#footnote-272) presents Jael as unmarried and thus can impact the way Jael’s gender is understood. It presents an opportunity to interpret Jael without assumptions of heteronormative marriage. I argue that the alternativetranslation, where heber is a kinship group rather than an individual man and in which Jael is presented without a husband, is a more persuasive reading since in the narrative Jael acts independently, as if there is no husband or other masculine family member who has authority over Jael. Therefore, a translation that omits a husband and disrupts the heteronormative expectations of marriage, in line with Jael’s independent behaviour, is a convincing one. This interpretation unsettles the foundations of scholarly arguments that rely on the heteronormative marriage. It also presents a character who is more easily identifiable as gender ambiguous through their disruption of heteronormative marriage and through a masculine living situation.

Introducing Jael as unmarried is an important aspect of the text; Jael as a Kenite member rather than a wife constitutes a character who, before speaking or acting, disrupts hetero-binary expectations of biblical women. While it is not only within marriage that individuals are subject to binarised gender expectations, introducing Jael without a husband changes the context in which Jael lives. As Kelly J. Murphy says, in reference to Deborah, “[h]ow we translate Deborah’s introduction can significantly alter how we understand her role in the textual world of the book of Judges.”[[273]](#footnote-273) This insightful comment is also relevant to the character of Jael; Jael is presented as independent of a husband and of any other masculine kin.[[274]](#footnote-274) Therefore, I suggest that within the context of Jael’s narrative, Jael does not live under a constant shadow of patriarchy.[[275]](#footnote-275) Jael is not restricted to the domestic space nor its expectations of feminine servility and submission to or by a man or husband.[[276]](#footnote-276) Being unmarried presents Jael as living autonomously, as is more commonly expected of men.

Jael’s introduction presents an ambiguous marriage in both the common English translation and in the alternativetranslation allowing Jael to be interpreted as gender ambiguous. In both translations Jael is presented as independent and “unmanned”—without a man—even if Heber is accepted as Jael’s husband since he is absent from the narrative.[[277]](#footnote-277) Jael is also depicted as undertaking masculine roles, such as host, without direction or permission from a husband or any other man. These masculine aspects, namely independence, Jael’s position as head of the household—head of “the tent of Jael”—and their role as host are mentioned here to highlight some ways in which Jael can be recognised as masculine in relation to their absent/non-existent husband. Therefore, despite the existing studies on Jael labelling Jael as a married woman, the text does not necessarily portray Jael as such: rather, it depicts Jael as someone without a husband and who exhibits femininity andmasculinity as a nonbinary character.

#### Jael’s Masculine Name

Both potential translations of Jael’s introduction label Jael as a woman but, I claim, do so in a way that also indicates Jael’s masculinity. Jael’s feminine label marks their identity as does Jael’s name, with their name marking them as masculine since it appears in the masculine form:[[278]](#footnote-278)

Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite (Jdg. 4:17).

While Jael’s feminine label, woman/wife, is overtly feminine, the text’s designation of a masculine label in the form of Jael’s name less explicitly indicates masculinity since some understanding of the Hebrew is required. This may be why Jael’s masculine name in general, but specifically as a gender marker, is frequently overlooked in discussions in scholarly literature. Since Jael is considered a woman, their name appearing in the masculine form is a queer aspect of the text and character which goes largely unnoticed. The result is that an important marker of Jael’s gender is not given the opportunity to inform or influence the way Jael’s gender is categorised by biblical scholars, leaving Jael’s attributed binary femininity intact. The masculinity indicated by Jael’s name disrupts the feminine gender designation that biblical scholars have assigned to Jael.

Recognition of Jael’s name appearing in the masculine form is not a new discovery; biblical scholar Leila Leah Bronner noted the masculine form of Jael’s name in Judges 4 and 5, despite a feminine form being available, as early as 1993.[[279]](#footnote-279) Jael’s name in the masculine form goes largely unacknowledged in the existing scholarship. Those few who do make reference to the masculine form of Jael’s name, such as Langeni, Duran and Wolde, do so in passing;[[280]](#footnote-280) they do not treat the masculinity of Jael’s name as an informative element of Jael’s gender. There are no discussions regarding the reason for the appearance of the masculine form when a feminine form is available and there are no deliberations regarding the impact that this masculine name might have on a character who the existing studies designate as feminine. Guest acknowledges that previous studies have not engaged with Jael’s masculine name but does not discuss its impact for Jael. Guest comments upon the meaning of Jael’s name as “mountain goat” and notes that pausing on a genderqueer aspect of the text

enables the reader, first, to take account of an unexpected use of grammar by the narrator. Jael’s name is the initial minor curiosity. The name “mountain-goat” is a masculine proper noun. Lindars notes that there is a feminine form for “mountain goat” available (Prov 5:19), but “here it is masculine, unlike all other animal names for women” (1995, 196). Ellen van Wolde also notes how Jael “bears a name which is marked as masculine” (1996, 292). “Her name is a yiqtol third person *masculine* singular. She is not called *tā‘ēl* (third person feminine singular), but *yā‘ēl*”. Neither commentator offers any further thought, other than to remark upon the oddity of this occurrence.[[281]](#footnote-281)

The above comment highlights Guest’s appreciation that the attribution of a masculine name to a character understood as feminine in scholarship is a queer aspect, one that is noteworthy. However, there is no discussion of why Jael’s name appears in the masculine form nor a consideration of its significance for an interpretation that disrupts the femininity ascribed to Jael in scholarship. Guest’s work, and wider scholarship, understand Jael as a woman, yet omit suggestions or explanations for Jael’s name appearing in the masculine form when a feminine form is available.[[282]](#footnote-282) By contrast, I view Jael’s masculine name as a gender marker that has equal significance with Jael’s feminine label (Jdg. 4:17).

Names are a way of assigning gender, with a name often being the first indication of an individual’s gender, especially when that individual cannot be seen.[[283]](#footnote-283) Names carry connotations and expectations of how an individual will behave based on the gender associated with their name by a given society.[[284]](#footnote-284) The attribution of gender plays a part in shaping that individual in conformity to an attributed gender.[[285]](#footnote-285) “Forenames are key to the social practices of placing others in gender categories” since they are commonly chosen to convey what is understood to be the correct gender (and sex due to the expectation of cisgenderedness) of an individual.[[286]](#footnote-286) In agreement, Jane Pilcher argues that the designation of “personal names is a *gendered* process.”[[287]](#footnote-287) She claims that this process assigns binary gender to an individual and thus binarises expectations of how they will behave. Pilcher understands the attributed gender of a name to be of great importance to the gendering of an individual:

if individuals are perceived to have (whether by themselves or by others) a gender-wrong forename, a person’s femininity or masculinity may be disrupted as a consequence.[[288]](#footnote-288)

Names, therefore, impact how an individual’s gender is shaped and perceived. Jael’s name, in the masculine form, is not a passive label but a gender marker and part of Jael’s gender ambiguity.

Jael’s masculine name upsets the dominant interpretation that Jael is a woman and supports my claim that Jael is not best understood as a woman but as nonbinary. A masculine name “acts (in most cases) to repeatedly categorize the individual” as masculine.[[289]](#footnote-289) While the text indicates that Jael should be gendered as a man through the repeated use of a masculine name (Jdg. 4:17, 18, 21, 22; 5:6, 24)[[290]](#footnote-290) it simultaneously indicates Jael’s femininity by referring to Jael as “woman/wife” (Jdg. 4:17, 21; 5:24). I suggest that Jael’s name appears in the masculine form because masculinity is an integral aspect of Jael’s gender which should be considered alongside Jael’s femininity. Subsequently, Jael’s gender ambiguity is made evident in the text, in part, through their gendered labels.

#### Subsection Summary

When relying on Jael’s introduction (Jdg. 4:17) to gender Jael, exegetes overlook the text’s indication ofmasculinity as well as femininity. The text refers to Jael through the use of a masculine name anda feminine label, stressing Jael’s nonbinary gender. Commentators categorise Jael as a woman, despite the text’s indications of gender ambiguity, adhering to what Asher-Greve calls an “either/or model” of gender.[[291]](#footnote-291) Their interpretations of Jael as woman/wife are influenced by dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender, supported by Jdg. 4:17’s explicit feminine label, rather than grounded in an analysis of the text. Jael need not be understood as a woman nor as a wife, but as a gender ambiguous character, yet, in the scholarship on Jael their gender is limited to binary femininity.

I am not proposing that interpreters should ignore the text’s attribution of feminine gender—quite the opposite. I am suggesting that instead of onlyacknowledging the text when it conforms to expectations of binary gender and heteronormativity, exegetes should address that Jael embodies femininity andmasculinity. The text labels Jael as masculine as well as feminine and presents Jael as performing femininity and masculinity. When interpreting Jael’s gender holistically, considering the various ways that Jael is gendered and bringing these together, an interpretation that distinguishes Jael as gender ambiguous and makes Jael’s ambiguity central to understanding the character becomes possible.

### Recognising yet Ignoring Jael’s Masculinity

This section demonstrates that the existing scholarly literature has recognised various ways in which Jael performs masculinity but claims to correct or explain away these performances of masculinity, maintaining Jael’s femininity. Adherence to dominant discourses of binary gender leads to Jael’s masculinity being framed as queer and thus those scholars whose interpretations are grounded in dominant discourses of binary gender and heteronormativity, ignore queer aspects of Jael’s gender. Consequently, many elements of Jael’s masculinity are acknowledged but viewed as errors in the text that require correction or explanation. I use Jael’s masculine gender markers, those that currently do not feed into existing interpretations of Jael’s gender, to highlight how hetero-binary biases lead to commentators correcting or explaining away Jael’s masculinity and thus their nonbinary gender.

Gil Rosenberg points out that scholars change queer aspects of texts forcing them to conform to binary gender and heteronormativity.[[292]](#footnote-292) Rosenberg argues that when there is something that does not fully adhere to the expectations of the gender binary or heteronormativity, as the interpreter understands them, they read an error in the text and endeavour to correct it and/or explain what they understand the text as really meaning. Although discussing textual criticism, Rosenberg’s comment that there is a “practice of changing difficult texts not in favour of some other attested version but in favour of an option that is speculatively recreated by the interpreter” is pertinent concerning the literature on Jael.[[293]](#footnote-293) He notes that interpreters’ heteronormative stances are often “unacknowledged but foundational” to their interpretations.[[294]](#footnote-294) The result is that any queerness in the text is rejected.

Biblical scholars frequently interpret Jael’s masculinity as queer because they categorise Jael as a woman. Jael’s masculinity is queer and thus viewed as an error—according to dominant discourses—that needs explaining or correcting. By correcting or explaining Jael’s masculinity Jael is framed as conforming to heteronormative and binary frameworks of gender. An “either/or model” of gender is imposed upon Jael resulting in their feminisation. Thus, heteronormativity and binary gender are reaffirmed through perpetuating Jael’s femininity at the expense of their gender ambiguity.

Three aspects of Jael’s masculinity, evident in the text, are discussed in this section. The first is Sisera’s masculine command, where Sisera speaks to Jael using language that is used for addressing men (Jdg. 4:20). The second is the text’s designation of homeownership—framing the tent as “the tent of Jael,” a role which is usually reserved for men in the Hebrew Bible (Jdg. 4:17). Finally, Jael’s independent behaviour, through reference to their marital ambiguity and role as host, is discussed below as a masculine indicator (Jdg. 4:18, 5:25-26). Each masculine aspect has been considered in need of correction or explanation by some biblical commentators, evidencing dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender. ‘Correcting’ Jael’s queerness leads to their masculinity being presented as secondary to their femininity or being erased altogether.

#### Sisera’s Masculine Command

Exegetes frequently attempt to correct or explain Sisera’s use of the masculine imperative: “He said to her, ‘Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, “Is anyone here?” say, “No”’” (Jdg. 4:20). The language Sisera uses is gendered since in the Hebrew the term “Stand,” *‘ămōd*, is a verb in the masculine imperative form, thus indicating that he is addressing a man.[[295]](#footnote-295) To address a woman the masculine imperative is incorrect, note scholars such as Reis, Olam and Bal.[[296]](#footnote-296) These scholars view Sisera’s use of the masculine imperative as an error in the text and present ways of explaining how this error came to be. Reis observes:

Sisera makes a grammatical slip and expresses “Stand” in the masculine imperative rather than in the feminine he should have used when addressing a woman. This gender fault is frequently remarked upon; most exegetes explain that Sisera is so tired or so relaxed that he, confusedly or comfortably, speaks as he usually speaks when addressing his troops.[[297]](#footnote-297)

Reis’s comment regarding Sisera’s speech makes clear that she understands the masculine imperative as an error since she calls it a “slip.”[[298]](#footnote-298) It is also evident that Reis understands Jael as a woman. Reis explicitly calls Jael a “woman” and reinforces this belief as otherwise the use of the masculine imperative would not be an error in need of correcting or explaining. The potential for an interpretation where Sisera recognises that Jael is not a woman and intentionally uses a masculine imperative is erased when scholars present interpretations that are intended to correct this queer aspect of the text. Olam notes that “it was definitely a mistake to use the masculine command with Jael, who was clearly a woman.”[[299]](#footnote-299) Bal also views this queer moment as an error in need of explaining, suggesting that Sisera speaks incorrectly because he attempts to return to his earlier position and rank as commanding officer over many men. Thus, she claims that he is accustomed to speaking to men and accidently uses a masculine imperative, probably because he is tired.[[300]](#footnote-300) The efforts of scholars to explain and correct the use of the masculine imperative cause Jael’s femininity to be perpetuated, resulting in a queer aspect of Jael’s gender, a masculine aspect, being erased. I propose that rather than correcting or explaining what appears to be an error in the text, Sisera’s use of the masculine imperative is an indication of Jael’s queerness, an indication that should feed into interpretations of Jael’s nonbinary gender.

#### Ownership of “the tent of Jael”

Another example of an aspect of Jael’s masculinity that is explained away by numerous scholars is the text’s reference to the tent as Jael’s own—“the tent of Jael” (Jdg. 4:17). Such a statement designates ownership of the tent to Jael, a privilege usually reserved for men.[[301]](#footnote-301) Biblical scholars frequently attempt to correct the text by explaining what they think it really means or noting what they think this verse should say, since they do not accept that Jael, whom they perceive as a woman, has ownership like a man. For example, Gray argues:

we should expect [the tent] to be termed the tent of her husband Heber. It may refer to the screened harem section of the long Bedouin tent, which would be more secure... Alternatively, the specific mention of her tent may indicate that she was an older, discarded wife of Heber.[[302]](#footnote-302)

He explains away Jael’s masculine-related ownership of “the tent of Jael,” claiming that the tent has been labelled in this way not because it belongs to Jael but because it is Jael’s allocated space within Heber’s tent.[[303]](#footnote-303) There is no indication in the text that either of Gray’s suggestions, that the tent is a “screened harem section” or that Jael “was an older, discarded wife of Heber,” are possible or likely. There is no indication of Jael’s age nor any sign that Heber has multiple tents or multiple wives. Gray draws on heteronormative assumptions of Jael’s expected feminine marital status and the unlikelihood of a woman having homeownership as his foundation for disputing Jael’s ownership of the tent. He understands Jael as a woman to be married to a man, and ownership of property and people as reserved for men. Thus, according to Gray, Jael does not own the tent; ‘her’ husband does. His interpretations are not only grounded in assumptions of heteronormativity, but also in constructions of binary genders. If he did not understand Jael as a woman, he would accept Jael as potentially owning their own tent. Gray’s hetero-binary reading strips Jael of their masculinity and thus their gender ambiguity.

Gray is not alone in reducing Jael’s gender to binary femininity, despite the text’s indication of masculinity and thus the indication that Jael is a nonbinary character. Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin also present an explanation as to why Jael’s tent is designated as Jael’s own and not Jael’s husband’s tent—as they perceive it should be termed. They explain that Jael has a separate tent because Jael was one of a number of Heber’s wives and that the space that Sisera approaches has been allocated as Jael’s living space, but insist that this tent still falls under Heber’s ownership.[[304]](#footnote-304) Thus, they make assumptions that perpetuate binary and heteronormative gender frameworks and go against the text’s designation of the tent as Jael’s own. Similarly, Barnabas Lindars comments that “[t]he fact that she was *the wife of Heber the Kenite* is enough to establish the ownership of the tent.”[[305]](#footnote-305) Such a comment makes clear that Lindars explains the ownership of the tent based on assumptions of Jael’s heteronormative marriage and a binary understanding that Jael is a woman and that women are subordinate to men.[[306]](#footnote-306) For Lindars, Jael’s assumed position as wife is enough to indicate that Jael does not—or maybe cannot—own their own tent and instead resides in a space that is under Heber’s authority. Such an explanation erases Jael’s masculine ownership of “the tent of Jael” and frames Jael as a woman without ownership, married to a man with ownership. Scholars such as Lindars, Gray and Matthews and Benjamin challenge only those aspects of the text that do not conform to dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender, going against the text’s designation of the tent as “the tent of Jael” (Jdg. 4:17).

Once assumptions of heteronormativity and binary gender are disrupted, the queer reality that the text presents become visible. Jael is the owner of “the tent of Jael,” fulfilling a masculine position. But as I argue, Jael’s ownership needs no correcting nor explaining. The attribution of the tent as “the tent of Jael” is one example of where the text presents Jael as embodying masculinity.

#### Jael’s Independence

Jael can be understood as living independently, as is in line with expectations of masculinity rather than femininity.[[307]](#footnote-307)The marital ambiguity, presented in both the common English translation and the alternative translation, has been acknowledged as “convincing evidence for Yael’s independence.”[[308]](#footnote-308) Jael acts independently and does not appear to consider the impact their actions may have on Heber, if such a man/husband exists.[[309]](#footnote-309) Biblical women who are not depicted as being married are understood as acting independently. Bal comments that the three women in Judges who kill men (Jael, Delilah and Abimelech’s unnamed killer) “live as independent women,” while Olam, in agreement, says that “Jael appears in a story with many other women acting independently,” with no supervision from men.[[310]](#footnote-310) The women that Olam references include Deborah and Sisera’s mother. Ackerman also draws on Jael’s living situation to stress Jael’s independence. She refers to Delilah, recognising that she has been framed as an independent woman, and that she, like Jael, is presented in Judges as not only behaving independently but also as living independently of any man.[[311]](#footnote-311) Acknowledgement of a husband’s absence from the narrative supports an interpretation that considers Jael’s masculine performances of independence and Jael’s non-conformity to heteronormative expectations of marriage.

However, those that note that Jael is independent due to their lack of a husband do not perceive the importance of Jael’s independence for interpretations of Jael’s gender. For example, Lillian R. Klein acknowledges that Jael is

exclusively independent, showing no deference to masculine authority whatsoever… and she takes matters into her own hands, acting without the intermediary of a male figure.[[312]](#footnote-312)

However, Klein does not present an interpretation of Jael as exhibiting masculinity through independence and as living an autonomous lifestyle, even though it is acknowledged in Hebrew Bible scholarship that a “man is usually the one who is strong and independent,” not a woman.[[313]](#footnote-313) Klein perceives that Jael’s masculine independence is evident through their embodiment of the masculine role of the host, offering safety, shelter and comforts that a host would provide:

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’” (Jdg. 4:18-20)

He asked water and she gave him milk,  
    she brought him curds in a lordly bowl. (Jdg. 5:25)

Jael’s masculinised independence[[314]](#footnote-314) does not feed into scholars’ interpretations of their gender.[[315]](#footnote-315) Jael demonstrates independence by undertaking the masculine role of host. Jael’s independence as a host has been acknowledged by scholars, as has the expectation that hosts are men.[[316]](#footnote-316) An offer of hospitality in the Hebrew Bible is like a contractual agreement, undertaken between men. The host’s offer includes shelter within a space that is expected to be owned by the man who is doing the offering, or by a man who has the authority to offer on another man’s behalf.[[317]](#footnote-317) This offer also includes home comforts which are also considered the property of the man, even if those home comforts—such as food and care—are physically given to the guest by women. These are vital elements of a biblical offer of hospitality where all parts must be fulfilled, especially the assurance of safety and the offer of a drink.[[318]](#footnote-318) The masculinity of the role of host is made particularly clear by Tyler Mayfield’s comment:

She [Jael] is not a host, since only males act as hosts in the anthropology of biblical hospitality, and therefore cannot be seen as disobedient to the ancient ways of hospitality.[[319]](#footnote-319)

Since Jael is understood to be a woman, Jael as a host is viewed as a queer aspect in need of correcting and explaining according to those whose interpretations are grounded in discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender.

The text frames Jael as a host, which is a role widely understood by biblical scholars to be reserved for men.[[320]](#footnote-320) Several biblical scholars note Jael’s role as host commenting on Jael’s offer of shelter and safety,[[321]](#footnote-321) while others focus on how Jael breaks the code of hospitality.[[322]](#footnote-322) Either way, Jael’s undertaking of this masculine role is not given the opportunity to be informative in biblical scholars’ interpretations of Jael’s gender. The result is the feminisation of Jael and the rejection of their masculinity and nonbinary gender. Exum notes:

the gender issue becomes submerged in issues of concern to men: hospitality and codes of behaviour. The success of this narrative ploy in promoting the androcentric agenda is witnessed by the amount of attention commentators devote to the issue of hospitality—a host’s obligation to *his* guests in the ancient world—as compared with the treatment of the woman. (Italics mine)[[323]](#footnote-323)

Important for my argument is that Exum evidently understands the host as a man. Mayfield stresses that Jael could not possibly be acting as a host, since only men can act as hosts and offer hospitality.[[324]](#footnote-324) Matthews and Benjamin argue that only husbands and fathers, not women/wives or daughters, could offer hospitality by inviting people into their homes.[[325]](#footnote-325) That women did not—or could not—offer hospitality in the Hebrew Bible is made particularly clear when Rebekah (Genesis 24) rushes home to notify the head of their household, a man, of the arrival of a potential guest, and it is this man who then offers hospitality:

Then the girl ran and told her mother’s household about these things.Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban; and Laban ran out to the man, to the spring. As soon as he had seen the nose-ring, and the bracelets on his sister’s arms, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah, “Thus the man spoke to me,” he went to the man; and there he was, standing by the camels at the spring. He said, “Come in, O blessed of the Lord. Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house and a place for the camels?” (Gen. 24: 28-31).

This pattern of women meeting men, then rushing home to men who are the ones to offer hospitality, is also evident when Rachel meets Jacob (Genesis 29) and when Moses saves Zipporah and her sisters (Exodus 2). Despite the women in these narratives sometimes making a suggestion of hospitality, it is men who offer hospitality and thus enter into a contract-like agreement to provide safety and nourishment. In the Hebrew Bible women leave the offerring of hospitality and the role of host to men.[[326]](#footnote-326) Peter Merchant also stresses that “the position of host [is] usually reserved for men.”[[327]](#footnote-327) Thus, when scholars acknowledge Jael’s undertaking of the role of host or behaviours of hospitality, they—inadvertently—notice that the text presents Jael as taking on a man’s social role. I agree with Exum’s gendering of the role of host as masculine, as do Mayfield and Matthews and Benjamin and numerous others.[[328]](#footnote-328) These biblical scholars understand the role of host as masculine and perceive Jael as a feminine character and therefore frame the two as incompatible, but I perceive Jael as gender ambiguous; taking on the masculine role of host is part of their gender ambiguity.

Jael invites Sisera in, offering safety and shelter (Jdg. 4:18) and provides nourishment (Jdg. 4:19) and comfort (Jdg. 4:18) as is also expected of a host.[[329]](#footnote-329) Jael is presented as a character who acts within the remit of “fathers of households”; Jael acts as is expected of a man.[[330]](#footnote-330) Interpreting Jael as masculine, due to their role as host, relies on accepting the text’s indications of Jael’s gender through the markers presented in the text—regardless of the interpreter’s heteronormative expectations and assumptions that deny a character labelled as a woman/wife to perform as a man. If the masculinity indicated by Jael’s name and Jael’s behaviours are accepted as legitimate, alongside their widely established femininity, the text can be recognised as presenting a nonbinary character.

#### Subsection Summary

Jael’s invitation to Sisera is open to an interpretation that labels Jael in ways other than as feminine. Jael’s invitation to Sisera indicates Jael’s independence and role as host in “the tent of Jael” (Jdg. 4:17), both of which are associated with masculinity.[[331]](#footnote-331) The text presents Jael as masculine (assertive, independent, host, head of the household)[[332]](#footnote-332) and feminine (nurturing and caring, providing nourishment).[[333]](#footnote-333) Jael demonstrates masculinity and femininity, and thus gender ambiguity—but only if interpreters are open to accepting what the text presents.

While some biblical scholars show awareness of Jael’s masculinity, they nevertheless perpetuate Jael’s femininity, rejecting queer aspects of Jael’s character which disrupt hetero-binary gender. Since Jael’s masculinity does not adhere to binary and heteronormative constructions of femininity, which scholars expect, they present explanations and supposed corrections and if those methods do not achieve a binary and heteronormative reading, they do not address the issue raised by a queer aspect at all, as with Jael’s masculine name. Consequently, Jael’s masculinity is rejected in favour of a binary feminine label and Jael’s masculinity is not given the opportunity to impact interpretations of their gender. A holistic interpretation of Jael’s gender acknowledges and represents the various ways Jael’s gender is performed and embodied. Therefore, since the text depicts Jael as embodying more than one set of gendered expectations and ascribes to Jael a masculine name and feminine label, I claim that Jael should be interpreted as performing gender in an ambiguous way and recognised as a nonbinary character.

### Jael’s Performances of Femininity

The biases of scholarship I describe have resulted in widespread adherence to an “either/or model” of gender and unquestioning acceptance of the explicit designation of Jael as woman/wife. Dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender appear to be supported by Jael’s performances of femininity, which are overt, and Jael’s performances relating to biblical tropes of women using feminine associated techniques to overcome men. I suggest that many scholars label Jael as a woman because Jael explicitly performs as is expected of women. In the same way that Jael’s feminine label genders Jael more overtly than does theirmasculine name, I claim that Jael’s feminine performances are more clearly gendered than many of their performances of masculinity. In order for Jael to achieve their aims, namely to overcome Sisera, Jael must convince Sisera that Jael is a woman who poses no threat to him through offers of safety,[[334]](#footnote-334) comfort and care.[[335]](#footnote-335) Therefore, Jael’s performances must be easily recognisable as feminine and thus are made explicit.

In this section I discuss how Jael’s overt performances of femininity have led to commentators, informed by dominant discourses of binary gender and heteronormativity, interpreting Jael’s feminine performances as confirmation of Jael’s binary feminine gender label despite Jael’s various masculine performances. I address the common acknowledgement that Jael’s feminine performances are not only explicit but also recognisable as behaviours considered as feminine tropes, namely, what Schüssler Fiorenza calls “woman’s weapons.”[[336]](#footnote-336) Jael’s feminine act of nourishing Sisera is the performance that will be discussed here, however, Jael performs explicit femininity in a range of ways:[[337]](#footnote-337)

Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him (Jdg. 4:19).

He asked for water and she gave him milk,  
    she brought him curds in a lordly bowl (Jdg. 5:25).

Nourishment, as well as care and seduction are framed as women’s weapons employed by Jael.[[338]](#footnote-338) Jael’s performances of care are discussed later in Chapters 2 and 3, and Jael’s seduction of Sisera is the focus of Chapter 4. This following section establishes that nourishment is characterised as a woman’s weapon because of its common use by biblical women who use nourishment to achieve their aims as well as because of the link that nourishment has to heteronormative expectations of women and feminine domains. I explore how the use of women’s weapons feminises the user, using Jacob and his stew pot (Genesis 25) as an example. Jael’s use of the woman’s weapon nourishment should not lead to the binarisation of Jael as a woman since Jael imbues the act of nourishing with masculinity, evident through Jael’s assertiveness and controlling behaviour with which Jael negates Sisera’s freewill and subsequently kills him. These performances of masculinity are considered here alongside Jael’s performances of femininity in order to demonstrate that while existing biblical research largely ignores their impact upon interpretations of Jael’s gender, Jael’s masculinity as well as their femininity should feed into interpretations of Jael’s gender resulting in an acknowledgement of a nonbinary character.

Jael’s masculinity is performed in ways that are less clear in order to avert Sisera’s anxiety.[[339]](#footnote-339) Jael’s explicit feminine performances mask their masculinity from Sisera, but are nonetheless present. For example, Jael takes initiative and is assertive when approaching Sisera and inviting him, as a host, into their own tent:[[340]](#footnote-340)

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug (Jdg. 4:18).

Such masculine behavioursare concealed by Jael’s apparent feminine concern for Sisera and Jael’s feminine acts of care and nurture which have largely been perceived as motherly behaviours by commentators (discussed further in Chapter 3). Despite my claim that Jael’s femininity disguises much of their masculinity, Jael’s masculine performances are evident and framed by scholars as performances of gender reversal.

#### Nourishment as Woman’s Weapon

That women use particular weapons to overcome men, namely weapons related to the domestic sphere, is a trope running throughout scholarship on the Hebrew Bible.[[341]](#footnote-341) As Schüssler Fiorenza’s term “woman’s weapons” indicates, these weapons are related to binary feminine gender. As a result, those who use women’s weapons are commonly feminised without a critical analysis of whether femininity is an appropriate interpretation or label of their gender. The feminisation of a character resulting from them providing nourishment is evident throughout studies on the Hebrew Bible and given its frequency has become a well attested theme in the Hebrew Bible as well as in the literature on the Hebrew Bible.[[342]](#footnote-342) Nourishment as a weapon has become a biblical trope because of its frequent use:

Within the male-created narratives, it stands to reason that women’s weapons would be chosen from the female arsenal… a connection between food and death [has developed].[[343]](#footnote-343)

Biblical scholars such as Bach, Duran and Meir Sternberg frame food and drink as among biblical women’s primary weapons.[[344]](#footnote-344) Nourishment, then, is not just gendered as feminine but can be understood as a weapon available to women and thus feminises those who use such a weapon. Studies such as Bach’s and Duran’s take nourishment as their focus as one of women’s weapons. Bach’s work focuses on how biblical women have used food and drink to seduce men and bring about their death.[[345]](#footnote-345) Similarly, Duran’s article focuses on the use of nourishment by Jael, Judith, Esther and Herodias as weapons against men, wielded to achieve their own ends.[[346]](#footnote-346) Those characters, understood as women in scholarship, “assume power through the ordinary elements available to all women.”[[347]](#footnote-347) In the Hebrew Bible, from Genesis onwards, when those labelled as women are involved with food there is frequently danger for men. Bach comments that the danger of nourishment when offered by a woman suggests that

[f]ood then takes on an aura of warning when women violate the primary connection they have to food and nurturing. This paradox permeates all the biblical stories of women who are murderers. They do not use the weapons of men to kill men; they assume power through the ordinary elements available to all women.[[348]](#footnote-348)

Sternberg agrees with Bach’s assertion, calling “drink” a woman’s weapon.[[349]](#footnote-349) Sternberg notes that when a drink is offered by a woman in the Hebrew Bible it is potentially deadly because it can bring about the downfall of the man who is being led into a vulnerable, often intoxicated, state.

Gender scholars Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginnet note that providing nourishment has widely been gendered as feminine given that women are expected to undertake this role and because providing nourishment has a link to caring and nurturing behaviour.[[350]](#footnote-350) This is especially true in the Hebrew Bible where providing nourishment has been framed as a prominent—if not a “paramount”—aspect of femininity.[[351]](#footnote-351) Providing nourishment is also associated with women since the domestic space is designated as feminine and nourishment is considered one of women’s domestic activities.[[352]](#footnote-352) Nourishment is understood as a key aspect of femininity especially within the gendered relationships/roles of mother to child, wife to husband and woman to man.[[353]](#footnote-353)

Providing nourishment is so closely associated with femininity that it can lead to feminisation, even if that individual is commonly considered to be a man.[[354]](#footnote-354) Jacob is a good example of a character who is widely understood to be a man but who is feminised, in part, due to his offer of nourishment. Not only does Jacob offer nourishment, he also uses that nourishment as a weapon against a man wielded to achieve his aims:

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!” (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright (Gen. 25:29-34).

Jacob “commands a stewpot, not a bow” and often “emerges as less of a ‘man’” than his brother Esau, comments Gravett and her co-authors.[[355]](#footnote-355) Although he does not use nourishment to kill, as Jael does, he uses it to assert control over his brother. He “controls Esau to the extent that he controls the stew. He does not control Esau in any other way.”[[356]](#footnote-356) This extract indicates that Jacob is only able to assert control at this point in this narrative because of his access to and use of the stew. Gravett and her co-authors stress that Jacob employs “the feminine act of food preparation”—a woman’s weapon—to secure his brother’s birth right.[[357]](#footnote-357) Therefore, as with Jael, Jacob embodies the masculine behaviours of assertiveness and control while wielding the feminised tool of nourishment. Jacob provides nourishment in order to assert masculine control and is feminised because of his use of women’s weapons. Both Jael and Jacob have masculine names, they both use the woman’s weapon of nourishment to exert control. Yet, Jacob is widely understood as a man who is temporarily feminised and Jael is understood as a woman who temporarily enacts masculinity.

I suggest that, in the same way that Jacob is feminised through his use of nourishment, Jael has been feminised through their association with nourishment. The example of Jacob shows how a character’s engagement with women’s weapons can lead to the feminisation of that character, regardless of how they can or should be gendered in other contexts. This supports my argument that biblical scholars have gendered Jael as a woman, in part due to Jael’s use of women’s weapons. However, Jael’s provision of nourishment simultaneously embodies what is expected of more than one gender through their act of nourishment and their bid for control. Jael’s feminine behaviours need not ground Jael in binary femininity, since they do not ground Jacob in binary femininity. Regardless, Jael’s fulfilment of a key feminine role has led academics to unnecessarily gender them as a woman.

#### Jael’s Simultaneous Performances of Masculinity

Very few biblical scholars have commented that Jael performs masculinity whilst undertaking the feminised role of nourishing Sisera. The presence of nourishment in Jael’s narrative reveals one of the greatest juxtapositions of Jael’s character; Jael is both giver of life—through nourishment—andtaker of life—through killing.[[358]](#footnote-358) When offering nourishment Jael employs assertiveness in a bid for control over Sisera. This nourishment leads Sisera closer to death through building his trust in Jael as well as by making him sleepy and therefore vulnerable.[[359]](#footnote-359) Such an act is evidence of masculinity since Jael endeavours to strip Sisera of his control, claim that control and make Sisera vulnerable so that they can kill him. Zucker and Reiss identify Jael’s assertiveness, characterised as masculine, whilst providing nourishment to Sisera. They comment that this “is the rare case of a woman taking charge.”[[360]](#footnote-360) They portray Jael’s offer of nourishment, milk instead of water, as demonstrative of masculinity since Jael takes control. Such a position of control, “taking charge,” is expected of men rather than women.[[361]](#footnote-361) Despite reading Jael as performing masculinity andfemininity, they frame Jael’s masculinity as separate and secondary to their femininity, regarding the former as “ironic” and representative of temporary gender reversal.[[362]](#footnote-362)

Similarly, Bal recognises Jael’s performances of more than one gender whilst Jael is nourishing Sisera, but frames Jael’s masculinity as separate and secondary to their femininity. For Bal, when Jael provides nourishment, it is Jael “who controls, who gives—and who kills.”[[363]](#footnote-363) Bal views Jael as being in the position of power since Jael has what Sisera needs and Jael uses it to their own advantage. Rather than moving past this embodiment of masculinity, as Bal does, my argument frames it as an example of and evidence for Jael’s nonbinary gender. Although nourishment is associated with femininity, Jael’s nourishing of Sisera embodies both feminine andmasculine behaviours. I build upon these rare recognitions of Jael’s simultaneous performances of femininity and masculinity and interpret Jael as performing gender ambiguously as a nonbinary character.

Jael makes decisions on Sisera’s behalf and gives him no opportunity to question those decisions:

Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him (Jdg. 4:19).

He asked for water and she gave him milk,  
    she brought him curds in a lordly bowl (Jdg. 5:25).

Although Sisera asks for “water,” Jael gives him “milk.” His desire for water is overruled by Jael; Jael decides what he will receive. Here the text presents an assertive character who mixes performances of femininity andmasculinity through providing nourishment in an assertive and controlling manner.[[364]](#footnote-364)

Jael’s giving of nourishment demonstrates another quality, binarised as masculine: that of tactical decision-making. I suggest that Jael is tactical since they carefully plan their actions with a specific aim in mind. This aim, to kill Sisera, can be understood as an act of warfare, as is explored in Chapter 2. That Jael employs tactics of warfare is thematically supported by the context of Jael’s narrative.[[365]](#footnote-365) Jael’s narrative is set in the midst of a battle between the Israelites and Canaanites and the individual that Jael nourishes is not just any man, but the Canaanite army commander.

So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim... She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand’” (Jdg. 4:2, 6-7).

The kings came, they fought;  
    then fought the kings of Canaan,  
at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo;  
    they got no spoils of silver (Jdg. 5:19).

Tactical decision-making is framed as masculine according to binary understandings of gender. This is owing not just to its association with the military and warfare but also because of its association with power over others and the independent thought and activeness involved in pursuing tactics.[[366]](#footnote-366) These are qualities constructed as more closely associated with men than with women. Although Sisera requests water, Jael tactically replaces water for a more relaxing, “soporific,” form of nourishment (Jdg. 4:19, 5:25).[[367]](#footnote-367) Jael tactically makes Sisera feel comfortable and relaxed, giving him a sleep-inducing drink.[[368]](#footnote-368) Jael’s masculine tactics, undertaken through the feminine performances of providing nourishment and care are evidence of Jael fulfilling their aims in a gender ambiguous manner.

Yee recognises Jael’s tactical choices, evident by her terming Jael’s decision to give Sisera a different form of nourishment than requested “guerrilla tactics.”[[369]](#footnote-369) This comment draws attention to Jael’s use of femininity (nourishment) to take part in masculine activities (killing and warfare).[[370]](#footnote-370) Jael’s act of providing nourishment isan act of war. Jael’s decisions are made when Jael is confronted with how to deal with an army commander during a battle between the Canaanites and Israelites (Jdg. 4:1-3). Therefore, Jael provides nourishment, as is expected of women, whilst simultaneously using this nourishment as a battle weapon, engaging with the masculine domain of warfare, as is expected of men.[[371]](#footnote-371) As Bal says, “[b]y giving milk, Yael, on the one hand, reassures Sisera further; on the other hand, she prepares the scene as an ironic one of anti-mothering.”[[372]](#footnote-372) Although Bal’s language is of anti/mothering rather than warfare, Bal nonetheless comprehends Jael’s feminine offer of nourishment as an act of masculine aggression. Jael’s masculine act is simultaneously performed with a feminine act, resulting in a gender ambiguous performance.

#### Subsection Summary

Jael’s masculine behaviour is embedded in feminine behaviour, so much so that it is almost disguised. I suggest that Jael’s use of the woman’s weapon of nourishment is intended to prevent Sisera from suspecting that Jael is anything but a dutiful woman adhering to feminine expectations of providing nourishment.[[373]](#footnote-373) If Sisera understands Jael to be a woman, Jael poses no threat to him as the gender binary attributes vulnerability and victimhood to women. If Sisera understands Jael to be a woman, he would not expect Jael to embody masculine behaviours of aggression and violence, behaviours that would threaten him.[[374]](#footnote-374) It is possible that Sisera seeks out a woman’s tent in which to hide in specifically because he understands a woman to pose him no threat.

Jael’s femininity is performed explicitly and as a result is widely accepted. Jael’s masculinity is widely commented upon but not accepted as part of Jael’s gender, since it is viewed as secondary to Jael’s feminine gender and suggesting otherwise would disrupt heteronormative and binary constructions of gender. I argue that all of Jael’s performances of gender should be understood together, in a holistic manner, and should all feed into an interpretation of Jael’s gender, resulting in an interpretation of gender ambiguity.

## Conclusion

Jael has been categorised as a woman in the literature since commentators approach the text from a heteronormative perspective informed by dominant discourses of binary gender. The reference to Jael as a woman/wife, in Jael’s introduction (Jdg. 4:17), has been used by scholars to reinforce assumptions of Jael’s heteronormativity and binary gender. Jael’s explicit performances of femininity coupled with their thematic link to the trope of women’s weapons has been used to binarise Jael as a woman.[[375]](#footnote-375) Jael fulfils binary and heteronormative expectations of women, especially the expectation that as a woman Jael will provide nourishment; Jael also, however, fulfils expectations of men.

A holistic approach allows Jael to be read as simultaneously performing femininity and masculinity. Jael’s masculinity is acknowledged by exegetes. However, Jael’s masculinity is framed as temporary artifice in scholarship, resulting in the perpetuation of a hetero-binary interpretation of Jael. Despite awareness of Jael’s masculine performances there are no considerations of gendering Jael in a different way, in a way that represents their gender holistically, as masculine andfeminine—as nonbinary. Subsequently, Jael’s gender is reduced to the binary category of femininity. Binarising Jael as a woman relies on an acceptance that Jael’s gendered label as woman/wife should be weighted more heavily than Jael’s masculine name and that Jael’s performances of femininity should be considered more significant than their performances of masculinity.

The gender ambiguity with which the text introduces Jael is perpetuated throughout Jael’s narrative through Jael’s embodiment of masculinity while using women’s weapons. Jael’s use of women’s weapons can be understood as masking Jael’s masculinity from Sisera by making explicit acts, roles and behaviours that are firmly associated with women.[[376]](#footnote-376) However, while Jael’s performances of femininity play into Sisera’s—and many interpreters’—expectations of women in the domestic space, masculinity is also undeniably evident. Jael’s masculinity is apparent in their bid to control Sisera and deny him his autonomy.[[377]](#footnote-377) Jael’s use of nourishment, while wielded as a feminine weapon, is a tactical manoeuvre that is undertaken assertively and independently and one that allows Jael to exert control over Sisera. Jael’s feminine role as nourisher allows Jael to engage in warfare; Jael turns domestic nourishment into a deadly weapon, placing Sisera in a position of vulnerability. The result is that Jael not only provides nourishment as a woman but embodies warrior status, as a man, through the killing of Sisera.[[378]](#footnote-378) Thus, Jael combines what is expected of women andmen in a single act of gender ambiguity. In scholarship Jael’s simultaneous performances of masculinity and femininity are read from a heteronormative and binary perspective resulting in Jael’s masculinity being presented as secondary and thus less important through the language of gender reversal. The result is that Jael is labelled as a woman while their masculinity is invalidated, ignored or overlooked. In this chapter I have worked to present a “richer, more interesting” way of interpreting Jael’s gender, one that is not bound by heteronormative gender binaries.[[379]](#footnote-379) By adopting a holistic approach, one that refuses to be limited to two distinct categories of gender, the opportunity to acknowledge Jael as a queer character comes to the fore.[[380]](#footnote-380) My application of a queer methodology highlights that the heteronormativity assigned to Jael is unstable with this heteronormativity being incorrectly viewed as fixed element of Jael’s character through repetition of social constructions.[[381]](#footnote-381)

# **Chapter 2. Killing Sisera**

This chapter focuses on Jael’s act of killing[[382]](#footnote-382) Sisera to demonstrate that Jael is better understood as a gender ambiguous character, rather than as a binarised feminine character. I use the scene of Sisera’s death, Jdg. 4:21, 5:26-27, as a backdrop for analysing and interpreting Jael’s gender:

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:21).

She put her hand to the tent peg  
    and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet;  
she struck Sisera a blow,  
    she crushed his head,  
    she shattered and pierced his temple.  
He sank, he fell,  
    he lay still at her feet;  
at her feet he sank, he fell;  
    where he sank, there he fell dead (Jdg. 5:26-27).

Having previously argued that the existing literature on Jael is largely influenced by dominant discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender, my interpretation moves away from such binary frameworks by examining how the scene of Sisera’s death indicates Jael’s gender ambiguity. I highlight that alternative readings and perspectives, that do not adhere to dominant interpretations of hetero-binaries, are available.[[383]](#footnote-383) This is made possible by employing a holistic approach which allows gendered roles and behaviours that appear to be contradictory or incompatible to be simultaneously accepted as informative for interpretations of Jael’s gender. By employing a holistic approach to Jael’s gender in relation to Sisera’s death Jael becomes recognisable as a nonbinary character.

This chapter analyses gender markers that relate to Jael’s killing of Sisera in conjunction with Jael’s performances to interpret Jael’s gender. These gender markers are Jael’s space and tools. With direct reference to Sisera’s death, I explore the ways in which Jael’s gender is readable as feminine as well asmasculine, often simultaneously.[[384]](#footnote-384) While Jael’s femininity is well established in the existing literature and leads to Jael being binarised as a woman, there is also acknowledgement of Jael performing masculinity, despite such masculinity being framed as temporary. In particular, the scene of Sisera’s death has garnered much scholarly attention, with widespread awareness that Jael performs masculinity through violence, killing and engagement with warfare.[[385]](#footnote-385)Jael engages with these three masculine aspects of the narrative primarily through their death-dealing act. Jael “picked up a tent peg and a hammer and… drove the peg through [Sisera’s] temple into the ground, and he died” (Jdg. 4:21). Jael is perpetually labelled as a woman in the existing literature despite Jael’s gender markers signalling masculinity as well as femininity.

The gender markers that are the focus of this chapter are Jael’s space and Jael’s tools. Both of these markers relate directly to Sisera’s death. Jael’s space, the tent, is the scene of Sisera’s death and Jael’s tools, the tent peg and hammer, are the instruments Jael uses to kill Sisera. I perceive both of these gender markers as informative for understanding Jael’s gender. The tent and the tent peg and hammer, as gender markers, are indicative of Jael’s gender ambiguity since, as will be demonstrated below, each suggests Jael’s femininity as well as theirmasculinity, and each highlights Jael’s simultaneous performances of more than one gender.

Despite scholarship recognising Jael’s femininity andmasculinity during Sisera’s death scene, academics have continually grounded Jael’s space and tools in femininity. As discussed in the previous chapter, I understand Jael’s femininity as deliberately foregrounded in order to avoid or alleviate Sisera’s anxiety towards Jael. Thus, I claim that Jael’s masculinity is most overt when Jael kills Sisera since they no longer need to mask their masculinity from him and thus their gender ambiguity becomes more apparent. I diverge from previous studies as, instead of representing one facet of Jael’s diverse and varied gender as primary, their femininity, and their masculinity as secondary and temporary, as is the trend in scholarship on Jael, I interpret Jael as nonbinary. While Jael’s space and tools feed into Jael’s illusion of femininity, an illusion that has fooled Sisera and leads biblical scholars to feminise Jael, I interpret the ways in which these markers suggest Jael’s masculinity as well asJael’s femininity.

## Jael’s Masculinity in Scholarship

This literature review highlights that biblical scholars do perceive Jael as performing masculinity during Sisera’s death scene, through engagement with the masculine themes of violence, killing and involvement in warfare. Despite scholarship noting Jael’s masculine performances, the existing literature maintains Jael’s femininity.

While all behaviours are performable by all individuals, biblical scholarship widely frames violence, killing and warfare as the domain of men without explanation regarding how or why they are understood as such.[[386]](#footnote-386) For example, when Fewell and Gunn reference Jael’s “violence,” saying, “Sisera and the patriarchal reader… do not want to imagine that, under duress, she [Jael] might herself invade the male monopoly of power, claim the authority of violence”[[387]](#footnote-387) and when Yee calls Jael a “Woman Warrior,” juxtaposing Jael’s femininity with the masculinity associated with being a warrior.[[388]](#footnote-388) These examples are representative of the existing literature. Their lack of discussion indicates that war, warriors and related behaviours of violence and killing are so widely understood and accepted as masculine that they require no critical discussion. Harold Garfinkel notes that—in regard to gendered roles and behaviours in general not just violence, killing and warfare—what constitutes masculinity or femininity is frequently, if not usually, taken for granted.[[389]](#footnote-389) The masculinity of certain roles and behaviours is taken for granted and Jael is not explicitly labelled as masculine or as a man, despite being recognised and discussed as behaving as such, and thus Jael’s gender ambiguity is not noted.

The key texts consulted for this literature review and used throughout this chapter include Harold C. Washington’s studies on masculinity, violence and warfare in the Bible,[[390]](#footnote-390) Exum’s study on literary violence against biblical women,[[391]](#footnote-391) Bal’s numerous studies on Jael and Judges,[[392]](#footnote-392) Yee’s work on women warriors in Judges[[393]](#footnote-393) and David Clines’ various studies on biblical men and masculinity.[[394]](#footnote-394) These scholars examine the text from the perspective of its historical situation as well as attending to the historical situation from which the text emerged. In doing so they frame violence, killing and engagement with warfare as masculine in the Hebrew Bible.[[395]](#footnote-395) Thus, the scholarship makes clear that violence, killing and warfare are framed as masculine in both the Book of Judges and the Hebrew Bible more widely.[[396]](#footnote-396) Nonbiblical research on gender, such as Monique Wittig’s work on the power of language,[[397]](#footnote-397) Raewyn Connell’s and James W. Messerschmidt’s work on hegemonic masculinity[[398]](#footnote-398) and Tim Edwards’ study on masculinity and violence[[399]](#footnote-399) are also consulted here to demonstrate that violence, killing and engagement with warfare are also grounded in constructs of masculinity in other fields of research. Once the masculinity of these behaviours and domains is established, I proceed to argue that Jael’s performances are grounded in masculinity and thus Jael is framed as performing as a man and as a woman. Consequently, Jael’s performances of gender can be understood as undermining the binary feminine label that biblical commentators ascribe to them.

Washington says that violence in the Hebrew Bible is “marked as masculine” since he understands violence as a form of power:

The language of war in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern literatures is acutely masculinist… In this discourse "man" and "woman" are mobile constructs, a complementary pair of signifiers reciprocally determined by their relation to violence. Here violent power is marked as masculine, subjugation and defeat as feminine.[[400]](#footnote-400)

He says that violence aims to exert control and dominance over another and aims to claim or reaffirm a position of authority. He understands masculinity and femininity as “reciprocally determined by their relation to violence,” leading him to argue that being the victim of violence is feminising.[[401]](#footnote-401) Due to the central role that violence plays in killing and warfare, it is unsurprising that Washington also understands killing and engagement with warfare as masculine. He stresses the link between violence, killing and warfare commenting, “what could be more acutely gendered than war,” an activity that expects and at times demands violence and killing.[[402]](#footnote-402) Washington understands warfare as an activity that has been “historically described as performed by men only, in a space containing nothing but men.”[[403]](#footnote-403) Thus, for Washington, not only are violence, killing and warfare closely related to each other, they are grounded in constructions of masculinity and expected to be performed by men.

Since violence is commonly a central feature of killing, killing too is widely constructed as masculine in scholarship.[[404]](#footnote-404) Wittig stresses that while gender is constructed and therefore all individuals have the potential to perform all acts, it “is the fate of women” to be killed rather than to kill.[[405]](#footnote-405) In line with Washington’s perceptions, Wittig’s comment highlights that the perpetration of violence and killing is gendered as masculine, whereas being the victim of violence and killing is framed as feminine.[[406]](#footnote-406) These behaviours, constructed as masculine, are framed as oppositional to the construction of femininity, according to a binary framework of gender. This is because binary discourses of gender frame masculinity and femininity as separate, distinct and oppositional genders.

Violence as masculine and victims of violence as feminised are widely accepted concepts in literature on the Hebrew Bible. In particular, scholarship on the biblical prophetic texts repeatedly stresses that “violence against women”[[407]](#footnote-407) is central and justified within the biblical texts as a tool that men can use to assert control over women.[[408]](#footnote-408) In support of the binarisation of violence as masculine is Clines. He understands violence, killing and warfare as constructed as masculine, with women being associated with violence as victims and men being associated with violence as perpetrators.[[409]](#footnote-409) Perpetrating violence is so closely related to masculinity that men who are the victims of violence and soldiers who have been defeated in battle are frequently referred to using language associated with women in the Hebrew Bible:[[410]](#footnote-410)

The warriors of Babylon have given up fighting,  
    they remain in their strongholds;  
their strength has failed,  
    they have become women;  
her buildings are set on fire,  
    her bars are broken (Jer. 51:30).

Look at your troops:  
    they are women in your midst.  
The gates of your land  
    are wide open to your foes;  
    fire has devoured the bars of your gates (Nah. 3:13).

In keeping with these biblical extracts, Clines stresses that violence is constructed as being associated with men. He argues that it is “essential for a man… that he be strong—which means to say, capable of violence against other men and active in killing other men.”[[411]](#footnote-411) For Clines this binarised rhetoric is so important to masculinity in the Hebrew Bible that “to be a warrior, a man of war” is the “essential” characteristic of masculinity.[[412]](#footnote-412) Being the victim of violence or failing to be a successful soldier resulting in the victims’ feminisation demonstrates that violence, killing and warfare are constructed as masculine. According to this understanding of masculinity Jael can therefore be framed as performing as a man when they violently end Sisera’s life and thus contribute to the Israelite war effort (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26-27).[[413]](#footnote-413)

Despite the potential for any performance of gender to be undertaken by any individual, nonbiblical gender scholars are widely in agreement that violence is masculine. Connell and Messerschmidt note that violence and masculinity are strongly associated. Masculinity, particularly hegemonic masculinity, is frequently understood as including violence:

Because the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based on practice that permits men’s collective dominance over women to continue, it is not surprising that in some contexts, hegemonic masculinity actually does refer to men’s engaging in toxic practices—including physical violence…[[414]](#footnote-414)

This statement highlights that violence is not only related to masculinity but constructed as a weapon used against women and thus in opposition to constructions of femininity.[[415]](#footnote-415) In the same vein of thought, Edwards states, unequivocally, that “violence is masculine.”[[416]](#footnote-416) He notes that violence is constructed as oppositional to femininity.[[417]](#footnote-417) His recognition of the strong association between violence and masculinity leads him to consider whether “masculinity is violence.”[[418]](#footnote-418) While it is not the intention of this thesis to address such a suggestion, the mere fact that a gender scholar poses this question indicates the deep-rooted link between violence and masculinity. The result is that an individual who performs violent acts—masculinised acts[[419]](#footnote-419)—as Jael does, is understandable as performing masculinity.

It is clear that biblical scholars recognise violence, killing and warfare as being related to masculinity in the Hebrew Bible, in the same way that gender scholars recognise these behaviours to be constructed as masculine in many cultures today. Similarly, scholarship also highlights that the Book of Judges, as part of the Hebrew Bible, also constructs violence, killing and warfare as masculine in line with wider biblical constructions of masculinity. As Murphy notes:

The general depiction of warfare in Judg suggests that battles are masculine and that is it “manly” to show strength on the battlefield… overall the book focuses on the part the men play on the literary battlefields of the book. In short, the representations of both warfare and leadership as they relate to men emphasize Yahweh’s role and presence.[[420]](#footnote-420)

While there are multiple masculinities evident in the Book of Judges, indeed in the Hebrew Bible more widely, hegemonic masculinity in the Book of Judges is grounded in violence, killing and warfare.[[421]](#footnote-421) Murphy also states that women “certainly did not go into battle,”[[422]](#footnote-422) stressing the masculinity of warfare and its related behaviours. As James G. Williams notes, “[t]he book of Judges is complex fictionalized history composed from a masculine or patriarchal point of view that associates men with strength and social dominance.”[[423]](#footnote-423) Zucker and Reis recognise such “traditional manly values (strength, courage, leadership)” of the Hebrew Bible to be present in Judges;[[424]](#footnote-424) Fewell and Gunn note that in Judges “the battle itself [Jdg 4-5] is chiefly described as a masculine event”[[425]](#footnote-425) and those taking part in the Judges battles are likewise masculinised:

[t]he tribes who participate are personified as male. The political titles employed are masculine in orientation (e.g., commander, marshal, prince, king). This battle is a patriarchal contest for control- control of people, goods, and territory.[[426]](#footnote-426)

Scholars thus consistently convey that the behaviours constructed as masculine in the Hebrew Bible as a whole are also presented as masculine in the Book of Judges.

Jael’s killing of Sisera is especially interpretable as masculine because it is linked to warfare and its related behaviours through the narrative context of a battle between the Israelites and Canaanites (Jdg. 4:1-7, 5:19). Gender scholars and biblical scholars alike understand warfare as a domain in which violence and killing come together, a domain that is also constructed as masculine.[[427]](#footnote-427) In support of this, Nancy Huston argues that warring and warfare are not merely associated with masculinity but “have been institutionalised as the *sacred privileges*” accorded to men.[[428]](#footnote-428) Violence, killing and warfare have in common that they are all acts that seek power and dominance over another; they all result in damage being caused; they all involve demonstrations of aggression;[[429]](#footnote-429) they are all practices associated with masculinity.[[430]](#footnote-430) It is not just warfare and its associated behaviours that are framed as masculine, but those individuals who participate in warfare.[[431]](#footnote-431) When Ackerman recognises Jael as participating in warfare as a warrior “who delivers the war’s final blow,” she is acknowledging Jael’s masculinity.[[432]](#footnote-432) Susan Niditch, too, makes clear her identification of Jael (and Deborah) as a warrior through her chapter title “Tales of Deborah and Jael, Warrior Women.”[[433]](#footnote-433) Her chapter title makes clear that the role of warrior is gendered as masculine through denoting Jael and Deborah as “Warrior *Women*” (italics mine).[[434]](#footnote-434) That they are not said to be warriors without the qualification of also being women indicates that the role of warrior is reserved for men and that Jael is believed to be a woman, despite their repeated engagement with masculinity.[[435]](#footnote-435) Consequently, it is clear that Jael embodies masculine behaviours expected of warriors.

In addition to their position as a “warrior,”[[436]](#footnote-436)Jael’s masculinity has also been noted, although by very few, through Jael’s employment of strategy. Strategic thinking and implementation of tactical manoeuvres are associated with masculinity as the deployment of strategy can be understood as a bid for power or control.[[437]](#footnote-437) Strategy and tactics are further masculinised through their association with the masculine domain of warfare and the masculinised position of leadership. That strategy and tactics are related to masculine aspects (power, warfare, leadership) reinforces the perception that they are masculine qualities and behaviours.[[438]](#footnote-438) Yee is explicit in their reference to Jael as employing strategy:

Jael's assassination of the enemy's top-ranking military officer already classifies her as a warrior, more broadly defined. The fact that she uses trickery is no different from the guerrilla tactics that the Israelite forces already employ.[[439]](#footnote-439)

Yee understands Jael’s killing of Sisera to have been achieved through careful thought and deliberate actions, which she characterises as “guerrilla tactics.” In light of the narrative context of warfare, Yee understands Jael’s tactics to mark Jael as a warrior, which is supported by Jael’s killing of an army general in the midst of a conflict (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26-27). Yee does recognise Jael’s “liminal” gender, however continues to use feminine pronouns and genders Jael as a “woman.”[[440]](#footnote-440) I perceive Jael’s liminal, or ambiguous, gender as a significant aspect for understanding Jael’s gender, leading me to read Jael as having nonbinary gender and refusing to use feminine gender pronouns to refer to Jael.

This literature review demonstrates that violence, killing and engagement with warfare are commonly understood as relating to masculinity by gender scholars and biblical scholars alike. That Jael is frequently documented as performing masculinity through their engagement with violence, killing and warfare is also established as broadly acknowledged in the existing literature. The examples provided in this section are representative of the scholarship on Jael. Consequently, my claim that Jael performs according to expectations of men and masculinity is not new nor is it exceptional. Yet despite widespread recognition of Jael’s masculinity, Jael is rarely gendered in any way other than as a woman.[[441]](#footnote-441) While Jael’s masculinity is frequently acknowledged it is erased through scholars’ explicit labels of femininity and use of gender reversal which undermine Jael’s liminality. By contrast, resisting that erasure, I distinguish that Jael’s gender is multifaceted and label their gender accordingly as nonbinary.

## Perpetuating Jael’s Femininity

Perpetuating Jael’s femininity and simultaneously undermining or erasing Jael’s masculinity commonly occurs in scholarship on Sisera’s death in a number of ways. The most common way binary femininity is perpetuated is through the use of feminine gendered pronouns to reference Jael. Even during Sisera’s death scene, where Jael’s masculinity is most explicit, biblical scholars continue to binarise Jael as a woman and use feminine pronouns to refer to Jael rather than acknowledging Jael’s masculinity, and thus gender ambiguity, and labelling Jael accordingly.[[442]](#footnote-442) A particularly clear example is Bal’s comment on Jael’s killing of Sisera. Bal says, “that which she [Jael] did, she [Jael] did *as* a woman.”[[443]](#footnote-443) This comment highlights that Bal unequivocally understands Jael as a woman since Bal not only uses feminine pronouns to refer to Jael but also directly labels Jael as a “woman.” Bal is emphatic about Jael’s womanhood despite perceiving that “that which she [Jael] did” is in opposition to Jael’s “specific gendered social position” as “a woman in the tent.”[[444]](#footnote-444) Bal’s comment suggests that she understands Jael’s act of killing as masculine and thus as in conflict with Jael’s attributed femininity, otherwise Bal would not need to stress that “that which she [Jael] did, she [Jael] did *as* a woman.”[[445]](#footnote-445) Despite Jael’s masculinity being explicit through their violent act of killing Sisera, Bal further stresses Jael’s femininity through the use of italics.[[446]](#footnote-446) Binarising Jael as a woman and using feminine pronouns to refer to Jael undermines their ambiguous position earned through performances of femininity andmasculinity.

Another way Jael’s femininity is preserved, overlooking their explicit masculine performances of violence and killing as a significant part of their gender, is through the omission of direct recognition of Jael’s masculinity. This is achieved through discussions that imply Jael’s masculinity by noting that Jael’s acts, roles or behaviours are masculine, but making no comment regarding whether Jael themself is interpretable as masculine or not. In the existing literature labelling Jael as a man does not occur, while labelling Jael as a woman is pervasive. Labelling Jael’s acts, role and behaviours as masculine, but not Jael themself, allows Jael’s masculinity to be discussed without commentators having to label Jael as a man or in a way other than as a woman. This is useful for biblical scholars who want to avoid discussions of queer aspects in the narrative or the complex nature of a character who simultaneously performs as a woman andas a man. Such a method of discussing Jael’s masculine performances allows interpretations that are grounded in dominant discourses of binary gender to avoid the issue of Jael as a character that does not conform to assumptions of binary gender and heteronormativity.

A good example of where Jael’s acts are viewed as masculine, but an explicit reference to Jael’s masculinity or gender ambiguity is omitted, is in Zucker and Reiss’ study:

As the principal women of Judges chapters four and five display traditional manly virtues (strength, courage, leadership) so the principal men of those chapters, Baraq and Sisera, reflect traditional womanly characteristics (fear, subservience, need of protection, frailty).

In their study they give much attention to Jael’s (and Deborah’s) performances, distinguishing many of them as masculine. These masculine characteristics include, but are not limited to, “Jael’s gutsy and grisly assignation and assassination.”[[447]](#footnote-447) Zucker and Reiss even directly quote the text, noting that “Jael ‘struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple’ (Jdg. 5:6)” to remind the reader of “Jael’s courageous and deadly deed.”[[448]](#footnote-448) Such acts, roles and behaviours, grounded in masculinity due to their violence, daring and brutality, lead Zucker and Reiss to comment that “[b]oth women, Deborah and Jael, perform masculine roles”[[449]](#footnote-449) and to surmise that “Israelite women have man-like qualities.”[[450]](#footnote-450) While their comments clearly highlight Jael’s masculinity when Jael kills Sisera, they do not explicitly label Jael as masculine. Instead, both comments refer to Jael’s “roles” or “qualities,” but not to Jael themself. The artificiality of Jael’s masculinity is implied since Jael’s attributed real gender is explicitly stated to be femininity. The reinforcement of Jael’s femininity is particularly evident in their study since they begin their comments on Jael’s masculine “roles” and “qualities” with “[b]oth women” and “Israelite women.” Thus, they explicitly label Jael as a woman on multiple occasions, but never as a man or as gender ambiguous. I claim that when Jael violently kills Sisera this is the point in the narrative where Jael embodies masculinity most explicitly, evidencing their gender ambiguity. Zucker and Reiss, however, avoid committing to Jael’s masculinity by designating Jael’s acts, roles or behavioursas masculine, rather than Jael themself. Jael’s masculinity is given a lesser status and framed as what Butler calls “the secondary appearance of gender.”[[451]](#footnote-451) The result is that Jael’s masculinity is noted, but they are labelled as a woman and their femininity is given primacy.

Gender reversal is another way in which Jael’s masculinity is framed as secondary, strengthening Jael’s femininity, in discussions of Sisera’s death. Because biblical scholars binarise Jael as a woman, when they do discuss Jael’s masculinity they often refer to this as a performance of gender reversal. Studies that employ the language and concept of gender reversal *do* acknowledge Jael’s performances of masculinity but present Jael’s masculinity as secondary to their femininity. Presenting Jael’s masculinity as secondary portrays it as temporary and artificial compared to their femininity which is framed as their original gender and thus attributed as their true gender. For Jael to reverse their gender indicates that Jael has an original or real gender which changes once the temporary performances of masculinity are completed.[[452]](#footnote-452) This supposed transformation of gender reinforces the notion that gender is binary. Consequently, when Jael kills Sisera, commentators’ use of gender reversal frames Jael’s femininity as their real binary gender, allowing Jael to be gendered as a woman despite evidence of their masculinity.

Ken Stone’s interpretation as well as Bal’s interpretation of Sisera’s death scene are examples of where the use of gender reversal has led to Jael’s masculinity being framed as temporary and thus secondary to their femininity, which is presented as their real gender. Stone comprehends the scene of Sisera’s death as one of “spatial gender reversal.”[[453]](#footnote-453) Stone identifies gender reversal as occurring given his understanding that Jael, whom he perceives to be a woman, is in the “above” position when killing Sisera.[[454]](#footnote-454) Since Jael is “above” Sisera when killing him, Stone understands Sisera as “beneath” in what is constructed as the feminine position.[[455]](#footnote-455) This reversal stresses that Jael’s real or original gender is femininity since it presents Jael’s masculinity as temporary; as soon as the killing is done Stone no longer perceives Jael as being in the masculine position. Jael is expected to return to what is framed as their real feminine gender. Similarly, Bal perceives Jael’s killing of Sisera as gender reversal through a “reversal of power” during the killing scene.[[456]](#footnote-456) She says that “[t]he roles, are reversed: here, it is the woman who controls, who gives—and who kills.”[[457]](#footnote-457) Bal interprets Jael as a woman and identifies power as masculine, especially power over a man and the power to kill a man. Thus, when Jael kills Sisera, according to Bal, it is Jael—a woman—who is wielding the power, but only temporarily.[[458]](#footnote-458) In both examples of Bal’s and Stone’s use of gender reversal, Jael’s masculinity is framed as temporary as their power over Sisera is gone once he is dead and thus Jael’s masculinity is also gone. In their analyses of Jael, they frame Jael’s gender as no longer reversed after the killing act as it is assumed to revert back to Jael’s, supposed, original feminine gender. Jael’s masculinity is presented as only occurring within brief spaces of time. By framing Jael’s masculinity as temporary and thus secondary to their femininity, Jael’s femininity is legitimated, and their gender ambiguity is erased. Biblical scholars’ use of gender reversal recognises Jael’s masculinity but legitimises only their femininity.

As demonstrated above, discussions of Jael’s killing of Sisera largely accept that Jael performs masculinity yet maintain Jael’s femininity in various ways. When Jael kills Sisera Jael’s overt masculinity should, I argue, distance Jael from the binary label of femininity, opening up interpretations that present them in ways other than as a binarised woman. However, biblical scholars commonly adhere to an “either/or model” of gender and continue to feminise Jael according to dominant discourses of binary gender. In order for scholars to avoid the problematic nature of a character perceived as a woman who violently kills and engages with warfare, they present Jael’s masculinity as illegitimate, temporary and secondary. Jael is framed as a woman, a woman whose *performances* are masculine or who *performs* masculinity through masculine acts, roles and behaviours, and through temporary gender reversal, but a woman nonetheless.[[459]](#footnote-459) Since I do not adhere to an “either/or model,” one that accepts only binary genders and only one binary gender at one time, I interpret Jael’s gender as nonbinary. I agree with biblical scholars that perceive Jael as performing masculinity when they kill Sisera.However, I do not preserve Jael’s femininity at the expense of their masculinity and gender ambiguity. By addressing Jael’s gender holistically, an interpretation that is informed by all of Jael’s performances of gender and all of the text’s markers of Jael’s gender, simultaneous performances of femininity and masculinity indicate Jael’s gender ambiguity.

## Gendering Jael

Through a focus on two gender markers related to Sisera’s death, each of which indicates Jael’s gender ambiguity, I articulate my own interpretation of Jael’s gender as nonbinary. These gender markers are Jael’s space and Jael’s tools. I will analyse the socio-cultural assumptions and connotations of each gender marker as well as contextually attached gendered connotations. The masculinity suggested by these gender markers goes largely uncommented upon in studies of Jael. When biblical scholars do comment upon Jael’s masculinity, the significance of Jael’s masculinity for interpreting Jael’s gender is not considered. My discussions of these gender markers will highlight how each gender marker can be understood as inferring gender ambiguity and subsequently inform a nonbinary interpretation of Jael’s gender.

When Jael kills Sisera, Jael’s gender does not change from feminine to masculine and then back to feminine.[[460]](#footnote-460) Jael’s killing of Sisera is a scene in which Jael’s masculinity and femininity are simultaneously evident, particularly apparent when Jael’s gender markers from the narrative relating to Sisera’s death are analysed:

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:21).

The text highlights that Jael approaches Sisera “softly,” creating the image of a mother going to their sleeping child and watching over them. However, this quiet approach can also be framed as a hunter stalking their prey in a stealthy manner. Jael acts both motherly and not motherly as life giver and as killer.[[461]](#footnote-461) These embodiments of differing gendered behaviours and roles occur simultaneously and, through the use of a holistic approach, can be accepted as differing parts of a whole: as equally valid aspects of Jael’s gender. Similarly, the gender markers discussed in this chapter are recognisable as being associated with masculinity andfemininity concurrently, implying that Jael’s gender should not be binarised.

### Jael’s Space

Jael’s tent, the space in which Jael kills Sisera, can inform an interpretation of Jael’s gender since space carries gendered information. Alexia Panayiotou states that “[s]pace is not gender neutral; on the contrary, it can be said that *all* spaces are gendered spaces.”[[462]](#footnote-462) She argues that the material world is intertwined with socially constructed genders and gendered performances. This allows spaces to be informative regarding an individual’s gender since socio-cultural understandings can shape how individuals perform within a given space.[[463]](#footnote-463) This way of understanding space is supported by Yihan Liu and Christopher Grey, who perceive space as a “dynamic entity” that “evolves and collides with other spaces” and with other social constructions, including gender.[[464]](#footnote-464) Similarly, S. M. Low and D. Lawrence-Zuniga report that gendered spaces are spaces

that cultures invest with gender meanings… that are used strategically to inform identity and produce and reproduce asymmetrical gender relations of power and authority.[[465]](#footnote-465)

Thus, it is clear that not only are spaces embedded with gendered connotations but these gendered connotations are not passive. The way spaces are gendered can impact individuals and gender dynamics. Therefore, Jael’s material world, in this case Jael’s tent, is intertwined with socio-cultural expectations. This means that Jael’s performances and interactions with and within the space they inhabit and the socio-cultural connotations attached to that space can inform a gendered interpretation of Jael.[[466]](#footnote-466)

Jael’s tent is a prominent space in Jael’s narrative; its significance is indicated, in part, through being noted in both accounts of Sisera’s death:

Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug…He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No’”… Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, “Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking.” So he went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple (Jdg. 4:17-18, 20, 22).

“Most blessed of women be Jael,  
    the wife of Heber the Kenite,  
    of tent-dwelling women most blessed…” (Jdg. 4:24).

In Judges 4 the tent is referred to as “the tent of Jael” (Jdg. 4:17) as well as being mentioned in relation to Sisera’s and Barak’s entering of Jael’s space (Jdg. 4:18, 22). In Judges 5 it is referred to when Deborah’s song praises Jael, the tent-dweller, for their killing of Sisera (Jdg. 5:24). In these cases, the tent is referred to in direct relation to Jael, indicating the importance of the tent for understanding the character of Jael. I consider Jael’s tent and Jael’s relationship to the tent as particularly significant to the narrative, especially in Judges 4, since it is not only the space in which Sisera is killed but also plays a significant role in Jael’s characterisation, especially with regards to their gender. The tent plays differently gendered roles in Jael’s narrative as feminised domestic space and as masculinised battlefield, indicating Jael’s multifaceted gender.

Jael’s behaviours are shaped by their space and Jael’s space is used to their full advantage when killing Sisera, especially the illusion it offers to Sisera of a safe space (Jdg. 4:18). This illusion leads Sisera to believe that the tent is separate to the battlefield and the war and that it is a sanctuary for him. The tent also allows Sisera to be shielded from the outside world (Jdg. 4:20), hiding him from those who pursue him (Jdg. 4:16). Jael reinforces this belief, telling Sisera to “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18). In addition, the tent provides Jael with a mask of domestic femininity behind which they can hide their gender ambiguity. The tent also makes available to Jael a range of items and tools. At Jael’s disposal are nourishment (Jdg. 4:19, 5:25), covers (Jdg. 4:18) and the hammer and tent peg (Jdg. 4:21, 26). All these things available within the tent are used by Jael to their advantage.

Jael’s tent is given little attention in the existing literature. Biblical scholars who do comment on Jael’s tent predominantly make reference to it as a domestic space and thus as an indicator of Jael’s femininity.[[467]](#footnote-467) Also, a limited number of exegetes discuss the tent with its ownership being their central concern.[[468]](#footnote-468) Those infrequent considerations of “the tent of Jael” largely overlook its significance as an indicator of Jael’s nonbinary gender. The significance of Jael’s space in understanding Jael’s gender as ambiguous is a gap in the literature, one which my contribution takes a step towards filling.

#### Jael’s Space as a Feminine Marker

Biblical scholars frame Jael’s tent as a feminine space due to their identification of its domestic use;[[469]](#footnote-469) domestic spaces are understood as feminine spaces in the Hebrew Bible.[[470]](#footnote-470) Bal understands the tent as a feminine space as it is Jael’s home, but also because responsibilities regarding the home and tent fell to nomadic women:

We must know that the task of pitching the tent was the woman’s responsibility if we are not to be surprised that Jael has the instruments of the murder at her disposal… In the case of nomadic tribes where the task of pitching the tent was the woman’s responsibility, it belonged to the feminine world.[[471]](#footnote-471)

As Bal states, for nomadic cultures such as the Kenites, it was the woman’s role to take care of the home, including the space of the home and the physical structure of the home, as part of their “feminine life.”[[472]](#footnote-472) Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, too, comments that “the proper sphere of activity for a woman is the family and the home rather than the public arena,”[[473]](#footnote-473) with Herbert Lockyer emphasizing that in the Hebrew Bible “everything connected with a tent was a woman’s job and that women became expert in all the phases of making, pitching and striking tents.[[474]](#footnote-474) Such comments mark Jael’s tent as a domestic space and as a feminine space.[[475]](#footnote-475)Biblical scholars’ acknowledgement that Jael’s tent, as a domestic space, is a feminised space is supported by scholars in other fields. For example, gender theorist Ann M. Shanahan and historian Beverly Gordon agree that the domestic space is constructed as a feminine space.[[476]](#footnote-476) Gordon, in her study of the modern industrial age, comments that “[i]t was considered appropriate that women be in the home… for they were by nature domestic beings… The house was seen to reflect the same qualities as the woman…”[[477]](#footnote-477) The link between domesticity and femininity is so strong, claims Gordon, that it is not uncommon for women and their homes to be conflated as one feminine entity. In this way, the home can be understood as an extension of the woman who cares for it, and thus informative regarding an individual’s gender.[[478]](#footnote-478)

The domestic space is associated with a number of expected aspects that have been constructed as appropriate for women within the home. The feminine domestic roles and behaviours discussed here include the expectation that women will remain within the home and thus largely separate to public spaces, the assumption that women are subservient to men within the domestic space and the expectation that women provide a range of home comforts.[[479]](#footnote-479) I save discussions of the expectation of women to nurture children[[480]](#footnote-480) and a sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera[[481]](#footnote-481) for later chapters. This subsection, focusing on Jael’s tent, demonstrates that Jael behaves in various ways that are in line with expectations of women in the domestic space. Jael’s adherence to domestic behaviour allows the tent, as a gender marker, to inform an interpretation of Jael’s gender, especially against a backdrop of Sisera’s death as the tent plays a central role in Sisera’s demise.

Jael adheres to the expectation that women mostly remain within the home, with Brenner commenting that Jael “spends her whole life inside the domestic framework.”[[482]](#footnote-482) Since Jael largely remains within the tent, when Jael does leave the tent—however briefly—this is a signal to the reader that what is occurring is significant for understanding the narrative, the character of Jael, and their actions in the narrative. Jael’s act of stepping out of the tent to call Sisera in marks the boundary between the tent (domestic space) and the external world (public space):

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug (Jdg. 4:18).

The text’s language marks the spatial boundary line. The text makes clear that Jael went “out” to Sisera. Jael did not merely meet Sisera, perhaps at the boundary of their tent. Jael did not beckon Sisera to approach them from within their tent. Rather, Jael goes “out” of the tent to greet Sisera, even if only momentarily.[[483]](#footnote-483) The text marks the inside/outside dichotomy making that boundary explicit when it says that Sisera went “into” the tent (Jdg. 4:18) and the reader discovers—or perhaps already knows—that Sisera will not have the chance to leave Jael’s tent. While the boundary of the tent is highlighted and thus the boundary of inside/outside and domestic/public is drawn the line between death and life has also been drawn. Sisera, however, fails to understand that by crossing this boundary line he enters into a space of danger and death. He misinterprets the tent as a domestic space of safety. Jael reinforces this misconception when Jael tells him to “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18).[[484]](#footnote-484) Sisera’s understanding that the boundary of the tent marks the boundary between safety and danger is evident not only through him believing that he is seeking sanctuary as he “fled away on foot” from the battle (Jdg. 4:17), but also through a later comment in the narrative: Sisera commands Jael to “Stand at the entrance of the tent” and watch over him (Jdg. 4:20). Such a command draws attention, again, to the boundary line between inside and outside the tent and demonstrates Sisera’s perception that within the tent he is safe and thus, that Jael poses no danger to him.[[485]](#footnote-485) While the boundary line between safety and danger is clear to both characters, which space is safe for Sisera and which is dangerous for him is perceived differently by Jael and Sisera; he believes it is the space outside of the tent that is dangerous and those outside the tent that are a danger to him. The tent, as a domestic space, not only allows Jael to make Sisera feel at ease but leads Sisera to deem Jael as harmless.[[486]](#footnote-486) The tent is integral to Jael’s killing of Sisera since it leads Sisera to perceive Jael as a woman, as an individual whom he expects to pose him no danger and who is confined to a safe space. Since he recognises the tent as domestic space and associates it with femininity, he understands Jael as exhibiting femininity and as adhering to expectations of feminine domesticity within the tent. The tent thus aids Jael’s feminine façade that Sisera expects, alleviating any anxiety Sisera may have regarding Jael.[[487]](#footnote-487) The tent can thus be said to contribute to Sisera’s demise by influencing his perceptions, putting him off-guard and allowing Jael to kill him.

Women are expected to care for those in their home and thus Sisera expects to be cared for within the tent and for that caring to be undertaken by a woman; in this case it is Jael who Sisera expects to care for him. This is evident from his first words which are a request for water:

Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him (Jdg. 4:19).

He asked water and she gave him milk,  
    she brought him curds in a lordly bowl (Jdg. 5:25).

He makes a request expecting Jael to comply, which from Sisera’s perspective, Jael appears to do, as “She opened a skin of milk, [and] gave him a drink” (Jdg. 4:19).[[488]](#footnote-488) Jael conforms to this feminine domestic expectation of women caring for men through their subservience to Sisera in offering nourishment and comfort.[[489]](#footnote-489) Jael takes on a subservient role, in part, through appearing to value Sisera’s needs and acting as though his needs take precedence. Jael does not question Sisera, but embodies subservience without comment or complaint. Jael fulfils Sisera’s request for hydration as Jael “gave him a drink” (Jdg. 4:19), but Jael offers a drink more nutritious and relaxing than water, demonstrating the subservience and caring expected of women, especially within the domestic sphere.[[490]](#footnote-490) Jael also cares for Sisera by “cover[ing] him” up after reassuring him that he should “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18). Through taking these measures to nourish, comfort and reassure Sisera, Jael reinforces Sisera’s gendered expectations that Jael is a woman fulfilling their domestic duties to the man in their home. Thus, Jael can be interpreted as adhering to the gendered expectations of women acting in line with the domestic space as a gender marker that indicates femininity and domesticity.

Not only does Sisera’s death take place within the domestic space but the tent shapes Jael’s behaviours as domestic and caring; the tent shapes the way Sisera expects Jael to behave and it also shapes how he perceives Jael, as feminine and as of no threat. Due to the gendered perceptions that the tent as domestic space implies, namely that as a woman Jael is harmless and subservient, Jael is able to lure Sisera into a false sense of security. Ultimately, then, the tent aids Jael in overcoming Sisera since it leads him to believe it is a space of safety, in which Jael, as a domesticated woman, poses no threat to him, but instead is there to serve his needs. It is also because of the tent that Jael has the cover from the outside world required to commit their death-dealing act and thus the tent is a vital element.

#### Jael’s Space as a Masculine Marker

The space in which Jael kills Sisera can equally be interpreted as a gender marker that indicates their masculinity. The tent can be perceived as a battlefield, as a gendered space that carries socio-cultural connotations of masculinity and expectations of behaviours constructed as masculine such as violence, killing and engagement with warfare.[[491]](#footnote-491) As already discussed, battlefields and warfare, as well as associated behaviours, have strong ties to masculinity. Jael’s tent is a space where violence, killing and tactical manoeuvres take place against an enemy army general. The warfare context of Jael’s narrative adds to the tent’s gendered implications as battlefield strengthening the masculinity of Jael indicated by their tent.

The language Jael uses to lure Sisera into the tent as battlefield and kill him has been recognised by Bal as language relating to men and warfare.[[492]](#footnote-492) Jael tells Sisera, to “have no fear,” *tîrā ’al*, (Jdg. 4:18). This language is frequently used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in contexts of conflict and warfare:

do not fear [*tîrā ’al*], for I am with you,  
    do not be afraid, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
    I will uphold you with my victorious right hand (Isa. 41:10).

Do not be afraid [*tîrə ’u ’al*] of the king of Babylon, as you have been; do not be afraid [*tîrə ’u ’al*] of him, says the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and to rescue you from his hand (Jer. 42:11).

These verse show that Jael’s language is related to war and conflict in the Hebrew Bible and Bal understands Jael’s speech, “have no fear,” as a phrase that “belongs to the vocabulary of war”:

Yael comes out and invites Sisera to “turn-in”, thus offering hospitality, a warranty of safety. The next phrase, “fear not”, however, comes from a quite different context; it belongs to the vocabulary of war. The contradiction between the invitation into the peaceful home and the encouragement to battle not only holds a warning for one who listens carefully, it is also a statement about the inseparability of the two domains.[[493]](#footnote-493)

I agree with Bal’s comment on the “inseparability of the two domains” in Jael’s narrative and go further stating that Jael’s use of such language also highlights the inseparability of Jael’s performances of femininity and masculinity. Jael’s language not only highlights Jael’s masculinity through their engagement with warfare and femininity through their provision of care and comfort, but highlights that the tent, their domestic space, is the space in which such engagement with warfare will take place, within “the tent of Jael” (Jdg. 4:17). Bal sees this invitation to Sisera, which holds connotations of both home and war, as a clue to Jael’s future actions as Jael will participate in the war from within their home.[[494]](#footnote-494) Bal understands Jael’s comment, “turn aside to me,” in conjunction with “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18), as Jael’s own acknowledgment that Jael is not going to perform as is expected of women, but instead “will participate in the battle.”[[495]](#footnote-495) I would add that Jael’s phrase indicates not only that Jael will unexpectedly participate in the war, but that Jael’s tent will also be involved in the war as the site of battle, the space into which Jael’s language of warfare calls Sisera. Jael uses femininity andmasculinity to begin their battle.

The context of warfare in Jael’s narrative strengthens my claim that the tent can be understood as a battlefield and as a masculine gender marker. Jael’s narrative has at its centre a battle between Israelites and Canaanites, one that is expressed through language of warfare:

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.’” (Jdg. 4:4-7).

When new gods were chosen,  
    then war was in the gates.  
Was shield or spear to be seen  
    among forty thousand in Israel?  
My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel  
    who offered themselves willingly among the people.  
    Bless the Lord (Jdg. 5:8).

These verses highlight the context of warfare of Jael’s narrative and make evident that the man that Jael kills is not just any man but an enemy army “general” (Jdg. 4:7). Jael defeats this seasoned warrior through the use of behaviours associated with warriors. Jael employs tactics and violence (Jdg. 4:18-21, 5:25-27)[[496]](#footnote-496) to “[deliver] the war’s final blow” bringing victory to the Israelites.[[497]](#footnote-497) Thus, the tent as battlefield suggests Jael’s masculinity, through association with warfare, especially since Jael causes the bloodshed and death within the space of the tent as battlefield. Jael participates in the battle, inviting Sisera into their tent, a battlefield of Jael’s own making.

The existing literature overlooks the tent as a battlefield, with Jacob L. Wright’s and Bal’s works being the rare exceptions; these two scholars briefly consider Jael’s domestic space as a site of conflict and war.[[498]](#footnote-498) As noted above, Bal comments on the “inseparability of the two domains” in Jael’s narrative, referring to the domestic space and the battlefield. Bal implies the co-existence of the tent as a domestic space and as a battlefield but does not consider the implications of this “inseparability” for interpreting Jael’s gender. Wright also recognises that Jael merges home and battlefield:

That also biblical authors could regard the battle-field and the bed as two antithetically gendered spaces is demonstrated by the David-Bathsheba account in II Sam 11-12. Defying this spatial polarity, our ancient song [Judges 5], and the narrative that precedes it [Judges 4], present Jael transforming her bed into a battleground.[[499]](#footnote-499)

This comment highlights that Jael’s tent (or at least Jael’s bed, which is within the tent) and the battleground can be understood as “two antithetically gendered spaces.”[[500]](#footnote-500) Wright argues that it is Jael’s engagement with warfare, through killing Sisera, that transforms this space from “personal domestic confines into a battlefield.”[[501]](#footnote-501) Despite this insightful interpretation, he gives little attention to these contrasting concepts of space. It is not within the remit of his article to discuss or analyse these “antithetically gendered spaces” nor is it his concern to engage with how perceptions of Jael’s gender may be affected by the space that has multiple gendered connotations. For Wright Jael is a woman, a perception he stresses when briefly considering Jael’s domestic space. He says that as “a woman, her [Jael’s] space is conventionally domestic (i.e., the tent).”[[502]](#footnote-502) Thus, despite perceiving the masculinity of Jael’s space as battleground and that it is Jael’s performances of masculinity that transform the bed into a battleground,[[503]](#footnote-503) assumptions of binary gender override the text’s illustrations of a masculine as well asfeminine space and a masculine as well asfeminine character. For him, the tent remains gendered in the “conventionally” heteronormative way, as a feminine “domestic” space.[[504]](#footnote-504) Consequently, the impact of Jael’s tent as a gender ambiguous marker is overlooked, despite Wright’s earlier hint at the space’s gender ambiguity. Jael remains gendered as a woman, rather than interpreted as a nonbinary character.

In the same way that Wright understands the bed and battlefield as oppositionally gendered spaces, I understand the tent (rather than the bed) and battlefield as spaces that suggest oppositional gendered connotations. Unlike Wright, however, I do not perceive the tent (or bed) as “transforming”[[505]](#footnote-505) through a binary shift from one gendered space to another. The concept of transformation, much like gender reversal, is problematic as it presents an original gender (in this case the feminine and domestic tent/bed) which is framed as real, that when transformed undertakes a shift, changing to another gender (here becoming a masculine battlefield), delegitimising the reality of what the space has been *transformed into* as secondary and temporary. The result is that one gender is presented as legitimate while the other is conveyed as temporary artifice rather than recognising the gender ambiguity evident.

Jael is widely said to behave in line with the gendered expectations associated with the gendered space of the battlefield, in addition to the gender expectations associated with the tent as domestic space.[[506]](#footnote-506) For example, Rasmussen calls Jael a “soldier” and Bal stresses that Jael’s invitation to Sisera is not one of feminine care and comfort but a “warning,” an “encouragement to battle.”[[507]](#footnote-507) Similarly, Yee calls Jael a “warrior” and Ackerman acknowledges Jael’s killing as an act of warfare.[[508]](#footnote-508) However, acknowledgement of Jael’s position as a warrior has not led to wider discussion of Jael’s tent as a battlefield, nor of the implications this may have on interpretations of Jael’s gender. Consequently, Jael’s masculine performances, in accordance with expectations within the masculine space of warzone, do not feed into exegetes’ interpretations of Jael’s gender. Gendered implications of Jael’s tent as home, however, do inform interpretations of Jael’s gender, yet Jael’s masculinity goes unrepresented in existing interpretations and thus perpetuates Jael’s binary femininity.

#### Jael’s Space as Gender Ambiguous

Jael’s tent as a domestic and feminine space is commonly acknowledged in the literature on Jael and frequently feeds into interpretations of Jael’s gender while the same cannot be said when Jael’s space is recognisable as a battlefield and as a masculine space. I suggest that this is because understanding the tent as a domestic space is a widely accepted heteronormative assumption that is influenced by, and supports, binary constructs of gender and reinforces scholars’ attributions of Jael’s binary femininity. Dominant discourses of binary gender and heteronormativity prevent biblical commentators from appreciating the potential for Jael’s space to *also* be masculine and thus *also* indicate Jael’s masculinity simultaneously to their femininity. The tent can be read as a home and battlefield, as a feminine as well asa masculine space and thus as an indicator of Jael’s nonbinary gender.

Through applying a holistic approach, one that accepts oppositional constructions to be simultaneously performable, it becomes evident that the tent can be read as a gender ambiguous marker. Jael brings together that which is constructed as binary, as oppositional and as separate; Jael unites domesticity and warfare and performs masculinity and femininity as expected within those respectively gendered spaces both of which are encompassed by the tent. Application of a holistic approach brings to the fore the impact of Jael’s space as a gender indicator for an interpretation of Jael’s gender, illustrating that it is not just Jael’s performances that present Jael as gender ambiguous, but also the space in which Jael is located. “[T]he tent of Jael” (Jdg. 4:17) when read against a backdrop of Sisera’s death is evidently gender ambiguous and as such supports my claim that Jael can be perceived as a nonbinary character.

### Jael’s Tools

Objects become gender markers through common use by, or through association with, a particularly gendered group of people or through use of that object for a particularly gendered task. For example, domestic items are gendered as feminine since they are related to a feminine space and thus are commonly used by those constructed as women to undertake roles attributed as feminine. Objects can also be gendered based on their context similarly to the cooking example provided earlier.[[509]](#footnote-509) For example, a skirt is widely considered a feminine item and the individual wearing that skirt is perceived to be feminine, but the same item is framed as a suitable piece of clothing for a man and infers masculinity when its context changes and it is understood as a kilt. Thus, not only can items and objects be gendered, but like spaces, they can also act as gender markers as they suggest the gender of the individual associated with them.

That objects carry significance regarding an individual’s identity, including suggestions about their gender, is not a new concept. Much of archaeology works from this premise. Sarah Milledge Nelson states that items of clothing are commonly considered significant for determining gender in archaeology this can include clothing items as small as a button or pin.[[510]](#footnote-510)Part of this recognition of objects—physical objects or objects written about in texts—being gendered is noting that particular gendered items are linked to particular gendered spaces and gendered objects can often be “distributed according to gendered activities.”[[511]](#footnote-511)Archaeology genders objects based not only on the item itself but the gendered space it inhabits and based on who was expected to use that item. When items are perceived as belonging to or being used by a specific gendered group of individuals “scholars refer to these [items] as ‘gendered’ objects.”[[512]](#footnote-512)Objects implying the gender of an individual or group of people is thus an accepted concept, widely employed in archaeology.[[513]](#footnote-513)

The items Jael uses to kill Sisera, the tent peg and hammer, are commonly discussed in the scholarship on Jael as feminine items with infrequent references to their masculine associations. The verses these objects appear in are the focus of this subsection:

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:21).

She put her hand to the tent peg  
    and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet;  
she struck Sisera a blow,  
    she crushed his head,  
    she shattered and pierced his temple (Jdg. 5:26).

Jael’s objects are most frequently commented upon in the literature in order to explain why Jael had access to these items; many biblical scholars note that the tent peg and hammer are unusual items for killing, while others show surprise that Jael was able to overcome and kill Sisera with such items.[[514]](#footnote-514) Discussions of Jael’s weapons usually lead to scholars framing the tent peg and hammer as feminine domestic items “because of their close connection to the domestic environment.”[[515]](#footnote-515)The tent peg and hammer, understood as women’s objects and related to women’s spaces and women’s roles, are discussed below where I suggest that Jael’s access to and use of the tent peg and hammer implies their femininity.

There are references in current scholarship to Jael’s items that do not frame them as feminine, although these are far less frequent than references to the tent peg and hammer as feminine items.[[516]](#footnote-516) References to Jael’s tools as masculine are discussed below in the section that demonstrates how Jael’s tools can also be understood as masculine and thus as indicating Jael’s masculinity, due to their relationship to the masculine working world, the public sphere and the masculine-related job of metalworking.[[517]](#footnote-517) Like the tent, the tools Jael kills Sisera with (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26) are gender markers that can influence an interpretation of Jael’s gender. The socio-cultural implications that the tent peg and hammer are imbued with and the contextual gendered implications they carry through Jael’s use of them, allow them to be perceived as simultaneously feminine andmasculine gender markers and thus suggest Jael’s gender ambiguity.

#### Jael’s Tools as Feminine Markers

Many biblical scholars, such as Matthews and Benjamin, Rasmussen and Exum frame the tools Jael uses to kill Sisera as feminine items.[[518]](#footnote-518) These biblical scholars understand Jael’s tools as feminine given the relationship of tent peg and hammer with the domestic space; they are integral tools to the woman’s role of homemaker.[[519]](#footnote-519) Matthews and Benjamin comment:

the weapons of Jael are symbolic as well as functional. It is characteristic of the hero stories in Judges that their protagonists wield unorthodox weapons. Ehud is armed with a two-edged sword (Judg 3:16), Shamgar with an ox goad (Judg 3:31), Samson with a jawbone (Judg 15:15). The motif characterises them as farmers and herders, not professional warriors. Nonetheless, they skilfully wield the tools of their peace-time trades to free their households from well-armed invaders. Jael’s homespun weapons mark her as an authentic deliverer.[[520]](#footnote-520)

These weapons are framed as “homespun” since pitching the tent was a role assigned to women in nomadic cultures.[[521]](#footnote-521)The tent peg and hammer are imbued with femininity because of their use by women, but also through their connection with the domestic space. This feminisation of the tools used to kill Sisera is supported by Exum who explicitly calls Jael’s weapons “domestic tools,”[[522]](#footnote-522) stressing their relationship to the home, grounding them in concepts of domesticity that have overtly feminine connotations. The tools Jael uses to kill are thus imbued with concepts relating to the home, ideas central to the constructed notion of femininity.[[523]](#footnote-523) Given the socio-cultural implications that these scholars highlight, the tent peg and hammer can be understood as gender markers that suggest Jael’s femininity.

Jael uses the tent peg and hammer in a way that reinforces their association with femininity. These tools are understood by biblical scholars as homemaking tools; I argue that Jael draws on homemaking skills when wielding the tent peg and hammer to kill Sisera. Jael does not hit Sisera with the hammer, nor does Jael stab him with the tent peg, but hammers the tent peg, killing Sisera, as if they were hammering a tent peg to pitch a tent:

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:21).

She put her hand to the tent peg  
    and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet;  
she struck Sisera a blow,  
    she crushed his head,  
    she shattered and pierced his temple (Jdg. 5:26).

The text conveys that Jael uses both the tent peg and the hammer. Jael “drove the peg into his temple” (Jdg. 4:21) and “pierced his temple” (Jdg. 5:26) mimicking the act of hammering a tent peg and piercing the ground. Jael thus uses a technique and motion to kill Sisera that is assumed to be a familiar skill to women who were expected to pitch their own feminine, domestic space.[[524]](#footnote-524) Jael’s skill with the tent peg and hammer evidently draws on their use of these implements as tent-pitching tools since it is noted in Jael’s narrative that Jael hammers the tent peg, not just into Sisera, but through him “down into the ground” (Jdg. 4:21)[[525]](#footnote-525) as with tent pitching where the hammer is used to hammer the tent peg into the ground, going through the material of the tent. Thus, the action used to kill Sisera simulates the domestic action, the feminine action of tent-pitching and homebuilding. Jael’s use of domestic items coupled with the domestic skills and domestic action all come together in their killing of Sisera. Jael uses these tools as they were expected to be used, as feminine tent-pitching utensils, indicating that the tent peg and hammer—as well as Jael themself through their use of the tent peg and hammer—can be perceived as feminine.

#### Jael’s Tools as Masculine Markers

Despite the prevalence of the tent peg and hammer being framed as feminine domestic items in scholarship on Jael, they can also be understood as masculine gender indicators. The context of Jael’s use of the tent peg and hammer have led to them being interpreted as “weapons” by biblical scholars such as Ackerman, Bal and Katherine Steinly, to name a few.[[526]](#footnote-526) Jael uses the tent peg and hammer not just as weapons but as war weapons, using them to violently kill an army general in the context of warfare and bring victory to the Israelites (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26-27).[[527]](#footnote-527) Associating the tent peg and hammer with warfare and framing them as weapons allows them to be perceived as masculine.[[528]](#footnote-528) Jael’s use of these items to violently kill an army general, in the midst of battle (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26-27), reinforces their masculinity and their validity as masculine gender markers.[[529]](#footnote-529) Thus, when understood in the context of warfare and as items used to commit violence and bring about death, the tent peg and hammer are gender markers that suggest Jael’s masculinity.[[530]](#footnote-530)

The hammer can also be understood as a gender marker that indicates masculinity due to its association with metalworking.[[531]](#footnote-531) In Judges 5 the hammer is referred to as the “workman’s hammer” (Jdg. 5:26)[[532]](#footnote-532) linking Jael’s tools to a masculine work role.[[533]](#footnote-533) This link between the hammer and the masculine domain of metalworking is supported by the narrative context which presents Jael as a Kenite, a group understood as metal smiths.[[534]](#footnote-534) The Kenites’ association with metal working is stressed by commentators such as Carolyn J. Sharp who understand the “nine hundred chariots fitted with iron” that Sisera enters battle with (Jdg. 4:3) as being made by the Kenites, a group who she understands to be associated with metal working.[[535]](#footnote-535) To emphasise the link between the Kenites and their reputation as metal workers some, such as Wright, call the tent peg “a metal tent peg,” as is possible but unstated in the text.[[536]](#footnote-536) Metalworking, as a form of skilled labour and hard, physical labour, constructed as masculine, leads to the hammer being understood as a masculine tool.[[537]](#footnote-537)

While the masculinity of the tent peg and, particularly, the hammer is noted in the literature on Jael, such recognition does not influence the way Jael’s gender is presented or labelled. Bal notes:

[the] workmen’s hammer is the tool of the working world, or the quotidian world of active existence. In the case of nomadic tribes where the task of pitching the tent was the woman’s responsibility, it belonged to the feminine world.[[538]](#footnote-538)

Bal implies the masculinity of the hammer but overtly states its femininity and thus recovers the femininity of Jael’s tools, she is not alone in doing this. For example, Stone calls the tent peg and hammer “the women’s choice of weapons” and Matthews and Benjamin comment that Jael uses “unorthodox weapons… homespun weapons,” thus acknowledging the tent peg and hammer’s masculinity and masculine use through reference to them as weapons, but recovering their femininity, preventing them from informing a masculine interpretation of Jael’s gender by indicating that they are not the weapons expected to be used by men.[[539]](#footnote-539) As such, Jael’s femininity is perpetuated and the simultaneous masculinity and femininity of the tent peg and hammer are not interpreted as significant to Jael’s gender.

#### Jael’s Tools as Gender Ambiguous

Existing scholarship has recognised the femininity of the tent peg and hammer with some frequency as well as the masculinity of these items, albeit less frequently. However, whilst Jael’s use of feminine tools has led to the identification of Jael’s femininity the same significance is not applied to interpretations of Jael when Jael’s tools are perceived as masculine weapons. I suggest that dominant discourses of binary gender and heteronormativity have influenced scholars’ interpretations leading to Jael being labelled as a woman, but not as a man nor as nonbinary, despite Jael’s use of the tent peg and hammer as war weapons and the masculinity of the user that is implied. I claim that scholars perpetuate Jael’s femininity based on a culmination of the text’s explicit feminine label and more easily recognisable feminine gender markers (feminine domestic space, feminine behaviours, feminine domestic related tools). The result is that the attribution of Jael as feminine, based on the text’s explicit feminine label, “Jael wife of Heber the Kenite” (Jdg. 4:17), appears to be strengthened by their use of tools distinguished as having domestic associations, while Jael’s masculinity is framed as less significant. Consequently, Jael’s gender is reduced to a binary label of femininity, despite gender markers and Jael’s performances suggesting otherwise.

In Jael’s narrative, the tent peg and hammer carry gendered connotations relating to femininity andmasculinity and thus Jael’s use of them, which conforms to expectations of femininity andmasculinity, indicates Jael’s gender ambiguity. Applying a holistic approach when interpreting the tent peg and hammer as gender markers allows interpretations of Jael’s femininity andmasculinity to be accepted simultaneously. Subsequently, Jael’s gender can be read in a new way. A holistic approach acknowledges that the tent peg and hammer are simultaneously Jael’s “domestic tools” and Jael’s war “weapons.”[[540]](#footnote-540) In my interpretation the tools are not reduced in a way that represents only one facet of their usage or context. Therefore, I argue that Jael, like their tools, should not be reduced to an interpretation that only represents a single facet of their gender identity. Jael’s tools can, and I argue should, be read as simultaneously feminine andmasculine and thus indicate Jael’s nonbinary gender.

## Conclusion

The preceding discussions make it clear that Jael performs masculinity when they kill Sisera. Jael’s killing of Sisera (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26) has led to Jael being viewed as embodying masculinity through engagement with multiple masculine performances and domains. Jael’s action is understood as violent,[[541]](#footnote-541) as a killing blow and as an act through which Jael engages with warfare.[[542]](#footnote-542) Despite Jael’s masculinity being widely commented upon in biblical scholarship, when they kill Sisera, discourses of binary gender prevent masculinity, and thus gender ambiguity, from being attributed to Jael. Scholars that comment onJael also utilise a variety of tactics that present Jael’s masculinity when killing Sisera as secondary to Jael’s femininity. In doing so, they reinforce their binary feminisation of Jael. Previous studies maintain a binary model of gender, where an individual is either one gender or the other, stripping characters such as Jael of the potential to be recognised as nonbinary.

Consideration of Jael’s space and Jael’s tools as gender markers relating to Sisera’s death indicate that Jael’s gender is ambiguous. The space in which Jael kills Sisera can be simultaneously interpreted as a feminine domestic space anda masculine battlefield; Jael fulfils behavioural expectations relating to both. Jael is nurturing and caring as is expected of women, particularly within the domestic setting, and Jael is violent, causing death, as is expected of men, especially within the domain of warfare. Similarly, the tools Jael uses to kill Sisera, the tent peg and hammer, can be read as feminine andmasculine implements. The tent peg and hammer can be understood as feminine tent-pitching implements relating to the domestic space. These tools are easily accessible to Jael within the domestic space and are skilfully wielded by Jael with ease, as is expected of women who are assumed to be comfortable using the tent peg and hammer to pitch their tent. The tent peg and hammer can also, concurrently, be read as masculine labourers’ tools expected to be wielded by men and framed as weapons of violence used to bring about death within the masculine domain of war. Jael wields the tent peg and hammer as is expected of men, especially those men comfortable with violence and killing within the arena of battle. Consequently, the tools Jael uses to kill Sisera also suggest Jael’s gender ambiguity, as does Jael’s engagement with those tools.

Jael’s gender markers concurrently suggest Jael’s masculinity and Jael’s femininity, challenging scholars’ binary designation of Jael as a woman. The masculinity indicated by these gender markers and Jael’s masculine performances demonstrate that Jael does not fully conform to expectations of femininity as they also embody expectations of men. Understanding Jael as gender ambiguous represents Jael in a way that highlights and validates Jael’s femininity as well astheir masculinity. Bringing together apparently oppositional suggestions of Jael’s gender results in an interpretation where Jael is recognisable as nonbinary. Interpreting Jael as gender ambiguous acknowledges that Jael’s femininity andmasculinity are simultaneously performed and equally important aspects of Jael’s gender identity.

# **Chapter 3. Jael’s Motherhood**

Jael’s performances of motherly behaviour are central to their performances of gender ambiguity. In the previous chapter, which focused on Jael’s gender during the scene of Sisera’s death, I took an act constructed as masculine and made evident the ways in which Jael performs this act in a gender ambiguous manner. Similarly, here I address a role that is constructed as feminine—motherhood[[543]](#footnote-543)—and articulate an interpretation of Jael’s motherhood as gender ambiguous. In doing so I contribute a unique reading of Jael as a biblical nonbinary mother. My application of a queer methodology makes evident the instability of all identities,[[544]](#footnote-544) even that of the quintessential position of mother. Jael’s gender ambiguous performances of motherhood become evident when their motherly behaviour is viewed holistically; Jael’s performances of motherhood are analysed as part of the wider narrative and in relation to other mothers in the text (Jdg. 5:7, 28) and all of their performances and gender markers, regardless of how they are gendered, are brought together to inform my interpretation. Through exploring the narrative theme of motherhood and demonstrating Jael’s gender ambiguous motherhood, this chapter recognises the complexity and diversity of ways in which motherhood can be performed and thus makes use of various ideologies pertaining to motherhood. Jael’s motherhood is performed through feminine andmasculine behaviours making evident that Jael is readable as a nonbinary character.

This chapter focuses on the verses that scholarship has primarily used to frame Jael as performing as a mother to Sisera (Jdg. 4:18-20, 5:24-25):

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, “No.”’ (Jdg. 4:18-20).

Most blessed of women be Jael,  
    the wife of Heber the Kenite,  
    of tent-dwelling women most blessed.  
He asked water and she gave him milk,  
    she brought him curds in a lordly bowl (Jdg. 5:24-25).

Although I engage with academics’ perceptions of Jael as a mother to Sisera, I perceive Jael as performing false motherhood towards Sisera—feminine performances perceivable as motherly that result in Sisera’s death. Jael’s mother-like performances towards Sisera are a ruse, evident since Jael kills him. However, it is through these performances and the act of killing Sisera that Jael’s role as symbolic mother to the Children of Israel becomes evident.

My articulation of Jael as a nonbinary mother engages with Deborah’s performances of motherhood, especially those in Jdg. 4:4-6 and 5:7, and also draws on Sisera’s mother’s performances of motherhood in Jdg. 5:28-30. Including these other performances of motherhood from Judges 4 and 5 as part of my analysis demonstrates that Jael embodies masculine performances of motherhood—like Deborah’s behaviours—and feminine performances of motherhood—like Sisera’s mother’s performances—concurrently:

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun.’” (Jdg. 4:4-6).

The peasantry prospered in Israel,  
    they grew fat on plunder,  
because you arose, Deborah,  
    arose as a mother in Israel (Jdg. 5:7).

Out of the window she peered,  
    the mother of Sisera gazedthrough the lattice:  
“Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
    Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?”  
Her wisest ladies make answer,  
    indeed, she answers the question herself:  
“Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?—  
    A girl or two for every man;  
spoil of dyed stuffs for Sisera,  
    spoil of dyed stuffs embroidered,  
    two pieces of dyed work embroidered for my neck as spoil?” (Jdg. 5:28-30).

Evident in the text are Deborah’s masculine performances of motherhood—initiating violence and taking on a leadership position—as well as Sisera’s mother’s feminine motherhood—through their separation from the battle and their exhibition of emotion. Despite arguing that Jael performs gender ambiguously, I use the gendered term mother to refer to Jael’s performances, rather than the gender-neutral term parent for two reasons. The first is that Jael’s performances can be understood as motherly but not as fatherly. Central expectations of fathers in the Hebrew Bible include circumcising their sons,[[545]](#footnote-545) working outside of the home in the public sphere,[[546]](#footnote-546) providing for the basic needs of the family and leading the religious practices of the household.[[547]](#footnote-547)Jael is not presented in their narrative as taking on the typical roles expected of a father. Referring to Jael as a parent would suggest that they perform according to the expectations of mothers andof fathers, but this is not the case. Jael’s behaviours line up with expectations of mothers, despite my claim that these motherly behaviours are performed in a gender ambiguous manner. My second reason for maintaining that Jael behaves as a mother rather than as a parent is due to the text presenting a theme of motherhood, not of parenthood. There are no characters indicated to be fathers in the text and the figure who is commonly viewed as the father of the Israelites, Yahweh, is largely absent from Judges 4 and 5. Thus, through naming Deborah as “a mother in Israel” (Jdg. 5:7) and including “Sisera’s mother” (Jdg. 5:28), a theme of motherhood, not fatherhood or parenthood, runs through Jael’s narrative. In addition to the two named mothers, behaviours associated with motherhood reoccur throughout Judges 4 and 5. The structure of Judges 5, in particular, highlights the theme of motherhood;[[548]](#footnote-548) to begin, the text introduces Deborah, “a mother in Israel” (Jdg. 5:7) and as the chapter ends Sisera’s mother is introduced (Jdg. 5:28-31). Jael is in the middle, between the appearances of the two other mothers (Jdg. 5:24-27). As such, mothers appear at key junctures of the poetic account, emphasizing a theme of motherhood. Both named mothers exhibit a range of performances relating to motherhood: Deborah is protective and active in defending the Children of Israel and Sisera’s mother shows concern for her son whilst waiting and watching, eager for his return. Despite Jael not being labelled as a mother in the text, their behaviours are interpretable as performances of motherhood and are commonly represented as motherly in biblical scholarship. Jael’s behaviours contribute to this theme of motherhood and thus I continue to label Jael as a mother and their behaviours as mothering.

Key aspects of the mothers’ behaviour in Judges 4 and 5 is their respective agency and passivity as mothers. These states of being have been binarised with agency being constructed as relating to masculinity and passivity being framed as relating to femininity by gender scholars and biblical scholars alike.[[549]](#footnote-549) Agency and passivity have not just been binarised as relating to different genders, but as with the gender binary itself, agency and passivity are framed as polar opposites and as “mutually exclusive.”[[550]](#footnote-550) These points are made particularly clear by Brenner’s comment:

Males are constructed largely as penetrators, insertive, initiators, active sexual agents; women are constructed largely as penetrated, receptors, passive sexual objects (an active seductress is condemned unless in the service of procreation). Whereas female sexuality is either ignored altogether or presented as potentially normative or neutral. Males are expected to become responsible sexual agents; women are expected to become irresponsible sexual agents who require supervision by seclusion.[[551]](#footnote-551)

As such, active roles, especially those that involve interacting with the public sphere, are largely framed as masculine.[[552]](#footnote-552) Women are framed as being “passive carers”[[553]](#footnote-553) whose domain is the private sphere.[[554]](#footnote-554) Consequently, when characters who are expected to be passive demonstrate agency they are framed as deviating from their assigned gendered role.[[555]](#footnote-555) Jael is one of those characters. Jael’s motherhood is undertaken through a combination of passive and active behaviours that can be understood by drawing on the other two mothers’ frameworks of motherly performances in Judges 4 and 5. Deborah is an active mother, Sisera’s mother is a passive mother and Jael embodies aspects of both frameworks of motherhood concurrently.

The theme of motherhood and the frameworks of motherhood evident in Judges 4 and 5 are useful for understanding Jael’s nonbinary gender since it presents a set of feminine and masculine maternal behaviours against which Jael’s performances can be examined. Deborah and Sisera’s mother exhibit different forms of motherhood. Deborah as “a mother in Israel” (Jdg. 5:7) commonly exhibits motherhood through behaviours constructed as masculine, namely through exerting power and authority and initiating violence.[[556]](#footnote-556) Deborah is an active mother who takes on a public role. Differently, Sisera’s mother’s motherhood is mostly evident through behaviours constructed as feminine, such as emotional distress including worry and concern for her son. She is a passive mother; unlike Deborah, Sisera’s mother waits to hear news of her son and takes no action. These elements of Deborah and Sisera’s mother’s motherhood are explored in later subsections. Both embodiments of motherhood are multifaceted and complex, in that they embody a range of elements relating to their roles as mothers, as will become more clear later in this chapter.

Before contributing my own articulation of Jael’s motherhood and shedding light on their gender ambiguity, I discuss the role of mother and its construction as a feminine role.[[557]](#footnote-557) This section lays out the expectations of biblical mothers and in doing so highlights how the gendered positions of woman, wife and mother have many similarities due to their mutual grounding in binary femininity.[[558]](#footnote-558) I then provide an overview of the literature on Jael’s motherhood. This review demonstrates that much of current scholarship interprets Jael as the symbolic mother of Sisera. I argue that Jael’s motherly behaviour towards Sisera is a ruse used to kill him. I show that Jael is better understood as mother to the Children of Israel to Sisera. Thus, although I frame Jael’s motherhood towards Sisera as false motherhood, I do understand motherhood asthe lens through which Jael’s performances should be interpreted. After outlining my reasons for framing Jael as undertaking false motherhood when interacting with Sisera, I articulate my own reading of Jael’s nonbinary motherhood, addressing Jael’s performances of motherhood holistically. By drawing together all the information on motherhood available in the narrative, a gender ambiguous image of Jael’s motherhood is illuminated.

## A Framework of Mothering

Jael’s motherhood is embodied in ways that are similar and different to that of Deborah’s and Sisera’s mother’s performances of motherhood. In studies of Jael, two patterns are apparent regarding comparisons between Jael, Deborah and Sisera’s mother. The first pattern is that commentators almost unanimously compare and contrast Jael with Deborah and Sisera’s mother as three women rather than as three mothers.[[559]](#footnote-559) Scholarship, first and foremost, perceives these characters as women. Their role as mothers is rarely treated as significant to their importance in the narrative. Jael’s motherhood is eclipsed by their femininity, which I interpret as merely one facet of their ambiguous gender. Since, in this chapter, I am interested in the theme of motherhood, my own analysis of these three characters places significance on their role as mothers, rather than their attributions of femininity. The second pattern evident in scholarship on Jael is that Jael is most commonly compared to Deborah *or* compared to Sisera’s mother, but not to both at the same time. Differently, I compare all three characters together to highlight that, as well as having similarities with both characters, Jael is the mediating mother who combines the two extremes of motherhood that Deborah and Sisera’s mother exhibit. Deborah’s motherhood presents as masculine, Sisera’s mother’s motherhood conforms to femininity and Jael’s motherhood is concurrently more than one gender and is thus recognisable as nonbinary.

References to Jael’s similarities and differences with Deborah or with Sisera’s mother highlight that biblical scholars have found it useful to view Jael alongside these two other characters. However, despite Deborah and Sisera’s mothers being labelled as mothers and scholarship widely perceiving Jael as performing as a mother,[[560]](#footnote-560) these characters are compared as three women rather than as three mothers. Biblical scholars frame Jael’s motherhood as being performed solely through feminine behaviours, overlooking Jael’s masculine performances of motherhood. Consequently, Jael’s femininity is given greater significance than their masculine performances of motherhood, erasing their nonbinary gender. Also, commentators place significance on Jael’s, Deborah’s and Sisera’s mother’s femininity, rather than focusing on these character’s roles as mothers, a significant role in Judges 4 and 5. The consequence of framing these characters as women rather than as primarily mothers, coupled with placing greater significance on Jael’s femininity over their masculinity, is that Jael’s attributed femininity is perpetuated at the expense of their nonbinary gender. Those few studies that compare Jael as a mother rather than as a woman[[561]](#footnote-561) largely compare Jael to only one other mother, or compare Deborah and Sisera’s mother as mothers, but do not include Jael in the comparison.[[562]](#footnote-562) Thus, the significance of the theme of motherhood is not acknowledged as being a central aspect of Jael’s character. As such, an interpretation of Jael as a mother who concurrently exhibits a combination of Deborah’s masculine motherhood and Sisera’s mother’s feminine motherhood is yet to be acknowledged. By comparing all three characters together, as mothers rather than as women, the significance of the theme of motherhood for understanding Jael’s gender ambiguity becomes apparent. Jael’s gender ambiguous motherhood becomes evident when their performances of motherhood are analysed against both existing frameworks of motherhood in Judges 4 and 5 in a holistic manner. I build upon discussions of Jael’s feminine motherhood illuminating the masculinity of some of Jael’s performances of motherhood which indicate Jael’s gender ambiguity. Considering Jael’s motherhood concurrently with Deborah’s and Sisera’s mother’s motherhood makes evident that motherhood can be performed through feminine andmasculine behaviours and that Jael employs both gendered sets of motherly characteristics.

Two notable exceptions to the patterns of scholarship I summarise include Judy Taubes Sterman’s article on “Themes in the Deborah Narrative (Judges 4-5)”[[563]](#footnote-563) and Freema Gottlieb’s article titled “Three Mothers.”[[564]](#footnote-564) Both address—albeit briefly—Jael as undertaking motherly behaviour. However, these two exceptions demonstrate that, even when the significance of Jael’s role as mother is noted and even when Jael’s motherhood is compared to both Deborah’s and Sisera’s motherhood, Jael’s performances of motherhood are framed as feminine. The concept of gender reversal is employed and, thus, Jael’s gender ambiguity goes unremarked.

Sterman recognises that Jael, Deborah and Sisera’s mother “are characterized, albeit in radically different ways, as mothers.”[[565]](#footnote-565) She goes on to discuss how

Deborah, the mother in Israel stands between these two other mothers, sharply contrasted to the foolish, ineffectual Canaanite mother, on the one hand, and strongly resembling the heroic mother figure of Jael, on the other… At first, each woman is portrayed in somewhat conventional and typically feminine terms… [Jael] at first speaks softly and soothingly… Yet, when the moment demands it, each of these mothers swiftly sheds her original identity, taking on an uncharacteristic, assertive, decidedly non-feminine one, instead.[[566]](#footnote-566)

Sterman compares and contrasts the three characters as mothers, commenting that like Deborah, who transforms from a mother sat under a palm tree (Jdg. 4:5) to a mother stood at the head of an army (Jdg. 5:9), Jael transforms from a soothing mother who offers Sisera comfort and shelter (Jdg. 4:18-19) to a violent mother who puts a tent peg through Sisera’s skull (Jdg. 4:21).[[567]](#footnote-567) Sterman stresses that these transformations are in contrast to Sisera’s mother who “undergoes no such transformation,” but remains passive, waiting for Sisera to return home with spoil (Jdg. 5:28-30).[[568]](#footnote-568) While Sterman compares and contrasts these three characters as mothers, rather than as women, her interpretation maintains Jael’s feminine gender despite identifying that Jael performs in “decidedly non-feminine” ways. Sterman binarises Jael as a woman, in spite of addressing Jael’s masculinity, through the use of feminine pronouns and language grounded in gender reversal which, as discussed in the ‘Thesis Introduction’,is rooted in binary gender. Sterman notes that “[a]t first, each woman is portrayed in somewhat conventional and typically feminine terms… [Jael] at first speaks softly and soothingly.”[[569]](#footnote-569) Her repeated use of the phrase, “at first” indicates that there is a change to come, with her use of this phrase being grounded in a binary framework of gender as it constructs characters who exhibit masculinity as well asfemininity as only being able to be designated one gender at one time as determined by an “either/or” model of gender.[[570]](#footnote-570)Sterman labels this change of gender as a “transformation” or notes that Jael “sheds her original identity, taking on an uncharacteristic, assertive, decidedly non-feminine one, instead.”[[571]](#footnote-571) Her methods of addressing Jael’s masculine performances do not draw attention to Jael’s simultaneous performances of more than one gender at one time but instead presents Jael as performing gender reversal in a manner in which Jael’s femininity is perpetuated.[[572]](#footnote-572) Like Sterman, I acknowledge that Jael’s performances of motherhood have similarities and differences with both other mothers in Judges 4 and 5. However, I assert that these features of Deborah’s masculine motherhood and Sisera’s mother’s feminine motherhood are embodied concurrently in Jael’s performances of motherhood and are evidence of Jael’s gender ambiguity.

Gottlieb’s article is also noteworthy as, although briefly, she compares Jael, Deborah and Sisera’s mother as three mothers. She argues that Deborah has had to deny the mother part of her identity, her “tenderness,” in order to fulfil the role of Judge and prophet during the Israelite-Canaanite conflict:[[573]](#footnote-573)

Deborah’s recoil from the public role that she is called on to play on the battlefield results in a displacement of the denied “mother” part of herself and in its projection upon two other women, who fleetingly and unsatisfactorily come to embody fragmentary longed-for parts of her consciousness.[[574]](#footnote-574)

Gottlieb goes on to say that Deborah’s denied motherhood is projected upon Jael and Sisera’s mother, but in different ways. She states that to win the war “Deborah has had to lose out on personal warmth.”[[575]](#footnote-575) She implies that it is Sisera’s mother’s lack of tenderness and her hostility towards those who are not her child that is a projection of Deborah’s denied motherhood (Jdg. 5:30). For Gottlieb, Deborah is unable to show such motherly emotions as she is leading her children, the Israelites, into battle.[[576]](#footnote-576) In a different way this tenderness that Deborah lacks is projected onto Jael who embodies such motherly behaviour when performing motherhood towards Sisera. As such, Jael’s exhibition of tenderness complements Deborah’s self-distancing from tenderness and Sisera’s mother’s lack of it.[[577]](#footnote-577) Gottlieb’s analysis presents the opportunity to recognise that parts of Deborah’s motherhood are evident in Jael’s performances. Jael acts as a “projection” of behaviours embodied by both Deborah and Sisera’s mother. It is not, however, within the remit of Gottlieb’s study to explore how the behaviours projected on to Jael from Deborah’s framework of motherhood are masculine and those projected on to Jael from Sisera’s mother’s motherhood are feminine and how these gendered behaviours can impact an interpretation of Jael’s gender. As such, Gottlieb has no need to question Jael’s gender, whereas I perceive these projections of motherhood as highlighting that Jael’s performances of motherhood are undertaken gender ambiguously.

Regardless of my argument that Jael should not be understood as a woman, existing comparisons of Jael, Sisera’s mother and Deborah as women are useful for understanding one facet of Jael’s character, and one facet of Jael’s gender—their femininity. However, in this chapter, I demonstrate that comparisons of these three characters’ performances of motherhood are significant in nuancing Jael’s gender, highlighting it as nonbinary rather than as feminine. Both women exhibit a diverse array of performances that highlight the complexity of motherhood. Drawing from the masculine framework of motherhood represented by Deborah and the feminine framework of motherhood demonstrated by Sisera’s mother shows that Jael often performs motherhood through masculine and feminine forms of motherhood simultaneously, indicating their gender ambiguity.

## The Feminine Role of Mother

The role of mother can be understood in two main ways: as a biological possibility for those sexed as female and as a gendered role constructed as feminine.[[578]](#footnote-578) As Adrienne Rich distinguishes:

motherhood has two connected, overlapping meanings: ‘the *potential relationship* of woman to her power of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential–and all women–shall remain under male control.[[579]](#footnote-579)

It is motherhood as a gendered institution, constructed as a feminine role, that is of interest to this chapter.[[580]](#footnote-580) Motherhood as a gendered role places behavioural expectations on women regarding their actions in relation to children.[[581]](#footnote-581) Motherhood and mothering take many forms with ideologies relating to child-rearing varying extensively. Despite this, performances of mothering, motherhood or mother-like behaviour can be considered feminine gender markers due to their grounding in constructions of femininity.[[582]](#footnote-582) However, all ideologies relating to mothering are constructions with there being no natural reason for women to raise children in a particular way, or indeed for women to raise children at all.[[583]](#footnote-583)

The Hebrew Bible constructs motherhood as a feminine ideal and relates the role of mother to the expected role of women to be or become wives, who will be or become mothers. Performances constructed as relating to motherhood are largely the same behaviours expected of wives/women in relation to husbands/men. That women in the Hebrew Bible are or will become wives is highlighted through the Hebrew term for woman being interchangeable with wife.[[584]](#footnote-584)This indicates that a distinction between women and wives is not deemed necessary in the Hebrew Bible; they are one and the same. Women are expected to become wives to men and, as wives to men, they are expected to become mothers to the children of those men. The ideology that frames women as being or becoming mothers has resulted in motherhood being considered the normative identity for women and presented as an expected fulfilment of femininity.[[585]](#footnote-585) The expectation that women will have and nurture children has gone largely unopposed in biblical scholarship. Dawn Llewellyn highlights this saying that

excessive sacred meaning [is] given to the maternal expectation, which usually goes unchallenged [in the church and in biblical scholarship]… From the biblical call to ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ (Gen. 1: 28), the declaration that ‘women will be saved through childbirth’ (1 Tim. 2.15), to the understanding in Roman Catholic teaching that motherhood is the ‘fundamental contribution that the Church and humanity expect from women’ (*Evangelium Vitae*, para. 19), the normative message for lay women is that they are ‘supposed’ to be mothers… [their] identities are fulfilled by becoming mothers.[[586]](#footnote-586)

Llewellyn’s claim is supported by the lack of voluntarily childless women in the Hebrew Bible. There is no instance in the Hebrew Bible where a woman is framed as not wanting children or refusing to care for their child; such a possibility is not presented.[[587]](#footnote-587) Guest, supported by others such as Esther Fuchs and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, comments that the “rhetoric of [biblical] narratives encourage readers to associate women with an ardent desire for children.”[[588]](#footnote-588) Women as mothers are expected to set aside their own goals and interests in order to devote themselves entirely to their children.[[589]](#footnote-589) Fuchs characterises biblical mothers as “devoted” to their children and their children’s needs.[[590]](#footnote-590) This care and devotion to their children can be seen in a number of biblical narratives which focus on the relationship between mother and child, usually mother and son. Examples of mothers ensuring their children’s wellbeing can be seen throughout the Hebrew Bible. For example, in the narrative of Sarah and Isaac, where Sarah says to Abraham, “‘Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac’” (Gen. 21:10). Also, in 2 Kings the Shunamite mother will not leave without Elisha who is needed to restore health (and life) to her son (2 Kgs 4:8-37). Surrogate mothers are also framed in the Hebrew Bible as fulfilling the role of motherhood through caring behaviour that puts the child’s needs first. Examples include the narratives of Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 4) and Yoash (2 Kgs 11) in which both are saved by mother figures who are not their ‘real’ mothers, but take on a motherly role. This demonstrates that women who are not mothers are still framed as taking on the symbolic position of mother and enact mothering behaviours which are grounded in expectations of femininity.

Becoming a mother in the Hebrew Bible is constructed as the ultimate expression of femininity. Motherhood as an expected role of women/wives is pervasively normalised in the Hebrew Bible,[[591]](#footnote-591) evident in the language used to label women who have not had children. The Hebrew Bible calls these women “barren”[[592]](#footnote-592) (Gen. 11:30, 25:21, Jdg. 13:3, Psm. 111:9)[[593]](#footnote-593) indicating an absence or lack since they are unable to fulfil the role that has been culturally ascribed to them.[[594]](#footnote-594) These childless women are framed as deeply unhappy and unsatisfied and as desperate to have children. These narratives feed into the discourse that having children is a normal—an expected—part of being a woman. That it was important for biblical women to have children is widely acknowledged in biblical scholarship and evident in numerous biblical narratives, particularly in the accounts of Rachel (Gen. 30) and Hannah (1 Sam. 1).[[595]](#footnote-595) Rachel’s desire for children and her expectation that she should become a mother is evident from her comment to her husband: “‘Give me children, or I’ll die!’” (Gen. 30:1). The same is true for Hannah; the narrator informs the reader that Hannah “wept and would not eat” (1 Sam. 1:7) and whilst praying to Yahweh for a child was “weeping bitterly” over her lack of a child (1 Sam. 1:10). Wilbur Williams states that being without children

was considered unbearable, especially to women. A woman’s whole purpose in life was to grow up, get married, and have children. A life of childlessness was almost totally unacceptable.[[596]](#footnote-596)

Childlessness in the Hebrew Bible is presented as “woman’s greatest tragedy” whereas becoming a mother is considered a fulfilment of femininity, where the roles of woman, wife and mother are largely amalgamated.[[597]](#footnote-597) The similarities between the expected behaviours of women, wives and mothers leads to the frequent conflation of these feminised roles.

Women, wives and mothers are all expected to perform the feminine role of caring for others. Mothers are expected to physically and emotionally care for their children as women/wives are expected to care for men/husbands.[[598]](#footnote-598) At the centre of each of these feminine roles is the expectation to provide care, especially through nourishment, leading to their frequent conflation.[[599]](#footnote-599) The behaviours associated with women, wives and mothers are so similar that if an individual can be considered in one of these ways (as either woman, wife or mother) than they are assumed to be or become all three. This is evident through the dominant stereotyping of mothers as “what women *are*” (italics mine)[[600]](#footnote-600) and mothering as being “what women *do*” (italics mine),[[601]](#footnote-601) so much so that if a woman does not become a wife and a mother they are framed as deviant.[[602]](#footnote-602) The similarities between these roles are so close that women, wives and mothers offering food is a trope in the Hebrew Bible that links these feminine roles.[[603]](#footnote-603) Bach comments that the presence of food can transform a woman into a “wifely character” since she perceives that “the standard convention of a good woman [is that she is] soothing or nurturing a man with food.”[[604]](#footnote-604) Similarly Frymer-Kensky notes this trope saying that “[w]omen may be most likely to use food and nurture, for these are the currency of the private domain, the one in which women were most prominent.”[[605]](#footnote-605) Her comment highlights the link that food and nourishment have to femininity. Bach takes this feminine link one step further, commenting that feeding is related to femininity and carries connotations of “maternal” behaviour.[[606]](#footnote-606) These comments demonstrate that in the Hebrew Bible food and nourishment are related to women generally as well as more specifically—through their caring roles—to wives and mothers.

Another feminine expectation of women generally and mothers and wives more specifically is that they are largely expected to remain within their domestic space, with mothers in particular being expected to enact motherhood within these feminine domestic confines.[[607]](#footnote-607) Matthews and Benjamin note that a man was expected to provide a tent for each of his wives,[[608]](#footnote-608) which suggests that the domestic space is not just women’s space but also wives’ space. Additionally, the tent as a domestic space is a woman’s and a wife’s space but is also a mother’s space. The matriarchs, Sarah (Gen. 18:10), Rebekah (Gen. 24:67), Rachel (Gen 31:33) and Leah (Gen 31:33) are all mentioned in relation to their tents, the space in which each became a mother. The matriarchs live and spend the majority of their time in their tents: they give birth to their children, the Children of Israel, in their tents, and they raise said children in and around their tents. For Hoffner, Jr. women and the domestic space are so closely related that the domestic space as well as domestic duties carry overtones of wifely and motherly behaviour.[[609]](#footnote-609) This suggests that the domestic space is widely considered a feminine space and because women were expected to be wives and mothers, the domestic space relates to the conflated feminine roles of women, wives and mothers.

These select examples of the shared expectations of the roles of women, wives and mothers, namely to be carers, to provide nourishment and to spend most of their time within the domestic space, demonstrate how closely related these feminine roles are. They are constructed in the same way, based on the same set of behaviours and are largely interchangeable, but are expected to be enacted in relation to different individuals and different relationships.[[610]](#footnote-610) These feminine roles have few factors which distinguish one from the others, hence they are often conflated. This leads to women being assumed to be wives *and* mothers as well as mothers being assumed to be women *and* wives, when they may not fit all three categories.

It is this homogenising of feminine roles, I suggest, that has led to the perception of Jael as symbolic mother to Sisera. Jael exhibits a number of behaviours that are expected of women, wives and mothers, namely their offer of safety, care, nurture, nourishment and reassurance towards Sisera (Jdg. 4:18-19, 5:25).[[611]](#footnote-611) Jael kills Sisera and because of this act I understand Jael’s behaviours to be feminine performances that can be interpreted in as motherly—as they are in scholarship—but are performances of false mothering since they end in death rather than life. Tamber-Rosenau highlights the practice of framing feminine behaviour as motherly behaviour and thus amalgamating these roles in her comment:

We might find it problematic that the biblical texts are so invested in women being mothers that they use maternal imagery to describe childless female characters, and that even women’s non-childbearing activities are framed in the language of reproductive futurism.[[612]](#footnote-612)

The similarities among these three feminised roles have resulted in Jael’s feminine behaviours towards Sisera being framed as motherly behaviours.[[613]](#footnote-613) Consequently, the interpretation that Jael is the symbolic mother of Sisera is prevalent in biblical scholarship.

## Jael as a Mother in Scholarship

Scholarship on Jael is almost unanimous in framing Jael as maternal towards Sisera;[[614]](#footnote-614) Jael’s feminine behaviour, based especially on Jdg. 4:18-19, is framed as motherly:[[615]](#footnote-615)

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him.” (Jdg. 4:18-19).

Jael’s acts of care (Jdg. 4:18), comfort (Jdg. 4:19) and nourishment (Jdg. 4:20) when interacting with Sisera are framed as motherly behaviours in the literature.[[616]](#footnote-616) These feminine acts are perceived as motherly and the categories of woman and mother are conflated with both being ascribed to Jael. This is evident in Brenner’s study, when she notes in passing that Jael, as a “woman,” is “potentially if not actually a mother.”[[617]](#footnote-617) Jael’s position as a woman is reinforced since only their feminine behaviours are recognised as motherly with their masculine performances of motherhood being given little, if any, attention. This literature review establishes three things: first, that Jael as the mother of Sisera is the dominant interpretation; second, that Jael as the mother of Israel is unexplored in the literature; and third, that Jael is firmly attributed feminine gender when scholars interpret Jael’s performances of motherhood.

Conway’s investigation into the cultural history of Jael’s encounter with Sisera labels Jael as “maternal” towards Sisera.[[618]](#footnote-618) Conway notes that the imagery relating to this encounter can be viewed as sexual as well as relating to motherhood. Conway comments that scholarship frequently interprets “Sisera falling between Jael’s legs” as “maternal imagery”:[[619]](#footnote-619)

He sank, he fell,  
    he lay still at her feet;  
at her feet he sank, he fell;  
    where he sank, there he fell dead (Jdg. 5:27).

This verse is viewed as maternal imagery due to the implication of childbirth;[[620]](#footnote-620) Conway interprets verse 27 as including imagery of a child falling from between its mother’s legs and associates this with childbirth. The biblical character, Rachel, suggests that it was common for a surrogate to give birth upon the knees of the mother so that the child can symbolically fall out from between the mother’s legs, despite the mother not being the one to physically give birth:[[621]](#footnote-621)

When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?”Then she said, “Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her.” (Gen. 30:1-3).

Rachel’s phrase, “bear upon my knees” is suggestive of the position that Jdg. 5:27 depicts Jael as being in, with a child falling from between their legs, as can be seen elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Isa 26:18). From this imagery in Jael’s narrative, Conway infers that Jael is symbolic mother to Sisera. However, while the references to Sisera as a symbolic child falling from between Jael’s legs draws a parallel with childbirth, the other aspects of this form of surrogate childbirth are absent. For example, Jael is alone, without the woman who is physically birthing the child. Also, a major difference, if this imagery is embraced, is that Sisera is ‘born’ dead and this death has been caused by Jael, the one who is symbolically giving birth to him. Jael’s killing of Sisera is a significant reason to be cautious when interpreting Jael as symbolic mother of Sisera, as I argue later, Jael can be understood as performing false motherhood towards Sisera. Here, it is enough to note that there are key differences between the birthing scenario that Rachel references (Gen. 30:1-3) and the potential birthing imagery that Conway recognises as signifying Jael’s position as symbolic mother to Sisera.

Exum also labels Jael as symbolic mother to Sisera, noting Jael’s femininity. Exum says “the men in this story are in the symbolic position of little boys, the women are their mothers.”[[622]](#footnote-622) In line with the vast majority of scholarship on Jael, she characterises Jael as a mother to Sisera based on Jael’s “nurturing” behaviour and “offers of security.”[[623]](#footnote-623) She also calls Jael a “mother” and “maternal” in reference to Jael’s offer of “milk” to Sisera.[[624]](#footnote-624) For Exum, the milk links to the expectation that mothers nurture and feed their child(ren), with milk being a form of nourishment that has a particularly close relationship with mothers and their offspring. While Jael does use milk to ease Sisera to sleep, as mothers would be expected to do, Jael encourages Sisera’s sleep so that Jael can kill him. Jael’s use of milk is thus in opposition to the expectations of mothers’ use of milk and is better interpreted as an act of false motherhood. Exum notes conventionally feminine and motherly behaviours in the text’s portrayal of Jael and focuses on these rather than on Jael’s masculine performances of motherhood towards Sisera or Jael’s performances that go against expectations of mothering behaviour.

Similarly, Bal labels a number of Jael’s feminine behaviours as “mothering”[[625]](#footnote-625) or “motherly”[[626]](#footnote-626) and despite highlighting that some of Jael’s motherly behaviours are constructed as masculine, perpetuates Jael’s feminisation. In particular it is Jael’s offer of “rest and milk” that has led to Bal’s understanding of Jael as performing behaviours of “maternity” when interacting with Sisera.[[627]](#footnote-627) The milky nourishment—milk in Chapter 4 and curds in Chapter 5—carries reassurance for Sisera. This is because milk is closely associated with care and nurture, since mothers giving milk to their children is a common practice to induce relaxation and sleep.[[628]](#footnote-628) Thus, not only is nourishment framed as a ‘woman’s weapon,’ but Jael, through the use of this ‘woman’s weapon,’ is feminised and further framed as a mother given milk’s association with the mother’s role. However, Bal notes that Jael “controls” Sisera through their offer of the “basic attributes of maternity,” things that Sisera “lacks” and needs.[[629]](#footnote-629) She frames Jael’s masculine behaviour of motherhood—their controlling behaviour—as a performance of gender reversal.[[630]](#footnote-630) Through the use of gender reversal Bal recognises that Jael performs masculinity as part of their role as mother to Sisera, continuing to frame Jael and Jael’s mothering of Sisera as feminine since any masculinity evident is interpreted as temporary and secondary to Jael’s femininity. Jael’s femininity is maintained, since gender reversal is grounded in a binary framework of gender, which, in this case, presents Jael as a woman who temporarily reverses ‘her’ gender rather than performing gender ambiguously. The dominant discourse of a binary framework of gender is evident when Bal says:

The reversal of roles, the isolation from society, the regression back to the rudimentary: the elements of the rite of passage (Turner 1981) are all here… The man in transit, who is nothing but a kind of transient, dispossessed, tries to turn back, to return to the moment when contact with the outside world was not yet severed. And he tries to return to the moment before the reversal of power roles. He gives an order to the woman who has over him the absolute power that a mother has over her infant… in this last burst of power, hence of social existence, he pronounces his death sentence, describing himself as ‘no [man].’[[631]](#footnote-631)

She states that Sisera “is no longer a man.”[[632]](#footnote-632) Consequently, Jael’s masculine performances of motherhood do not feed into Bal’s construction of Jael’s gender, whilst Jael’s feminine performances of motherhood do.

Tamber-Rosenau, like Bal, interprets Jael’s motherhood as being imbued with masculinity yet grounds their motherhood in femininity.[[633]](#footnote-633) She makes various comments regarding Jael’s maternal and motherlike behaviours when interacting with Sisera and dedicates much space to Jael’s performances of motherhood towards Sisera.[[634]](#footnote-634) She describes Jael as employing “over-the-top versions of womanhood, including motherhood,”[[635]](#footnote-635) citing Jael’s offer of milk and framing Jael as tucking Sisera into bed, like a child,[[636]](#footnote-636) explicitly labelling Jael as “a symbolic mother to Sisera.”[[637]](#footnote-637) She also acknowledges that Jael’s motherhood is used as “as a weapon of war,” as a masculine tool that is associated with masculine constructs such as violence and warfare.[[638]](#footnote-638) Tamber-Rosenau makes clear that Jael’s masculinity is a part of their motherhood, reiterating that Jael’s performance of mothering is “a covert weapon.”[[639]](#footnote-639) Despite recognitions of masculinity and femininity when Jael performs as mother to Sisera, Tamber-Rosenau interprets Jael as a woman. She stresses Jael’s motherhood as an aspect of their “womanhood,” erasing their gender ambiguity and reinforcing their femininity. Since this covert behaviour is being employed to bring about Sisera’s downfall and is a weapon used against Sisera, I build upon Tamber-Rosenau’s recognition. Unlike Tamber-Rosenau who perceives Jael as using feminine, mother-like, behaviours as well as masculine, mother-like, behaviours against Sisera but maintains Jael’s binary femininity, I argue that Jael is interpretable as gender ambiguous not as a feminine mother. I further argue that Jael embodies performances of false motherhood towards Sisera and is better understood as symbolic mother to the Children of Israel. These examples of the feminisation of Jael as the symbolic mother of Sisera, due to their feminine performances, are widespread. Jael’s masculine performances of motherhood are rarely noted and when they are mentioned they do not feed into interpretations of Jael’s gender nor interpretations of Jael’s mothering. Subsequently, Jael as a feminine mother to Sisera is the dominant interpretation despite evidence to the contrary.

Although no study discusses Jael’s position as mother of the Children of Israel in any detail, two studies are notable in that they comment on Jael as symbolic mother of the Israelite nation. Fewell and Gunn’s *Gender, Power and Promise[[640]](#footnote-640)* and Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes’ chapter, “Mother and a Mediator in the Song of Deborah” both do so.[[641]](#footnote-641) Fewell and Gunn comment upon Jael as a mother of Israel in passing. They state that “Deborah and Jael, witting and unwitting, are caretakers of Israel, ‘mothers’ lauded for accomplishments quite other than the bearing of sons.”[[642]](#footnote-642) They suggest that Jael unknowingly and unintentionally, by killing Sisera, is understandable as a mother to Israel, one who is celebrated for saving Israel. Their comment highlights that Jael’s actions, like Deborah’s behaviours, lead to Jael being similarly regarded as “a mother in Israel.” Although they reference Jael as mother to the Children of Israel, however briefly, they also interpret Jael as symbolic mother to Sisera saying that Jael “‘mothers Sisera to death,” feminising this mothering by labelling Jael as a “*femme fatale*.”[[643]](#footnote-643) They state that “[w]hile Jael is neither, literally, mother nor lover to Sisera, this scene is filled with maternal and sexual imagery.”[[644]](#footnote-644) Even though Fewell and Gunn note the possibility of Jael as symbolic mother to the Children of Israel they accord more attention to Jael as symbolic mother to Sisera and maintain Jael’s femininity.

Dijk-Hemmes’s chapter in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* is the only other study I am aware of that labels Jael as a symbolic mother to the Children of Israel.[[645]](#footnote-645) In her comparison of Deborah and Sisera’s mother, Dijk-Hemmes notes that Jael is foreign like Sisera’s mother but like Deborah can be understood as “becoming a ‘mother in Israel’ by virtue of her reported action.”[[646]](#footnote-646) This is all that is said on this topic. Like Fewell and Gunn, Dijk-Hemmes suggests that Jael is a mother to the Israelite nation, but also discusses Jael as “a mother figure” to Sisera. She mentions “Jael’s offering of milk [as] a motherly gift of life” and makes reference to Jael “giving birth” to Sisera.[[647]](#footnote-647) She understands both these parts of Jael’s narrative as grounding Jael’s motherhood in feminine expectations of nurturance. No more is said by Dijk-Hemmes regarding Jael’s motherhood towards the Children of Israel. Thus, while she recognises that Jael performs motherhood towards the Israelite nation, she also frames Jael as mother to Sisera and frames Jael’s role as mother as feminine. In doing so, Jael’s performances of masculinity while acting as mother to Sisera (controlling behaviour) and acting as mother to the Children of Israel (killing to protect them) go undiscussed. The result is that Jael’s performance of gender ambiguous motherhood is overlooked in favour of an interpretation of femininity.

This review of the literature makes evident that the dominant interpretation regarding Jael’s symbolic position as mother is that through feminine behaviours Jael is symbolic mother to Sisera. Jael is rarely addressed by scholars as “a mother in Israel” despite being commonly regarded as: a saviour or defender of Israel;[[648]](#footnote-648) as devoted to the Israelites or to Yahweh;[[649]](#footnote-649) or even as Yahweh’s weapon or tool.[[650]](#footnote-650) Jael performs in much the same way as Deborah, “a mother in Israel,” does. It is therefore possible to interpret Jael as showing concern for the Israelite nation if Jael is interpreted as acting in defence of the Children of Israel. In their act of protecting the Children of Israel Jael puts their own wellbeing at risk and initiates violence in order to defend them, as is expected of mothers.[[651]](#footnote-651) Regardless, Jael as performing motherhood towards the Children of Israel remains underrepresented in biblical scholarship. Those rare occasions when Jael is said to be the mother of Israel are brief references rather than sustained analysis of an alternate interpretation. By exploring the potential for Jael to be understood as “a mother in Israel” I uncover another way in which Jael’s performances of gender ambiguity are evident in the text: their role as mother to the Children of Israel is performed in a gender ambiguous manner.

## Jael as Mother to the Children of Israel

The dominant interpretation that sees Jael as symbolic mother to Sisera is, I argue, problematic. It is problematic because Jael’s killing of Sisera (Jdg. 4:21) is in direct opposition to what is expected of a mother—it is an act deemed incompatible with mothering. Killing their child is almost irreconcilable with the construction of motherhood, in part because motherhood is framed as feminine and killing is framed in opposition, as masculine, but also because “unconditional love of children by mothers” is expected, and killing is largely deemed to go against this.[[652]](#footnote-652) Some commentators who view Jael as symbolic mother of Sisera are aware of the contradiction of a mother who kills their child, noting that Jael’s act is disruptive to their mothering role. Since killing their (symbolic) child is framed as “distinctly unmotherly”[[653]](#footnote-653) it is viewed as an act of “anti-mothering” by some scholars.[[654]](#footnote-654) Some scholars who view Jael as symbolic mother to Sisera consider Jael’s mothering behaviour to be “perverse,” [[655]](#footnote-655) since the resultant act is “sacrilege” to the role of motherhood.[[656]](#footnote-656) These views highlight that Jael’s killing of Sisera goes against their perception of what is expected of motherhood. These recognitions, however, do not dissuade commentators from framing Jael as feminine, symbolic mother to Sisera. Since Jael’s act of killing upsets interpretations of Jael as symbolic mother to Sisera and the imagery created by this interpretation of Jael mothering Sisera I frame Jael as instead undertaking false motherhood.

Scholarship frames Jael’s performances of motherhood as feminine, even when masculinity is commented upon. For example, Exum notes that some of Jael’s motherly behaviours do not conform to feminine expectations—namely their killing of Sisera—calling Jael a “death-dealing mother.”[[657]](#footnote-657) This phrase indicates that Jael’s killing of Sisera does not prevent Exum from labelling Jael as a mother. Exum’s choice of phrase also makes clear the contrast between the two roles that Jael performs, that of killer and of mother. One is a life-giving role while the other is a destructive role that ends life. Killing and mothering are therefore highlighted as oppositional in Exum’s naming of Jael as “death-dealing mother,” making it clear that Jael does not fall in line with dominant stereotypes regarding motherhood. Despite commenting on Jael’s killing of Sisera, which disrupts Jael’s femininity and their motherhood, Exum perpetuates the imagery of Jael as a feminine mother, highlighting Jael’s maternal behaviours of “nurturing,” especially through their offer of nourishment in the form of “milk.”[[658]](#footnote-658) Following her comment that Jael brings death,[[659]](#footnote-659) despite this being a masculine act that is in opposition to motherhood, Exum calls Jael a “woman.” She repeats that she understands Jael as a “nurturing mother” and compares Jael to other biblical women such as the “‘strange’ woman of Proverbs.””[[660]](#footnote-660) Thus, Exum reinforces the scholarly attribution of femininity to Jael. Jael as a mother to Sisera is the prevalent interpretation held even by those who recognise Jael’s killing of Sisera as disruptive to femininity and expectations of mothers’ behaviours.

A number of scholars who interpret Jael as symbolic mother to Sisera frame Jael’s behaviour as shifting from maternal to violent, since their mothering and their killing are in opposition and cannot be accepted simultaneously. This presents Jael’s maternal role as Sisera’s symbolic mother as coming to an end being replaced by Jael’s role as killer.[[661]](#footnote-661) For example, Jennifer Williams states that “[i]n both chapters 4 and 5, the scene with Jael and Sisera quickly shifts from a tone of nurturing and care to one of violence and murder,”[[662]](#footnote-662) and Lindars notes that

Jael plays the part of the man, so that the roles are reversed. At first, she entices Sisera with the bowl of milk, performing the woman’s part. But then she takes over the role of the man when she uses the tent-peg to penetrate his skull.[[663]](#footnote-663)

These examples employ the concept of gender reversal, framing Jael as shifting from femininity to masculinity in a way that presents mothering and killing as oppositional. This incompatibility of Jael’s mothering and killing is occasionally framed in the literature as ironic, since it does not fit what is expected of a mother. Examples include Bal’s comment:

Milk is the drink that mothers offer children. By giving milk, Yael, on the one hand, reassures Sisera further; on the other hand, she prepares the scene as an ironic one of anti-mothering.[[664]](#footnote-664)

Similarly, Don Seeman remarks that “[f]rom this ironic perspective, therefore, Sisera is not only a warrior fallen in battle. He is also Jael’s dead offspring, fallen between her legs.”[[665]](#footnote-665) These scholars’ observations make clear that Jael’s act of killing is deemed incompatible with femininity and, more importantly, incompatible with their role as mother of Sisera, yet they continue to label Jael as a woman and as a mother to Sisera. Jael’s behavior—taking a stranger into their home and providing him with food/drink (Jdg. 4:18-19, 5:25)—can be thought of as mothering behaviour towards Sisera only if considered separately to the narrative context in which a battle is going on and without consideration of the fact that Jael kills Sisera. When considering the theme of motherhood in Judges 4 and 5 together with Jael’s acts of nurturing and killing, perceiving Jael as mother to the Children of Israel, rather than as symbolic mother to Sisera, is a more nuanced understanding of Jael’s character. Jael’s acts of masculinity and femininity are intertwined and take place concurrently. Understanding Jael as “a mother in Israel,” like Deborah, means that when Jael kills Sisera they do not disrupt their mothering role, rather Jael’s violent act feeds into the image of Jael as defending their children. This is in keeping with the narrative theme of motherhood in Judges 4 and 5.

Scholarship rarely acknowledges Jael’s masculine performances of motherhood because these are not clear when interpreting Jael as mother to Sisera. I argue that a shift in perspective is required: when interpreting Jael as mother to the Children of Israel, Jael’s performances of feminine motherhood on behalf of their children (for example consideration and selflessness) are evident alongside their performances of masculine motherhood, also undertaken on behalf of their children (behaviours such as controlling and killing). I identify simultaneous embodiments of feminine motherhood (caring for and protecting the Children of Israel) as well asmasculine motherhood (violence towards an enemy). By committing this masculine act of killing Jael fulfils the feminised expectations of a mother to care for their children—to act selflessly and to ensure their children’s health and wellbeing[[666]](#footnote-666)—whilst simultaneously performing as a warrior mother and caring mother by killing those who wish their children harm. As Jael’s simultaneous caring for the Children of Israel and killing of Sisera demonstrates, Jael’s motherhood is performed gender ambiguously rather than purely through behaviours constructed as feminine.

My claim that Jael is recognisable as mother to the Children of Israel is supported by Jael’s lack of biological children which can be considered an indicator that Jael should be understood as mother to the nation of Israel. Childlessness as suggesting of symbolic motherhood is a motif which is commonly picked up on in studies on Judith and can be extended to Jael and even other feminised characters that are childless, such as Deborah and Esther. In studies on Judith it has been argued that it is her lack of children that makes her suitable to be understood as a mother of Israel. E. L. Hicks highlights Judith’s childlessness as well as her willingness to risk her reputation and put herself in danger for the good of the Israelite people.[[667]](#footnote-667) He understands Judith as being in a position to risk herself because she does not have children that prevent her from dedicating herself to Israel as a mother. This idea is supported by Williams who states that “being childless is a sign that her true infants are the Israel of the future.”[[668]](#footnote-668) Erin K. Vearncombe describes Judith in this way, saying that Judith is “a childless widow who gave spiritual and political life to her people.”[[669]](#footnote-669) Jael fits the criteria that scholars have used to understand Judith as mother of the Children of Israel. While Jael is not said to be a widow, unlike Judith, Jael is only ambiguously linked to a husband and acts without the oversight of any man, like Judith. Similarly, Jael “gave spiritual and political life” to their people.[[670]](#footnote-670) By these criteria, then, Jael can be understood, alongside Judith, as a mother of Israel.

The idea that being childless, without a man and acting selflessly, in a way that saves the Israelites, leads to Judith being framed as a mother to the nation is supported by the text calling Deborah “a mother in Israel.” Deborah too has no children, is under the authority of no man and acts to save the Israelites and due to these qualities is labelled as a mother to the nation (Jdg. 5:7). Deborah, like Judith, acts for the benefit of the Israelite nation; both mothers are willing to enact violence to ensure the wellbeing of their children—the Children of Israel. Jael can therefore be recognised, alongside Judith and Deborah as a symbolic mother to the Children of Israel.

Parallels between Deborah’s and Jael’s forms of motherhood are an important aspect of the narrative and of this chapter. These shared aspects of motherhood between Jael and Deborah are explored below alongside an exploration of Jael’s similarities with the other named mother in the text, “the mother of Sisera” (Jdg. 5:28). Such a comparison of the three mothers is undertaken in order to demonstrate that Jael’s motherhood draws on the two existing frameworks of motherhood in the narrative in a way that combines feminine performances and masculine performances of motherhood. Jael embodies a number of feminine motherly qualities, like Sisera’s mother, and simultaneously demonstrates masculine motherly qualities, as exemplified by Deborah. The result is that Jael’s performances of motherhood allow Jael to be read as a nonbinary mother.

## Jael’s Gender Ambiguous Motherhood

Jael’s motherhood is a complex amalgamation of femininity and masculinity. Jael’s performances of motherhood draw on the wider narrative theme through shared motherly qualities with the two named mothers in Judges 4 and 5. This section articulates my own interpretation of Jael’s motherhood and mothering behaviours, claiming that Jael embodies false motherhood towards Sisera in order to fulfil their role as symbolic mother to the Children of Israel. Their performances of motherhood, whether false motherhood towards Sisera or symbolic motherhood towards the Israelites, are embodied in a gender ambiguous manner with the best interest of the Children of Israel being of foremost concern. Jael performs a variety of masculine acts and behaviours that can be interpreted as part of their motherly role, many of which draw from the masculine framework of motherhood exhibited by Deborah (Jdg. 4: 4-10, 5:12), “a mother in Israel” (Jdg. 5:7):

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel.She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun.I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.’” Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.” And she said, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh.Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him (Jdg. 4:4-10).

Awake, awake, Deborah!  
    Awake, awake, utter a song!  
Arise, Barak, lead away your captives,  
    O son of Abinoam (Jdg. 5:12).

In particular, the masculine behaviours demonstrated by Deborah and Jael include assertive and controlling behaviour as well as acts of violence and engagement with warfare. Jael also behaves in a range of ways that have been constructed as feminine. Many of these, such as domesticity, physical separation from the battle field and emotional concern, are also exhibited by Sisera’s mother:

Out of the window she peered,  
    the mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice:  
“Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
    Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?”  
Her wisest ladies make answer,  
    indeed, she answers the question herself:  
“Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?—  
    A girl or two for every man;  
spoil of dyed stuffs for Sisera,  
    spoil of dyed stuffs embroidered,  
    two pieces of dyed work embroidered for my neck as spoil?” (Jdg. 5:28-30).

Tamber-Rosenau stresses that by “mentioning Sisera’s mother, the biblical author invites the reader to draw the parallel between her and Jael.”[[671]](#footnote-671) I agree and build upon this recognition, drawing attention to parallels between Jael and Sisera’s mother including Deborah in that comparison of mothers.

Motherhood has historically been feminised and thus attributed to women and associated with feminine performances; Jael, too, has been historically feminised. Consequently, when Jael performs motherhood through masculine behaviours, commentators do not frame Jael as performing masculine motherhood or gender ambiguous motherhood, but present Jael’s masculinity as temporary performances of gender reversal. A close reading of the text, with the theme of motherhood as the focus, will make evident that Jael performs motherhood through concurrent masculine and feminine behaviours. Further, by employing a genderqueer methodology and using a holistic approach, Jael’s gender ambiguous motherhood to the Children of Israel becomes apparent.

My analysis of Jael’s performances of motherhood demonstrate that Jael employs differently gendered motherly performances in relation to Sisera—their false child—and the Children of Israel—their symbolic child. When Jael performs in ways that are understood by scholarship as feminine—motherly behaviour towards Sisera—their actions are simultaneously interpretable as masculine motherhood towards the Children of Israel. For example, when caring for Sisera by alleviating his fears (feminine motherly behaviour) Jael is luring him into a position of vulnerability so they can protect the Children of Israel from this threat (masculine motherly behaviour). Hence, Jael performs a gender ambiguous performance of motherhood since they embody feminine mothering traits simultaneously with masculine traits performed in motherly ways.

### Agency

Jael is an active mother to the Children of Israel. Jael initiates contact with the Israelites’ enemy, Sisera, inviting him into their tent before he has the chance to approach or act himself. Jael employs initiative throughout their interaction:[[672]](#footnote-672)

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him.He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’” (Jdg. 4:18-20).

Jael shows initiative and demonstrates assertive behaviour constructed as masculine. This masculine behaviour is performed through mothering behaviour of caring for Sisera since Jael brings Sisera into a place of shelter and comfort.[[673]](#footnote-673)Jael is not only active in bringing Sisera into their tent but also takes initiative by switching a harmless drink for a soporific drink (Jdg. 4:19, 5:25), taking an active role in ensuring Sisera is in a vulnerable position—sleepy, covered up, expecting protection (Jdg. 4:18-20). Jael’s active behaviour and instances of taking the initiative shows Jael’s willingness to be involved in the events that affect the Children of Israel. It is through Jael’s masculine agency and initiative that Jael is able to liberate the Children of Israel from their Canaanite oppressors, making this a key aspect of their motherhood towards the Children of Israel.

Jael’s active and assertive behaviour is an aspect of their motherhood that is paralleled by Deborah’s motherhood. Deborah is an active mother; she rouses her children and leads them into war. She not only takes an active role in beginning the war but also leads it (Jdg. 5:12), as “Israel’s chief military leader.”[[674]](#footnote-674) This masculine aspect of Jael’s and Deborah’s motherhood benefits the Israelite nation at Sisera’s expense. Both mothers make decisions with the wellbeing of their children in mind and in doing so take an active role in the survival of the Children of Israel. Despite motherhood being constructed as a feminine role, Jael’s motherhood, like Deborah’s, is imbued with masculine performances.

Sisera’s mother, unlike Jael and Deborah, exhibits no active behaviour but rather is firmly addressed in the literature as a passive mother, one who waits and watches:[[675]](#footnote-675)

Out of the window she peered,  
    the mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice:  
“Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
    Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?” (Jdg. 5:28).

She has no active responsibility, political or otherwise[[676]](#footnote-676) and does not act in defence of her child, in fact, she does not act at all.[[677]](#footnote-677) She does not move from her window, not even to find out what has become of her child and thus she adheres to feminine expectations of passivity.[[678]](#footnote-678) As Seeman points out, Sisera’s mother “is unable to act decisively in defence of her child.”[[679]](#footnote-679) While Deborah and Jael, mothers of Israel, are active in securing their children’s safety and wellbeing, Sisera’s mother watches and waits, passively. The outcome for her child is markedly different than the outcome for the Children of Israel, highlighting that Jael’s and Deborah’s active motherhood is not only beneficial but is a significant aspect of their success as mothers.

### Domestic Space

Jael’s active motherhood and Sisera’s mother’s passive motherhood both take place within the domestic—private—space, a sphere that is related to women and mothers as their designated space in opposition to men’s agency in the public domain.[[680]](#footnote-680) The text makes clear that Jael and Sisera’s mother are within domestic spaces:

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug (Jdg. 4:18).

Out of the window she peered,  
    the mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice:  
“Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
    Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?” (Jdg. 5:24).

A conflation of the woman’s role and the mother’s role often occurs in relation to the private space that Jael and Sisera’s mother are portrayed as residing in.[[681]](#footnote-681) As well as being constructed as a feminine space, the domestic space is commonly understood as the space in which mothers and children reside, as the place where children are raised by their mothers.[[682]](#footnote-682) In part, this is because women have historically been tasked with caring for the home and the household and the care of children falls within this remit.[[683]](#footnote-683) As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in the Hebrew Bible to be a woman is to be or become a mother: these roles are constructed as one and the same. By depicting Jael within a space that has conventional ties to femininity and motherhood Jael’s performances of femininity are conflated with performances of motherhood and reading Jael as a feminine, domestic mother is possible.[[684]](#footnote-684)

Jael’s domestic space lends itself to images and interpretations of Jael as a mother in general, but more specifically as “a mother in Israel.” The poem’s reference to Jael as “most blessed” in relation to their position as a tent-dweller (Jdg. 5:24) highlights their location in a domestic space and has been understood by some scholars as a reference to the tent-dwelling matriarchs. This is stressed in Weiss’s comment that in the poem Jael is being “praised among the matriarchs.”[[685]](#footnote-685) Bronner and Gottlieb take this assertion a step further, suggesting that the text’s reference to Jael as a tent-dweller not only links Jael to the matriarchs but places Jael above the matriarchs. They claim that, if not for Jael, the Children of Israel, the children that the matriarchs birthed, would have perished.[[686]](#footnote-686) Linking Jael’s domestic space to the matriarchs and their position as mothers of the Children of Israel highlights that the tent is a mother’s space. Thus, by depicting Jael in a domestic space when they save the Children of Israel and referring to Jael as a tent-dweller creates an image of Jael as a mother, but not just any mother: “a mother in Israel”—like the matriarchs.

Associating Jael with the biblical matriarchs, as a mother to the Children of Israel, establishes a parallel between Jael’s motherhood and Deborah’s motherhood. Deborah is also framed as a mother to the Children of Israel and is explicitly named as “a mother in Israel” (Jdg. 5:7):

The peasantry prospered in Israel,  
    they grew fat on plunder,  
because you arose, Deborah,  
    arose as a mother in Israel (Jdg. 5:7).

Deborah is understood in this way because she metaphorically rose up to protect the Children of Israel from the Canaanite threat, as Jael does. As Matthews and Benjamin comment, “[m]others in Israel were selfless… in protecting [their children] from harm.”[[687]](#footnote-687) Similarly, Exum states that “[a] mother in Israel is one who brings liberation from oppression, provides protection, and ensures the well-being and security of her people.”[[688]](#footnote-688) Both Jael and Deborah fulfil these expectations of “a mother in Israel.” Between Deborah and Jael, the Canaanite threat is eradicated because these mothers were willing to put themselves in harm’s way for the benefit of Israel. The text leaves open the way for Jael to be understood, alongside the matriarchs and Deborah, as “amother in Israel.” Within their private, domestic space Jael is depicted as performing in ways that are both feminine and masculine. These behaviours adhere to expectations of biblical mothers towards their children and make evident that Jael performs as mother to the Children of Israel and as false mother to Sisera.

While Jael’s location within the domestic space links Jael to Sisera’s mother, it distances Jael from the masculine motherhood performed by Deborah. Unlike Jael and Sisera’s mother, Deborah is presented as being outside, in the public arena, not within a private space or a domestic space:

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment (Jdg. 4:4-5).

While the text locates Jael in a tent which links them to the role of mother and motherly behaviour—and the tent-dwelling matriarchs—it is Jael’s performance of motherhood within the confines of domesticity that highlights a difference between Jael’s and Deborah’s motherhood. This aspect of Jael’s motherhood is feminine and conforms to the feminine expectations of domesticity, whereas Deborah’s public motherhood does not.[[689]](#footnote-689) Sisera’s mother is described as being within the private, domestic space, looking through a latticed window (Jdg. 5:28). It is within this space that she is expected to remain and await the outcome of the war, performing her role of mother.[[690]](#footnote-690) So too is it within the private, domestic space that the text’s audience encounters Jael’s performances of motherhood. Jael and Sisera’s mother share this feminised facet of their motherhood, their restriction within the domestic, private sphere. This shared element of their motherhood highlights that Jael’s motherhood exhibits feminised features which have led to the feminisation of Jael themself as well as the feminisation of their performances within the mother’s domestic space.

It is, in part, this motherly space that allows Jael’s performances of motherhood to benefit their symbolic children, the Children of Israel. Sisera enters a woman’s space, but also a mother’s space. When Jael invites Sisera into their tent and reassures him that he should “have no fear” Jael acts as a warrior mother leading the enemy of their children into a trap. However, scholarship has largely viewed Jael as taking “a child into her home and car[ing] for him.”[[691]](#footnote-691) Sisera is not only drawn into the tent by the appearance of motherly concern but also as “a child seeking his mother’s shelter.”[[692]](#footnote-692) Sisera cannot reach his own mother and her motherly, domestic space, and thus accepts Jael’s false performance and tent as a substitute.

Sisera’s death within a mother’s domain allows for a number of conclusions and parallels to be drawn. Jael’s killing of Sisera indicates that Jael is a false mother to Sisera, embodying symbolic motherhood instead to the Children of Israel. Also, Jael’s killing makes clear that although Jael remains within the domestic space they still participate in the war as Deborah does. This allows a parallel to be drawn between these two mothers of the Israelites since both act in defence of the Children of Israel and both are willing to initiate violence to do so. Jael’s relationship to the narrative theme of motherhood thus becomes apparent; Jael’s performances relate to the domains of motherhood and warriorhood, simultaneously, in a gender ambiguous manner. The gender ambiguity of Jael’s space is discussed in full in the previous chapter on ‘Killing Sisera’ so will not be repeated here.[[693]](#footnote-693) It is enough to say here that Jael’s domestic space is simultaneously used as a feminine space and as a masculine space: it functions as a feminine, mother’s space and a masculine space of battle and conflict simultaneously.

Jael, as the mother of the Children of Israel, offers the illusion of all that Sisera’s own mother has to offer within her motherly domestic space. However, Jael employs masculine behaviours of warfare and control, like Deborah, concurrently to feminine behaviours of motherly doting. Jael does this to dominate Sisera, not as a mother dominates a child, but as a warrior mother removing obstacles from the path of their children’s wellbeing. It is within Jael’s private space that Jael enacts emotional concern towards Sisera leading him to believe he is in a place of maternal safety. Consequently, this domestic space, coupled with the emotional and maternal implications, allows Jael to bring safety to the Children of Israel through gender ambiguous performances of motherhood.

### Emotional Concern

Jael calls Sisera into their domestic space with an exhortation that suggests concern for Sisera’s wellbeing:

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug.Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him (Jdg. 4:18-19).

This apparent concern is in line with expectations of feminine, maternal behaviour.[[694]](#footnote-694) Jael says “‘Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear’” (Jdg. 4:18). Such a phrase indicates sympathy, comment Fewell and Gunn,[[695]](#footnote-695) signifying that Sisera’s emotions are important to Jael and that Jael wishes for Sisera to feel safe and secure. Sterman understands Jael’s exhibition of concern to sooth Sisera as a mother’s words would be expected to do.[[696]](#footnote-696) Demonstration of emotion and emotional concern for others has been commonly characterised as a feminine trait and in relation to children, as a motherly trait.[[697]](#footnote-697) Jael’s emotional concern for Sisera, demonstrated through Jael’s reassuring of Sisera, creates an image of Jael as mothering Sisera in conventional feminine ways. That femininity is recognised in Jael’s mothering behaviour to Sisera is particularly evident in Adrien Janis Bledstein’s comment that Jael’s actions and concerns “are aligned with the expected behaviour of a woman as lover, adviser, mother and loyal servant.”[[698]](#footnote-698) Jael’s performances, thus, can be perceived as an exhibition of the feminine ideal of a caring and considerate mother.

However, Jael’s demonstration of emotional concern can be understood as a masculine manoeuvre to gain control over Sisera and thus a simultaneous embodiment of femininity and masculinity. Jael’s performance of emotional concern misleads Sisera: as Olam notes, their reassurance of Sisera is employed in order to “lull Sisera into a false sense of security.”[[699]](#footnote-699) Jael’s emotional concern forms a segue into physical demonstrations of concern, such as covering Sisera with a rug (Jdg. 4:18), giving him a soporific drink (Jdg. 4:19) and allowing him to sleep (Jdg. 4:20-21). Such acts of concern, both emotional and physical, allow Jael to encourage Sisera to lie down and go to sleep. Jael’s show of emotions leads Sisera to trust Jael and gives Jael the opportunity to take control of Sisera’s actions. Jael wins Sisera’s trust and in doing so Sisera becomes vulnerable to Jael allowing Jael to “cleverly and powerfully [dispatch] him after making him feel that he had nothing to fear from her [Jael].”[[700]](#footnote-700) It is this vulnerability, achieved through Jael’s apparent feminised concern for Sisera’s wellbeing, that allows Jael to take control of the interaction. It is Jael who “came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, ‘Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear’” and thus it is Jael who decides whether Sisera will have sanctuary in their tent or not (Jdg. 4:18). Also, it is Jael who decides whether Sisera will live or die:

He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’”But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:20-21).

Ultimately, Jael’s show of motherly, emotional concern is concurrently a masculine manoeuvre of control which presents Jael with the opportunity to kill Sisera as a mother defending the Children of Israel. Jael’s behaviours of feminine concern and masculine control are undertaken as symbolic mother of the Children of Israel as Jael creates the opportunity, through these behaviours, to kill Sisera—in doing so Jael saves the Children of Israel. Jael’s pretence of emotion when mothering Sisera is used against him in order to ensure the wellbeing of the Children of Israel. As such, when Jael performs feminine emotional concern and masculine domination, simultaneously, Jael embodies symbolic motherhood to the Children of Israel in a gender ambiguous manner.

The emotional concern Jael exhibits, regardless of their motivation for doing so, allows parallels to be drawn between Jael’s performances of motherhood and the two other mothers’ performances of motherhood. Jael’s concern, framed as feminine, [[701]](#footnote-701) links Jael’s mothering behaviour to Sisera’s mother’s demonstration of motherhood since both mothers show concern for Sisera’s wellbeing. Sisera’s mother is also emotional when considering her son:

Out of the window she peered,  
    the mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice:  
“Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
    Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?” (Jdg. 5:28).

She demonstrates emotion, voicing worry regarding her son and shares her worries with the women around her. Jack M. Sasson has interpreted Sisera’s mother’s show of emotion as “tenderness.”[[702]](#footnote-702) This tenderness is similar to that embodied by Jael towards Sisera when Jael tells Sisera to take shelter and “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18). Jael’s emotion and tenderness draw from the feminine framework of motherhood demonstrated by Sisera’s mother. Jael can thus be read as performing motherhood through femininity, albeit false motherhood. Jael’s assurance that Sisera should “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18) establishes a parallel between Jael and Deborah’s motherhood since this emotional exhortation can be understood as a call to war. Thus, this phrase allows Jael’s motherhood to be recognised as both feminine through emotional concern and masculine through its connotations of warfare and violence.

### Violence

Deborah does show concern for her children, the Israelites, but that concern is exhibited not through comforting behaviour, as Jael does with Sisera, but through a call to war against those who threaten the Israelites:

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel.She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun.’” (Jdg. 4:4-6).

Similarly to Deborah, Jael also takes up the mantle of violent maternal protector of the Israelites when killing Sisera, their enemy. Deborah’s motherhood is largely masculine and is exhibited towards the Children of Israel. This same masculine way of showing concern is evident in Jael’s behaviour. The phrase Jael uses when talking to Sisera, “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18), suggests emotional concern but is also related to warfare. For example, this phrase’s association with warfare is evident in Deuteronomy’s rules of war as well as when Yahweh reassures Joshua before he goes into battle:

When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots, an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them; for the Lord your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. Before you engage in battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the troops, and shall say to them: “Hear, O Israel! Today you are drawing near to do battle against your enemies. Do not lose heart, or be afraid, or panic, or be in dread of them;for it is the Lord your God who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to give you victory.” (Deut. 20:1-4).

They came out, with all their troops, a great army, in number like the sand on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots.All these kings joined their forces, and came and camped together at the waters of Merom, to fight with Israel.

And the Lord said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will hand over all of them, slain, to Israel; you shall hamstring their horses, and burn their chariots with fire.” (Josh. 11:4-6).

Bal understands “fear not” as a phrase that “belongs to the vocabulary of war” and Jael’s use of this phrase links their character and their actions to the masculine domain of battle, including violence and killing.[[703]](#footnote-703) Bal interprets Jael’s phrase as an invitation to war, which is supported by its use elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Violence and killing are behaviours characterised as masculine and thus have been understood as contradictory to the feminised role of motherhood.[[704]](#footnote-704) This is particularly evident from various academics’ comments, including Conway’s, that Jael’s killing is “a surprising act of violence from a female character” as it goes against feminine gendered expectations.[[705]](#footnote-705) This violence and killing, however, does not upset Jael’s position as mother, as Jael commits violence in order to protect their children, the Children of Israel, and ensure their wellbeing in line with expectations of motherhood.[[706]](#footnote-706) Jael’s act demonstrates their willingness to put the Children of Israel’s wellbeing above their own, a commonly feminised trait of motherhood.[[707]](#footnote-707) Jael cares for the Children of Israel by killing Sisera, thus concurrently showing feminine motherly care and concern as well as masculine motherly protection during the single act of killing.[[708]](#footnote-708)

Employing language that has ties to violence and warfare, “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18), brings to the fore similarities between Jael’s motherhood and Deborah’s motherhood. When Deborah calls herself “a mother in Israel” she does so in reference to her willingness and ability to enact violence:

In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,  
    in the days of Jael, caravans ceased  
    and travellers kept to the byways.  
The peasantry prospered in Israel,  
    they grew fat on plunder,  
because you arose, Deborah,  
    arose as a mother in Israel.  
When new gods were chosen,  
    then war was in the gates.  
Was shield or spear to be seen  
    among forty thousand in Israel?  
My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel  
    who offered themselves willingly among the people.  
    Bless the Lord (Jdg. 5:6-9).

The fighting is brought about by Deborah and it is through this violence that Deborah behaves as “a mother in Israel.” As Fewell and Gunn point out, “Deborah is a bellicose mother.”[[709]](#footnote-709) Deborah’s willingness and ability to instigate violence, violence that is considered to be in the Israelites’ best interest, is a position that Jael also embodies. Jael performs as a warrior mother first through their “encouragement to battle”[[710]](#footnote-710) through the phrase “fear not,” and then by their manoeuvring of Sisera into a child-like state of vulnerability to violently kill him.

Jael and Deborah are both mothers who initiate violence. Jael initiates violence when they went “softly to him [Sisera] and drove the tent peg into his temple” (Jdg. 4:21), while Deborah initiates violence when she summons Barak and tells him to begin a war against the Canaanites:

She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, ‘Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun.I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.’” (Jdg. 4:6-7).

Here, Deborah begins the war by making known what is assumed to be communication from Yahweh; a war is to be waged. Her role as a Judge is to lead the war and as such, she “went with Barak to Kedesh” (Jdg. 4:9), where the Canaanites are being led for a battle (Jdg. 4:7). Deborah calls for her children to engage in battle, marking her as a mother who is willing to invoke violence and warfare to free her children from Canaanite rule. Jael and Deborah, as mothers, enact a violent method of eliminating the threat to the Children of Israel unlike Sisera’s mother who merely awaits the outcome of the war, staying separate from it as women were expected to do.[[711]](#footnote-711) In this way, Jael’s performances of motherhood, like Deborah’s, include masculinity as an integral aspect; they are both warrior mothers who act violently to protect their children, the Children of Israel.[[712]](#footnote-712)

## Conclusion

Recognising Jael and their behaviours as feeding into the text’s theme of motherhood addresses some aspects of ambiguity evident in Judges 4 and 5, in particular Jael’s motivation for killing Sisera. As noted by Elie Assis, Jael’s motivation is “not apparent in the story.”[[713]](#footnote-713) Although scholarship has widely picked up on Jael’s mothering behaviour, it has framed Jael as mother to Sisera rather than as mother to the Children of Israel. Jael’s killing of Sisera, which disrupts their role as Sisera’s mother, makes evident that Jael should be understood as the mother of the Children of Israel and only as performing false motherhood towards Sisera. The narrative never explicitly reveals Jael’s motives for nurturing and caring for Sisera or for killing him. Without acknowledging the importance of the theme of motherhood Jael’s motives remain a mystery and their position as mother to the Israelites does not influence interpretations of Jael’s character. Jael’s false mothering of Sisera, which results in his death, is explained by Jael’s position as a mother to the Children of Israel. This motive, to act in defence of their children, is made evident by the theme of motherhood that runs throughout Judges 4 and 5.

The theme of motherhood also explains why Deborah is referred to as “a mother in Israel” (Jdg. 5:7) and why Sisera’s mother appears in the narrative (Jdg. 5:28). Deborah could have been labelled in a number of ways, such as, as a Judge or a leader more generally, and any Canaanite woman could have been depicted worrying about Sisera and his wellbeing, especially a wife. However, these characters are included and labelled as mothers. Their inclusion as mothers highlights the theme of motherhood in Judges 4 and 5 as well as allowing parallels to be drawn between the motherhood of Jael, Deborah and Sisera’s mother.[[714]](#footnote-714) Rather than including three characters who are women, the text includes three characters who are mothers.

The focus in scholarship is on Jael as mother to Sisera. This chapter demonstrates that Jael as mother to Sisera is disrupted by their killing, demonstrating that Jael embodies false motherhood towards Sisera and is more suitably recognised as performing motherhood towards the Children of Israel. In this chapter I have articulated that Jael’s mothering shares commonalities with Sisera’s mother’s motherhood through emotional concern and their location within a private, domestic sphere as well as with Deborah’s motherhood through engagement with warfare and violence on behalf of the Children of Israel. Jael embodies some behaviours evident in the masculine framework of motherhood exhibited by Deborah whilst simultaneously embodying feminine behaviours which manifest in Sisera’s mother’s framework of motherhood. Consequently, Jael’s performance as a mother in Israel is a gender ambiguous one. In this chapter I have addressed Jael’s context, actions and motivations together holistically, opening up an interpretation of Jael as a nonbinary mother to the Children of Israel.

# **Chapter 4. Sexual Assault of Sisera**

In this chapter I frame the sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera as sexual assault committed by Jael and explore how Jael perpetrates this assault in a gender ambiguous manner. As explored in Chapter 2, the penetrating tent peg and hammer cause Sisera’s death. This killing act is also, however, readable as rape due to the violent phallic penetration inflicted. This interpretation—that the same act that kills Sisera rapes him—is widespread in biblical scholarship on Jael. I agree with this interpretation of simultaneous killing/rape but also perceive, unlike current scholarship on Jael, that Jael not only rapes Sisera but through a different set of acts sexually seduces him. I read Jael’s masculine-constructed act of sexual assault, in agreement with the majority of scholarship on Jael, as rape. I also, however, assert that Jael commits sexual assault through feminine behaviours; Jael intentionally uses feminine behaviours to seduce Sisera into a violent sexual encounter. The coercive nature of the sexual interaction and the violence involved allows Jael’s seduction to be framed as sexual assault. While Jael is almost unanimously labelled as a seductress in studies of Jael—with numerous scholars noting that Jael lures Sisera into a sexual interaction[[715]](#footnote-715)—their sexual seduction of Sisera is not framed as sexual assault. Jael has been read as taking on two distinct roles, one of seductress and one of rapist. However, I interpret these two roles to be constructed as related to different genders, here undertaken simultaneously as performances of the same act of sexual assault. This reading leads me to frame Jael as a gender ambiguous sexual assailant.

Jdg. 4:21 and 5:26-27 are the verses in which a sexual encounter, often considered an illicit and/or violent sexual encounter, have been widely noted in scholarship:

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:21).

She put her hand to the tent peg  
    and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet;  
she struck Sisera a blow,  
    she crushed his head,  
    she shattered and pierced his temple.  
He sank, he fell,  
    he lay still at her feet;  
at her feet he sank, he fell;  
    where he sank, there he fell dead (Jdg. 5:26-27).

In Judges 4 it is primarily Jael’s penetration of Sisera with a phallic object which leads academics to interpret sexual assault in this passage. In Judges 5 it is a combination of euphemisms for genitals (feet) and the imagery of Sisera between Jael’s legs/feet coupled with Jael’s violence that leads scholars to interpret this scene as sexual assault. The literature review for this chapter demonstrates that these verses are frequently characterised as containing a violent sexual interaction. Jael’s narrative conveys their sexual assault of Sisera through numerous references to sexual violence and makes reference to other forms of illicit sex. The prominent theme of sex in Judges 4 and 5 has been influential in scholarships’ perception of Jael as a rapist. In discussions of sexual assault in Jael’s narrative—labelled as reversed rape—both accounts feed into interpretations of the interaction as one of sexual assault. This theme of sex, including sexual violence, is addressed in detail later in this chapter. The inclusion of references to sexual violence and illicit sex make evident that Jael’s interaction with Sisera can be interpreted as a sexual one, and more so as sexual assault.

Scholarship understands Jael as a woman and perceives Jael’s sexual assault as rape—an act perpetrated through behaviours constructed as masculine. As such scholarship interprets Jael’s sexual assault—rape—of Sisera as occurring through gender reversal.[[716]](#footnote-716) As I address below, when discussing Jael’s rape of Sisera, Jael perpetrates rape (as well as seduction) in a gender ambiguous manner. I resist the common interpretation that Jael performs gender reversal when embodying masculinised behaviour,[[717]](#footnote-717) sexual or otherwise. Instead, I understand Jael as a gender ambiguous character who does not switch between binary genders during their sexual encounter with Sisera but who embodies both binarised genders concurrently to sexually assault Sisera. Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera has been constructed as rape because Jael enacts expected masculinised features of rape (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26). Jael’s sexual seduction of Sisera, which includes feminine behaviours, has not been interpreted as a form of sexual assault.

I argue that Jael’s performances of sexual assault are undertaken not just through rape but also through coercive seduction. I claim that, in the context of Jael’s narrative, both rape and seduction can be read as forms of sexual assault due to the force and coercion involved in Jael’s seduction of Sisera as well as the negation of his autonomy.[[718]](#footnote-718) When exploring seduction as a form of sexual assault later in this chapter, I highlight that Jael’s feminine performances are used against Sisera coercively, as acts of psychological violence in line with expectations of sexual assault. In addition to highlighting Jael’s feminine andmasculine performances of sexual assault—coercive seduction *and* rape—I will demonstrate that when Jael behaves in masculine ways associated with rape these behaviours can be simultaneously read as feminine gender markers. I claim that the same is true of Jael’s feminine behaviours which are recognisable as sexual seduction; they are simultaneously interpretable as feminine andmasculine gender indicators. Therefore, I argue not only that Jael sexually assaults Sisera in a masculinised way (rape) and in a feminised way (coercive seduction), but also that Jael embodies femininity and masculinity concurrently during both forms of their sexual assault of Sisera. Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera suggests Jael’s gender ambiguity; Jael performs according to feminine and masculine traits when sexually assaulting Sisera, highlighting Jael’s gender ambiguity.

I engage with constructions of rape and seduction at different points in this chapter and in order to contribute my own articulation of Jael’s sexual interaction with Sisera as gender ambiguous sexual assault I first outline what is understood by sexual assault. I introduce brief outlines of my understanding of rape and seduction here before discussing them in detail in their own subsections. For the purposes of this chapter, I employ Caroline Blyth’s definition of rape, used when discussing Dinah from Genesis 34: “a forcible violation of her bodily integrity… a source of immense physical, emotional and spiritual distress for her.”[[719]](#footnote-719) With this definition in mind, and in line with previous studies on Jael, Jdg. 4:21 and 5:26-27 can be read as depicting Jael as sexually assaulting Sisera in a manner interpretable as rape, despite Sisera not experiencing the distress that Blyth references since Jael’s sexual assault kills him. In my interpretation of Jael as gender ambiguous, their seduction of Sisera is an equally meaningful act of sexualised violence which influences my perception of Jael’s sexual assault and my interpretation of Jael’s gender. I understand seduction in the same way as Paul Hoffman does: “[s]eduction is another way in which our will is overpowered. When we are seduced, what we propose to do is not really up to us, it is up to our seducer.”[[720]](#footnote-720) Jael uses feminine behaviours of seduction to control Sisera and exploit his vulnerabilities during a sexual encounter, not for Sisera’s pleasure and sexual gratification, but so that Jael can control and kill him.

Central to this discussion is that sexual assault, in particular rape, is perceived as a gendered crime, as highlighted by Washington: “[i]n rape cultures, sexual assault is viewed as a manly act and women are regarded as intrinsically rapable.”[[721]](#footnote-721) Sexual assault, broadly, and rape specifically are grounded in constructions of masculinity. Particularly significant features expected of sexual assault that have led to its masculinisation include force, violence and control with rape, as a specific type of sexual assault, being closely associated with penetration, domination and violence.[[722]](#footnote-722)Since these behaviours are constructed as masculine, sexual assault and rape are also constructed, almost invariably, as masculine acts. Following a discussion of rape as a form of sexual assault, I outline how seduction can be understood as a method of sexual assault that often results in the same sexual exploitation as rape. Seduction, however, is largely framed as feminine in the Hebrew Bible due to the feminised behaviours associated with it. Jael’s seduction includes seeming kindness and consideration, care and nurture as well as comfort and nourishment—all these aspects, used to coerce, are associated with femininity rather than masculinity. Despite the feminine features of Jael’s seduction of Sisera, this seduction is employed in a manner which controls Sisera’s actions and thoughts and makes him vulnerable to sexualised violence through simultaneous performances of femininity and masculinity. Through the employment of feminine behaviours in a deceptive manner Jael denies Sisera his autonomy when leading him into a sexual interaction. Sisera’s decision-making ability is impaired by incorrect information, exploitation of his vulnerabilities and the use of a soporific which affects his inhibitions, leading to his sexual assault through Jael’s feminine performances of coercion being recognisable as sexual seduction.

After discussing seduction as a feminine form of sexual assault I present a literature review that has three main sections. The first section establishes that there is a theme of illicit sex including sexual violence in Jael’s narrative. The second section of the review demonstrates that in scholarship Jael is widely said to commit sexual assault, labelled by academics as rape. Here, it becomes evident that Jael as a gender-reversed rapist is the dominant reading,[[723]](#footnote-723) with the rape interpreted as occurring primarily through overtly masculine behaviours of violence and phallic penetration.[[724]](#footnote-724) The third section of the review then shows that Jael as a seductress is a well-established reading. However, Jael’s seduction of Sisera, despite leading him into a sexual interaction to which he is not freely able to consent, is not labelled as sexual assault in academic studies. Jael’s role as a seductress is instead framed as a separate role to their role as a rapist and the two roles are oppositionally gendered as feminine and masculine respectively. A genderqueer approach, where “the binary of personhood… is erased,”[[725]](#footnote-725) coupled with a holistic approach allows these different interpretations of Jael’s gender to be simultaneously significant in demonstrating that Jael performs sexual assault in a gender ambiguous manner.[[726]](#footnote-726)

Finally, I undertake a close reading of Jael’s interaction with Sisera, focusing on Jael’s coercive seduction. My analysis in this section draws attention to a number of Jael’s feminine acts and behaviours which are used to sexually assault Sisera that despite being constructed as feminine are simultaneously imbued with masculinity. These commonly femininised behaviours, used as weapons to coerce and assault Sisera, include Jael’s invitation to Sisera, the care and comfort they offer, as well as the milk Jael gives to Sisera. In this section the holistic approach I employ is particularly useful, allowing me to consider both Jael’s femininity and masculinity as meaningful when interpreting their act of sexual assault. I am able to agree with previous studies that appear to contradict each other, those that note that Jael *does* perform masculinity (although temporarily) as well as studies that stress Jael’s femininity. I bring them together and build upon them, arguing from a genderqueer perspective that Jael does not perform gender reversal, but performs both genders concurrently in a gender ambiguous manner. Such a holistic approach used alongside a genderqueer approach places significance on gender markers, particularly Jael’s performances of gender, regardless of whether these are masculine, feminine or both. Integrating a holistic approach with a queer methodology also allows for gendered themes and other gendered clues apparent in the wider narrative to be considered as significant, and in doing so takes a queer perspective in embracing non-normative experiences.[[727]](#footnote-727) The result is that Jael’s gender is interpretable as nonbinary as is their performance of sexual assault.

## Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is the violation of an individual in a sexual manner.[[728]](#footnote-728) It is viewed as a violent crime rather than a sexual crime, despite it involving sex acts.[[729]](#footnote-729)Sexual assault is acknowledged as a coercive act of domination and an exertion of power:[[730]](#footnote-730) Catherine N. Niarchos argues that sexual assault is first and foremost an act of control through “a rejection of the [victim’s] right to self-determination.”[[731]](#footnote-731) Sexual assault is a violation of the individual and denies them their autonomy by negating their right to consent or refuse to a sexual interaction in a way that reduces the victim to the status of sexual object.[[732]](#footnote-732) Sexual assault encompasses a broad range of sexual violations, ranging from touching to forced intercourse. This chapter focuses on two forms of sexual assault that can result in sexual intercourse where the victim is not given the “right to self-determination”—rape and coercive seduction—meaning any sexual interaction that follows is a forced one.[[733]](#footnote-733)

Different behaviours are expected of different forms of sexual assault. Rape is a form of sexual assault associated with a specific set of masculine behaviours, including a penetrating phallus and violence.[[734]](#footnote-734) Since rape is associated with masculinised behaviours and symbols and the majority of rapists are men, rape, like sexual assault, is more generally framed as masculine, despite being performable by anyone.[[735]](#footnote-735) Although physical violence is a prominent aspect of many acts of sexual assault, including rape, some forms of sexual assault do not involve physical force or the threat of it but rely on psychological force to coerce consent. In particular, sexual seduction can be understood as a form of sexual assault that is not expected to involve physical force and physical violence, but still results in a sexual encounter where the victim has not freely chosen to partake. Given the lack of physical force and violence and, often, the inclusion of soothing or lulling behaviour, sexual seduction is commonly framed as a feminine act in the Hebrew Bible.[[736]](#footnote-736)These two forms of sexual assault—rape and seduction—are discussed below in relation to the Hebrew Bible in general, with Jael’s assault of Sisera specifically in mind.

### Rape in the Hebrew Bible

When discussing rape in the Hebrew Bible, I refer to a modern concept of rape which a modern reader can recognise as present in the biblical text. What I read as rape in the Hebrew Bible would not have been understood as rape by the Israelites; the concept of rape, as will be discussed below, would not have existed in the ancient world. Thus, this subsection will consider how the actions and narratives that modern scholars have perceived as rape/rape narratives may have been understood by the Israelite. I will then draw attention to the elements in the Hebrew Bible that have been perceived by scholars as rape, before considering Jael’s sexual violence towards Sisera as rape.

There are key differences between the modern concept of rape and rape as a literary construct in the Hebrew Bible. In agreement with Leah Rediger Schulte, I recognise that “[t]he key difference between modern and ancient rape laws concerns the concept of consent and the identity of the victim.”[[737]](#footnote-737) Biblical laws that address what is today labelled as rape “are really a subset of the general laws of adultery” and property laws, rather than a set of laws on sexual assault.[[738]](#footnote-738) They treat rape as a property crime against men:

If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives (Deut. 22:28-29).

As property, women are not in the position to give or deny consent. It is authorisation for sex rather than consent for sex which is at issue in the Hebrew Bible, and thus, any analysis of the literary depictions of rape in the biblical text must be aware of the different modern and ancient concepts. As Alice A. Keefe comments, “cultural meanings surrounding rape in a pre-modern agrarian culture such as ancient Israel cannot be automatically collapsed into our own.”[[739]](#footnote-739) However, this does not prevent a modern reader from recognising a literary depiction of what they perceive as rape. The Hebrew Bible repeatedly presents a narrative world which includes sexual violence used by men, against women, without the women’s consent, despite their consent or the lack of it not being the concern of the text. The biblical laws, mentioned above, treat what scholars characterise as rape as an instance of property crime and frame the legal victim of the crime not as the raped woman but as the husband or father to whom she is said to belong. The woman cannot give or deny consent as she is treated as property, thus rape is redundant within an ancient context.[[740]](#footnote-740) In literary cases of rape in the Hebrew Bible, it is not the woman—the bodily victim—who is the victim, nor is it her lack of consent that is at issue. Rather, the identity of the victim is/are

the male family members who will suffer a financial loss over her lost virginity… so the rapist who has unauthorized intercourse with a young woman robs something of monetary value from her father (or her brother).[[741]](#footnote-741)

Retribution is made to the father or husband by the offender, not to the person who was physically and sexually assaulted.[[742]](#footnote-742) Schulte’s comment, above, makes clear that in the Hebrew Bible the issue is not the woman’s consent but whether or not a man gives authorisation to another man to have sex with that woman.

There are clearly differences between an ancient concept of property law which involves sexual violation and a modern concept of rape, namely the issues of consent or authorisation and who the victim of the sexual violence is. However, a similarity is that some form of struggle is often expected of the bodily victim. The biblical laws here address what is today understood as rape rather than sexual assault more broadly, evident since the woman in these scenarios is seized, suggesting physical force and domination without the victim’s consent before the assailant has sex with them. The biblical laws cited above, as well as other biblical narratives, demonstrate that some form of struggle or resistance is expected on the part of the woman highlighting that physical force is being exerted upon her; she is expected to cry out for help:[[743]](#footnote-743)

If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death, the young woman because she did not cry for help in the town and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deut. 22:23-24).

The bodily victim’s struggle demonstrates a lack of consent to a modern reader and acts as an indicator of the woman’s—the bodily victim’s—innocence in the sex act taking place without authorisation from an ancient perspective.[[744]](#footnote-744)

Force remains a key indicator for a modern reader of rape, an element evident in the Hebrew Bible and is evident in other biblical texts as a central element, not just in Deuteronomy where the property laws invoking a modern concept of rape are included. For example, what scholars call ‘the rape of Tamar’ in 2 Samuel 13 makes clear that force is the central element that leads to this sexualised interaction being framed by scholars as rape. Despite Tamar’s refusals, Amnon uses his strength to force a sexual interaction:

She answered him, “No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile!... But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her (2 Sam. 13:12, 14).

As the verses cited above demonstrate that, which is characterised as rape by modern scholars is constructed in the Hebrew Bible as being perpetrated by men: women are the bodily victims, men are the perpetrators but the legal victims of these crimes are the husbands or fathers of the victimised women.[[745]](#footnote-745) The property laws which involve rape focus on the repercussions when a man uses force to have sexual intercourse with a woman who is not his wife. As Washington comments, the biblical “laws thus reinscribe the discursive positioning of the feminine as object of violence.”[[746]](#footnote-746) It is assumed that men may use force against women and that women have no bodily autonomy. Thus, property law, in this case those laws that are perceived today as including rape, frames that violation—rape—as a masculine act perpetrated by men against women.[[747]](#footnote-747)

In the Hebrew Bible there is a “relationship between rape and war”[[748]](#footnote-748) which strengthens its masculinisation.[[749]](#footnote-749) Rape sometimes leads to war or violent conflict (Gen. 34, Jdg. 19, 2 Sam 13) and in other cases rape occurs during or after warfare[[750]](#footnote-750) with the metaphor of a besieged city as a raped woman a common image in the Hebrew Bible (Ezek. 26:10, Jer. 52:7, Isa 1:8, Lam. 3:5).[[751]](#footnote-751) Thus, as noted by Keefe, sexual violence by men against women in the Hebrew Bible is a common aspect of warfare:

[c]ertainly, the violation of women as a metaphor fits the destruction of capital cities, for the stripping, penetration, exposure, and humiliation of the woman is analogous to siege warfare, with its breaching of the wall, entrance through the gate, and so forth.[[752]](#footnote-752)

The language of war in the Hebrew Bible, especially language from which a modern reader recognises rape metaphors and cities as women under siege, “is acutely masculinist.”[[753]](#footnote-753) This masculinist language acts as a reminder that sexual violence and rape as outcomes of war is commonly “the fate of women in war.”[[754]](#footnote-754) Sexual violence—what is here framed as rape—occurs in the Hebrew Bible as an accepted—maybe expected—aspect of biblical warfare.[[755]](#footnote-755) Images that merge warfare and rape (Jer. 6:1-5, Ezekiel 23: 1-10, Isaiah 1: 7-9) act to highlight that masculine violence against a feminine subject is normalised in the Hebrew Bible, especially during times of conflict and war.[[756]](#footnote-756) As such, what I name as rape in the Hebrew Bible involves physical, sexual violence and the denial of the victim’s bodily autonomy with warfare being a common context related to the modern concept of rape. The elements of masculinised sexual assault—rape—according to a modern reader are all present in Jael’s assault of Sisera.

While the characteristics used by modern commentators to identify rape are prevalent in the Hebrew Bible,[[757]](#footnote-757) there is no word in the Hebrew Bible that equates with a contemporary understanding of rape.[[758]](#footnote-758) The lack of a Hebrew term, however, does not indicate the absence of rape in the Bible.[[759]](#footnote-759)

One of the terms commonly used in contexts of rape, *way‘annehā*—as in Gen. 34:2 and 2 Sam. 13:14—“carries the primary meaning of ‘afflict, humiliate.’”[[760]](#footnote-760) To afflict or to humiliate, however, can refer to a range of situations, not only sexual assault but also military attack or the defeat of an individual or nation.[[761]](#footnote-761) Thus, it is the context of the wider narrative that often informs how best to understand *way‘annehā*. Its various meanings of illicit sex and sexual violence through connotations of and references to defeat, violence and death are frequently conflated and equally applicable in a single narrative, often simultaneously. Other conjugations of this term are also present in what modern readers would likely recognise as instances of rape, in particular *'innū* and *'innāh*.[[762]](#footnote-762) *'innū* appears in Jdg. 20:5 where an unnamed concubine is raped and in Lam, 5:11 with the rape of the daughters of Zion. *'innāh* is the term used in 2 Sam. 13:22 when Tamar is raped and in Deut. 22:24, 29 in which there are property laws that include consideration of sexual relations, especially forced sexual relations pertaining to virgin women. Also, in Deut. 21:14, the verb

*ānāh* clearly denotes sexual violence and affliction; most translations use the phrase “he has had his way with her,” which nuances the force of the verb *piel* and how it functions in this text.[[763]](#footnote-763)

It is therefore clear that rape does occur in the Hebrew Bible despite their being no specific word equivalent to such a modern concept and despite the Israelites not having a concept which directly relates to modern scholars’ perceptions of rape. However,

the usage of particular Hebrew terms is not even the point when defining biblical rape, since biblical rape is situational and its definition must allow for that broader scope.[[764]](#footnote-764)

Thus, Hebrew terms alone do not indicate rape, rather these terms coupled with their narrative context are vital for recognising the modern concept of rape. The concepts of affliction, humiliation and defeat which Hebrew terms such as *way‘annehā 'innū* and *'innāh*, convey are evident in Jael’s interaction with Sisera. In common with Susanne Scholz, rather than aiming to identify a Hebrew term(s) that is equivalent to the modern term and concept of rape, I seek to address Jael’s rape of Sisera in terms of a “hermeneutics of meaning,”[[765]](#footnote-765) whereby themes relating to sexual violence, in this case rape, in the Hebrew Bible can be used to shed light on what I label as rape against Sisera. Schulte notes that “the definition of biblical rape is dependent not on specific Hebrew terms used but rather on common themes.”[[766]](#footnote-766) It is the presence of these concepts coupled with Jael’s violent penetration of Sisera’s body with a phallic item (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26) that leads scholars, myself included, to label Jael’s assault upon Sisera as rape.[[767]](#footnote-767) Jael’s assault certainly afflicts and humiliates Sisera in a sexual manner that brings together connotations of defeat, violence and death: Jael sexually assaults Sisera, but also defeats Sisera using violence and causing his death, with this defeat being recognisable as a military attack against him. The overlapping categories of violence, death and humiliation which are present in the Hebrew terms that are used in cases understood by modern commentators as rape are all present in Jael’s attack on Sisera—coupled with the sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera, this leads me to frame this attack on Sisera as rape.

### Seduction in the Hebrew Bible

Seduction takes place when someone is tempted, sometimes through manipulative, persuasive or deceitful behaviour to do something; sexual seduction is when these behaviours are exerted in order to engage in a sexual act. Seduction can be understood as a form of sexual assault when seductive behaviours are used to coerce consent. Thus, seduction as a form of sexual assault differs from sexual intercourse as its primary purpose is not the mutual desire and mutual gratification of those involved, but is to gain access to sexual acts through psychological force without consideration of the victim’s autonomous will. Coercive sexual seduction can entail deception, manipulation or persuasion to gain consent. And it can use force—psychological rather than physical force—to gain consent and is thus recognisable as sexual assault where the victim’s “will was overcome.”[[768]](#footnote-768) This form of sexual seduction is an act of aggression where force is employed through manipulation, persuasion and/or deceit as a form of sexual violence and violation. Jael’s feminine behaviours of seduction result in sexual assault since they are used by Jael to coerce and control Sisera; Jael lures a vulnerable man into a violent sexual encounter that leads to his death. Jael uses feminine behaviours “as a tool to impose control over the situation; control which would not likely have been accomplished by women in other ways”[[769]](#footnote-769) and as Mayfield suggests, “Jael seduced Sisera in order to kill him.”[[770]](#footnote-770) As will be explored later in this chapter, Jdg. 4:18-20 and 5:24-25 in particular demonstrate that Jael’s feminine behaviours are laced with deceit and manipulation as elements of Jael’s coercive sexual seduction. I highlight how Jael’s feminine behaviours of seduction are used as psychological weapons to lead Sisera into a sexual encounter in which his decision-making ability is impaired, his vulnerabilities are exploited and his inhibitions are impeded, compounded by Jael’s use of a soporific. The result is that Sisera engages in a violent sexual encounter to which he is not in a position to consent, beguiled by Jael.

Characters understood as women in the Hebrew Bible are often discussed in relation to their use of sexual seduction in coercive ways to achieve their own ends. Examples of biblical women framed as using feminine wiles or feminine sexuality include Tamar (Gen. 38), Jezebel (2 Kgs. 9) and Delilah (Jdg. 16).The behaviours commonly employed by these characters as part of their sexual coercion include sexual enticement,[[771]](#footnote-771) persuasion, manipulation, pressure[[772]](#footnote-772) and deceit.[[773]](#footnote-773) Sexual seduction in the Hebrew Bible is also associated with women’s use of food and drink and including their own body, especially through beautifying and adorning.[[774]](#footnote-774) In the Hebrew Bible sexual seduction is feminised since it is predominantly perpetrated by feminine characters using feminine-associated behaviours and tools—“feminine wiles”—to do so.[[775]](#footnote-775) In this way sexual assault is a crime that can be committed through a variety of gendered expressions, not just through masculinised rape.[[776]](#footnote-776)

Sexual seduction, which uses psychological force rather than physical force, can be committed using behaviours and roles commonly attributed to femininity. I acknowledge Jael’s masculine performances used to sexually assault Sisera, but also identify that Jael uses behaviours constructed as feminine in order to coerce Sisera into a sexual encounter through seductive behaviours and thus sexually assault him. Consequently, I claim that Jael’s perpetration of sexual assault is committed gender ambiguously, through both masculinised and feminised acts (rape and sexual seduction).

Sexual seduction is largely exerted through psychological force.[[777]](#footnote-777) Just as the force employed in a physical assault is used to gain power over another so too is the force used in a psychological attack used to oppress another person:[[778]](#footnote-778)

[W]hat counts as the sort of force which invalidates consent should not be limited to either physical force or explicit threats of physical force… Ultimately, she may find herself in a state of psychological exhaustion, feeling unable to resist in the face of what seems an implacable will. In these cases, it is argued, the woman has been forced against her will as surely as if the aggressor had used physical violence.[[779]](#footnote-779)

As this quotation stresses, in many occurrences of seduction psychological force puts the victim under pressure or leads them to engage in a sexual act that, without the perpetrator’s interference, they would not have engaged in otherwise.[[780]](#footnote-780) This form of force is often employed when a victim is already in a position of vulnerability.[[781]](#footnote-781) If coercive seduction is employed when the victim is in a state of vulnerability, for example while they are upset or tired, they may be unaware that pressure is being exerted on them, they may be more willing to give into what someone else wants since they lack the energy to assert their will, or they may misinterpret the perpetrators acts of manipulation as care or kindness. Thus, psychological force can exploit the emotional state of an individual who is “distracted by grief or fear,” potentially causing them to give in to the predator’s coercive behaviour “without fully rational consideration” or without full knowledge of what they are entering into.[[782]](#footnote-782) Consequently, coercive seduction as a form of sexual assault uses psychological force to control the victim, luring them into a sexual encounter to which they are unable to freely and knowingly consent. Sarah Conly, a commentator on modern sexual assault including rape and sexual seduction, explains that if the victim is deceived or does not consent freely and willingly to a sexual act that they would not have engaged in had the seducer not exerted pressure then such seduction can be understood as what she calls “a species of rape”—what I frame as a form of sexual assault:

[w]eakness induced by another is what we’ve come to know as seduction. In seduction, a person does not simply act weakly because she finds the prospect of sex overwhelmingly tempting; she is brought to this weakness by the interference of someone else. There are two ways this can happen: the victim of seduction can be brought to do something that she in many ways likes but which she is trying to resist. She can be led to succumb to temptation so that desire overcomes conviction. Or, she may be importuned to do something that she is not attracted to, and distracted by grief or fear, she may give in, without fully rational consideration. It is this which might lead one to see seduction as a species of rape, because pressure is brought to bear on the woman to act in a way that runs counter not just to what she would not want without that pressure but also to what she really wants even given that pressure.[[783]](#footnote-783)

In the same vein as Conly’s perception of sexual seduction as a form of sexual assault is Guest’s statement: “[t]o have been seduced implies the overtaking of one’s independent, discerning judgment, to have had one’s rational defences wooed away.”[[784]](#footnote-784) Their comments indicate that sexual seduction can be characterised in much the same way as rape, with the major difference being a lack of physical force but a presence of psychological force, and thus is recognisable as a form of sexual assault.

This is evident in Jael’s interaction with Sisera. Jael is aware of Sisera’s fearful and distracted state since Jael knows that he has just fled from battle and is being pursued. Jael assures Sisera that he should “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18) and then proceeds to make decisions on his behalf, such as that he will drink a soporific rather than a refreshing drink. Through manipulative and controlling behaviour Jael refuses Sisera’s autonomy, instead luring him into a position of further vulnerability. The use of any kind of force or coercion, as Jael exhibits, invalidates consent.[[785]](#footnote-785) Therefore, in the same way that physical force or the threat of it can be used to make a victim unwillingly consent, resulting in rape, so too can psychological force.[[786]](#footnote-786)

Seduction can include deceit as a way of coercing consent. Deceit can be employed without the victim being aware of its use against them. For example, Jael deceives Sisera regarding their allegiance when they invite him in for shelter (Jdg. 4:18) and reinforce this deceit by telling Sisera not to be afraid (Jdg. 4:18). Sisera is unaware that he is being manipulated and coerced into a violent sexual act. In her study, *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible*, Weiss considers deception a key element of seduction:

lying deprives the individual of his humanity, namely his ability to make free and rational decisions. Surely if the seduced was aware of the truth, he would choose differently… In an act of shameful exploitation, the seductress uses the seduced to fulfil her objective. Thus, the will of the deceived becomes an instrument of the deceiver’s purposes as the deceived is not treated as an autonomous agent.[[787]](#footnote-787)

Sexual seduction occurs frequently in the Hebrew Bible and is commonly labelled as “tricksterism”[[788]](#footnote-788) or as one of “woman’s weapons”[[789]](#footnote-789)—highlighting that deceit is frequently employed by feminised characters and is constructed as weaponised femininity. Biblical characters understood as women who use their sexuality to lure men into traps are perceived as practising “trickery.”[[790]](#footnote-790) The tools these women use to trick men are framed as woman’s weapons due to their association with women, femininity and feminine domains and tasks.[[791]](#footnote-791) Frymer Kensky’s comment highlights the expectation in biblical scholarship that feminine characters draw on particular roles and behaviours—framed as feminine—to achieve their aims:

[w]omen in the Bible… have certain techniques and strategies at their disposal; they can use their access to food to set the mood and so influence people; they can use their powers of persuasion through reason, rhetoric and resistance (nagging); and they can trick and deceive when they cannot persuade.[[792]](#footnote-792)

Jael employs women’s weapons when interacting with Sisera which feeds into and draws from “stereotypical association[s] of women with seduction, betrayal and dangerous sexuality.”[[793]](#footnote-793) For example, Judith is understood as seducing Holofernes because of her extensive regime of beautifying before going to see him, her manipulative speech, and her careful use of food and drink which lead to Holofernes’ intoxication (Jdt. 10:3-4).[[794]](#footnote-794) Tamar is likewise described by some as seductive through her practise of deceit to lead Judah into “an incestuous or quasi-incestuous union.”[[795]](#footnote-795) Similarly, Jezebel is frequently characterised as behaving in a sexually seductive manner based on her application of makeup before Jehu arrives (2 Kgs 9:30).[[796]](#footnote-796) These behaviours are grounded in constructions of femininity by biblical scholars and thus seduction has largely been framed as a feminine weapon wielded to control men. As Guest notes, in the Hebrew Bible there is a “stereotypical association of women with seduction” where women’s sexuality is understood as dangerous to men.[[797]](#footnote-797) Scholars have commented that biblical women exploit feminised responsibilities of providing food, drink and care to create a particular mood in which they can influence the men they wish to have power over, with Bach stressing that “food marks the narratives of Judith, Esther and Jael.”[[798]](#footnote-798) Regarding biblical women, Bach argues that:

[t]he food that she serves—poisonous, intoxicating, magical—operates at the centre of the trope. An offer of a bowl of curds precedes the killing of Sisera; banquet wine acts as a narcotic upon Holofernes. Food then takes on an aura of warning when women violate the primary connection they have to food and nurturing.[[799]](#footnote-799)

These behaviours are constructed as feminine and labelled as seduction. Seductresses who lure men into bed through manipulation and often deceit are not framed as committing sexual assault. These feminine aspects are rarely associated with rape and sexual assault given the assumption that these are masculine domains that involve physical violence and phallic penetration and are separate from femininity. Women throughout the Bible are characterised as wielding feminine related behaviours and objects, frequently in conjunction with their sexuality, as a weapon against men to achieve their own ends.[[800]](#footnote-800) Thus, my claim that Jael’s use of sexually seductive behaviour results in sexual assault is supported by other biblical encounters where feminine seduction is employed to coerce men into situations where “their will is overpowered”.[[801]](#footnote-801)

## Jael’s Sexual Assault in the Literature

My review of scholarship on Jael begins by evidencing that a theme of sexuality and sex is widely acknowledged in Judges 4 and 5 in relation to Jael and Sisera’s encounter. There are myriad sexually suggestive elements noted which reinforce my interpretation that Jael perpetrates sexual assault, as well as biblical scholars’ claims that Jael seduces Sisera and rapes him. Following this, I establish that the dominant interpretation of Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera is that it is gender-reversed rape. Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera is recognised by scholars as being perpetrated through behaviours constructed as masculine but is discussed as being performed through gender reversal since Jael is understood as a woman.[[802]](#footnote-802) The review also evidences that Jael’s feminine behaviours of sexual seduction are frequently discussed in studies of Jael, but are not framed as sexual assault, unlike Jael’s masculine sexualised behaviours which *are* framed as sexual assault.

### A Sexual Theme in Judges 4 and 5

There are references to sexual intercourse throughout Jael’s encounter with Sisera. The numerous indicators of sexual intercourse, especially including sexual violence, make clear that sex (and sexualised violence) is a prominent theme of Jael’s narrative. Some examples of sexual references are outlined here to demonstrate this theme, with discussion of further aspects being integrated throughout this chapter.

Jael covers Sisera up and he lies down to sleep. References to Sisera lying down and sleeping have led some scholars, plausibly, to infer that Sisera is in Jael’s bed, despite the text making no reference to a bed:[[803]](#footnote-803)

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug… But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:18, 21).

Sisera asleep in Jael’s bed has been understood euphemistically, as suggestive of a sexual encounter between Jael and Sisera. For example, Brenner comments that sexual euphemisms are frequent in Jael’s narrative and frames Jael’s interaction with Sisera as illicit sex:

Jael is a married woman. It even seems that she actually commits adultery with Sisera. The text (Judges 4-5) does not say so explicitly; nevertheless, various euphemisms and references to legs, beds, and so on impart broad sexual connotations.[[804]](#footnote-804)

In the same vein as Brenner, Serge Frolov notes the possibility that Jael can be understood as “luring Sisera into her bed and putting him to sleep with wine and sex.”[[805]](#footnote-805) As well as highlighting the assumption that Sisera is in Jael’s bed, Frolov’s comment suggests a sexual encounter. He draws on the sexually suggestive verbs meaning ‘to kneel’ or ‘to crouch’ (Jdg. 5:27) when making these suggestions.[[806]](#footnote-806) Interpreting Jael’s bed as an indicator that illicit sex occurs is persuasive since there is a biblical trope of men being lured into bed before being violated.[[807]](#footnote-807) Such bedroom violation can be seen in the narratives of Samson and Delilah (Jdg. 16) as well as Judith and Holofernes (Jdth. 13). The references to the features of what Lefkovitz calls “bedroom violence,” namely, a sexually suggestive encounter in the private domain involving violence, leads her to comment:

bedroom violence against men is a biblical convention, a cliched power reversal in domestic space so familiar as to seem natural. Indeed, it is this convention that makes the… interpretation of the murder of Sisera as a sexual seduction effortless.[[808]](#footnote-808)

Lefkovitz makes clear that Jael’s actions feed into a violent sexual trope, one where men are taken advantage of through the use of feminine sexuality and are overcome, usually leading to their death. Her comment also shows that despite no mention of a bed in Jael’s narrative, nor any explicit reference to sexual intercourse, a sexual encounter is an “effortless” reading. The simultaneous implications of sex, violence and death in Jdg. 4:18-21 lead Lefkovitz to observe that Jael’s encounter with Sisera is charged with a tone of sexual violation, one of “sexual seduction” and violence interpretable as not only illicit sex but sexual violence.[[809]](#footnote-809) But her interpretation also exemplifies scholars drawing on the language of reversal rather than recognising that femininity and masculinity and their associated behaviours, especially in this encounter, can occur concurrently. Sisera asleep in Jael’s tent, presumably in Jael’s bed, is interpreted by Lefkovitz as suggestive of a sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera. She reads this interaction as including a reversal of gendered behaviours, in this case, a “cliched power reversal” which she highlights is typical of other such biblical scenes.

Once Sisera is asleep, the language used to describe Jael approaching him can be interpreted as sexually suggestive.[[810]](#footnote-810) The text conveys that while Sisera sleeps, Jael “went softly to him” (*ballāt ’êlāw wattābōw*) (Jdg. 4:21). The Hebrew, *ballāt ’êlāw wattābōw*, sometimes translated as ‘comes to him,’ is reminiscent of the phrase “come to/unto her,” which is often used in the Hebrew Bible to denote a man having sex with a woman.[[811]](#footnote-811) Niditch notes that “[t]he ‘come’ verb is often used in the Hebrew Scriptures to indicate sexual entry.” This suggestion of sexual entry coupled with the secrecy[[812]](#footnote-812) with which Jael comes to Sisera “creates a mood of mystery and eroticism,” claims Niditch.[[813]](#footnote-813) Jael is said to move “softly,” which indicates that “Jael comes to Sisera in secret,”[[814]](#footnote-814) stalking Sisera, indicating Jael’s illicit—violent—intent coupled with the sexualised language of entry, feeding into the sexual theme present in Judges 4 and 5.[[815]](#footnote-815)

This sexual image as an illicit encounter of sexual violence is made clearer when Jael picks up a hammer and tent peg with which to penetrate Sisera and in doing so introduces sexualised violence that Sisera has not consented to:

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him [*ballāt, ’êlāw wattābōw*] and drove the peg into his temple [*bəraqqātow*], until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:21).

This penetration draws attention to the sexual nature of the scene, and that it is a sexually violent one; the attack is a clandestine one that occurs in the form of phallic penetration. This penetration is not only sexual but brings about Sisera’s death (Jdg. 4:21). Tamber-Rosenau addresses the sexual element of the hammer and tent peg as penetrating objects:

[t]he [Hebrew] word *maqqebet,* usually translated as “hammer” or “mallet,” comes from the root *nqb*, “to pierce,” which carries sexual connotations and gives the passage a phallic tone.[[816]](#footnote-816)

Her comment highlights the sexual suggestiveness of the scene through the inclusion of the penetrating tent peg and the hammer used “to pierce.”[[817]](#footnote-817) Jael’s secrecy, evident by the text conveying that Jael “went softly to him,” draws attention to Jael’s clandestine behaviour with tent peg and hammer as phallic penetrating objects. This violent phallic penetration of Sisera is most commonly translated as an attack on his “temple” (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26)[[818]](#footnote-818) but numerous commentators have highlighted that the term *bəraqqātow* can be translated as “mouth” or “throat” heightening the sexual tone of Jael’s penetrating act by playing on the imagery of oral sex.[[819]](#footnote-819) An image of Jael orally piercing Sisera with the tent peg,[[820]](#footnote-820) entering “parted lips,” is created.[[821]](#footnote-821) This imagery in turn suggests sexualised violence since this oral penetration is being performed without Sisera’s consent—presumably while he sleeps—and with the intention of “severing his spinal column, leaving him to die in a convulsive death” (Jdg. 4:21).[[822]](#footnote-822) Thus, this is not merely a sex act since “Jael orally violates Sisera” in a violently sexual manner with the intention of killing him. The sexual theme in Judges 4 and 5 is thus not only sexual but also sexually violent.[[823]](#footnote-823)

The claim that there is a sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera is strengthened by another sexually suggestive image. Conway in particular has read Jael’s encounter with Sisera in Judges 4 as portraying Jael on top, “straddling Sisera,”[[824]](#footnote-824) in a masculinised sexual position.[[825]](#footnote-825) The potential for Jael to be on top of Sisera during a sexual encounter, when read with the frequent innuendos and references to violent sex in mind, leads Klein to suggest that Jael “screwed” Sisera or “socially/sexually abused” him.[[826]](#footnote-826) She highlights that these sexual references are part of a violent theme of sex where the sex is not between two consenting equals. This highlights the plausibility of interpreting Jael’s encounter with Sisera as sexual assault drawing from the sexually violent theme of sex in Jael’s narrative.

In Judges 5, in addition to the image of phallic penetration (Jdg. 5:26), there are a set of verbs that have been widely commented upon in academic writing as indicating sex:

He sank, he fell,  
    he lay still at her feet [*raglehā*];  
at her feet [*raglehā*] he sank, he fell;  
    where he sank, there he fell dead (Jdg. 5:27).

This repetition of verbs creates a rhythm of Jael pounding the tent peg into Sisera. Bal refers to this as a “hammering rhythm,” claiming that it arouses images of the rhythmic motion expected during sexual intercourse,[[827]](#footnote-827) as well as “the intoning repetitive quality of sacrificial or ritual death.”[[828]](#footnote-828) The indication of both sex and death, together, make apparent that the sexually suggestive theme is a violent one. This theme is compounded through the inclusion of the term, *raglehā*, variously translated as legs or feet, which is suggestive of genitals in the Hebrew Bible.[[829]](#footnote-829) This euphemism is picked up by Brenner when she highlights “references to legs, beds, and so on [which] impart broad sexual connotations.”[[830]](#footnote-830) Rachel Adelman supports the interpretation of feet as sexually euphemistic. In relation to the encounter between Ruth and Boaz, she comments: “[m]uch ink has been spilled over the phrase ‘uncover his feet’ as a euphemism for sexual relations, along with the verb ‘lie down.’”[[831]](#footnote-831) Adelman’s comment that ‘feet’ and ‘lying down’ commonly lend a sexual tone to the narrative supports the interpretation that there is a sexual theme in Jael’s narrative and that Jael’s interaction with Sisera can be interpreted as a sexual encounter since both of these phrases appear in close proximity in Judges 4 and 5.

Following this euphemistic reference to genitals, the text depicts Sisera as falling and sinking:

He sank [*kāra‘*], he fell [*nāpāl*],  
    he lay still at her feet;  
at her feet he sank [*kāra‘*], he fell [*nāpāl*];  
    where he sank [*kāra‘*], there he fell [*nāpāl*] dead [*šādūd*] (Jdg. 5:27).

These verbs are differently interpreted by Bal and Yair Zakovitch, but are linked by both scholars to sex. Bal understands these verbs as suggestive of “the sexual posture expected of a would-be lover.”[[832]](#footnote-832) The motion attributed to Sisera, that of his body moving forwards, towards the ground, can be read as a “man [bending] down over a woman to subject her to sexual acts, with or without her consent,” and thus this verse makes reference to a—potentially violent—sexual encounter.[[833]](#footnote-833) When discussing these verbs, falling (*nāpāl*) and sinking (*kāra‘*), Bal references Zakovitch’s work summarising that for him these verbs “form a *chronological* series, representing the successive phases of orgasm.”[[834]](#footnote-834) Bal communicates that, for Zakovitch, the final phase of orgasm is death as he sees the “post-orgasmic rest here equivalent to death” and as inseparable from the sexual act,[[835]](#footnote-835) highlighting another reference to sex and violence euphemistically present in Jael’s narrative and Jael’s engagement with Sisera.

For Tamber-Rosenau, “the sexual element is clear” and is made especially so by the final reference to Jael and Sisera’s interaction. She stresses that when “he fell dead” (Jdg. 5:27) the

participle used to describe Sisera after Jael has penetrated him is *šāḏūḏ,* “destroyed” or “despoiled.” The root is common in the Bible and can sometimes carry the suggestions of sexual despoiling; that is, rape. This is the case where the object of the despoiling is a female-personified city or a woman and where there is a connection made between despoiling and shame, as in Ps 137:8, Jer 4:30, 9:18, 48:18, and 51:48, 53, 55-56. That Sisera lays *šāḏūḏ* between Jael’s feet drives home the point that she has penetrated him and left him destroyed. The connection to sex is further reinforced by the remark of Sisera’s mother and her lady that the victorious troops must be dividing the spoils, with “a womb or two for each man’s head.”[[836]](#footnote-836)

Tamber-Rosenau claims that the translation that depicts Sisera as falling “dead” (Jdg. 5:27) lacks nuance since it does not convey the violent and violating sexual connotations implied by this term. She suggests that *šādūd* brings together the categories of sexual violence, violation, death, shame and defeat. This interpretation is supported by the abundance of sexual references in Judges 4 and 5, many of which suggest a violent sexual encounter between Jael and Sisera, as has been widely accepted and noted in scholarship.

In summary, a theme of sex, especially violent and violating sex, is acknowledged throughout Judges 4 and 5, especially during Jael’s interaction with Sisera; Jael approaches Sisera stealthily (Jdg. 4:21) in order to penetrate him with a tent peg,[[837]](#footnote-837) a phallic item, and a hammer, an item used to pound another item causing it to pierce (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26). This penetration takes place while Sisera is lying down, presumably, in Jael’s bed (Jdg. 4:21) and as such is indicative of the trope of bedroom violence. Jael’s penetration of Sisera is conveyed through a pounding motion which kills him causing him to fall to the ground between Jael’s legs/feet, despoiled (Jdg. 5:27). These and other references, discussed throughout this chapter, make evident that a sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera is strongly implied and that this interaction is one of sexual violence. Sexual violence in Jael’s narrative is well-established in academic writing on Jael and has led scholars widely to agree that Jael sexually assaults Sisera and that Jael can be read as a (gender-reversed) rapist. Jael’s rape of Sisera and seduction of Sisera in the literature are addressed below.

### Jael’s Rape in the Literature

The dominant interpretation in scholarship regarding Jael and Sisera’s sexual encounter is that Jael performs gender-reversed rape. The above section established a theme of sex in Judges 4 and 5, especially violent sex; this section highlights that the interaction between Sisera and Jael is commonly interpreted as reversed rape. Thus, this section draws attention to the specifically masculine aspects of Jael’s sexual assault addressed in scholarship, which feed into that sexual theme. The dominant view that Jael commits gender-reversed rape is represented by Bal when discussing Jael’s narrative similarities with Beth’s, Bal’s name for the unnamed concubine in Jdg. 19-21:

[t]he man Sisera is turned into a non-man by means of the penetration of a hard object into his soft flesh. The murder takes the specific form and meaning of rape… Not only does the weapon entail penetration; it also leads to the same result as the rape of Beth… Rape is, as I have argued, a specific way of destroying a subject from within and without at the same time, a specific way of destroying the victim as a woman. This reversed rape, indeed, also destroyed the man as a man.[[838]](#footnote-838)

Bal thus understands Jael as raping Sisera primarily due to the “penetration of a hard object into his soft flesh” coupled with the destruction of Sisera “as a man.” The weapon as a penetrating object is central to Bal’s interpretation of Sisera’s death scene as one of rape. The language chosen by Bal to describe Jael’s penetration focuses on the image of the tent peg as a phallic penetrator, framing Jael’s killing of Sisera as a forced and violent sexual interaction.[[839]](#footnote-839) Since Bal understands Jael to be a woman, the imagery of Jael as a phallic penetrator leads her to label this sexual assault as “reversed rape,” framing Jael as temporarily reversing their binary gender to perpetrate this masculine act of sexual assault. Bal recognises Jael as performing femininity and masculinity, but frames Jael as either feminine or masculine at one time:

The imagination appealed to here can be illustrated by means of the concept of homonymy, which finds its pictorial equivalent in the celebrated example of the drawing representing simultaneously a rabbit and a duck. Both isotopies cannot be *seen* simultaneously, but it is possible to pass at will from one to the other… each of which mutually illuminates the others.[[840]](#footnote-840)

Bal draws on the “concept of homonymy” to explain Jael’s supposed change of gender as Jael being able to “pass at will from one to the other,” demonstrating that a binary framework underpins Bal’s interpretation of Jael. While Jael is here discussed as switching genders—reversing their gender—I understand Jael as embodying femininity and masculinity concurrently, where Jael’s femininity and their masculinity can both be “*seen* simultaneously.”[[841]](#footnote-841) Bal’s understanding of Jael temporarily reversing their gender when committing rape is prevalent among scholars.[[842]](#footnote-842)

Yee also frames Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera as the “reversal of rape,” highlighting that Sisera is deprived of his masculinity through “passage into the feminine domain.”[[843]](#footnote-843) She understands Sisera as being ironically “un-manned” through his death scene taking the form of rape and Jael as simultaneously being masculinised through their sexualised violence that brings them victory over Sisera:

The author describes the killing scene as the reversal of rape (4:21). The man becomes the woman; the rapist becomes the victim; the penetrator becomes the penetrated. The tent peg in Jael’s hands becomes synecdochally the ravaging phallus.[[844]](#footnote-844)

Yee thus regards Jael’s killing of Sisera as a sexually violent interaction. She understands Jael as a woman and expects Jael to be in the position of penetrated victim—the feminine position—rather than in the masculine position of penetrating rapist as the text displays. Similarly, she understands Sisera to be a man who is forced into the feminine position through Jael’s apparent “reversal” of their gender and their taking on the masculine role of rapist. As in Bal’s interpretation, Jael’s penetration of Sisera with a “ravaging phallus” is a key element in Yee’s interpretation of Jael and Sisera’s interaction, not only marking Jael as a rapist but, from their perspective, as a gender-reversed rapist.[[845]](#footnote-845)

I agree that Jael’s penetration of Sisera is significant for understanding Jael as a rapist and that it highlights that Jael takes on the masculine behaviours associated with rape. Equally significant for my interpretation, however, are the feminine associations of the penetrating objects. The tent peg and hammer, as argued in the earlier chapter on ‘Jael’s Gender,’ are considered feminine tools due to their association with the domestic space as tent-pitching utensils and because their expected users are women.[[846]](#footnote-846) The feminine implications of the tent peg and hammer are, as I have shown previously, as important to my interpretation as their masculine implications; they are simultaneously phallic penetrators and feminine domestic tools. The gender implicated by the tent peg and hammer does not change—their gender does not switch from masculinity to femininity—but is simultaneously interpretable as feminine and masculine. Consequently, my interpretation builds on the dominant reading of Jael as a gender-reversed rapist, claiming that Jael is better understood as a gender ambiguous sexual assailant who perpetrates rape (and sexual seduction). Despite frequent association of Jael’s tent peg and hammer with femininity and feminine domains, scholarship continues to read the rape of Sisera as being perpetrated by Jael in a wholly, albeit temporarily, masculine manner.

Niditch, too, argues that Jael undertakes gender-reversed rape when sexually interacting with Sisera. However, their interpretation of reversed rape is not primarily based on Jael’s penetration of Sisera but hinges on the Hebrew word-root *škb*, translated as ‘to lie’ or ‘to lay,’ after Jael has penetrated Sisera with a tent peg:

He sank, he fell,  
    he lay still [*šāḵāḇ*] at her feet;  
at her feet he sank, he fell;  
    where he sank, there he fell dead (5:27).

Niditch argues that *škb*, commonly translated as “he lay still,”has violent sexual connotations:

Images of sexuality, defeat, and death [are implied] in the following verb of the chain *škb*, “to lie”… The vast majority of biblical uses of *škb* in a sexual context refer to illegitimate relations in rape, incest, ritual impurity, adultery and so forth.[[847]](#footnote-847)

In support of Niditch’s interpretation of *škb* is Blyth. In reference to *šāḵāḇ*, which is the exact form used to describe Sisera’s motion or position (Jdg. 5:27) from the root *škb*, Blyth notes:

one of its more frequent idiomatic uses in the Hebrew Bible, constituting just over one-quarter (54 out of 207) of its occurrences, is to denote sexual behaviour, where it tends to be translated to ‘to lie [with]’ or ‘to sleep [with]’. In particular, it appears to be employed primarily to describe acts of sexual intercourse that are in some sense illicit. Out of the fifty-four occurrences where *šāḵāḇ* denotes sexual intercourse, only four refer to a legitimate form of sexual relationship…[[848]](#footnote-848)

According to Niditch, *škb* alludes to a sexual interaction in the form of rape between Jael and Sisera and appears in numerous biblical narratives that depict illicit sexual relations, violent sexual interactions and sexual defeat.[[849]](#footnote-849) For example, *škb* appears in Genesis in contexts of the rape of Lot by his daughters (Gen. 19:32-35) and where Dinah is raped (Gen. 34: 2-7). It appears in 2 Samuel where Tamar is raped (2 Sam. 13:11-14) and where David is punished through another man raping his wives (2 Sam. 12:11). Other examples of *škb* being used in contexts of illegitimate sexual intercourse and sexual assault in the Hebrew Bible are abundant (Gen. 39:10-14, Lev. 15:24, 1 Sam. 2:22).[[850]](#footnote-850) In further support of Niditch’s reading of *škb*, Brenner notes that the verbs used in conjunction with *škb* also imply sexual violence, specifically rape where the categories of sex, violation and death often come together. She comments that the image of Sisera lying between Jael’s legs, coupled with the verbs conveying that “Sisera sinks down (thrice), falls (thrice), and lies (once) between… Jael's legs,” presents “unmistakable sexual connotations,”[[851]](#footnote-851) strengthening the prevalent argument that Jael rapes Sisera.[[852]](#footnote-852)

The Hebrew word *škb* has been frequently employed in scholarship to suggest that Jael commits gender-reversed rape, where Jael is framed as the masculine victor and Sisera as the feminine victim. In addition to *škb*’s sexual connotations, it has strong ties to “death and defeat” and the feminisation of men, notes Niditch.[[853]](#footnote-853) Through the use of *škb* death and sexual defeat are conveyed as overlapping categories. The image of Sisera lying down for sex or for sleep (Jdg. 5:27) has visual similarities with those who lie dead in their graves. The use of *škb* to draw this parallel between sleeping and death is especially common when referring to the dead as defeated, for example because of battle (1 Kgs 1:21, 2 Kgs 14:22), and are thus femininised due to their victimhood. The Hebrew word’s link to the conquered—those defeated and dead from battle—draws on the common motif of feminising the defeated. Therefore, *škb* draws on the language of both death and defeat as well as sexual defeat in a way that feminises the victim.[[854]](#footnote-854) Those that are defeated (sexually or in battle) are feminised through their position of weakness and vulnerability. In opposition, the victor is masculinised and framed as being in the dominant—masculine—position. Connotations of sexual violence, brought to the fore through *škb*’s ties to sexual defeat, further feminise the victim by placing them in the sexually submissive position constructed as the woman’s position.[[855]](#footnote-855)This violent sexual imagery draws on the stereotypical gendered attributes of men and women, where men have agency and are powerful, and, in opposition, women are passive and powerless.[[856]](#footnote-856) Dilys Naomi Patterson supports claims that this motif is feminising, noting that men who are defeated in battle, or more generally shamed, are symbolically emasculated through a “sexual reversal.”[[857]](#footnote-857) Patterson notes that the social or sexual defeat of a man draws a conceptual link between them and the shame attached to being a woman and therefore results in men’s emasculation and symbolic gender reversal connoting the defeated as a woman.[[858]](#footnote-858) As Niditch summarises, “[v]ia *škb* Judg. 5.27 brings together the nuances of improper sexual intimacy, death and the warriors defeat.”[[859]](#footnote-859) The merging of images of sexual defeat and death, especially within the context of war, are particularly apparent in the encounter between Jael and Sisera. Sisera is defeated as a warrior and as a man and it is Jael who is presented as the victor, a character understood in scholarship to be a woman who is temporarily masculinised through victory. This defeat, however, is not caused by merely a death-dealing blow that feminises Sisera as a victim and masculinises Jael as victor but occurs through a sexual defeat—a sexual assault that causes Sisera’s death. Jael takes on the masculine position of sexual conqueror while Sisera is feminised through his physical defeat and further feminised though his position as being sexually dominated.[[860]](#footnote-860) However, since scholarship binarises Jael as a woman, when Jael performs in masculine ways or is masculinised as the sexual assailant, academics frame Jael as temporarily reversing their gender. As such, biblical scholars maintain Jael’s binary femininity despite recognising that Jael performs femininity as well as masculinity.

The Hebrew Bible’s overlapping categories of sexual defeat and death, especially in context of warfare, are evident in Jael’s narrative:

But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:21).

She put her hand to the tent peg  
    and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet;  
she struck Sisera a blow,  
    she crushed his head,  
    she shattered and pierced his temple.  
He sank, he fell,  
    he lay still at her feet;  
at her feet he sank, he fell;  
    where he sank, there he fell dead (Jdg. 5: 26-27).

The presence of these elements—sexual defeat, death and warfare—supports an interpretation of Jael as rapist.

When Jael rapes Sisera, their behaviour draws on the gendered expectations of wartime assault where men rape women. Jael’s rape of Sisera ties into the theme of warfare and thus allows Jael to be read as performing sexual assault in a masculinised way. This link between the sexual assault of women and warfare is made particularly clear by Sisera’s mother:

‘Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
    Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?’  
Her wisest ladies make answer,  
    indeed, she answers the question herself:  
‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?—  
    A girl or two for every man…’ (Jdg. 5:28-30).

Sisera’s mother’s speech is frequently noted by commentators as a reference to sexual assault[[861]](#footnote-861) and rape.[[862]](#footnote-862) Her question makes evident that rape of women was an expected element of war and many relate her comment regarding her son raping women (Jdg. 5:30) to the reversed rape that Jael enacts against him.[[863]](#footnote-863) A combination of a violent sexual encounter, the context of warfare and Sisera’s mother’s reference to rape have led to Jael being firmly perceived as a rapist, who in scholarship is perceived as a woman who performs rape through gender reversal.

While Jael is framed as a temporarily masculine sexual assailant in scholarship, as a gender-reversed rapist, I argue that Jael’s rape is performed gender ambiguously. As I have shown, those masculinised behaviours that lead Jael to be labelled as a rapist are performed in a gender ambiguous manner: Jael’s penetration of Sisera takes place using feminine tools, since the tent peg and hammer are tent-pitching tools associated with women and the domestic space.[[864]](#footnote-864) It has not been noted in other discussions of Jael’s (reversed) rape of Sisera that Jael’s phallic penetrators—the tent peg and hammer—are both masculine symbols and feminine symbols, simultaneously, and thus indicate gender ambiguity. Similarly, Jael’s violence is undertaken as an act of motherhood, as argued in the previous chapter, and accordingly is recognisable as an ambiguously gendered act.[[865]](#footnote-865) Jael’s rape of Sisera is also undertaken by Jael through feminine and masculine elements and is evidence of Jael’s nonbinary gender.

When discussing Jael’s feminine performances of sexual assault—sexual seduction—below, I demonstrate that Jael’s feminine behaviours of sexual assault are also gender indicators that suggest Jael’s nonbinary gender. Jael’s soothing behaviour, sexually suggestive behaviour, and deceit are feminised behaviours used to coercively seduce Sisera.[[866]](#footnote-866) However, these behaviours are performed by Jael in a gender ambiguous manner. Thus, the behaviours that are framed as masculine *or* as feminine by academics demonstrate Jael’s nonbinary gender, especially those behaviours that form part of Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera.

The studies discussed here are a representative sample of scholarship’s dominant understanding of the sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera as reversed rape and is by no means an exhaustive list of scholars who hold this view.[[867]](#footnote-867) In accordance with these biblical scholars, this chapter works from the premise that Jael’s narrative involves a violent sexual interaction—sexual assault in the form of rape. I build upon these studies and integrate Jael’s feminine performances of sexual assault (sexual seduction) with those masculine performances of sexual assault (rape) referenced here.

### Jael’s Seduction in the Literature

Although Jael as a gender-reversed rapist is the dominant interpretation, Jael as a seductress is also widely noted in biblical scholarship. Jael’s seduction, however, is not framed as sexual assault, as I perceive it to be. Conway’s statement that “[t]here is little disagreement among commentators about Jael’s seductive actions,” makes clear that Jael as a seductress, one who is “duplicitous and deadly,” is an established interpretation in current scholarship.[[868]](#footnote-868) Mayfield is in agreement, saying that “concerning the figure of Jael; she has been described both as a robust defender of the Israelite faith and a deceptive seductress.”[[869]](#footnote-869) Both Conway and Mayfield highlight Jael’s deception and in doing so draw attention to an element of Jael’s seduction that allows it to be framed as coercive and thus as sexual assault. Scholarship understands Jael as a seductress who uses feminine behaviours as coercive weapons against Sisera in line with “stereotypical association[s] of women with seduction, betrayal and dangerous sexuality.”[[870]](#footnote-870) Jael’s sexual seduction of Sisera is acknowledged as luring Sisera into a sexual interaction—which is his downfall—yet Jael’s seduction is not framed as sexual assault although Jael’s sexualised, violent penetration is. As such, scholarship’s discussions of Jael’s sexual assault remain grounded in masculine performances, labelled as rape, and Jael’s sexual seduction is viewed as feminine and as separate to Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera. Consequently, rather than being interpreted as a nonbinary sexual assailant, one who commits sexual assault through simultaneous masculine performances of rape and feminine performances of coercive seduction, Jael is framed as committing rape through temporary gender reversal; Jael’s binary femininity is maintained and their feminine performances of sexual seduction are not acknowledged as sexual assault.

Ackerman calls Jael a “seductress” and links their seductive behaviour to another biblical character, Judith, who is widely remembered for similar actions.[[871]](#footnote-871) For Ackerman the link between these characters is not just their practice of seduction but their use of seduction to bring death to an enemy army general:

[i]n such portrayals, the society’s convictions about a woman’s appropriate gender roles come to the fore so that the *initial* and *primary* focus of Judg 4:21 becomes Jael’s role as a seductress.[[872]](#footnote-872)

Ackerman argues that for the Israelite audience of texts such as Judges and the Book of Judith, it is no surprise that characters who are understood as women use their sexuality as weapons as they are thought to have no other power to draw upon.[[873]](#footnote-873) The idea that Jael uses sexuality as a weapon, because that is what is available to Jael—who is perceived by academics as a woman—draws on Schüssler Fiorenza’s concept of “women’s weapons.”[[874]](#footnote-874) Since Ackerman perceives Jael to be a woman, she argues that Jael’s role is linked to expected (albeit deviant) behaviours of women. I draw on Ackerman’s acknowledgement that Jael uses seduction as a weapon to bring about Sisera’s downfall and acknowledge that this weapon is both sexual and violent and subsequently label this weapon as sexual assault.

Klein, too, labels Jael as “seductive,” [[875]](#footnote-875) understanding Jael’s invitation to Sisera to be an invitation for sex.[[876]](#footnote-876) She notes that Jael “uses her sexuality to gain her wishes”[[877]](#footnote-877) and that for Sisera the “effect is disastrous.”[[878]](#footnote-878) Her comments draw attention to the fact that it is Jael’s use of feminine sexuality and “seductive” behaviour that leads to Sisera’s death. She acknowledges that Jael uses “trickery”[[879]](#footnote-879) and “is devious with sexuality.”[[880]](#footnote-880) Klein argues that Jael’s seduction of Sisera, which includes deceit, is key to Sisera’s demise, and this implies coercive behaviour. However, she does not frame Jael’s seduction or trickery as sexual assault. I build upon Klein’s study highlighting that these behaviours of sexual seduction, including trickery, are coercive and culminate in sexual violence. Subsequently, I stress that the behaviours Klein draws out are interpretable as femininised forms of sexual assault since they are used by Jael as a means of controlling Sisera.

This review of a sample of the literature demonstrates that Jael as a seductress, one who uses coercive behaviour to lure Sisera into a sexual encounter, is an acknowledged interpretation.[[881]](#footnote-881) These examples are representative of the literature on Jael and show that despite awareness of Jael’s seduction as leading to a violent sexualised death for Sisera this seduction is not perceived as sexual assault. Since Jael’s rape of Sisera is not tied to Jael’s role of seductress in previous studies, Jael has been read as taking on two distinct roles: one of seductress and one of rapist. Jael is binarised in the literature as a woman who performs gender-reversed rape. However, both Jael’s seduction and Jael’s rape achieve the same thing—the violent sexualised death of Sisera—and in both cases sexual behaviour is central to bringing about that outcome. I understand Jael’s seduction of Sisera and Jael’s rape of Sisera as differently gendered performances of sexual assault. As such, I contribute an interpretation which is not currently represented in scholarship on Jael. I argue that Jael is a nonbinary sexual assailant who, through feminine and masculine behaviours, sexually assaults Sisera in a gender ambiguous manner.

## Jael’s Feminine Performances of Sexual Assault

I argue that Jael commits the masculine act of rape as well as a femininised form of sexual assault—seduction—through feminine behaviours used to coerce. Jael’s coercive seduction causes Sisera to be in a position of vulnerability where he is unable to freely consent. Jael, who academics perceive as a woman, has been represented as employing sexual behaviour and deception as weapons against Sisera. Mayfield notes that Jael uses trickery and deceit which result in a sexual encounter between themselves and Sisera. He comments that Jael is characterised as a temptress, one who uses deceit, saying that Jael is framed “in such a way as to reinforce a negative stereotype of women as temptress/deceiver”[[882]](#footnote-882) reiterating that Jael is a “deceptive seductress.”[[883]](#footnote-883) Similarly, Niditch highlights that Jael uses “alluring sexuality and deception” against Sisera.[[884]](#footnote-884) Sternberg acknowledges that Jael uses the woman’s weapon nourishment, particularly the milky drink, against Sisera. He says that “[s]he disarmed Sisera with woman’s weapons: soft words and strong drink,”[[885]](#footnote-885) whilst Exum comments that Jael uses care and nurture against Sisera; Sisera “finds refuge with a woman who, for all appearances, is a nurturing mother, but who turns out to be a cunning assassin.”[[886]](#footnote-886) Exum’s recognition of Jael as cunning highlights that Jael employs deception and that in this case that deception is intentional and is employed through “nurturing” behaviour—feminine behaviour. More explicitly, Williams expresses how Jael uses the woman’s weapon of care against Sisera stating that “Jael dominates Sisera and overpowers him in nurturing and violent ways.”[[887]](#footnote-887) Thus, Jael’s use of deceit, especially through feminine sexuality, nourishment and nurture is widely attested in biblical scholarship and acknowledged as leading to Sisera’s vulnerability and downfall. Jael’s use of so-called women’s weapons is employed in a scene filled with sexual innuendo and results in a sexual interaction in which Sisera is coerced; he has not been given the chance to make an informed decision. Jael’s behaviours, especially deceptive behaviours and coercive care, deny Sisera his sexual autonomy resulting in his death, framing the encounter as sexual assault.

I will show that Jael’s seduction, despite being firmly grounded in constructions of femininity, is simultaneously imbued with masculinity. Thus, I claim that Jael perpetrates sexual assault in a gender ambiguous manner. Three aspects of Jael’s feminised sexual assault are considered here. The first is Jael’s sexually suggestive invitation to Sisera. The second is Jael’s sexually seductive domestic care/comfort used to manipulate Sisera’s emotional state and control him. The third seductive act that I argue Jael uses to sexually assault Sisera is Jael’s use of nourishment in the form of a soporific—“milk” in Chapter 4 and “curds” in Chapter 5—despite Sisera only wanting water (Jdg. 4:19, 5:25). As I demonstrate, Jael’s behaviours indicate that Jael intentionally lures Sisera into a position of vulnerability through manipulating his thoughts and actions. Each of Jael’s feminine acts of coercive seduction can be viewed as acts of violence since they are used to harm Sisera. The sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera, therefore, comes about due to Jael’s use of coercive behaviour. Their sexual interaction, which occurs as a result of Jael’s feminine performances of coercive seduction, is sexual assault because Sisera was unable to knowingly and willingly consent to Jael’s deadly sexualised attack.

### Invitation

Jael’s invitation to Sisera has been understood by biblical scholars as one of a number of signposts of an illicit sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera, especially one where Jael seduces Sisera with the intention of violating him.[[888]](#footnote-888) The invitation to Sisera to enter Jael’s tent has been viewed as seductive for two main reasons: first, due to a common biblical trope of illicit sex taking place when men and women are alone together; second, because the phrasing of the invitation is suggestive of a sexual encounter, one where Jael is inviting Sisera for sex, not specifically for shelter. Both of these reasons for interpreting Jael’s invitation as sexually seductive are explored in this section.

My interpretation of Jael committing sexual assault through coercive seduction is supported from the outset of Jael’s appearance in the narrative of Judges 4. Jael engages with warfare through sexual violence, using seduction to lure Sisera into Jael’s tent, into Jael’s bed and to his death. Jael’s first act is to invite Sisera into their tent (Jdg. 4:18). As explored in Chapter 2, Bal argues that Jael’s invitation to Sisera “belongs to the vocabulary of war”:[[889]](#footnote-889)

Yael comes out and invites Sisera to “turn-in”, thus offering hospitality, a warranty of safety. The next phrase, “fear not”, however, comes from a quite different context; it belongs to the vocabulary of war. The contradiction between the invitation into the peaceful home and the encouragement to battle not only holds a warning for one who listens carefully…[[890]](#footnote-890)

Such a comment highlights that Jael’s invitation marks Jael as engaging in warfare. Bledstein comments that “[a]s a seductress, Jael invites Sisera into her tent, then advises him not to be afraid,”[[891]](#footnote-891) making evident Bledstein’s recognition of the seduction included in Jael’s invitation. Jael uses coercive seduction to participate in the Israelite-Canaanite conflict and uses that sexual seduction as a weapon against Sisera, a weapon intended to inflict violence.

The biblical trope of men entering women’s tents for sexual intercourse has led many scholars, including Fewell and Gunn, to frame Jael’s invitation to Sisera as seductive:

at least in biblical literature, a man seldom enters a woman's tent for purposes other than sexual intercourse… Jael further confirms his patriarchal understanding by portraying herself as sympathetic and as subservient to him personally: “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me. Do not fear…” While Jael is neither, literally, mother nor lover to Sisera, this scene is filled with maternal and sexual imagery.[[892]](#footnote-892)

Reis agrees with Fewell and Gunn that Jael’s invitation is sexually seductive, arguing that whenever a man is alone with a woman in private in the Bible, sexual intercourse takes place.[[893]](#footnote-893) Fewell and Gunn provide the example of Jacob entering Leah’s tent (Gen. 30) and Reis provides numerous examples of where sexual behaviours occur when men and women are alone together, commenting that “in the Hebrew Bible, whenever a man and a woman, not married to one another, are alone in private there is sex. There are no occasions of innocent rendezvous.”[[894]](#footnote-894) A number of her examples highlight that this theme of women and men engaging sexually when alone together is an illicit and violent sexual theme. For example, Lot is raped when he is alone with his daughters (Gen. 19: 30-36), Dinah is raped by Shechem when she goes out alone (Gen. 34: 1-2), Potiphar’s wife attempts to seduce Joseph when they are in the house alone (Gen. 39:7) and Amnon plots to get Tamar alone so he can rape her (2 Sam. 13: 1-14).[[895]](#footnote-895) Reis and Fewell and Gunn draw on this biblical trope of illicit, often violent, sex occurring when a man and a woman are alone to indicate that Jael’s invitation is a sexual proposition. Jael’s invitation to Sisera can thus be read as sexually seductive and carries a thematic implication of illicit and violent sex. Their invitation seeks to place Sisera in a position of vulnerability—the sexual offer is coercive as it manipulates Sisera into believing that Jael is sexually interested whereas what Jael is actually interested in is the violence they can inflict upon Sisera in a sexualised manner in order to end his life and remove him as a threat to the Israelites. Jael’s invitation is their first step in leading Sisera into a situation where he can be controlled and thus sexually assaulted and killed.

As well as Jael’s invitation drawing on a common biblical trope of sex, Assis has noted that the language of Jael’s invitation draws attention to its sexual suggestiveness. He says that Jael’s phrasing ambiguously invites Sisera to enter either Jael’s tent or Jael’s body. Jael tells Sisera to “turn in to me” (Jdg. 4:18), not ‘turn in to my tent,’ suggesting that Sisera is invited to enter Jael’s body rather than Jael’s tent. ‘Turn into my tent’ would be an invitation to shelter while “turn into me” (Jdg. 4:18) is an invitation for sexual intercourse:[[896]](#footnote-896)

Her greeting, “**Turn in, my lord, turn in to me**; fear not.” is fraught with ambiguity. Does she offer shelter, or, perhaps the promise of a sexual encounter? Contrast the sexual innuendo in her invitation, with the innocence evidenced in Lot's invitation to the angels, using nearly identical language: “And he said, Behold now, **my lords, turn in**, I pray you, **into your servant’s house**.” (Gen 19:2). Lot’s words are a clear invitation into the house: “turn in.…into the.… house”… Yael, however, applies the verb to herself: “turn into me.”[[897]](#footnote-897)

Assis understands Jael’s invitation as a sign that Jael is seducing “a strong warrior” who is likely to be able to overpower Jael.[[898]](#footnote-898) To strengthen his claim that Jael’s invitation is a sexually seductive one, Assis highlights that there is a linguistic parallel between Jael’s invitation and the invitation of a sex worker in Proverbs: “You who are simple, turn in here” (Prov. 9:15-16). He highlights that Jael’s language draws on a “sexual formula” where the invitation may well seem innocent enough but is actually an invitation to engage sexually.[[899]](#footnote-899) Drawing a parallel between Jael and a sex worker highlights that the sex that Jael offers is not suggested by Jael innocently but so that Jael, like the sex worker, can further their own interests. The sex worker offers sex for, presumably, financial gain at the expense of her ‘customer’ whereas Jael offers sex to gain control over Sisera at the expense of Sisera’s life.

Jael’s seductive invitation to Sisera can be read as part of Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera since it taps into Sisera’s psychological weakness. Jael’s seductive invitation includes a reassurance to Sisera that he should “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18). This indicates that Jael is targeting Sisera’s psychological weaknesses and exploiting his fear in order to have sex with him—sexually assault him—and kill him. As Weiss notes, Jael “carefully utilized her sexuality as a tool to impose control over the situation; control which would not likely have been accomplished by women in other ways.”[[900]](#footnote-900) The security that Jael offers with the carefully-chosen language of their invitation is intended to take advantage of Sisera’s vulnerable position and put Sisera at ease,[[901]](#footnote-901) encouraging him to drop his guard, as recognised by Olam:

The terminology used to invite Sisera is laden with comfort overtones the term “turn aside” *s-w-r* means to turn aside from attacking, turn aside to shelter, revealing how Jael’s invitation was phrased to lull Sisera into a false sense of security.[[902]](#footnote-902)

Olam notes that Jael purposefully controls Sisera psychologically with the intention of deceiving him. Jael’s invitation to enter a space of safety, whether this be Jael’s tent or Jael themself, is a whole-hearted deception on Jael’s part, which Jael uses to construct a situation in which they can manipulate Sisera.[[903]](#footnote-903) Jael’s invitation to Sisera, while on the face of it is a kind gesture of help, is actually a bid to control him through exploiting his situation of defencelessness.

Jael’s seductive invitation is imbued with behaviours associated with femininity and masculinity. Yet, due to Jael’s deception their masculinity is largely disguised; Jael’s use of femininity largely masks their masculinity. Jael presents a performance of femininity to Sisera through apparent concern for his wellbeing, portraying themself as someone to whom Sisera can turn and “turn in to” (Jdg. 4:18). While Jael’s invitation draws Sisera closer to Jael physically, he is also drawn closer to Jael emotionally through Jael’s reassurances (Jdg. 4:18). Jael’s sexually seductive invitation is imbued with feminised emotional concern for Sisera’s psychological and physical wellbeing but this concern is a deception since it is used to purposefully exploit Sisera’s fear and vulnerability.

Jael does not wait passively for Sisera to instigate the communication between them, as a woman is expected to do, but takes action and uses initiative—behaviours constructed as masculine.[[904]](#footnote-904) The text communicates that to invite Sisera in “Jael came out to meet Sisera,” showing that it is Jael who takes the initiative in making contact (Jdg. 4:18). Jael’s seductive invitation can be understood as an assertive and autonomous act, characteristics regarded as masculine.[[905]](#footnote-905) Jael makes their own decisions, independently, without influence or input from others,[[906]](#footnote-906) especially not from a husband, if Jael has one.[[907]](#footnote-907) Jael’s assertiveness in particular has been commented on by Reis who describes Jael’s act as a “pressing invitation.”[[908]](#footnote-908) Reis reads Jael as inviting Sisera in with forcefulness and intent, characteristics that are closely linked to masculinity, more sothan femininity, and are also behaviours expected to occur during sexual assault.[[909]](#footnote-909) The invitation is thus the first step in Jael’s seductive sexual assault.

In the Hebrew Bible deceit is commonly associated with women; Jael’s use of deceit is, however, imbued with masculinity as well as femininity. The deceit that Jael employs in their invitation through acts of kindness and subservience, coupled with displays of concern are acts of control used to exploit Sisera’s vulnerabilities. These are recognised ways of perpetrating sexual assault, especially the use of deceit.[[910]](#footnote-910) Deception can result in sexual assault when access to a sexual act is gained due to intentional deception by the perpetrator.[[911]](#footnote-911) In this case, Sisera requires protection and shelter from his enemy and Jael deceives Sisera, leading him to believe that these are being offered. Jael tells Sisera not to be scared (Jdg. 4:18), yet he should be scared, since Jael intends to assault him; as Bal points out, this invitation includes a call to war, as discussed in Chapter 2. Jael deceives Sisera in a way that is meant to encourage him to feel safe in the company of a supposed ally in “the tent of Jael” (Jdg. 4:17). This deception is a key aspect of Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera as Jael uses his vulnerabilities against him, meaning that he does not know who Jael truly is. Jael is not his ally, but his enemy and thus, as Onara O’Neil says, when discussing cases of sexual assault generally: “the seducer’s victim lacks insight into what is proposed, so neither can nor does consent to it.”[[912]](#footnote-912) Sisera is unaware that the sexual interaction he has been led into is a trap laid by an enemy.

Jael indicates to Sisera that a sexual encounter is available while using his vulnerable position as a fleeing warrior against him. Jael appears to be helpful and considerate, creating an atmosphere of comfort as well as bringing Sisera into close proximity to themself, creating intimacy with an invitation of sex and safety. But Jael is also assertive, independent and takes the lead in this situation. As such, through their invitation, Jael performs masculinity as well asfemininity, simultaneously. Unbeknownst to Sisera, Jael chooses to engage with the battle through a sexually seductive encounter through which Jael coerces Sisera into engaging in sex that makes him vulnerable to Jael’s deadly assault. Jael’s invitation informs the reader that, despite how biblical scholarship has historically labelled Jael, Jael is not bound by binarised expectations. Rather, Jael is a gender ambiguous character whose performances disrupt a binary framework of gender by combining masculinity and femininity in their coercive seduction of Sisera—sexual assault.

### Domestic Care and Comfort

As part of Jael’s coercive seduction Jael plays on Sisera’s expectations of how women are expected to behave. Jael outwardly fulfils Sisera’s expectations of women in the domestic space and uses these against him, manipulating him to respond positively towards Jael.[[913]](#footnote-913) As Fewell and Gunn note:

men have, now as always, an emotional and practical investment in home life, both as a place of comfort and retreat and also as an outward symbol of status and achievement… In our culture the concept of “home” embraces amongst other things ideas of security, affection and comfort which are almost bound to evoke favourable responses.[[914]](#footnote-914)

The expectations of femininity that the tent encompasses encourage Sisera to feel and act as though he is the dominant commander who is expected to be virile and powerful. Jael’s seduction is complex in that it is achieved by deliberately encouraging Sisera to feel as if he is in the position of power, through manipulation, whilst simultaneously taking control away from him. The result is that the army commander is enticed into a sexual encounter with a person about whom he is misinformed; he is thus unable to freely consent to the encounter and so placed in a vulnerable position without his knowledge. It is the illusion of Sisera’s position of power, evident when he commands Jael to stand guard over him, which results in his death:

He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’” But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:20-21).

Jael taps into Sisera’s physical and emotional vulnerabilities; Jael uses care and comfort, especially their act of covering Sisera, to allay any suspicion that Sisera may have and to exploit Sisera’s fear and exhaustion which leads him to trust Jael (Jdg. 4:18, 21).[[915]](#footnote-915) It can be presumed that having lost the battle and his comrades (Jdg. 4:16) he fears for his life:

And the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot,while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left.Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was peace between King Jabin of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug (Jdg. 4:15-18).

His fear is heightened since, his army having been defeated, he is being pursued by Barak, who the text records is coming “in pursuit of Sisera” (Jdg. 4:22). Sisera’s fear makes him susceptible to being manipulated; he is “distracted by grief or fear,”[[916]](#footnote-916) or both. Although discussing a (presumably cis-)woman as the victim, Conly’s comment below is useful here. She highlights how a seducer can place psychological pressure on their victim, exploiting their vulnerabilities, and how this is a form of sexual assault similar to rape which uses psychological force, rather than physical force:

[u]ltimately, she may find herself in a state of psychological exhaustion, feeling unable to resist in the face of what seems an implacable will. In these cases, it is argued, the woman has been forced against her will as surely as if the aggressor had used physical violence.[[917]](#footnote-917)

Jael appears to act caringly when they tell Sisera to “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18).[[918]](#footnote-918) Jael’s comment indicates that Jael perceives Sisera as being afraid. Conly highlights that purposefulness is vital for a sexual encounter to be understood as sexual assault. She says that “[a]ccidentally doing something which causes another to decide to have sex with you can’t be considered coercive.”[[919]](#footnote-919) Jael’s intentional manipulation of Sisera is evident since Jael verbalises a recognition of Sisera’s psychological weakness before exploiting that fear through offers of seductive care and comfort.

In addition to fear, the narrative indicates that Sisera is physically fatigued from battle and from fleeing on foot.[[920]](#footnote-920) This exhaustion is evident since soon after entering Jael’s tent Sisera falls asleep despite being in danger of discovery:

Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, “Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear.” So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug… But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died (Jdg. 4:18, 21).

Jael’s act of covering Sisera is a multi-pronged attack on his vulnerabilities. This act shows care and as such persuades Sisera that he is in a safe place, gaining his confidence.[[921]](#footnote-921) It is also a suggestion of sex as Sisera is lying down in bed, under the covers which Jael has put over him as a lover might do.[[922]](#footnote-922) Reis interprets this covering act as Jael covering Sisera with their own body,[[923]](#footnote-923) indicating that Jael is on top of Sisera in a direct bid for sexual intercourse.[[924]](#footnote-924) Jael leads Sisera into a sexual interaction; Jael brings Sisera into the tent with a sexually suggestive and coercive invitation and covers him up in a sexually suggestive manner, combining masculinised and feminised behaviours. Jael has reassured Sisera that he is safe with Jael and that sex between them is a possibility. What Sisera does not know is that he is being seduced so that he can be killed; the sex Jael offers comes at a price, a price that Sisera is unaware of and a price that costs him his life and benefits his enemies, the Israelites.

There is widespread recognition in scholarship that Jael’s acts of care and comfort lead to sex between Jael and Sisera, but scholars frame Jael as Sisera’s lover rather than as a sexual assailant. For example, Bal says that Jael “lures him into love, and kills him.”[[925]](#footnote-925) Her comment highlights the underhanded behaviour that leads to the sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera as coercive, evident since she frames Jael as luring Sisera. However, Bal frames the sexual interaction as “love” rather than as sexual assault. Others, including Niditch,[[926]](#footnote-926) Ackerman[[927]](#footnote-927) and Fewell and Gunn[[928]](#footnote-928) imply that Jael coerces Sisera into a sexual interaction in order to kill Sisera. However, they frame this sexual encounter not as assault but as “love” and Jael as Sisera’s “lover,” rather than as an assailant. Framing this sexual encounter as love or as lovemaking overlooks the violence and coercion involved, reading the interaction as an enactment of mutual sexual desire not one of coercive sexual violation. Jael’s seduction of Sisera is often framed as love because, despite awareness of Jael’s coercion of Sisera, seduction is constructed as feminine and thus is largely considered incompatible with the masculine act of sexual assault according to a binary model of gender. Jael’s coercive seduction—or act of love, as scholarship often labels it—is interpreted as being primarily undertaken through femininity and is consequently interpreted as a separate act to their rape of Sisera which scholarship interprets as a masculine act. Jael’s coercive seduction is thus not labelled as the violent sexual violation that it is.

The act of covering which reassures Sisera whilst being suggestive of lovemaking foreshadows sexual assault; it encourages Sisera to let down his guard and go to sleep.[[929]](#footnote-929) To have sex and to sleep are both acts of intimacy and trust, trust which Jael has deceptively extracted from Sisera. Sex and sleep, in that order, commonly go hand-in-hand. Jael manipulates Sisera into a position that is conducive for sex, luring him into that position through deceptive acts of care so that Jael can kill him. Jael’s apparent act of care exploits Sisera’s weariness, his fear and his overall vulnerability.

While Williams interprets Jael’s interaction with Sisera as “shift[ing] from a tone of nurturing and care to one of violence and murder,” I perceive these two tones as taking place simultaneously.[[930]](#footnote-930) Rather than Jael performing in feminine ways of “nurturing and care” and then switching to masculine gendered performances of “violence and murder,” recognising Jael as seducing Sisera as a method of sexual assault presents Jael as enacting femininity and masculinity concurrently. Jael’s acts of care and nurture *are* acts of violence since they are acts couched in deception and trickery that are performed in order to harm Sisera, to sexually assault and kill him. When Jael shows concern for Sisera, it is both an act of femininity and a masculine bid for control over his autonomy. As Karen L. Bloomquist comments, violence is used as a form “of subordination and domination,” one which asserts control while negating the autonomy of another.[[931]](#footnote-931) Drawing from Bloomquist’s comment, Jael’s acts of care and comfort can be viewed simultaneously as acts of violence since they allow Jael to exert authority over Sisera and deny him his autonomy. Through Jael’s offers of care and comfort Sisera is misled and his right to self-determination is impaired by being fed false information. Thus, while each element of Jael’s kindness carries a suggestion of sex, each is also imbued with deception and treachery and denies Sisera the information needed to make a freely informed decision to consent to a sexual encounter.

### Milk

Giving Sisera milk when he has asked for water is a key aspect of Jael’s coercive seduction and thus sexual assault of Sisera. First, Jael offers milk in a manner that suggests their subservience to Sisera. Second, Jael uses the milk to make Sisera feel safe. Both of these uses of milk feed into Jael’s deception and present Jael as adhering to femininity; Jael is tricking Sisera into believing that they adhere to only feminine expectations. Similarly, both of these uses of milk encourage Sisera to feel comfortable with Jael, especially while Sisera is lying down and is in close quarters with Jael. Third, milk can be considered an aphrodisiac and thus Jael provides Sisera with a sexually suggestive drink, creating a mood conducive for a sexual interaction. Fourth, the milk is a soporific which relaxes Sisera and makes him drowsy, placing him in a vulnerable state in which he can be taken advantage of psychologically and physically. My articulation of Jael’s use of milk as both a coercive act of seduction and a controlling act which, I claim, leads to the sexual assault of Sisera focuses on the following verses:

Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him (Jdg. 4:19).

He asked water and she gave him milk,  
    she brought him curds in a lordly bowl (Jdg. 5:25).

Although Sisera asks for water Jael supersedes this providing milk. Matthews and Benjamin perceive Sisera’s request as Sisera ordering “Jael to wait on him like a slave by bringing him a drink and guarding the door.”[[932]](#footnote-932) Whether Sisera commands Jael or asks in an overwhelmed and desperate manner, as Ackerman has suggested,[[933]](#footnote-933) Jael appears to be subservient in fulfilling his need for a drink. Thus, Jael deceptively reassures Sisera that he is in the position of authority and that he is safe. Since milk is a nourishing, “life-giving drink,” this alternative drink to water encourages Sisera to believe that Jael has his best interests at heart.[[934]](#footnote-934) Jael appears to be subservient regarding Sisera’s request, however Jael does not submit to Sisera’s wishes as Jael overrules his request providing an alternate drink that is more conducive for sexual seduction.

Jael has gained the position of power through having what Sisera needs, a drink. For Sisera to ask for something suggests that he is lacking, and that Jael is in the position to grant or deny access to what Sisera needs. Thus, while Sisera is reassured that he is safe with Jael due to their care and generosity, Sisera’s vulnerability is evident to the reader. Jael’s manipulation of Sisera becomes clearer; the army commander is at the mercy of Jael.[[935]](#footnote-935) Jael’s nourishment of Sisera is a bid for control. Bal states that through the offer of “protection, rest and milk,” the “roles are reversed: here, it is the woman who controls, who gives—and who kills. She gives life and then she takes it back.”[[936]](#footnote-936) Although Bal understands this scene as one of gender reversal, I recognise that by giving Sisera milk Jael performs femininity, using feminine tools of nourishment, while simultaneously assuming the position of authority and control—the masculine position—in a gender ambiguous manner.

The text indicates that Jael’s offer of milk has had the desired effect since Sisera requests that Jael watch over him while he sleeps. This suggest that he feels safe and secure in Jael’s company as he allows himself to be vulnerable within Jael’s presence. His request for Jael to watch over him suggests that he believes that Jael poses no threat to him:

Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him. He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, ‘Is anyone here?’ say, ‘No.’” (Jdg. 4:19-20).

His request is affirmation that Jael’s deception has worked. By offering “the bowl of milk, [Jael is] performing the woman’s part.”[[937]](#footnote-937) Milk is a drink associated with women through the conflation of the roles of woman and mother owing to the expectation that women are or will become mothers.[[938]](#footnote-938) Jael’s offer of milk reassures Sisera of his safety with Jael since it reinforces Jael’s femininity, at least from Sisera’s perspective—women are not expected to be a threat to men.[[939]](#footnote-939) Jael’s use of milk is thus an act of deception, used as a ploy “to gain the enemy’s confidence.”[[940]](#footnote-940) Such an act puts Sisera at ease: he is in the company of someone he supposes to be a woman since they follow expected feminine conventions of domesticity, offer care and comfort, and thus appear to be a safe companion.

Jael’s use of the milk is intended to manipulate Sisera psychologically as “stratagem;” it is not used to show kindness or hospitality.[[941]](#footnote-941) Milk has been acknowledged as an aphrodisiac as Matthews and Benjamin note.[[942]](#footnote-942) Milk has been used in celebrations of marriage.[[943]](#footnote-943) Matthews and Benjamin comment that:

[m]ilk is an aphrodisiac with which a husband and a wife toast their marriage contract… Sisera drinks the milk to prepare for sex while Jael serves the milk to prepare him for death.[[944]](#footnote-944)

Matthews and Benjamin also note that milk is presented as an aphrodisiac in the Song of Solomon allowing milk to be associated with sex and the consummation of marriage:[[945]](#footnote-945)

I come to my garden, my sister, my bride;  
    I gather my myrrh with my spice,  
    I eat my honeycomb with my honey,  
    I drink my wine with my milk.

Eat, friends, drink,  
    and be drunk with love (Song of Solomon 5:1).

When Sisera requests water but Jael brings milk, the sexual invitation that Jael makes to Sisera to enter Jael’s body is reinforced—or reiterated—making evident the sexual seductive behaviours of Jael. Jael brings a drink that can induce a sexual atmosphere.[[946]](#footnote-946) The milk is useful in encouraging a sexual interaction, making Sisera vulnerable to Jael in both mind and body. The milk’s “lactic acid soothes away the anxieties”[[947]](#footnote-947) inducing a sexual mood, making Sisera more vulnerable to Jael’s assault.

Jael’s use of milk renders Sisera pliable and vulnerable and as a recognised soporific has been read by some biblical scholars as a drug. Olam states that “the milk was served to drug him.”[[948]](#footnote-948) As a soporific, milk relaxes Sisera, tricking him into feeling safe with Jael and simultaneously making him easier to take advantage of. Jael’s use of milk makes Sisera particularly vulnerable since his inhibitions are impaired. In the same vein as Olam, who perceives Jael to use the milk akin to a drug, is Robert Boling who comments that Jael “duped him and doped him.”[[949]](#footnote-949) The milk makes Sisera physically vulnerable since it puts him in a sleepy state. Jael uses the milk to further Sisera’s vulnerability, much in the same way as an intoxicant. Subsequently, I view the sexual interaction that Jael lures Sisera into to be one where Sisera is not able to freely consent and thus can be read as sexual assault.

While Jael’s use of milk taps into feminine constructions of woman and mother, and their related behaviours of care and subservience, Jael’s use of milk is also evidence of their masculinity. Jael uses the milk in an assertive bid for control; the milk is used as a weapon intended to aid Jael in their violation of Sisera. Through disarming Sisera psychologically Jael engages with warfare. Jael keeps their enemy close and through concurrent performances of femininity and masculinity lures their victim into a position of vulnerability. Jael’s use of milk as a tool to sexually assault Sisera is employed in a gender ambiguous manner.

## Conclusion

Jael uses Sisera’s expectations of femininity against him, performing as he anticipates a woman would, in order to encourage him to lower his guard so that Jael is able to coercively seduce him.[[950]](#footnote-950) Wijk-Bos argues that Jael’s deception works because Sisera allows himself to be deceived,[[951]](#footnote-951) therefore that Sisera deceived himself. However, framing Sisera as “self-deceived”[[952]](#footnote-952) downplays Jael’s active deception and deliberate coercion which, as I have shown, are embodied throughout the narrative through concurrent behaviours of masculinity and femininity. It is noteworthy that Jael is the initiator in their encounter with Sisera. Jael is the one who leaves the safety of the tent and begins a conversation with Sisera (Judg. 4: 18); it is Jael who offers Sisera a means of escape from the battlefield, and Jael who offers sanctuary assertively, without Sisera asking for help (Judg. 5: 18); Jael makes the decision regarding what Sisera will drink, dismissing his request for water (Judg. 4:19 5:25) and covers him up (Jdg. 4:19) of Jael’s own volition. Feminine behaviours are undertaken assertively and autonomously with an intention to seduce to assault and kill. As such, Jael’s performances of femininity act to disguise Jael’s gender ambiguity as well as disguise their intentions to violate Sisera.[[953]](#footnote-953)

Jael asserts control over Sisera by making decisions on his behalf, directing the situation as Jael sees fit. The decisions Jael makes on Sisera’s behalf, coupled with Jael’s coercive behaviours of manipulation and deceit, not only deny Sisera his autonomy but also make him more vulnerable; Jael works to make him feel at ease, relaxed and therefore off-guard. It is emotional and physical exploitation that causes Sisera to feel comfortable enough to fall asleep, placing himself in an exposed state. Jael takes advantage of Sisera’s defenceless state of mind and battle-weakened body to manipulate his behaviour, actions and choices. Jael lays out the clues for Sisera and for the text’s reader. These clues include Jael initiating their interaction with Sisera through a sexually suggestive invitation whose linguistic structure mirrors that of a prostitute yet is also a call to violent battle, Jael covers Sisera up and gives him a sleep-inducing aphrodisiac. These sexually charged actions are indicators for both Sisera and the reader that Jael is preparing him for sex. Jael, however, does not leave Sisera these clues to entice him into a pleasurable sexual encounter, but to coerce him into a violent sexual encounter that results in violation and death. Jael influences Sisera’s behaviour and feelings luring him into a sexual encounter to which he is unable to fully consent and then uses that sexual encounter as a weapon against him.

This chapter has demonstrated that Jael’s feminine behaviours of seduction can be framed as sexual assault and are performed in a gender ambiguous manner, despite scholars primarily constructing them as feminine. I have discussed Jael’s rape of Sisera, following Blyth’s definition of biblical rape as “a forcible violation of her bodily integrity… a source of immense physical, emotional and spiritual distress for her.”[[954]](#footnote-954) I have not, however, made rape central to this chapter since scholarship has already widely acknowledged Jael’s rape of Sisera—albeit reversed-rape—as sexual assault. Greater attention has been accorded to Jael’s seduction, recognised by scholars but framed not as sexual assault as I argue it should be, in accordance with Claudia Card’s definition:

to display, communicate, and produce or maintain *dominance*, which is both enjoyed for its own sake and used for such ulterior ends as exploitation, expulsion, dispersion, murder.[[955]](#footnote-955)

Jael’s coercive seduction fits what is expected of sexual assault and suggests that, like rape, coercive seduction can be understood as a form of sexual assault. As such, whereas Jael’s rape employs physical force and physical violence, Jael’s sexual seduction, as a feminised form of sexual assault, uses psychological force and psychological violence; both are acts of dominance for ulterior means. Thus, this chapter has demonstrated that Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera is undertaken in a gender ambiguous way through performances of masculinity *and* femininity—rape and coercive seduction.

Contrasting ways of reading Jael’s performances of gender explored in this chapter need not stand in opposition to one another when considered holistically through a genderqueer lens. Jael’s seductive behaviours are performed through masculinity and femininity with both being evident concurrently. Consequently, Jael’s performances disrupt a framework of binary gender.[[956]](#footnote-956) Jael’s behaviours refuse to conform to a binary that maintains boundaries between genders.[[957]](#footnote-957) Their behaviours can be read as simultaneously illuminating a masculine performance through Jael’s acts of independence and assertiveness as well as a feminine performance through Jael’s kindness and concern. Both of these gendered ways of understanding Jael’s behaviours towards Sisera are present in the text and present in Jael’s sexual assault of Sisera. Jael is thus recognised as conflating different gendered performances in a way that reveals Jael’s gender as ambiguous. Jael’s behaviours cross through the expectations attached to men and women,[[958]](#footnote-958) causing gender trouble by challenging widely held views of binary gender, especially when Jael perpetrates sexual assault.

# **Thesis Conclusion**

This study of Jael’s gender in Judges 4 and 5 has yielded a reading of Jael as a nonbinary character. My interpretation disrupts previous readings of Jael which have unanimously binarised Jael as a woman, through repeated references to Jael as a woman and the exclusive use of only feminine pronouns to refer to Jael. Through close analysis of a range of Jael’s key roles and behaviours in their narrative, acknowledging the text’s historical context and with a particular focus on gender markers, I have demonstrated that Jael performs femininity and masculinity simultaneously throughout their narrative. Each chapter in this thesis has shown how Jael embodies masculinity and femininity concurrently, regardless of whether the act or role being discussed is constructed as feminine or masculine in the Hebrew Bible. This reading has widespread implications for the field of biblical studies as it highlights that a character historically presumed to be normative—without question—can with equal validity be understood as queer and points towards the possibility, even the likelihood, that other biblical characters presumed to be normative could also be read as queer. More studies, such as this one, are required to “rupture hegemonic repetitions and undo dominant powers at play”[[959]](#footnote-959) in the uncritical acceptance of dominant discourses of hetero-binary frameworks.

My reading highlights that biblical scholarship has been blinkered by hetero-cis binaries. Scholarship on Jael assumes hetero- and cis-normativity of the Hebrew Bible and its characters[[960]](#footnote-960) and overlooks that this normativity can be disrupted, quite easily, through accepting queer elements of a character or text as valuable for interpretations. As such, this thesis’s interpretation of Jael as nonbinary exposes binary gender as a construct rather than as natural; it takes a step towards making visible the Hebrew Bible’s representation of non-normative gender. The importance of this reading is to highlight that when queer aspects of a character or narrative are viewed as having interpretative worth, queer characters, who have always been present and are represented in the wider ancient world, but have had their queerness overlooked, emerge from the Hebrew Bible.

One significant contribution of this thesis, which largely sets it apart from previous research on Jael, is its analysis of Jael’s name as a marker of masculinity. Jael’s name appears in the masculine form (*yā‘ēl*), despite a feminine form being available (*tā‘ēl*).[[961]](#footnote-961) This queer aspect of Jael’s character disrupts the feminine label attributed to them. The masculine form of Jael’s name is noted in other studies[[962]](#footnote-962)—albeit infrequently—yet there is no consideration of the impact the masculinity of this name could have on biblical scholars’ understanding of this character or their gender. In this thesis I have demonstrated that the evidence suggesting Jael’s gender ambiguity—the evidence that disrupts the dominant interpretation of Jael as a binarised woman—is noted in previous studies yet not used to inform interpretations; Jael’s disruptive gender markers are not accorded influence nor visibility in scholarship. Differently, in Chapter 1, I address the value of Jael’s masculine name as a gender marker for understanding Jael’s gender as non-normative, arguing that the use of a masculine name alongside a feminine label of woman/wife introduces Jael as a gender ambiguous character.

Chapter 2 demonstrated that in the same way that Jael is introduced as simultaneously feminine and masculine, so too are the major elements of Jael’s act of killing undertaken gender ambiguously. Although this act is firmly rooted in constructions of masculinity, Jael’s space and their tools are central to their killing of Sisera and, in the context of Judges 4 and 5, are feminine indicators and masculine indicators simultaneously. Academics frame Jael as performing gender reversal, since they perceive Jael to be a woman yet killing is constructed as masculine, and they consequently maintain Jael’s femininity. This chapter, however, highlighted that regardless of dominant discourses of gender Jael kills Sisera through gender ambiguous acts, roles and behaviours. All the elements of the scene of Sisera’s death, especially when brought together and analysed holistically, indicate Jael’s nonbinary gender.

Just as Jael performs what has been firmly understood as masculine roles—violence and killing—in a gender ambiguous fashion, so too does Jael undertake roles that have been decisively constructed as feminine—motherhood—in a gender ambiguous way. Jael performs the role of mother through a combination of femininity and masculinity. Chapter 3 is innovative in recognising Jael’s nonbinary gender through their performances of motherhood, achieved by drawing on the existing frameworks of motherhood in Judges 4 and 5. Basing my interpretation of Jael’s motherhood on other frameworks of motherhood in the text makes evident that motherhood is already being represented in both feminine and masculine ways in this narrative. Scholarship perceives Deborah to be framed as a predominantly masculine mother,[[963]](#footnote-963) differently to Sisera’s mother who is noted as being primarily presented by the text as a feminine mother.[[964]](#footnote-964) Jael embodies characteristics of both these mothers simultaneously: Jael’s performances of motherhood are imbued with the femininity expected as well as masculinity, allowing each of Jael’s motherly behaviours to suggest Jael’s gender ambiguity.

The final chapter of this thesis addresses another historically binarised gendered act. Although a modern concept of rape and a biblical concept of rape have key differences regarding the issue of male authorization for sex rather than the woman’s consent to sex, sexual violence is consistently gendered as masculine in the Hebrew Bible as well as in other fields of study.[[965]](#footnote-965) Yet I illustrate that Jael performs sexual assault in a gender ambiguous way through concurrent performances of masculinity and femininity. I interpret Jael as sexually assaulting Sisera through behaviours that can be read as rape and coercive seduction. While interpretations of Jael as a rapist and as a seductress are numerous, biblical scholars represent these two roles as separate and unrelated rather than as two differently gendered forms of the same act of sexual assault. Integrating these roles and interpreting them both as forms of sexual assault, through behaviours gendered as masculine and feminine respectively, constitutes an intervention in scholarship. I bring to the fore the coercive nature of Jael’s seduction and the psychological violence employed against Sisera through Jael’s seduction. Thus, Jael’s behaviours disrupt scholarship’s attribution of a binary label of femininity and instead supports the ambiguity—the simultaneous femininity and masculinity—that Jael is introduced with in Judges 4.

Discourses of heteronormativity and binary gender have dominated past scholarship on Jael—indeed, past scholarship on the Hebrew Bible more widely[[966]](#footnote-966)—leading to suggestions that elements of Jael’s gender ambiguity are errors or are overlooked completely.[[967]](#footnote-967) Queer aspects of Jael’s character or text have not been appreciated as worthwhile aspects of Jael’s gender since they disrupt hetero-binary frameworks and thus have not been given the opportunity to feed into interpretations of Jael’s gender. Consequently, Jael’s nuanced gender is not at the fore of scholarly interpretations of Jael, rather a managed version of Jael’s gender, one which does not disregard understandings of binary gender but, rather, temporarily pushes the boundaries of what is possible within a binary framework of gender, for example, through the concept of gender reversal. In this study, however, I have highlighted numerous queer aspects of Jael’s character, interpreted them as valuable for understanding Jael’s gender and demonstrated that they are incompatible with an interpretation of Jael as a binarised woman. I accept all suggestions of gender regardless of whether these conform to hetero-binary frameworks or not and whether they conform to my own, or scholars’, expectations of Jael—I call for scholarship on Jael to do the same. The holistic approach taken in this thesis has considered numerous differently gendered ways of reading Jael’s performances as significant to a nuanced understanding of Jael’s gender. Thus, despite diverging from scholarship’s binarisation of Jael, I have utilised previous readings that make reference to Jael’s gender. I have engaged with the research of current scholarship and built upon academic acknowledgement that Jael performs in ways constructed as feminine and as masculine. Queer studies such as this one work towards building a longer, fuller history for queer individuals, who have always been present even in the ancient world and in the biblical text, even if they have not always been represented in scholarship. As such, Jael is shown to be one of potentially many queer characters who is celebrated in the Hebrew Bible.

Ambiguity more generally is a key theme of Judges 4 and 5.[[968]](#footnote-968) That there are two accounts of Jael’s single interaction with Sisera presents apparent contradictions and invites an ambiguous reading—as such Jael’s gender ambiguity feeds into the overarching theme of ambiguity in Judges 4 and 5 and is reinforced by the presence of this theme in the narrative. While various ambiguities regarding Jael as well as other elements of Jael’s narrative have been widely discussed by scholars with many standpoints convincingly argued, there are no discussions that address or consider the ambiguity of Jael’s binary feminine gender. Even when Jael’s masculinity is noted in scholarship it does not disrupt interpretations of Jael’s femininity. Methods are employed to reinforce Jael’s femininity when noting Jael’s masculinity, but why these methods are employed—why scholars choose to perpetuate Jael’s femininity—is not addressed. Jael is labelled as a woman without consideration of other available alternatives which more closely reflect their behaviours and effectively describe their gender.

While this study has concentrated on Jael’s gender ambiguity, there are other ambiguities in Jael’s character that remain difficult to label according to the limited categories available. As noted in my ‘Thesis Introduction’, Jael’s ethnicity is debated in scholarship: it is unclear whether Jael is a Kenite or an Israelite, with some commentators recognising Jael’s ethnic ambiguity as significant.[[969]](#footnote-969) Similarly, whether Jael and their family or clan have been subsumed into the Israelite nation or are seen as outsiders is a facet of Jael’s character which some scholars have considered ambiguous.[[970]](#footnote-970) Jael’s physical position is also liminal since the Kenites “had encamped as far away as Elon-bezaanannim, which is near Kedesh” (Jdg. 4:11), between the Israelites and the Canaanites and hence in the middle of the ongoing conflict. Consequently, Jael’s ethnicity, political allegiances and geographical location are all liminal and are presented in Judges as ambiguous. This signals that ambiguity is a recurrent element of Jael’s character, marking more than their gender. This study has focused on Jael’s gender, only considering such additional ambiguities when these are significant historical contextual features—such as tent pitching—which influence how Jael’s gender can be understood. A future intersectional study on Jael would be valuable for enhancing an understanding of Jael’s ambiguity which this thesis has only begun to shed light on through a genderqueer analysis.

Demonstrating Jael’s gender ambiguity through various performances of gender at key intervals and through themes of Judges 4 and 5 is an original contribution to the body of work on Jael. Such a contribution is not only important for studies on Jael but for the wider field of biblical studies. Although the focus of this thesis is Jael’s gender, such a genderqueer holistic approach can be applied to other characters, such as Jacob and Deborah, and to other elements of a character’s identity, such as their sexuality or nationality. I have brought an aspect of the text that was once marginalised—Jael’s nonbinary gender—to the fore and in doing so have challenged previous studies of Jael. Such an approach matters as this method of reading evidences the multiplicity of characters in the Hebrew Bible and celebrates diversity. Feminist studies have endeavoured, in part, to give women in the Bible (or characters understood as women) a voice or bring them from the margins into a central position. My holistic genderqueer approach has a similar aim. It is employed to bring queer elements of the text or character to attention and place value on them as influential elements in need of representation. Such an approach allows queer characters such as Jael to be read in a more nuanced way in which their complex gender is framed as significant. In turn, the presence of queer characters in the Hebrew Bible can be used to challenge the homophobic use of the Bible. Such a genderqueer interpretation can be used to give voices to those previously silenced as well as used to deconstruct discriminatory socio-cultural practices and policies. In this thesis, I have demonstrated the influence that hetero-binary frameworks can have and have had on interpreting characters that embody queer elements. My analysis has demonstrated that such frameworks need not continue to carry such power and influence: further, that an attentive, queer, holistic approach both exposes their limits and fallacies, and points the way towards a more sophisticated, inclusive interpretive model.

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1. See pages 4-5 for more on my use of the phrase gender ambiguous. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sally Hines, *Is Gender Fluid? A Primer for the 21st Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 11;Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman and Meg-John Barker, “Introduction,” in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders,* ed. Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2017), 1—9, 5; Alex Lantaffi, “Future Directions,” in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, ed. Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave; Macmillan, 2017), 283—297, 283; Austen Hartke, *Trans*forming*: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* (Kentucky; Westminster, John Knox Press, 2018), 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All Bible references used come from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise stated. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Uncovering Jael and Sisera. A New Reading,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19/1 (2005): 24—47, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Robert H. O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (*VTSup*, 63; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 102; Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5,” *JAAR* 58/3 (1990): 389—411; Berit Olam, “The Poem of Deborah, Judges 3:31-4:24,” in *Judges,* ed. Tammi J. Schneider (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 53—85, 83 and 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Athalya Brenner, “A Triangle and a Rhombus in Narrative Structure: A Proposed Integrative Reading of Judges 4 and 5,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 98—110, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Brenner, “Triangle,” 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Robert Boling, *Judges: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1981), 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Brenner, “Triangle,” 99; Kawashima, “Song to Story,” 154; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 390; Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 106). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. O’Connell, Rhetoric, 102; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 389-411; Reis, “Uncovering,” 39; Brenner, “Triangle,” 98; Olam, “Poem,” 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Chris Greenough, “‘Queer Eye’ in Theology and Biblical Studies: ‘Do you have to be queer to do this?,” *JIBS* 1/1 (2019): 26—41, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Chris Greenough, *Queer Theologies; the basics* (London: Routledge, 2020), 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Biblical scholarship unanimously labels Jael as a woman. See the following studies for examples of this, Adrien Janis Bledstein, “Is Judges a Woman’s Satire of Men who Play God?,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 34—55; Brenner, “Triangle,” 98-110; Bal, *Murder*, 51-74; Exum, “Shared Glory”; Danna Nolan Fewell, “Judges,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary,* Eds. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (London: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 67—78; Susan Niditch, *Judges, A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Bal, *Murder,* 102, 116; Niditch, *Judges,* 82; Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 33; Colleen M. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 23; Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, “Invitation to Murder,” *Nordic Journal of Theology* 73/1 (2019): 89—108, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Although the terms performative and performance seem to imply a separation between the individual and their performances, performativity theory recognises no division between the two as all acts, roles and behaviours are understood as performed (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999*,* xv; Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2006), 99-100). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The transliterated Hebrew throughout this thesis follows the SBL style guide (*The SBL Handbook of Style*, Second Edition.(Georgia: SBL Press, 2014)). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I have included transliterated Hebrew in a number of direct quotes from the Bible throughout the thesis. I have included some transliterated words for ease of reference for the reader as following paragraphs make reference to or discuss such terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The following studies note the possibility that Jael penetrates Sisera through his mouth: Exum, “Shared Glory,” 20; Fewell, “Judges,” 69; Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, “Inside, Outside, or in Between,” in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 69—91, 75.The following studies comment on the possibility that Sisera’s throat was pierced by the tent peg: Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 107; Ellen van Wolde, “Deborah and Ya‘el in Judges 4,” in *On Reading Prophetic Texts*, ed. Bob Becking and Meindert Dijkstra (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 283—294, 293. The following works suggest that Sisera’s neck was pierced by Jael’s tent peg: Bal, *Murder*, 134; Niles Elliot Goldstein, *Lost Souls: Finding Hope in the Heart of Darkness* (London: Bell Tower, 2002), 127. The following studies note that Sisera’s temple could have been the part of his body which Jael penetrated: Bal, *Murder*, 134; Fewell, “Judges,” 69;

    J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges; A Commentary,* Trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1987), 92. While this study is primarily literary rather than linguistic, it is worth noting that there is also ambiguity around the translation of this word in the LXX versions of Jael’s story with LXX A being translated as “jaw” while LXX B is translated as “temple” (4:21, 5:26) (Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, *A New Translation of the Septuagint, and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included Under That Title* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007), 207; Gary F. Zoella, *Analytical-Literal Translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint)* (Lulu, 2014), 30). It should be noted that the LXX is thought to have been “in existence by the end of the second century B.C.E.”(Philip E. Satterthwaite, “Judges,” in *T&T Clark Companion to the Septuagint*, ed. James K Aitken (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 102—117) and therefore comes from a different culture, time and place than that of the Hebrew noted here and thus is a translational product of a different culture; nevertheless, ambiguity regarding Jael and their narrative is abundant and pervasive. The LXX can, however, provide insight into the ambiguity of Jael’s gender and ambiguity more widely in Judges 4 and 5, since it shows how the translators have had to grapple with meaning due to the ambiguity present in those chapters. This grappling is particularly evident from discrepancies between LXX A and LXX B, some of which are referenced at points in this thesis. For more on the LXX see Natalio Fernandez Marcos, *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Versions of the Bible* (Boston: Brill, 2000) and Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Indiana: Eisenbrowns, 1993) and for more on Judges, specifically, in the LXX see the following texts: Barnabas Lindars, “Some Septuagint Readings in Judges: In grateful memory of David Thomas,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 22/1 (1971): 1—14; A. V. Billen, “The Hexaplaric Element in the LXX Version of Judges,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 43/169-170 (1942): 12—19; Emanuel Tov, “The Textual History of the Song of Deborah in the A Text of the LXX,” *Vetus Testament* 28/2 (1978): 224—232. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The following studies recognise that scholarship suggests that Jael breaks the code of hospitality by killing Sisera: Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry; the Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 24; Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Reformed and Feminist, A Challenge to the Church* (Kentucky: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1991), 72.However, Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, do not recognise the code of hospitality as applying to Jael’s invitation to Sisera and thus do not perceive such a code to have been broken when Jael kills Sisera (Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin*, Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. When referring to or discussing rape, I use the term ‘rape’ as representing a modern concept, one that would not have been understood in the same way in the ancient world. I discuss the differences between a modern concept of rape and the literary rape represented in the Hebrew Bible later, in my chapter ‘Sexual Assault of Sisera. Please see pages 173-180 for this consideration. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The literature on Jael commonly perceives a sexual encounter taking place between Jael and Sisera (Bal, *Murder*; Serge Frolov, “Sleeping with the Enemy: Recent Scholarship on Sexuality in the Book of Judges,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 11/3 (2013): 308—327, 310-317; Reis, “Uncovering,” 29-31; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social,* 87). The following studies explicitly understand the sexual interaction as one of reversed rape: Bal, *Murder,* 134, 228; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Some of the ambiguities involving Jael which will not be covered in this thesis include Jael’s ethnicity and their political affiliation. It is unclear whether Jael is an Israelite, is a Kenite who has been accepted as an Israelite or is considered an outsider (Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen; Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 94; Sharp, *Irony,* 103). As a result of this ethnic ambiguity, Jael’s political allegiances remain ambiguous (Katherine Steinly, “Jael, Warrior of YHWH: Judges 4:17-24,” (Masters diss., Philadelphia: The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, 2012), 7). In scholarship Jael is thought to have a marginal, potentially ambiguous, position socially due to their being a member of the Kenite clan (Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag,* 91). On top of these various ambiguities Jael’s physical position is an ambiguous one. Jael’s geographical location is hinted at and appears to be a liminal one, somewhere between the Israelite and Canaanite territories (Jdg. 4:16-17) (Reis, “Uncovering,” 25). These and other ambiguities regarding Jael’s ethnic, national or political identity are not within the scope of this thesis since they do not directly relate to Jael’s gender. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Although a lack of clarity in the text does not necessarily equate with deliberate ambiguity in the narrative, there are numerous gaps in Judges 4 and 5 that can be read as points of ambiguity. Such instances of ambiguity in Judges 4 and 5 are not restricted to the character of Jael. For example, it is unclear why Barak will not go into battle without Deborah (Jdg. 4:8). It has been suggested that either he refuses to go without her as a mark of respect for her position and leadership and thus his refusal indicates that he believes her to be the more appropriate person to lead the army, rather than himself (Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther; Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 1-9) or because he is afraid to go into battle without her (Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34). Additionally, it is unclear whether Deborah is married or not (Bal, *Death*, 211; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Deborah 2,” in *Women in Scripture; A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament,* ed. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 66—67, 66; Sidnie Ann White, “In the Steps of Jael and Deborah: Judith as Heroine,” in *“No One Spoke Ill of Her” Essays on* Judith, ed. James C. VanderKam (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1992), 5—17, 6) with some academics understanding Lappidoth as the name of Deborah’s husband (Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 33) and others perceiving this as a description of Deborah as a “fiery woman” (Frymer-Kensky, “Deborah,” 66; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 38), “woman of torches” (Mieke Bal, *On Story-Telling; Essays in Narratology,* (California: Polebridge Press, 1991), 67; Jack M. Sasson, “‘A Breeder or Two for Each Leader’: On Mothers in Judges 4 and 5,” in *A Critical Engagement; Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honour of J. Cheryl Exum,* ed. David J. A. Clines and Ellen van Wolde (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011)*,* 333—355), “a woman of fire” (Kelly J. Murphy, *Rewriting Masculinity: Gideon, Men, and Might* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 8) or even as reference to her being a “pyromancer” (Sasson, “Breeder,” 342). Also, scholars debate whether Deborah should be understood as a literal mother or a symbolic mother when she is called “a mother in Israel” (White, “Steps of Jael,” 6; James G. Williams, “Other Feminine Figures: The Multifaceted Israelite Feminine,” in *Women Recounted; Narrative Thinking and the God of Israel,* ed. David M. Gunn (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1982), 67—95, 73; Richard M. Davidson, *The Flame of Yahweh; Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 263-264). These various aspects of Jael’s narrative are grounded in ambiguity (Tyler Mayfield, “The Accounts of Deborah (Judges 4-5) in Recent Research,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 7/306(2009): 306—335, 309). This list of ambiguities in Judges 4 and 5 is not exhaustive. It is provided here to demonstrate that ambiguity is widespread in Jael’s narrative and that ambiguity is a theme that runs throughout Judges 4 and 5 and that it is not just in relation to Jael although Jael is at the centre of numerous ambiguities. Thus, my claim that Jael is gender ambiguous is not out of place but fits into a larger pattern of ambiguity evident throughout Judges 4 and 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Lillian R. Klein, “A Spectrum of Female Characters,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges,* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 24—34; Bledstein, “Judges”; Leila Leah Bronner, “Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges,* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 72—98; Bal, *Murder*; Bal, *Death*; Jane Shaw, “Constructions of Woman in readings of the Story of Deborah,” in *Anti-Covenant; Counter-Reading Women’s Lives in the Hebrew Bible*,ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1989), 113—133; Niditch, *Judges*; Jo Ann Hackett, “In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel,” in *Immaculate and Powerful; The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality,* ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret R. Miles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 15—39; White, “Steps of Jael,” and Ackerman, *Warrior*. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ackerman, *Warrior,* 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ackerman, *Warrior,* 90; Conway, *Sex and Slaughter,* 5, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Langeni, “Gender,” 9; Yee*,* “Hand,” 6-7, 28; Yee*,* “Hand,” 100-105. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Jennie Barnsley, “Grounding Theology in Quotidian Experience of Complex Gender: A Feminist Approach,” (PhD diss., Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2013), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. By using Jael’s name, I am not ‘ungenderring’ Jael but representing Jael in a way that does not erase parts of their gender, as using binarised pronouns would. I do not refer to Jael as ‘him’ when Jael is performing masculinity and ‘her’ when Jael is performing femininity for two main reasons. First, I want to avoid confusion for the reader by having a consistent and coherent way of referring to Jael. Second, using differently gendered pronouns for Jael implies that they change between genders in a manner that supports a binary framework of gender. This would present Jael as switching or reversing gender, which is problematic and supports a notion of binary gender. The problematic nature of gender reversal is addressed later in this introductory chapter, see pages 21-23. I recognise Jael as performing masculinity as well as femininity simultaneously, not as switching between binary genders. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Lee Airton, *Gender: Your Guide: A Gender-Friendly Primer on What to Know, What to Say, and What to Do in the New Gender Culture* (London: Adams Media, 2019); Morgan Lev Edward Holleb, *The A-Z of Gender and Sexuality; From Ace to Ze* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. That Jael’s gender as a woman is not stressed, in comparison with other characters, is also evident in the LXX versions of Judges 4 and 5. As Gary F. Zoella highlights in his translation of the LXX (reliant on LXX B), Deborah as a ciswoman is stressed in the Greek. Zoella underlines certain pronouns in his English translation of the Greek to show that “the pronoun is emphasized on the Greek text” (Zoella, *Analytical-Literal Translation*, 7). From Zoela’s perspective this is where the text makes explicit and thus stresses the sex/gender of the character. In Judges 4 sex/gender stressing pronouns are used in reference to Sisera (4:2) “and he dwelt in Arisoth of the Gentiles,” in reference toBarak (4:22), “I will show you the man whom you seek” and more importantly for my argument, in repeated reference to Deborah (4:4-5), “And Deborah [LXX, Debbora], a woman, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she was sitting under [the] palm tree of Deborah…” (Zoella, *Analytical-Literal Translation*, 30, (square brackets and underlining in original)). Thus, Deborah’s position as a ciswoman is stressed through the Greek pronouns as well as the repeated feminine titles (woman, prophetess, woman/wife). In Judges 5 pronouns stress the sex/gender of Sisera’s mother (5:29) “Her wise female ruling ones answered to her, and she returned words to herself” (Zoella, *Analytical-Literal Translation*, 31, (underlining in original)).In neither Judges 4 nor Judges 5 does the Greek stress the sex/gender of Jael in the way it does the other main characters. Thus, all the main characters of Judges 4 and 5—Deborah, Barak, Sisera and Sisera’s mother—have their sex/genders stressed, except for Jael. While Deborah is explicitly and repeatedly labelled as a woman, Jael is not. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. David J. Zucker and Moshe Reiss, ‘Subverting Sexuality: Manly Women; Womanly Men in Judges 4–5’ *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 45/1 (2015), pp. 32–37, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Trent Butler, *Judges* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Colleen M. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter in the Tent of Jael; A Cultural History of a Biblical Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Amy Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play in the Hebrew Bible: The Ways the Bible Challenges Its Gender Norms* (London: Routledge, 2016), 50, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Rachel C. Rasmussen, “Deborah the Woman Warrior” in *Anti-Covenant; Counter-Reading Women’s Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Mieke Bal; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1989), pp. 79-95, 84, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. It is worth noting that Rasmussen understands the Hebrew as indicating Deborah’s “female” sex rather than Deborah’s gender, much in the same vein as my argument that references are made to Jael’s female sex with clear depictions of Jael’s ambiguous gender through performativity. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Harold C. Washington, “Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible: A New Historicist Approach,” *Biblical Interpretation* 5/4 (1997): 324—363, 331; David J. A. Clines, “He-Prophets: Masculinity as a Problem for the Hebrew Prophets and their Interpreters,” in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll*,ed. Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies, *JSOTSup* 348 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 311—328, 314; Deryn Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 132; Rebecca Emerson Dobash and Russell P. Dobash, *Rethinking Violence Against Women* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 163; Ann Lloyd, *Doubly Deviant, Doubly Damned; Society’s Treatment of Violent Women* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 22; Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, “Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror,” *SAGE Publications* 22/1 (2008): 5—23, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The role of mother and behaviour or nurturing is expected of women by biblical scholars (Bledstein, “Judges”; Brenner, “Triangle”; Dawn Llewellyn, “Maternal Silence: Motherhood and Voluntary Childlessness in Contemporary Christianity,” *Religion and Gender* 6/1 (2016): 64—79, 69; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddess; Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 139) and gender scholars alike (Rosemary Gillespie, “When No Means No: Disbeliefe, Disregard and Deviance as Discourses of Voluntary Childlessness,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 23/2 (2000): 223—234, 225; Ann Lloyd, *Doubly*, 31, 47; Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 406; Gale A. Yee, *“*By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4,” *Semeia* 61 (1993): 99—132; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 68; Niditch, *Judges,* 59-67; Murphy, *Rewriting*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The concept of gender reversal is discussed throughout the thesis and is given particular attention on pages 21-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ken Stone, “How a Woman Unmans a King: Gender Reversal and the Woman of Thebez in Judges 9,” in *From the Margins 1; Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 71—85; Bal, *Murder*; Bal, *Death*; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling.” [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Butler, *Gender Trouble*. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ken Stone, *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Greenough, “Queer Eye,” 27; Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag,* 11; Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Tamber-Rosenau and Guest do not distinguish between “gender criticism” and “queer criticism” (Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 13 fn. 25; Guest, *Beyond*, 40). I, however, use the term “queer criticism” and more commonly Guest’s preferred phrase, “genderqueer criticism,” instead of gender criticism in order to avoid confusion since the phrase ‘gender criticism’ has been co-opted by Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERF’s) (Guest, *Beyond*, 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Deryn Guest, “From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens,” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship,* ed. Ken Stone and Teresa Hornsby (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2011), 9—45, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. June L. Reich, “Genderfuck: The Law of the Dildo,” *Discourse* 15/1 (1992): 112—127, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Reich, “Genderfuck,” 121; Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Calvin Thomas, “Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality,” in *Straight with a Twist; Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, ed. Calvin Thomas (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000) 11—45, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Greenough, *Queer Theologies,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Chris Greenough, “Why does theology need undoing?,” *SCM Press Blog*, 29 June 2018, https://scmpress.wordpress.  
    com/2018/06/29/why-does-theology-need-undoing/. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag,* 16 fn. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. While this approach relies on an understanding that binary gender can be destabilised and queerness brought to the fore, this does not mean that all binary and heteronormative aspects of a text are problematic. Destabilising binary gender is useful in understanding some aspects of a narrative and for understanding some characters and their actions. However, I recognise that in some cases destabilising binary gender and heteronormativity is detrimental. For example, as noted by Chris Beasley, many trans people wish to ‘straighten’ rather than queer their sex, gender and sexuality. While I wish to dismantle the concept that gender is binary, I do not want to dismantle the genders of masculinity and femininity. Rather, I aim to highlight that there are more ways of performing gender than just the two options presented as oppositional by a binary framework (Chris Beasley, *Gender and Sexuality; Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 154). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag,* 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Beasley, *Gender,* 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Jacqueline Foertsch, “In Theory If Not in Practice: Straight Feminism’s Lesbian Experience,” in *Straight with a Twist; Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, ed. Calvin Thomas (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 45—60, 46; Gil Rosenberg, “New Authorities, New Readings; Queering Hebrew Bible Text Criticism,” *Biblical Interpretation* 23 (2015): 574—600, 575. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ken Stone, “Bibles That Matter: Biblical Theology and Queer Performativity,” *BTB* 38 (2008): 14—25, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Discussions of Adam as having ambiguous sex or gender can be found in Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah. For scholarship on these collections of midrashim, see Judith Baskin, Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002); Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing and Valarie H. Ziegler, *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999). For studies on the God of the Hebrew Bible as having ambiguous gender see Stephen D. Moore, *The Bible in Theory: Critical and Postcritical Essays* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), especially chapters 8 and 9, pages 175—201 and 201—221 respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Richard H. Bell, *Theology of Wganer’s* Ring *Cycle II; Theological and Ethical Issues* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Irit Ziffer, “The First Adam, Androgyny, and he ‘Ain Ghazal Two-headed Busts in Context,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 57/2 (2007): 129—152, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. David Lyle Jeffrey, *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1992), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Ziffer, “First Adam,” 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Mark Crosby, “‘Merely a Superior Being’: Blake and the Creations of Eve,” in *Blake, Gender and Culture*, ed. Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne J. Connolly (London: Routledge, 2012), 11—25, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Nokuphiwa S. Langeni, “Gender Ambiguity in the Bible,” (Masters diss., Chicago: Chicago Theological Seminary, 2015), 1—36, 21. ‘Zir’ is one of a number of neopronouns used by and to signify nonbinary identity (Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginnet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 217). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Lori Hope Lefkovitz, *In Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2011), 47-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Kalmanofsky, *Gender-Play*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Adrian Thatcher, *God Sex, and Gender: An Introduction* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Rivkah Harris, “Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites,” *History of Religions* 30/3 (1991): 261—278, 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Harris, “Inanna-Ishtar,” 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Harris, “Inanna-Ishtar,” 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Johanna Stuckey, “‘Inanna and the *Huluppu* Tree’: One way of Demoting a Great Goddess,” *Cross-Quarterly for the Goddess Woman Lammas* 4/4 (2005): 1—8, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Stuckey, “Inanna,” 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Harris, “Inanna-Ishtar,” 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Carole Fontaine, "The Deceptive Goddess in Ancient Near Eastern Myth: Inanna and Inaras," in *Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Johanna W. H. Bos, Semeia, no. 42 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 261—278, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. For more on gender ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East see the following studies: Matthew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001); Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God’s Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Ann C. Gunter, *A Companion to Ancient Near Eastern Art* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019) especially John D. M. Green’s chapter, “Gender and Sexuality,” 179—209; Mark Masterson, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and James Robson, *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World*, ed. Mark Masterson, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and James Robson(London: Routledge, 2015); Theodore W. Burgh, *Listening to the Artifacts: Music Culture on Ancient Palestine* (London: T & T Clark International, 2006), especially 44—106; Illan Peled, *Masculinities and Third Gender: the Origins and Nature of an Institutionalized Gender Otherness in the Ancient Near East* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Gender and queer studies that focus on interpreting the Bible, indeed any historical source, have been accused of anachronism. As Roland Boer comments, this criticism is often a result of “turf wars between historical-critical approaches and what are variously called ‘newer literary’ approaches” which are viewed as forcing “modern categories on an ancient text and are, therefore, invalid” (Roland Boer, “An Essay on Method,” in *Present and Future of Biblical Studies*, ed. Tat-Siong Benny Liew (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 15—33, 20). Such a claim makes the grave error in assuming that historical-critical, archaeological, social scientific and other methodologies grounded in “scientific methods” do not approach their sources with biases and subjectivity (Boer, “Method,” 20). As Caryn Tamber-Rosenau states explicitly, “It is true that the lens of gender criticism comes from the reader and not from the text, but this is the case with any method, even historical-critical ones” (Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag, Gender and Performance in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Literature* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press LLC, 2018), 23). Similarly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza stresses that it is not possible to fully know or understand the reality of the past (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Remembering the Past in Creating the Future: Historical-Critical Scholarship and Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*,ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (California: Scholars Press, 1985), 43—63, esp. 44-48). Thus, she claims that all historical studies are ideological and that they are unavoidably subjective. Consequently, all such studies employ anachronism in some shape or form (Schüssler Fiorenza, “Remembering,” 44-48; Colleen M. Conway, “The Production of the Johannine Community: A New Historicist Perspective,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 (2002): 479—495, 494). Those who claim to avoid anachronism in their historical work assume that they are capable of researching in an impartial manner, without subjectivity. Schüssler Fiorenza states that “scholarship claiming to be ‘objective’ and ‘realistic’ is not more value-free and less ideological because it hides its ‘subjectivity,’ ‘cultureboundeness,’ and ‘contemporary interests’ from itself” (Schüssler Fiorenza, “Remembering,” 47-48). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Linda Nicholson, “Interpreting Gender,” *Signs* 20/1 (1994): 79—105, 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. The fluidity and changeability of concepts relating to gender being changeable over time and space is discussed more on page 21. There it is discussed with a specific focus on the understanding of woman but is a discussion applicable to terms such as masculinity, gender more broadly and heteronormativity. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. See pages 26-28 for a discussion of the holistic approach I employ throughout this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Teresa J. Hornsby, “The Annoying Woman: Biblical Scholarship After Judith Butler,” in *Bodily Citations; Religion and Judith Butler,* ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 71—93, 74; Beasley, *Gender,* 12; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3-4, 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag,* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, “Judith Butler—In Theory,” in *Bodily Citations; Religion and Judith Butler,* ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1—15, 5-7; John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Armour and St. Ville, “Judith Butler,” 5-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 78, 179; Annika [Yannik] Thiem, “No Gendered Bodies,” *OTE* 20 (2007): 456—470, 465; Celine-Marie Pascale, “Common sense, gender and the politics of queer visibility,” *Gender Research* 13 (2015): 39—59, 45; Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Pascale, “Common,” 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Edwards, *Cultures*, 99-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Jodie Taylor, *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-making* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010); Reich, “Genderfuck,” 121; David Gauntlett, *Media*, *Gender and Identity* (London: Rutledge, 2005), 139; David Tabb Stewart, “LGBT/Queer Hermeneutics and the Hebrew Bible,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 15/3 (2017): 289—314, 292; Richards, Bouman and Barker, “Introduction,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Butler, *Bodies*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Butler, *Bodies*; Pascale, “Common,” 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 78; Bolich, *Dress*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Butler, *Bodies*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Bantam, 1952), 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Aysha W. Musa, “Judith; constructions of gender and sexuality in the Apocryphal *Book of Judith*,” (Masters diss., Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Monique Wittig’s work on the creative power of language supports Butler’s claim that gender is created, in part, through a naming process. Wittig argues that, language constructs gender as binary through the use of and perpetuation of binarised language (Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind; And Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 14). [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. For Butler language has a creative and productive power through naming (Pascale, “Common,” 46); a discursive practice “enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler, *Bodies*, 13). For the purposes of this chapter, the process of naming using gender terms and proper nouns as names is the focus as this relates directly to Jael and how their gender can be interpreted. However, this creative process of naming which Butler discusses does not just apply to proper names, naming individuals and naming gender. This naming process is much broader than the way in which it is used in this thesis. In naming something, language is used to create boundaries and through the reiteration and reinforcement of these boundaries the naming process is given authority and thus creates what it names (Butler, *Bodies*, 8). Thus, naming can be an act of power, of domination (Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech; A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 28). “Being named is a necessary condition for becoming a subject… and also constitutes the way the subject is read by others” (Cristyn Davies, “Becoming Sissy: A Response to Davide McInnes,” in *Judith Butler in Conversation: Analyzing the Texts and Talk of Everyday Life,* ed.Bronwyn Davies (London: Routledge, 2008), 117—135, 121). While naming forces a description and limitations it can also be an act of power through stripping meaning or clarity and as such can be a tool to silence (Butler, *Excitable*, 28). For more on the broader expressive power of naming see the following studies: Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (London: Routledge, 2002); Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe, *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound,* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Victoria Pruin DeFrancisco and Catherine Helen Palczewski, *Communicating Gender Diversity, A Critical Approach* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007); Gill Jagger, *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 2008); David Adger, *Language Unlimited: The Science Behind Our Most Creative Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Butler, *Excitable.* [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Jael’s name is recognised as masculine due to the form it takes in the Hebrew (Bronner, “Valorized,” 87). A discussion of this name is reserved for Chapter 1, in particular pages 58-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Wolde, “Deborah,” 292, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Jack [Judith] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Halberstam, *Female,* 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Halberstam, *Female,* 1; Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 68; Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. It is not within the remit of this thesis to explore the advantages or disadvantages of disrupting what is related to the categories of femininity and masculinity. However, my choice to resist disrupting masculinity and femininity is informed by Julia Serano and Barnsley who stress that “shattering” the categories of femininity and masculinity undermines trans individuals’ right to claim, for themselves, a stable gender (Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007), 359; Barnsley, “Grounding Theology,” 51). Rather than challenging the categories of femininity and masculinity, I work towards upsetting the constructed notion that masculinity and femininity are the only two genders that are fixed and mutually exclusive. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Nicholson, “Interpreting,”, 100-101, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Nicholson, “Interpreting,” 100-101, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Nicholson, “Interpreting,” 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Guest, *Beyond*, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Halberstam, *Female*, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Rosenberg, “New Authorities,” 595. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Nicholson, “Interpreting Gender,” 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. For examples of studies that recognise that Jael does not behaviour as is expected of women see Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 32; Conway, *Sex and Slaughter,* 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. For examples of studies that highlight that Jael does not perform as is expected of men see Klein, “Spectrum, 30; Elie Assis, “’The Hand of a Woman’: Deborah and Yael (Judges 4),” *JHS* 5/19 (2005): 1—12, 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Reich, “Genderfuck,” 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 32–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Butler, *Gender Trouble,* xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Guest, *Beyond,* 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Bal, *Murder,* 128; Guest, “Gender Reversal, 19; Niditch, *Judges,* 66; Bledstein, “Judges,” 40; Reis, “Uncovering,” 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Nicole J. Ruane, “When Women Aren’t Enough: Gender Criticism in Feminist Hebrew Bible Interpretation,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect. Volume 3: Methods*,ed. Susanne Scholz (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 243—260, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Butler, *Gender Trouble,* xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 9; Ruane, “Women,” 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Beasley, *Gender*, 69; Armour and St. Ville, “Judith Butler,” 2; Guest, *Beyond,* 18; Ruane, “Women,” 245-246; Stewart, “LGBT,” 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Butler, *Bodies*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Guest, “Gender Reversal.” [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 125; Butler, *Bodies*; Gauntlett, *Media*, 135; Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), 42; Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone, “Already Queer: A Preface,” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*,ed. Ken Stone and Teresa Hornsby (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), ix—1, x; Taylor, *Playing,* 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Julia M. Asher-Greve, “The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body,” in *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean,* ed. Maria Wyke (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998), 8—38, 10; Joan Acker, *Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Social Class: Dimensions of Inequality* (London: Sage Publications, 2013), 420; Joan Z. Spade and Catherine G. Valentine, *The Kaleidoscope of Gender, Prisms, Patterns, and Possibilities* (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Spade and Valentine, *Kaleidoscope*, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Hanne Loland, *Silent or Salient Gender, The Interpretation of Gendered God-Language in the Hebrew Bible, Exemplified in Isaiah 42, 46 and 49* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language,* 26; Shelly L. Koch, *Gender and Food, A Critical Look at the Food System* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Koch, *Gender*. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Catalina-Ionela Rezeanu, “The Relationship Between Domestic Space and Gender Identity: Some Signs of Emergence of Alternative Domestic Femininity and Masculinity,” *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 6/2 (2015): 9—29, 2; Koch, *Gender*. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory,* 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory,* 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. For example, Esther uses beauty, food and drink, all related to the feminine arsenal, to gain influence in politics and the governing of the country, roles and ambitions attributed as masculine (Esther 2-5). Comparatively, Judith uses beauty, seduction, food and drink to influence the outcome of the Israelite-Assyrian conflict, similarly to Jael (Judith 8-16). In addition, Herodias’ daughter, Salome, is famously said to have used their feminine wiles in conjunction with a banquet, where food and drink flowed freely, to bring about the death of John the Baptist (Matthew 14). Food and drink, what I refer to as nourishment, are central to all of these narratives and to the success of all these characters, labeled as women, including Jael and Jael’s narrative. Nourishment as well as the other women’s weapons mentioned, care and nurture and seduction are addressed in different chapters. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Shira Weiss, *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible: Philosophical Analysis of Scriptural Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Nicole Duran, “Having Men for Dinner: Deadly Banquets and Biblical Women,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 35/117 (2005): 117—124, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory,* 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Examples of studies that have addressed Jael’s gender makers in isolation from each other include: John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (Basingstoke: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1986); Stone, “Woman;” Bal, *Murder*; Exum, “Shared Glory;” Ackerman, *Warrior*; Niditch, *Judges*. These texts are a representative sample of this widespread practice in scholarship on Jael. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Stone, “Woman,” 80; Bal, *Murder*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Taylor, *Playing,* 99; Reich, “Genderfuck,” 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Taylor, *Playing,* 99; Reich, “Genderfuck,” 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Bronner, “Valorized,” 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Rosenberg, “New Authorities,” 593. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Rosenberg, “New Authorities,” 577; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2001), 327-328. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Julia M. Asher-Greve, “Feminist Research and Ancient Mesopotamia: Problems and Prospects,” in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible; Approaches, Methods and Strategies,* ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 218—238, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 406; Yee,“Hand"; Brenner, “Triangle,” 101; Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*,23-24; Mayfield, “Deborah,” 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Bal, *Murder*, 134; Yee*,* “Hand,” 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Marie M. Fortune, “Rape,” in *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 195—197, 196; Washington, “Violence,” 361; Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will; Men, Women and Rape* (England; Penguin Books, 1976), 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Guest, *Beyond,* 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Sarah Conly, “Seduction, Rape, and Coercion,” *Ethics* 115/1 (2004): 96—121, 112; Weiss, *Ethical*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. The Hebrew term in Jdg. 4:17, [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm), frequently translated as ‘wife,’ can be translated into English as ‘woman’ or ‘wife’ interchangeably, depending on the context it appears in. The biblical Hebrew has no specific word for ‘wife’ (Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32. This is discussed in more detail later in this chapter, see pages 50-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Halpern, “Resourceful,” 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. See pages 26-28 for a discussion of the holistic approach I apply. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Frederick L. Greene, “Introducing Queer Theory into the Undergraduate Classroom: Abstractions and Practical Applications,” *English Education* 28 (1996): 325—339, 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Chris Greenough, *Undoing Theology* (London: SCM Research, 2018), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Linda Tatro Herzer, *The Bible and the Transgender Experience: How Scripture Supports Gender Variance* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2016), 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory,* 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Brenner, “Triangle”; Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting”. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Ackerman, *Warrior*; Bal, Murder; Bal, *Death;* Mieke Bal, *Story-Telling;* Mieke Bal, “Dealing/With/Women: Daughters in the Book of Judges,” in *The Book and the Text; The Bible and Literary Theory*,ed. Regina M. Schwartz (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 16—40. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Brenner, “Triangle,” 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Lloyd, *Doubly*, 36; Brenner, “Triangle,” 101; Sjoberg and Gentry, “Reduced,” 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Brenner, “Triangle,” 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Athalya Brenner, “Introduction,” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 9—24, 14; Brenner, “Triangle,” 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Brenner, “Triangle,” 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman; Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Brenner, *Israelite*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. *Brenner, Israelite, 120.* [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Brenner, *Israelite*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Brenner, *Israelite*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Deborah is largely characterised as a manly woman in scholarship. Very few feminine features are attributed to this character by biblical scholars, differently to studies of Jael which focus much of their attention on elements of femininity embodied by Jael. Despite this difference, many of the same issues occur in studies on Jael and studies of Deborah, namely the recognition of Deborah’s manly and masculine behaviours but the perpetuation of Deborah being labelled as a woman. While a case could be made that Deborah, like Jael, is better understood as gender ambiguous, rather than as a woman, such a discussion is not within the remit of this thesis. For more on Deborah see the following studies: Ackerman, *Warrior*; Exum, “Shared Glory”; Rasmussen, “Deborah,” 79—95; Shaw, “Constructions;” Niditch, *Judges*; Klein, “From Deborah;” Assis, “Hand.” [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Ackerman, Warrior, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Ackerman, Warrior, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Ackerman, Warrior, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Stone, “Woman,” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Stone, “Woman,” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 17; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Bal, *Death,* 212-213; Bal, “Dealing,” 17; Bal, *Murder*, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Independence, control and killing, discussed on pages 65-68, 72-78 and 86-87 respectively, are widely binarised as masculine by gender scholars as well as biblical scholars (Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The Lenses of Gender* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 119; Alexander, “Feminism,” 92; Lloyd, *Doubly*, 22; Sandra L. Gravett, Karla G. Bohmback, F. V. Greifenhagen and Donald C. Polaski*, An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible; A Thematic Approach* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 134; David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties; The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 214). The masculine construction of these behaviours is further addressed in the following Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Bal, *Murder,* 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Bal, *Murder,* 121; Bal, *Death,* 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Bal, *Murder,* 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Bal, *Murder,* 128, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Brownmiller, *Against*, 378; Pamela Gordon and Harold C. Washington, “Rape as a Military Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 308—326, 323; Bal, *Death,* 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Bal, *Murder,* 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Bal, *Murder,* 121; Stone, “Woman,” 79; Hackett, “Days of Jael,” 28; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 394; Conway, *Sex and Slaughter,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael; Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2005), Guest, “Gender Reversal”; Guest, *Beyond*. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Katherine J. Dell, “Book Review: When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Sage Publications* 110/856 (2007): 283—284, 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Guest, *Beyond,* 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. This rape imagery is addressed in my final chapter, ‘Sexual Assault of Sisera.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Guest, “From Gender Reversal,” 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Yee*,* “Hand.” [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Langeni, “Gender.” [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Yee*,* “Hand,” 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Yee*,* “Hand,” 99-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Yee*,* “Hand,” 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Yee*,* “Hand,” 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Langeni, “Gender,” 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Langeni, “Gender,” 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Langeni, “Gender,” 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Langeni, “Gender,” 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Langeni’s use of a nonbinary pronoun draws attention to Joseph’s nonbinary gender whilst also perpetuating the binarisation of Jael’s gender by not applying a nonbinary pronoun to them. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Langeni, “Gender,” 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Asher-Greve, “Feminist,” 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Francisco Valdes, “Unpacking Hetero-Patriarchy: Tracing the Conflation of Sex, Gender & Sexual Orientation to Its Origins,” *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 8/1 (1996): 161—212, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Asher-Greve, “Feminist,” 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Asher-Greve, “Feminist,” 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Asher-Greve, “Feminist,” 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Guest, *Deborah,* 6; Musa, “Judith.” [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Guest, *Deborah,* 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. Musa, “Judith.” [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Stone, “Woman,” 79, Brenner, “Introduction”; Johanna W. H. Bos, “Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38; Judges 4: 17-22; Ruth 3,” *Semeia* 42 (1988): 37—67, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Langeni, “Gender,” 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Langeni, “Gender,” 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. Asher-Greve, “Feminist,” 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Asher-Greve, “Feminist,” 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Although I acknowledge, and work with, binary constructions of femininity and masculinity, I do not understand these two gender expressions as being mutually exclusive. I perceive binary genders to be performable simultaneously. I recognise that there is an array of ways in which gender can be performed, with many being performed through different combinations and to differing degrees of what have been constructed as feminine and masculine. Therefore, while attributing gender to behaviours may be understood as a binary approach, recognising that they can be performed together, in a kaleidoscope of ways, allows nonbinary expressions of gender to be represented despite binary language and binary concepts of masculinity and femininity being employed. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Introducing a woman, as Jael is framed as in scholarship, as a wife is both traditional and safe in the Hebrew Bible. It is traditional in that it is a widespread practice to introduce women in relation to men, namely their husband or father (Eric S. Christianson, “The Big Sleep: Strategic Ambiguity in Judges 4-5 and in Classic *film noir*,” *Biblical Interpretation* 15(2007): 519—548, 533). It is a safe introduction as it presents Jael as conforming to heteronormative and binary constructions of gender. Thus, a woman introduced in this way is expected to be meek and mild and subservient as well as submissive to men in general (Christianson, “Big Sleep,” 533). The safety aspect of this form of introduction, where Jael is introduced as a woman and as a wife, however, does not just refer to societal expectations of women’s place and behaviour but also applies to the woman’s safety. A woman introduced without a man is unattached and as Bach stresses “unattached means unprotected and unsupervised,” and potentially in danger from other men (Bach, *Women,* 201). [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. As is explored fully later in this chapter, [’eš*et*](https://biblehub.com/hebrew/eshet_802.htm)can be translated into English as ‘woman’ or ‘wife’ interchangeably, depending on the context it appears in. This is because biblical Hebrew has no specific word for ‘wife’ (Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32). [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Angela Clark-Oates, Duane Roen and Sherry Rankins-Robertson,“Understanding the Life Narratives of Immigrants Through Naming Practices,” in *Rhetorics of Names and Naming,* ed. Star Medzerian Vanguri (London: Routledge, 2016),89—102, 89; Jane Pilcher, “Name and “Doing Gender”: How Forenames and Surnames Contribute to Gender Identities, Difference, and Inequalities,” *Sex Roles* 77 (2017): 812—822, 812; Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Rachel Thwaites, *Changing Names and Gendering Identity: Social Organisation in Contemporary Britain* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2017), 1-2; Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography; Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women’s Press, 1982), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Clark-Oates, Roen and Rankins-Robertson,“Understanding,” 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Halpern, “Resourceful,” 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Halpern, “Resourceful,” 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. This marital ambiguity is strengthened by thealternativetranslation of the Hebrew of Judges 4:17 in which marriage is absent. This is discussed below, see pages 52-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Olam, “Poem,” 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Olam, “Poem,” 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Bal, *Death,* 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Brenner, *Israelite,* 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Christianson, “Big Sleep,” 533-534. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Gray, *Joshua,* 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Olam, “Poem,” 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Soggin, Judges, 61-62; Rasmussen, “Deborah,” 92; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32; Abraham Malamat, “Mari and the Bible: Some Patterns of Tribal Organization and Institutions,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82/2 (1962): 143—150, 144-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Bronner, “Valorized,” 80; Olam, “Poem,” 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 105-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Rasmussen, “Deborah,” 92, Soggin, Judges, 61-62; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Ackerman, *Warrior,* 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Malamat, “Mari,” 144-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Soggin, *Judges,* 62, 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Ackerman, *Warrior,* 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Malamat, “Mari,” 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Halpern, despite noting the potential translation of Jdg. 4:17 as “the woman of the Qenite community/band,” states that there is “no doubt” that “Jael is “the wife of Heber the Qenite” (Halpern, “Resourceful,” 393). Halpern is the only biblical scholar that I have discovered who notes the ‘clan’ translation yet chooses to perpetuate the ‘husband’ translation. Halpern provides no explanation as to why there is “no doubt” about Jael being Heber’s wife. However, the discussion that follows Halpern’s statement, a discussion that centres around Heber’s treaty with King Jabin as the explanation as to why Sisera fled to where Jael and Heber live, indicates that for him, Jael’s marriage to a man called Heber is foundational to his arguments as to why Sisera ended up near Jael’s tent. (Halpern, “Resourceful,” 393). The lack of discussion regarding Halpern’s confidence in the translation of “Jael, wife of Heber,” coupled with the immediate discussion of Heber’s treaty indicates that Halpern’s translation is grounded in heteronormative and binary assumptions, namely that Jael, who he believes to be a woman, is married to a man and that Sisera was searching fora man, rather than a woman, to save him from those who he was fleeing from. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. Soggin, *Judges,* 62, 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 105-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32-33; Bal, *Death,* 26; Olam, “Poem,” 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Malamat, “Mari,” 144-146; Soggin, *Judges,* 62, 65-66; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. This is particularly clear when biblical scholars comment on Sisera’s use of a masculine imperative to address Jael, who they believe to be a woman (Reis, “Uncovering,” 31). It has been suggested that Sisera misgenders Jael because he is more comfortable addressing men (Olam, “Poem,” 80). Thus, this queer aspect of the narrative, one that potentially draws attention to Jael’s nonbinary gender, is overlooked in favour of maintaining dominant discourses of binary gender. This example is further addressed in the later subsection on ‘Sisera’s Masculine Command’ on pages 63-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Greenough, *Queer Theologies*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. J Soggin, *Judges,* 61-62; Rasmussen, “Deborah,” 92; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32; Malamat, “Mari,” 144-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. Bach, *Women,* 201; Soggin, *Judges,* 61-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. While Jael remains within a patriarchal society, whether they have a husband or not (Williams, “Feminine,” 74-75), Jael’s narrative takes place almost completely within “the tent of Jael” (Jdg. 4:17), despite Jael not being restricted to this space. I claim that within this space Jael is autonomous since there is no man overseeing Jael. Thus, Jael is free to choose how to behave within “the tent of Jael.” [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. Ann M. Shanahan, “Playing House: Staging Experiments About Women in Domestic Space,” *Theatre Topics* 23/2 (2013): 129—144, 129; Jacob L. Wright, “Deborah’s War Memorial The Composition of Judges 4–5 and the Politics of War Commemoration,” *ZAW* 123/4 (2011): 516–534, 528; Cheryl B. Anderson, *Women, Ideology and Violence; Critical Theory and the Construction of Gender in the Book of the Covenant and the Deuteronomic Law* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Susan Ackerman, “What if Judges had been written by a Philistine?,” *Biblical Interpretation* 8/1 (2000): 33—41, 38; Bach, *Women,* 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. The name Jael appears in ancient records which are external and unrelated to the biblical text. For example, the name Jael is included in the Aphrodisias Inscription in Greek (*Iael*). Since the name appears in Greek, rather than in Hebrew as in Judges 4 and 5, it does not influence my discussion of Jael’s gender. It is mentioned here merely to highlight that the name can be found in other contexts as likely referring to a man rather than to a woman. Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum in their joint study on this inscription conclude that this name can easily be understood as a woman’s name “but is more probably a man’s” (Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1987), 41). Although Bernadette J. Brooten disagrees with Reynolds and Tannenbaum, gendering the name as feminine, her reason for disagreeing draws directly on Judges 4 and 5 where she understands Jael to be a “well-known” biblical woman (Bernadette J. Brooten, “The Gender of *Iael* in the Jewish Inscription From Aphrodisias,” in *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism, and Christian Origins,* ed. Harold W. Attridge, John J. Collins and Thomas H. Tobin (London: University Press of America, Inc., 1990), 163—173, 170). Therefore, my claim that Jael in Judges 4 and 5 should not be understood as a woman disrupts Brooten’s foundations for gendering the name as feminine and is strengthened by Reynolds’ and Tannenbaum’s assertion that *Iael* can refer to a man (Reynolds and Tannenbaum, *Jews*, 41). [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Bronner, “Valorized,” 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Langeni, “Gender,” 7; Nicole Wilkinson Duran, *Having Men for Dinner: Biblical Women’s Deadly Banquets* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 18; Wolde, “Deborah,” 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 21, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. There are, however, a few biblical names that do not conform to this way of gendering the individual they are naming. For example, Shomer (2 Kgs 12:21), whose name means “[k]eeper *or* guarded of the Lord… is a masculine name” despite the character being understood to be a woman (Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1988), 161), (italics in original). Abigail’s name also differs in that its meaning is grounded in masculinity through the root *Abi* or *Avi* meaning “my father.” For this reason, it would be expected to be a man’s name, yet in the Bible is attributed to a woman (1 Sam. 25) (Malka Muchnik, *The Gender Challenge of Hebrew* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 210; Sir William Smith, Horatio Balch Hackett and Ezra Abbot*, Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge Riverside Press, 1872), 2061. There are very few studies that address the gendering of biblical names, those that do note that there are some names that suggest a gender other than that with which they are commonly associated with. Such studies stress that these names are anomalies and some include the name Jael in their lists and discussions (Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, Part I, Palestine 330 BCE – 200 CE* (Germany: Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2002); Muchnik, *Gender,* 210; Lockyer, Women; Smith, Balch and Abbot, *Dictionary*. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Clark-Oates, Roen and Rankins-Robertson,“Understanding,” 89; Pilcher, “Name,” 812; Elias, *Society*; Thwaites, *Changing Names,* 1-2; Dworkin, *Pornography,* 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Butler, *Bodies,* 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Pilcher, “Name,” 815; Muchnik, *Gender,* 210 [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Pilcher, “Name,” 812-814, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Pilcher, “Name,” 814; D. Figilo, “Boys Named Sue: Disruptive Children and their Peers,” *Education Finance and Policy* 2 (2007): 376—394. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Pilcher, “Name,” 814. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 21; Wolde, “Deborah,” 292; Langeni, “Gender,” 7; Bronner, “Valorized,” 87; Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Asher-Greve, “Feminist,” 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Rosenberg uses Micah 2:5 as an example of a biblical text that is viewed as in need of correction rather than being celebrated for its potential queerness (Rosenberg, “New Authorities,” 593). [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Rosenberg, “New Authorities,” 577; Tov, *Textual,* 327-328. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Rosenberg, “New Authorities,” 577. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Olam, “Poem,” 74; Boling, *Judges*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. Reis, “Uncovering,” 31; Olam, “Poem,” 74; Bal, *Murder,* 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Reis, “Uncovering,” 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Reis, “Uncovering,” 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Olam, “Poem,” 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Bal, *Murder,* 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Biblical scholars, such as Alice Bach, state that “women could not own property” (Bach, *Women,* xx). Others comment that women could own property but highlight that it was a rare occurrence. Therefore, while the right to own property was not exclusively reserved for men in the Hebrew Bible it was the norm for men to own property and for that property to include women themselves. Women owning property was rare enough to be viewed as unconventional (Carolyn Pressler, “Wives and Daughters, Bond and Free: Views of Women in the Slave Laws of Exodus 21.2-11,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 147—173, 166; Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Foreword” in Richard H. Hiers’ *Women’s Rights and the Bible; Implications for Christian Ethics and Social Policy* (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012), ix—xv, xiii; Bernhard Lang, *Hebrew Life and Literature; Selected Essays of Bernhard Lang* (Germany: Ashgate, 2008), 78). [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Gray, *Joshua,* 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Gray, *Joshua,* 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Langeni, “Gender,” 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Barnabas Lindars, *Judges 1-5. A New Translation and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 197, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Bem, *Lenses,* 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Bal, *Death,* 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. Bal, *Death,* 26; Olam, “Poem,” 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Ackerman, “Judges,” 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Klein, “Spectrum,” 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Shaw, “Constructions,” 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Scholars of gender have almost unanimously attributed independence and assertive behaviour as masculine within a binary framework of gender (Bem, *Lenses,* 119; Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language,* 165). [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. Klein, “Spectrum,” 29; Bronner, “Valorized,” 87; Bal, *Death*, 26; Olam, “Poem,” 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*; de Hemmer Gudme, “Invitation,” 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, “Death at the Hand of a Woman: Hospitality and Gender in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Gender and Methodology in the Ancient Near East*, ed. S. L. Budin, M. Cifarelli, A. Garcia-Ventura and A. M. Alba (Barcelona: University of Barcelona, 2019), 23—33, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Mayfield, “Deborah,” 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*; de Hemmer Gudme, “Invitation,” 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 42; Peter Merchant, “Inhabiting The Interspace: De Tabley, Judges, ‘Jael,’” *Victorian Poetry* 36/2 (1998): 187—204, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Olam, “Poem,” 79; Brenner, “Triangle,” 101; Bal, *Murder*,124. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women; Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 182-183. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Mayfield, “Deborah,” 319; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*,87. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*,83-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. de Hemmer Gudme, “Invitation,” 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. Merchant, “Inhabiting,” 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Mayfield, “Deborah,” 319; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*,87. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Klein, Triumph, 42; Merchant, “Inhabiting,” 8; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*,85; Bal, Death, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*,83-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Bem, *Lenses,* 119; Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language,* 165; Mayfield, “Deborah,” 319; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social,* 83-84, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language,* 165; Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction,* 134; Alexander, “Feminism,” 92; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social,* 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Sylvia Chant, “The ‘feminization of poverty’ and the ‘feminization’ of anti-poverty programmes: room for revision?,” in *The Women, Gender & Development Reader*, ed. Nalini Visvanathan, Lynn Duggan, Nan Wiegersma and Laurie Nisonoff (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2011), 174—197, 186; Lloyd, *Doubly,* 34; Bach, *Women,* 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. That women can provide a safe space for men to hide in is not a new concept. Niditch notes the “traditional motif of the woman who hides the soldiers” (Niditch, *Judges*, 66). An example appears in Joshua 2 where Rahab hides the men that Joshua has sent to spy on the city. The men that Rahab hides, like Sisera, are hiding from other men, from people who are viewed as posing a threat to them in a way that women are not expected to do (Niditch, *Judges,* 66). Therefore, Jael’s feminine performance of offering nourishment disguises the danger Jael presents to Sisera by obscuring Jael’s masculinity (Riviere, “Womanliness,” 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Anderson, *Women,* 8; Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge; On Gendering Desire and ‘Sexuality’ in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Brill, Leiden, 1997), 178; Lloyd, *Doubly,* 36; Sjoberg and Gentry, “Reduced,” 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. See the ‘Thesis Introduction’ for an explanation of women’s weapons, especially pages 25-26 (Schüssler Fiorenza, Memory, 119). Demonstrating that nourishment is a biblical theme that has come to be framed as one of ‘women’s weapons’ is covered briefly because this topic has already been widely written about. For more on the biblical theme of women using nourishment against men, as one of ‘women’s weapons,’ see the following studies: Bach, *Women,* especially166-210; Duran, *Men*. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Schüssler Fiorenza, Memory, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Providing nourishment and providing hospitality should not be confused. Providing nourishment is framed as feminine. This is primarily due to its association with women and their domestic roles as carers (Bach, *Women,* 166-210; Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction,* 140-147). Providing hospitality, however, is a masculine act that can only be offered by men (Matthews and Benjamin, *Social,* 82-84; Mayfield, “Deborah,” 319). Hospitality includes not only food and drink, but shelter, sanctuary, the promise of safety and most importantly the invitation to enter one’s home in order to receive these aspects of hospitality (Gray, *Joshua,* 259; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social,* 82-85). In the Hebrew Bible offering hospitality is understood as a man’s obligation, one that ensures their own safety when they themselves are travelling and are in need of hospitality (Matthews and Benjamin, *Social,* 82). Although some of the actions involved in offering hospitality are similar to that of caring and nurturing, and may well be enacted by women at the behest of men, the act of offering hospitality falls to men unlike the roles of caring and nurturing. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as Masquerade,” in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), 35—45, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Taking initiative and being assertive are both behaviours that have been binarised as relating to masculinity, rather than femininity according to biblical scholars and scholars of gender (Deborah F. Sawyer, “Gender Criticism: A New Discipline in Biblical Studies or Feminism in Disguise?,” in *A Question of Sex? Gender and Difference in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed Deborah W. Rooke (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 2—20, 8; Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language,* 165; Brenner, *Intercourse,* 178; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Bach, *Women,* 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Bach, *Women*; Duran, *Men*. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. Bach, *Women,* 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Bach, *Women*; Duran, “Men”; Meir Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative, Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. Bach, *Women*. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. Duran, “Having Men.” [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Bach, *Women*, 183-184. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Bach, *Women*, 183-184. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. Sternberg, *Poetics,* 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. Eckert, and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language,* 26; Anderson, *Women,* 97; Beverly Gordon, “Woman’s Domestic Body; The Conceptual Conflation of Women and Interiors on the Industrial Age,” *Gendered Spaces and Aesthetics* 31/4 (1996): 281—301, 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Andrea Adolf, *Food and Femininity in Twentieth-Century British Women’s Fiction* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), 79; Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, “‘Bread from Heaven, Bred from the Earth’: Recent Trends in Jewish Food History Writing” in *Writing Food History, A Global Perspective*, ed. Kyri W. Claflin and Peter Scholliers (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 121—140, 134-135; Cristina Mazzoni, *The Women in God’s Kitchen, Cooking, Eating and Spiritual Writing* (London: Continuum, 2005), 41; Bach, *Women*, 176; Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528; Eckert, and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language*, 26-27; Bach, *Women*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Bach, *Women*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Bach, *Women*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Herzer, *Bible,* 83; Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Bach, *Women*, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Klein, *Triumph,* 42; J. Cheryl Exum, “Whose Interests Are Being Served?,” in *Judges and Method; New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 65—95, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,”35-36 [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,”35-36 [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,”35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Bal, *Murder*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32-33; Olam, “Poem,” 77; White, “Steps of Jael,” 5; Clines. [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Letitia Anne Peplau and Kristin P. Flanagan, “Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals in Relationships,” in *Encyclopaedia of Women and Gender; Sex Similarities and Differences and the Impact of Society on Gender*, ed. Judith Worell (London: Academic Press, 2002), 657—667, 659; Bruce A. Jacobs and Richard Wright, *Street Justice; Retaliation in the Criminal Underworld* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Peplau and Flanagan, “Lesbians,” 659; Jacobs and Wright, *Street*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Klein, *Triumph,* 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Sasson, “Breeder,” 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Yee*,* “Hand,” 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. Yee*,* “Hand,” 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. That warfare is strongly associated with masculinity is discussed and explored in the following chapter ‘Killing Sisera’ (Peplau and Flanagan, “Lesbians,” 659; Jacobs and Wright, *Street*, 75). See pages 83-88, especially pages 85-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Bal, *Death,* 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Frymer-Kensky, *Wake,* 139; Olam, “Poem,” 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Thiem, “Gendered,” 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory,* 117; Sternberg, *Poetics,* 282; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 68; Reis, “Uncovering,” 35; Bach, *Women,* 183; Pamela J. Milne, “What Shall We Do with Judith? A Feminist Assessment of a Biblical ‘Heroine,” in *A Feminist Companion to Tobit and Judith*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan and Helen Efthimiadis-Keith (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 117—137, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. Riviere, “Womanliness,” 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Bal, *Murder,* 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. Wijk-Bos, *Reformed,* 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. Rosenberg, “New Authorities,” 582. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Greene, “Introducing,” 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Greenough, “Queer Eye,” 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. I refer to Jael’s death-dealing act as killing, differently to biblical scholarship on Jael which commonly refers to the same act as murder. This is demonstrated in the following texts: Bal, *Murder,* 107; Bal, *Death,* 215;Ackerman, *Warrior,* 182; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 22; Frolov, “Sleeping,” 322; Conway, *Sex and Slaughter,* 17-18; Merchant, “Inhabiting,” 187. I do not wish to label Jael as a murderer without due consideration of the definition and criteria of murder and whether or not Jael’s act fulfils the criteria of murder. However, it is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss the definition of murder, nor is it within the remit of this thesis to assess whether or not Jael can or should be considered a murderer. Such considerations would take away space and would diverge from the focus of this study, which is Jael’s gender. Consequently, I use the more ambiguous term kill, instead of murder. Killing refers to a wide range of death causing acts, both legal such as “capital punishment, war, and self-defence,” and illegal (Laura Schlessinger and Stewart Vogel, *The Ten Commandments, The Significance of God’s Laws in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1998), 175; Kate Cook, Mark James and Richard Lee, *Core Statutes on Criminal Law 2014-15* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 99). Labelling Jael’s act as killing, rather than as murder, supports the ambiguity that the text presents and allows me to discuss Jael’s act without judging its legality or morality. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Greenough, *Undoing*, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Although there are many aspects of Jael’s text that suggest Jael’s masculinity only those that relate directly to Sisera’s death will be considered in this chapter. For example, Jael’s assertive invitation for Sisera to enter their tent, while readable as a performance of masculinity, is not discussed in this chapter since it has no direct bearing on Sisera’s death (Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 35-36; Sterman, “Themes,” 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Washington, “Violence,” 361. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. While the following comments evidence that some scholars acknowledge Jael’s performance of masculinity, they do not present them as equally significant as Jael’s performances of femininity for understanding Jael’s gender. Jael’s femininity is treated as primary and reinforced through the exclusive use of feminine pronouns when discussing both Jael’s femininity and their masculinity. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Yee, “Hand.” [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1967). [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Washington, “Violence;” Gordon and Washington, “Rape.” [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Exum, *Fragmented*. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Bal, *Murder*; Bal, Death; Mieke Bal, “Dealing.” [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. Yee, “Hand.” [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Clines, *Interested*; David J. A. Clines, “Being a Man in the Book of the Covenant,” in *Reading the Law: Studies in Honour of Gordon J. Wenham,* ed. J. G. McConville and Karl Moller (London: T & T Clark International, 2007), 3—9; Clines, “He-Prophets.” [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. These studies work from a binary perspective with different levels of adherence to the constructed binary framework of femininity and masculinity as separate and distinct. For example, Yee recognises that there are more than two ways of understanding gender, evident from their use of language such as “anomaly,” “liminal” (99) and “disruptive” (105) when discussing gender. Despite this awareness of the potential flexibility of gender she maintains an either/or binary framework by labelling a character that she interprets as performing gender in an anomalous manner as a woman without explanation (Yee, “Hand”). Differently, Clines adheres to rigid constructions of binary gender, although he acknowledges that these binary categories are social constructions (Clines, *Interested*, 214). He presents masculinity and femininity in the traditional sense, as separate, distinct and oppositional. His work, while extremely useful for understanding the extremes of masculinity and femininity, does not recognise the flexibility of gender. Drawing from and building upon biblical studies that are grounded in binary frameworks of gender is not problematic for my study as I do not aim to dismantle the constructions of femininity and masculinity. Instead, I aim to highlight that they can be embodied by a single individual and can be embodied simultaneously. Further, my use of binary concepts of gender works to demonstrate that Jael cannot be defined by merely one of those categories since they perform both, often simultaneously, in a gender ambiguous manner. As addressed in the ‘Thesis Introduction,’ especially on pages 13-20, I work with binary constructions of gender to highlight that gender is performable in more than two distinct ways and thus that an individual who performs femininity *and* masculinity is not appropriately defined by a single binary label. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. In addition to the texts mentioned here and referred to throughout this thesis, for more on violence, killing and warfare as masculine constructs in the Hebrew Bible see the following texts: Harold Washington, “‘Lest He Die in Battle and Another Man Take Her’: Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Laws of Deuteronomy 20-22,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* , ed.Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levonson and Tikva Frymer-Kensky; *JSOTSupp* 262 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 185—213; Tracy Maria Lemos, *Violence and Personhood in Ancient Israel and Comparative Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Brian Charles DiPalma, *Masculinities in the Court Tales of Daniel: Advancing Gender Studies in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018); Cynthia R. Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* (Harvard: Eisenbrauns, 2004). For more on violence, killing and warfare as masculinised constructions in the Book of Judges, in addition to the studies referenced in this chapter, see the following texts: Marty Alan Michelson, *Reconciling Violence and Kingship, A Study of Judges and 1 Samuel* (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011); Mercedes L. Garcia Bachmann, *Judges* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2002); Roy L. Heller, *Conversations with Scripture: The Book of Judges* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Wittig, *Straight*. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity; Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19/6 (2005): 829—859. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Edwards, *Cultures*. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Washington, “Violence,” 330-331. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. Washington, “Violence,” 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Washington, “Violence,” 329-330. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Washington, “Violence,” 329-330. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. Caryn A. Reeder, “Deuteronomy 21.10-14 and/as Wartime Rape,” *JSOT* 41/3 (2017): 313—336, 317; Elizabeth Yardley, David Wilson and Adam Lynes, “A Taxonomy of Male British Family Annihilators, 1980-2012,” *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 53/2 (2014): 117—140. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. Wittig, *Straight*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. Wittig, *Straight*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. Brenner, “Introduction,” 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. See the following texts for sustained discussions on violence as a weapon used against women in the prophetic literature: Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love; Marriage, Sex and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Naomi Graetz, “God is to Israel as Husband is to Wife: The Metaphoric Battering of Hosea’s Wife,” in *The Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 126—146; Carol J. Dempsey, “The Whore of Ezekiel 16: The Impact and Ramifications of Gender-Specific Metaphors in Light of Biblical Law and Divine Judgement,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East,* ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 57—79; Tamar Kamionkowski, “The ‘Problem’ of Violence in Prophetic Literature,” in *Religion and Violence*,ed. David A. Bernat and Jonathan Klawans (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 38—47; Athalya Brenner, “Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections,” *JSOT* 70 (1996): 63—86. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. Clines, *Interested,* 217; Clines, “He-Prophets,” 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. Stuart Macwilliam, *Queer Theory and the Prophetic Marriage Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Routledge, 2011), 39; Julia M. O’Brien, *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of The Bible and Gender Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Clines, *Interested*, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. Clines, *Interested,* 216; Niditch, *Judges*; Yee, “Hand,” 111; Conway, *Sex and* Slaughter, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Clines, *Interested,* 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic,” 840. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Lisa Isherwood, “Pornography,” in *An A to Z of Feminist Theology,* ed. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 179—180; Anderson, *Women,* 96; Sjoberg and Gentry, “Reduced,” 6; Diana Milillo, “Rape as a Tactic of War; Social and Psychological Perspectives,” *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 21/2, (2006): 196—205, 196; Brownmiller, *Against*, 396. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Edwards, *Cultures*, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Edwards, *Cultures*, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Edwards, *Cultures*, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 169, fn 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Stephen D. Moore, “Final Reflections on Biblical Masculinity,” *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă, Bible in the Modern World 33 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 240—255, 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Williams, “Feminine,”74-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Justin Collings, *Democracy’s Guardians, A History of the German Federal Constitutional Court 1951-2001* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 266; Dianne Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry 1650-1850* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Nancy Huston, “The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes,” in *The Female Body in Western Culture; Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 119—139, 130, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Channelle Tarabay and Wayne Warburton, “Anger, aggression and violence: it matters that we know the difference,” *The Conversation,* 01 September 2017, http://theconversation.com/anger-aggression-and-violence-it-matters-that-we-know-the-difference-82918. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Cory Freivogel, “Feminizing the Enemy: The Sexual Exploitation of Men as a Tactic of War,” *McKendree.edu*, Accessed: 25 July 2017, http://www.mckendree.edu/academics/scholars/issue14/freivogel.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Dugaw, *Warrior,* 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Ackerman, *Warrior,* 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. Niditch, *Judges,* 59-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. Musa, “Judges.” [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Musa, “Judges.” [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Peplau and Flanagan, “Lesbians,” 659; Jacobs and Wright, *Street*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Peplau and Flanagan, “Lesbians,” 659; Jacobs and Wright, *Street*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. Yee,“Hand,” 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. Yee,“Hand,” 108, 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Yee’s study goes further than most studies by recognising Jael’s “liminal” gender give their actions, yet, they nonetheless label Jael as a woman (Yee,“Hand,” 99). [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32; Frolov, “Sleeping,” 322; Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 17; Merchant, “Inhabiting,” 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Bal, *Murder,* 128, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Bal, *Murder,* 128, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. Bal, *Murder,* 128, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. Bal, *Murder,* 128, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. Butler, *Gender Trouble,* xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Guest, “Gender Reversal,” 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. Stone, “Woman,” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. Stone, supported by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, understands the “above” position as the masculine position. Bourdieu argues that the language of above and below is gendered, in part, due to its significance regarding heterosexual sexual intercourse. Therefore, Stone’s perception of the gendering and reversed gendering of Sisera’s death scene is grounded in language that carries dichotomous connotations of gender relating to constructions of masculinity and femininity. The language of above and below draws on heteronormativity and binary gender based on the gendered expectations of men as the dominant and active gender in general, but in particular relating to sexual endeavours. Jael’s position of “above” is not only the masculine position, but is the position associated with power (Stone, “Woman,” 79; Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001; 29; Musa, “Judith”). [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. Bourdieu, Masculine, 30; Stone, “Woman,” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. Bal, *Death,* 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. Bal, *Murder*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Bal, *Death,* 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Asher-Greve, “Feminist,” 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. As discussed in the earlier chapter on ‘Jael’s Gender,’ existing research frequently interprets Jael as switching between masculinity and femininity, commonly framed as gender reversal, especially when Jael kills Sisera (Musa, “Judith”). Indications of Jael’s switching between binary genders is particularly clear from Lindars’ comment. Jael’s apparent switching between genders is most commonly conveyed when scholars frame Jael’s performances of masculinity as gender reversal. Lindars comments that “[a]t first she [Jael] entices Sisera with the bowl of milk, performing the woman’s part. But then she takes over the role of the man when she uses the tent-peg to penetrate his skull.” Not only does his language of “[a]t first” and “[b]ut then” indicate a switch, he states that “[f]inally, the proper roles are resumed,” suggesting that he understands Jael’s switching of genders as a performance of gender reversal (Lindars, *Judges*,275). Differently, I interpret Jael as performing femininity *and* masculinity simultaneously. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. Jael’s performances of mothering behaviours are the focus of the following chapter on ‘Jael’s Motherhood’ and thus are not discussed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. Alexia Panayiotou, *“*Spacing gender, gendering space:A radical “strong plot” in film,” *Management Learning* 46/4 (2014): 427—443, 428, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. Panayiotou, *“*Spacing,” 428. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Yihan Liu and Christopher Grey, “History, gendered space and organizational identity: An archival study of a university building,” *Human Relations* 71/5 (2017): 640—667, 644. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. S. M. Low and D. Lawrence-Zuniga, “Locating Culture,” in *The Anthropology of Space and Place, Locating Culture*, ed. S. M. Low and D. Lawrence-Zuniga (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1—48, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. For sustained discussions on the gendering of places and spaces see the following studies: Dörte Kuhlmann, *Gender Studies in Architecture: Space, Power and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2013); Mona Narain and Karen Gevirtz, *Gender and Space in British Literature, 1660-1820* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2014); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); Andrzej Zieleniec, *Space and Social Theory* (London: SAGE Publications, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. Gray, *Joshua,* 260; Bal, *Murder,* 59-60; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. See the previous chapter on ‘Jael’s Gender,’ especially pages 64-66, for examples of where biblical scholars reference Jael’s tent in order to bolster their assumptions of heteronormativity and binary gender, specifically Jael’s heteronormative position as wife and binary gender as a woman. Biblical scholars’ consideration of the tent largely focuses on the concern that the text incorrectly suggests Jael’s ownership of “the tent of Jael” (Jdg. 4:17). Numerous scholars ‘correct’ the text’s attribution of ownership explaining that Jael’s tent is a section of Heber’s tent or is a separate tent allocated to Jael, though Heber is still the owner. For the most part, this is the only way in which scholars are interested in Jael’s tent, when it supports their assumptions of binary gender and heteronormativity and thus strengthens their perception that Jael is a woman. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Brenner, *Israelite*, 120; Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528; Robert Alter, “From Line to Story in Biblical Verse,” *Poetics Today* 4/4 (1983): 615—637, 630-631; Bal, *Death*, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Hilary Lipka, “Queen Jezebel’s Masculinity,” in *Hebrew Masculinities Anew*, ed. Ovidiu Creanga (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2019), 125—150, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. Bal, *Murder*, 129-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. Bal, *Murder,* 129-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. Wijk-Bos, *Reformed,* 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. Lockyer, Women, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. Sedgwick, *Epistemology,* 11; Anderson, *Women,* 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Shanahan, “Playing,” 129; Gordon, “Woman’s,” 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Gordon, “Woman’s,” 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. Gordon, “Woman’s,” 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 19; Gordon, “Woman’s,” 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. Women are expected to care for children within the domestic sphere (Gordon, “Woman’s,” 285; Shanahan, “Playing,” 129; Ruth Madigan and Moira Munro, “Gender, House and ‘Home’: Social Meanings and Domestic Architecture in Britain,” *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 8/2 (1991): 116—132, 117; Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born; Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1995), 25; Rosemary Gillespie, “Childfree and Feminine; Understanding the Gender Identity of Voluntarily Childless Women,” *Gender and Society* 17/1 (2003): 122—136, 122; Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 2-3). In the following chapter on ‘Jael’s Motherhood,’ I discuss Jael’s role as mother. The links between expectations of women’s domesticity and the expectations of women to have and raise children and how Jael engages with these expectations of femininity are reserved for that later discussion. I mention here the expectation of women to care for children in the home merely to indicate that there are other ways Jael embodies the expectations of femininity and domesticity in relation to Sisera’s death. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. The sexual interaction that many biblical scholars read as present in the text (Jdg. 4:21, 5:26-27) can be perceived as a demonstration of Jael’s adherence to women’s expectations within the domestic space since women are expected to fulfil the sexual desires of men (Conway, *Sex and Slaughter,* 24; Olam, “Poem,” 93; Mayfield, “Deborah,” 318; Guest, *Deborah,* 130). This sexual interaction is the focus of this thesis’ final chapter on Jael’s ‘Sexual Assault of Sisera.’ To avoid repetition, the sexual element of Jael’s narrative is not discussed here. I mention this sexual interaction between Jael and Sisera here to indicate that there are numerous ways that Jael can be interpreted as adhering to expectations of feminine domesticity during Sisera’s death scene. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. Brenner, *Israelite*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. The immediate space surrounding Jael’s tent can be considered as part of the domestic space. Since the text does not indicate how far Jael ventured before inviting Sisera into their tent, whether Jael leaves the domestic space or not is not discussed here. For the purposes of this study it is enough to say that Jael’s narrative takes place within the domestic space and that if Jael does leave that space they do so for the briefest of time, with the intention of returning immediately. References to the tent and Jael’s movement between domestic space and public space, marks the boundary between inside the tent and assumptions of safety and outside of the tent and dangers of warfare. [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. Ackerman believes that Sisera approaches Jael’s tent without fear of Jael. The fear that Jael sooths when they say “have no fear” (Jdg. 4:18) is Sisera’s fear that he is being pursued (Ackerman, *Warrior,* 91-92). [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. Scholars from various fields of study have noted that the domestic space has been constructed as carrying connotations of safety. Roger Hancock and Julien Gillen argue that although in reality there are many variables, the domestic space is widely perceived as “safe,” with Anthony Fry employing the concept of *Safe Space* and B. Martin C. T. Mohanty remembering home nostalgically as a safe place (Roger Hancock and Julien Gillen, “Safe Places in Domestic Space: Two-Year-Olds at Play in their Homes,” *Children’s Geographies* 5/4 (2007): 337—351, 339; Anthony Fry, *Safe Space: How to Survive in a Threatening World* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1987) and Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do With It?,” in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies,* ed. T. de Lauretis (Indiana: Bloomington and Indiana University Press, 1986), 191—292). While what constitutes a safe space is open to interpretation, comfort, whether this be physical or psychological, is expected to be provided within the domestic space as a safe space (Hancock and Gillen, “Safe”). [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. For more on women being perceived as non-threatening, especially not towards men, see fn 300 on page 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. I understand Jael as demonstrating subservience but not obedience. While subservience and obedience are closely related and commonly undertaken simultaneously, they are not the same. John McIlhon stresses that “Subservience, however, is not a synonym for obedience” (John McIlhon, *Forty Days Plus Three; Daily Reflections for Lent and Holy Week* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 122). Subservience includes a perception that “your wishes [are] less important than those of other people,” including a willingness to be compliant. Subservience also involves an aspect of inferiority, which is not necessarily expected of obedience (Cambridge Dictionary, “subservient,” *Cambridge University Press*, 2019, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/subservient). Jael appears to fulfil the requirements of subservience by willingly acting as inferior to Sisera and tending to his needs. While obedience can be included in subservient acts, it is not a necessary part of subservience. Obedience carries various nuances based on context. Being obedient may well entail carrying out the wishes of others to the letter, whereas subservience does not demand this exactitude. Sisera’s request for water makes clear that he is thirsty. Jael quenches that thirst and thus is subservient to Sisera’s needs. Jael is not, however, obedient. “Obedience is simply translating what you hear into action,” Jael does not do this (C. Gene Wilkins, *Jesus on Leadership; Timeless Wisdom on Servant Leadership* (Illinois: Tyndale, LifeWay Press, 1998)). Thus, there are many circumstances where one can be obedient but not view their own “wishes as less important,” nor undertake the act of obedience willingly (Dictionary, “subservient”). Robert J. C. Young highlights that obedience without subservience, that is the willingness and desire to obey, is often practiced by colonised nations or individual slaves (Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies; Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2004), 192). Therefore, I am in agreement with Blessed Antonio Rosmini, when they say “that obedience (the same can be said about dependence) is not subservience” (Blessed Antonio Rosmini, *Philosophy of Politics; Society and its Purpose*, Trans. Denis Cleary and Terence Watson (Durham: Rosmini House, 2010), 120). [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. Anderson, *Women,* 8; Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction,* 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. Ulrika Widding, “Parenting ideals and (un-) troubled parent positions,” *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 23/1 (2015): 45—64, 48; Lloyd, *Doubly,* 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, The Wound of the Hero, Blood, Gender and Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Upinder Singh, *Political Violence in Ancient India* (London: Harvard University Press, 2017); Wallis R. Sanborn III, *The American Novel of War; A Critical Analysis and Classification System* (London: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. Bal takes Jael’s performances of masculinity a step further than many biblical scholars. She argues that it is not just Jael’s performances of violent killing that presents Jael’s performances as masculine, but the form that the violence and killing take. Bal recognises that the violence Jael performs takes the form of “penetration,” and that the killing takes the form of “rape.” The later chapter on Jael’s ‘Sexual Assault of Sisera’ establishes that penetration and rape are constructed as masculine. My chapter on Jael’s ‘Sexual Assault of Sisera’ also discusses rape as a weapon used in war. Bal states that “[t]he murder takes the specific form and meaning of rape… the weapon entail[s] penetration” (Bal, Death, 215). Bal’s understanding of Jael’s figurative rape of Sisera also ties Jael’s actions to the ongoing war since women of the defeated nation were often the victims of rape (Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 406; Exum, “Whose Interests,” 73. This is made clear by Sisera’s mother who imagines that Sisera is late returning from war as he is busy raping “a woman or two” (Jdg. 5:30). Bal’s perceptive point on Jael’s form of violence and killing is fully explored in the later chapter on ‘Sexual Assault of Sisera.’ For the purposes of this chapter, it is enough to note that Bal frames Jael’s violence, killing and engagement with warfare as strongly associated with masculinity. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. Bal, *Death*,212-213. [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. Bal, *Death*,212-213. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. Bal, *Death*,212-213. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. See the previous chapter on ‘Jael’s Gender’ for a discussion on Jael’s tactical use of nourishment, pages 73-79, especially pages 78-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. Ackerman, *Warrior,* 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 531. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 531. [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 531. [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. Ackerman, *Warrior,* 68; Rasmussen, “Deborah,” 91; Bal, Death, 212; Yee, “Hand,” 113; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. Rasmussen, “Deborah,” 91; Bal, Death, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. Yee, “Hand,” 113; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language*, 26; Shelly L. Koch, *Gender and Food, A Critical Look at the Food System* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. Sarah Milledge Nelson, *Gender in Archaeology;* *Analyzing Power and Prestige* (Oxford: Altamira Press, 2004), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. Nelson, *Gender*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2002), 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. For more on gendered objects and gendering objects in a variety of fields and contexts see Pat Kirkham*, The Gendered Object* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects, How Things Tell the Stories of People’s Lives* (London: Routledge, 1998); Barbara J. Risman, Carissa M. Froyum and William J. Scarborough *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*,Second Edition, (New York: Springer, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 14; Sara Jarlemyr, “A Tale of Cross-dressers, Mother and Murderers; Deborah and Jael in Ancient and Contemporary thought,” (PhD diss., Lunds: Lunds University, 2015), 43; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
516. Most of the references that do not ground Jael’s tent peg and hammer in femininity, through references to domesticity, present Jael’s tent peg as a penetrating tool, as a phallic weapon. It is enough to say here that those references to Jael’s tools as phallic and as penetrative employ the language and concept of gender reversal, thus recovering Jael’s femininity despite recognising the masculinity attached to the phallic penetrator. [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
517. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528; Olam, “Poem,” 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
518. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social,* 94; Rasmussen, “Deborah,” 91; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
519. Geoffrey W. Bromley, “Tent,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Volume 4* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 791—792, 791.

     791; Bal, *Murder,* 129; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social,* 94; Rasmussen, “Deborah,” 91; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
520. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social,* 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
521. Bal, Murder, 129; Lockyer, *Women*,70; Judah J. Slotki, “Judges: Introduction and Commentary,” in *Joshua & Judges*, ed. A. Cohen (London: The Soncino Press, 1980), 152—318, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. Gray, *Joshua,* 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
525. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 22; Olam, “Poem,” 80; Wijk-Bos, *Reformed*, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
526. Ackerman, *Warrior,* 71; Bal, Murder, 130; Steinly, “Jael,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
527. Matthews and Benjamin, Social, 94; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
528. J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Trans. Jack Sage (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 323-325; Emma Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, Trans. Andrea Dykes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
529. Matthews and Benjamin, Social, 94; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
530. That wielding weapons successfully is framed as a vital aspect of masculinity is evident in biblical texts such as Jdg. 8:20 and 1 Sam. 17. In these biblical narratives the successful use of weapons differentiates men from boys (and from women). Further, as Harold Torger Vedeler and Harry A. Hoffner, Jr. note, the ability to use weapons successfully, especially during warfare, is understood as a masculine ideal (Harold Torger Vedeler, “Reconstructing Meaning in Deuteronomy 22:5: Gender, Society, and Transvestitism in Israel and the Ancient Near East,” JBL 127/3 (2008): 459—476, 470; Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., “Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity: Their Use in Ancient Near East Sympathetic Magic Rituals,” JBL 85 (1966): 326—334, 328-329; Hilary Lipka, “The Prohibition of Cross-Dressing,” *The Torah*, 23 August 2018, https://  
     thetorah.com/the-prohibition-of-cross-dressing/). Jael successfully engages in the masculine domain of warfare and effectively wields weapons as is expected of men. [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
531. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
532. The LXX B is explicit in its designation of the hammer as a workers’ tool with translations of 5:26 reading “a hammer of labourers” (Pietersma and Wright, *A New Translation*, 209) or as “a mallet of a labouring one” (Zoella, *Analytical-Literal Translation*, 31), indicating that the hammer is an essential tool of labourers, who are predominantly expected to be men. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
533. For more on עֲמֵלִ֑ים (*’ămēlîym*) translated in Judges 5:26 as “workman’s” see Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Washington, 2000), 766. [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
534. Gray, *Joshua,* 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
535. Sharp, *Irony*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
536. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
537. Rhys Evans, “‘You questioning my manhood, boy?’: using work to play with gender roles in a regime of male skilled-labour,” in *Spaces of Masculinity,* ed. Kathrin Hörschelmann and Bettina van Hoven (London: Routledge, 2005), 179—191, 181; Darren Nixon, “Yearning to Labour? Working-Class Men in Post-Industrial Britain,” in *Masculinity, Labour and Neoliberalism: Working-Class Men in International Perspective,* ed. Charlie Walker and Steven Roberts (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2018), 53—77, 57; Dolly Smith Wilson, “Gender, Race and the Ideal Labour Force,” in *Gendering Migration: Masculinity, Femininity and Ethnicity in Post-war Britain*, ed. Louise Ryan and Wendy Webster (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), 89—105, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
538. Bal, *Murder*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
539. Stone, “Woman,” 90; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 77; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
540. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 22; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 71; Matthews and Benjamin, Social, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
541. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
542. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 406; Susan Niditch, “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 50; Ackerman, Warrior, 5; Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
543. Rich, *Woman*, 30; Helen Peterson and Kristina Engwall, “Silent Bodies: Childfree women’s gendered and embodied experiences,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 20/4 (2013): 376—389, 376-377; Gillespie, “When No Means No,” 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
544. Greenough, “Queer Eye,” 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
545. Daniel Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell(Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 33—103, 47, 53; Andreas J. Ksstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Illinois: Crossway, 2004), 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
546. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 19; Johanna Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2013), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
547. Block, “Marriage,” 47, 53; Ksstenberger and Jones, *God,* 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
548. Rasmussen, “Deborah,” 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
549. Bourdieu, Masculine, 30; Valdes, “Unpacking,” 170; Stone, “Woman,” 79; Sawyer, “Gender,” 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
550. Valdes, “Unpacking,” 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
551. Brenner, *Intercourse*, 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
552. Deborah F. Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible* (London: Routledge, 2002), 66; Anderson, *Women*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
553. Lloyd, *Doubly*, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
554. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 19; Raili Marling, “Strong Women and the Masculinity Crisis: Adulterous Appropriations of the Old Testament,” *Neohelicon* 40 (2013): 157—167, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
555. Lloyd, *Doubly*, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
556. Deborah’s masculine performances open up avenues of discussion regarding whether it is appropriate to label Deborah as a woman and use feminine gender pronouns to refer to her. Such a discussion, however, is not within the remit of this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
557. Elizabeth A. Suter, Leah M. Seurer, Stephanie Webb, Brian Grewe Jr. and Jody Koenig Kellas, “Motherhood as Contested Ideological Terrain: Essentialist and Queer Discourses of Motherhood at Play in Female–female Co-mothers’ Talk,” *Communication Monographs*, 82/4 (2015): 458—483, 464, Hays, *Cultural*, 13; Peterson and Engwall, “Silent,” 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-557)
558. Rich, *Woman,* 13, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
559. Brenner, “Triangle,” 102; Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes, “Mothers and a Mediator in the Song of Deborah” in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 110—116, 112-113; Bal, *Murder*, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-559)
560. Dijk-Hemmes, “Mothers,” 112; Bal, *Death*, 213; Kawashima, “Song to Story,” 159; Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, “The ‘Mothers’ Who Were Not: Motherhood Imagery and Childless Women Warriors in Early Jewish Literature,” in *Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination*, ed. Marjorie Lehman, Jane L. Kanarek and Simon J. Bronner (Liverpool: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2017), 185—206, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
561. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 33; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94; Williams, “Feminine,” 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
562. Rasmussen, “Deborah,” 92; Klein, *Triumph*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
563. Sterman, “Themes.” [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
564. Freema Gottlieb, “Three Mothers,” *Judaism: Periodicals Archive Online* 30/2 (1981): 194—203. [↑](#footnote-ref-564)
565. Sterman, “Themes,” 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-565)
566. Sterman, “Themes,” 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
567. Sterman, “Themes,” 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-567)
568. Sterman, “Themes,” 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-568)
569. Sterman, “Themes,” 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-569)
570. Asher-Greve, “Feminist,” 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-570)
571. Sterman, “Themes,” 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-571)
572. Sterman’s comment is problematic in the same way as Wright’s comment, quoted in the previous chapter on ‘Killing Sisera’ on pages 106-107, where he notes that Jael transforms their bed, switching their domestic space, from “personal domestic confines into a battlefield” (Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528). Such comments are problematic in that they are grounded in binary gender and present Jael as performing gender ambiguously, reinforcing Jael’s femininity despite recognitions of masculine performances. [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
573. Gottlieb, “Three,” 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
574. Gottlieb, “Three,” 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-574)
575. Gottlieb, “Three,” 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
576. Gottlieb, “Three,” 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-576)
577. Gottlieb, “Three,” 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-577)
578. Suter, Seurer, Webb, Grewe Jr. and Kellas, “Motherhood,” 464; Hays, *Cultural*, 13; Peterson and Engwall, “Silent,” 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-578)
579. Rich, *Woman*, 13, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-579)
580. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores; Women’s Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 30; Judith Kegan Gardiner, “Men, Masculinities and Feminist Theory,” in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn and R. W. Connell (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publication, 2005), 35—50, 42; Widding, “Parenting,” 48; Peterson and Engwall, “Silent,” 376. [↑](#footnote-ref-580)
581. Lerner, *Creation,* 17; Terry Arendell, “Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade’s Scholarship,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62/4 (2000): 1192—1207, 1192. [↑](#footnote-ref-581)
582. As with all gender markers, however, with a shift in context or perspective the gender indicated by a particular marker can also change. See pages 23-26 for more on gender markers and how their context influences the gender they suggest. [↑](#footnote-ref-582)
583. Hays, *Cultural*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-583)
584. The translation of ’eš*eṯ* as woman or wife, interchangeably, based on context is discussed in the earlier chapter on ‘Jael’s Gender,’ especially pages 50-53. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32; Hoffman, “Eshet,” 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-584)
585. Gillespie, “When No Means No,” 225; Lerner, *Creation*, 17; Bach, *Women*, 204; Llewellyn, “Maternal,” 69; Sjoberg and Gentry, “Reduced,” 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-585)
586. Llewellyn, “Maternal,” 68-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-586)
587. There are however, a limited number of occurrences where men appear to show a lack of desire for children or at least a resistance to having a child. For example, Onan “spilled his semen on the ground” rather than impregnate Tamar (Gen. 38:10) and despite impregnating Bathsheba, David tries to pass his child off as Uriah’s rather than claim the child as his own (2 Sam. 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-587)
588. Guest, *Deborah*, 132; Esther Fuchs, “The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical* Scholarship, ed. Adele Yarbro Collins (California: Scholar Press, 1985), 117—136, 133; Frymer-Kensky, *Wake*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-588)
589. Amélie Couvrette, Serge Brochu and Chantal Plourde, “The ‘Deviant Good Mother’: Motherhood Experiences of Substance-Using and Lawbreaking Women,” *Journal of Drug Issues* 46/4 (2016): 292—307, 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
590. Fuchs, “Literary, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-590)
591. Susanne Scholz, *Introducing the Women’s Hebrew Bible: Feminism, Gender Justice, and the Study of the Old Testament* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Esther Fuchs, Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Fuchs, “Literary.” [↑](#footnote-ref-591)
592. The term barren is the prevalent term used in biblical translations and is also used by many biblical scholars, despite this term being largely considered derogatory and even misogynistic since women are blamed for their own inability to produce children (Robin E. Jensen, “From Barren to Sterile: The Evolution of a Mixed Metaphor,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45/1 (2015): 25—46, 27; Marian Sawyer, “Misogyny and Misrepresentation,” *Political Science* 65/1 (2013): 105—117; Miranda Larbi, “Women are reclaiming the word ‘barren’ to talk about their fertility issues,” *Metro.co.uk*, 31 July 2019, https://metro.co.uk/2019/07/31/women-reclaiming-word-barren-talk-fertility-issues-10284278/). For this reason, I use the term childlessness after this initial reference to the term ‘barren.’ See the following texts as examples of studies that use the term ‘barren,’ especially, but not exclusively, in discussions on the matriarchs’ childlessness: Ackerman, *Warrior*, especially pages 181—216; Tamber-Rosenau, “Mothers,” 185; Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, “How to Get a Head in Ancient Israel: Women-Turned-Warriors and Queer Theory,” *Ancient Jew Review*, 05 September 2019, https://www.  
     ancientjewreview.com/articles/2019/9/5/how-to-get-a-head-in-ancient-israel; Rachel Havrelock, “The Myth of Birthing the Hero: Heroic Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible,” *Biblical Interpretation,* 16 (2008): 154—178; Fuchs, “Literary.” [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
593. See Gil Rosenberg, *Ancestral Queerness; The Normal and the Deviant in the Abraham and Sarah Narratives* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2019), especially pages 100-125, for his discussion on the potential to translate ‘barren’ as ‘childless’ and the possibility that Sarah does not desire to become a mother. [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
594. Fuchs, “Literary,” 130; Rich, *Woman*, 29; Sjoberg and Gentry, “Reduced,” 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
595. Joel S. Baden, “The Nature of Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, ed. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13—28; Susan Ackerman, “The Blind, the Lame, and the Barren Shall Not Come into the House,” in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, ed. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 29—45; David Tabb Stewart, “Sexual Disabilities in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, ed. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 67—87; Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 152; Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
596. Wilbur Glenn Williams, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan, 2000), 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
597. Fuchs, “Literary,” 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
598. Widding, “Parenting,” 48; Maryann McCabe and Timothy de Waal Malefyt, “Creativity and cooking: Motherhood, agency and social change in everyday life,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 15/1 (2015): 48—65, 52; Gillespie, “When No Means No,” 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
599. Frymer-Kensky, *Wake*, 139; Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language*, 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-599)
600. Gayle Letherby, “Mother or Not, Mother or What? Problems of Definition and Identity,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 17/5 (1994): 525—532, 525; Gillespie, “When No Means No,” 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-600)
601. Gillespie, “When No Means No,” 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-601)
602. Sjoberg and Gentry, “Reduced,” 14; Scholz, *Introducing.*; Lerner, *Creation,* 17; Gillespie, “Childfree,” 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-602)
603. Bach, *Women*, 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-603)
604. Bach, *Women*, 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-604)
605. Frymer-Kensky, *Wake*, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-605)
606. Bach, *Women*, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-606)
607. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 528; Gordon, “Woman’s,” 265; Weiss, *Ethical*, 201; Clines, “He-Prophets,” 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-607)
608. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-608)
609. Hoffner, Jr., “Symbols,” 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-609)
610. Gillespie, “When No Means No,” 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-610)
611. Bledstein, “Judges,” 40; Bal, *Death*, 213; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 90; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-611)
612. Tamber-Rosenau, “Mothers,” 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-612)
613. There are scholars that have characterised Jael’s behaviour towards Sisera as that of a host rather than as a mother. Interpreting Jael as a host or as a mother towards Sisera are not mutually exclusive, despite being differently gendered roles. Scholars that have considered Jael as performing as a host include: Klein, *Triumph*, 42; Steinly, “Jael,” 8; de Hemmer Gudme, “Invitation,” 103; Geoffrey P. Miller, “A Riposte Form in the Song of Deborah,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 113—128, 214. Studies such as: Brenner, “Triangle,” 101-103; Bal, *Murder*, 124; Bal, *Death*, 212-215, include discussions of Jael as a host and as mothering Sisera. [↑](#footnote-ref-613)
614. I have not come across a study that suggests that Jael should not be understood as a mother or that argues against Jael being interpreted as the symbolic mother of Sisera. There are, however, studies that note that Jael’s killing of Sisera is counter to the images of motherhood presented, suggesting that Jael’s act of killing disrupts their role as mother to Sisera. These are discussed later when I articulate my own interpretation of Jael as a symbolic mother to the Children of Israel, where I unpack why I do not interpret Jael as symbolic mother to Sisera. Therefore, to avoid repetition those few studies that recognise Jael’s killing of Sisera to disrupt their role as mother are not discussed here (Sterman, “Themes,” 22; Jennifer Williams, “Ambiguity, Liminality, and Unhomeliness in the Book of Judges An Analysis of the Gendered Pairs and Families,” PhD diss., Faculty of the Graduate School of Vanderbuilt University, 2015, 30; Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 17-18). [↑](#footnote-ref-614)
615. Tamber-Rosenau, “Mothers,” 185; Bledstein, “Judges,” 40; Dijk-Hemmes, “Mothers,” 112; Bal, *Death*, 213; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-615)
616. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 90; Bledstein, “Judges,” 40; Dijk-Hemmes, “Mothers,” 112; Bal, *Death*, 213; Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-616)
617. Brenner, “Triangle,” 102-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-617)
618. Conway, Sex and Slaughter, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-618)
619. Conway, Sex and Slaughter, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-619)
620. Although childbirth is closely associated with biological motherhood, the image in the text of Sisera as a baby falling from between Jael’s legs is also related to surrogate motherhood and motherhood through adoption. This gendered, rather than biological, form of childbirth and motherhood is suggested in Sarah and Hagar’s narrative (Gen. 16) and is evident in Rachel and Bilhah’s narrative (Gen. 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-620)
621. Ernest Busenbark, *Symbols, Sex and the Stars* (California: The Book Tree, 1997), 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-621)
622. Exum, “Whose Interests,” 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-622)
623. Exum, “Whose Interests,” 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-623)
624. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-624)
625. Bal, “Dealing,” 36; Bal, *Death*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-625)
626. Bal, *Death*, 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-626)
627. Bal, *Murder*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-627)
628. Bal, Death, 213; Sasson, “Breeder,” 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-628)
629. Bal, *Murder*, 121, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-629)
630. Bal, *Murder*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-630)
631. Bal, *Murder*, 121-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-631)
632. Bal, *Murder*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-632)
633. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-633)
634. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women*, 88, 97, 103, 227, 111, 117, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-634)
635. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-635)
636. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-636)
637. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women*, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-637)
638. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-638)
639. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women*, 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-639)
640. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible’s First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 125-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-640)
641. Dijk-Hemmes, “Mothers,” 112-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-641)
642. Fewell and Gunn, *Gender,* 125-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-642)
643. Fewell and Gunn, *Gender,* 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-643)
644. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-644)
645. Matthews’ and Benjamin’s joint study appears to recognise Jael as a mother in Israel, like Deborah. They comment that Jael’s behaviours reflect “the fearless courage of a mother defending” “their young” as “mothers in Israel” are expected to do. While this at first appears to be a reference to Jael as symbolic mother to the Israelite nation, like Deborah, their reference to Jael’s children as “their young” suggests that they are discussing actual physical children rather than the symbolic Children of Israel. Further, their following comment that “each woman is a mother of a household honored as a chief for delivering their household when it is left in harm’s way,” suggests that they perceive Jael as a mother who defends their individual home and their own (potential) children, rather than as defending the Children of Israel (Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94). [↑](#footnote-ref-645)
646. Dijk-Hemmes, “Mothers,” 112-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-646)
647. Dijk-Hemmes, “Mothers,” 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-647)
648. Assis, “Hand,” 11; Mayfield, “Deborah,” 307; Alter, “Line,” 630; Jo Ann Hackett, “Violence and Women’s Lives in the Book of Judges,” *Interpretation* 58/4 (2004): 356—364, 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-648)
649. Wijk-Bos, *Reformed*, 75; Lindars, *Judges*, 197; Steinly, “Jael,” 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-649)
650. Brenner, “Triangle,” 100-101; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-650)
651. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94; Steinly, “Jael,” 13; Tamber-Rosenau, “Mothers,” 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-651)
652. Susan Hatter Friedman, James Cavney and Phillip J. Resnick, “Mothers Who Kill: Evolutionary Underpinnings and Infanticide Law,” *Behavioural Sciences and the Law* 30 (2012): 585—597, 592. [↑](#footnote-ref-652)
653. Sterman, “Themes,” 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-653)
654. Gottlieb, “Three,” 200; Bal, *Death*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-654)
655. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-655)
656. Gottlieb, “Three,” 200; Bal, *Death*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-656)
657. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-657)
658. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-658)
659. Exum, “Whose Interests,” 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-659)
660. Exum, “Whose Interests,” 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-660)
661. Susan Niditch, War in the Hebrew Bible; A Study in the Ethics of Violence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 114; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Jael” in Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of named and Unnamed Women in the Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament, ed. Carol Meyers (London: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 97—98, 98; Williams, “Ambiguity,” 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-661)
662. Williams, “Ambiguity,” 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-662)
663. Lindars, *Judges*, 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-663)
664. Bal, *Death*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-664)
665. Don Seeman, “The Watcher at the Window: Cultural Poetics of a Biblical Motif,” *Prooftexts* 24/1 (2004): 1—50, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-665)
666. Fuchs, “Literary,” 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-666)
667. E. L. Hicks, “Judith and Holofernes,” *The* *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 6 (1885): 261—274, 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-667)
668. Williams, “Feminine,” 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-668)
669. Erin K. Vearncombe, “Adorning the Protagonist: The Use of Dress in the Book of *Judith*,” in *Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. Alicia J. Batten, Carly Daniel-Hughes and Kristie Upson-Saia (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), 117—137, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-669)
670. Vearncombe, “Adorning,” 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-670)
671. Tamber-Rosenau, “Mothers,” 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-671)
672. Sterman, “Themes,” 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-672)
673. Sasson, “Breeder,” 343; Steinly, “Jael,” 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-673)
674. Ackerman, *Warrior*, 31; Miller, “Riposte,” 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-674)
675. Bledstein, “Judges,” 41; Sasson, “Breeder,” 345; Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-675)
676. Dijk-Hemmes, “Mothers,” 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-676)
677. Seeman, “Watcher,” 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-677)
678. Lloyd, *Doubly*, 36; Messerschmidt, *Masculinities*, 35; Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski*, Introduction*, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-678)
679. Seeman, “Watcher,” 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-679)
680. Weiss, *Ethical*, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-680)
681. The domestic space as a feminine domain is discussed in the previous chapter on ‘Killing Sisera.’ See pages 98-103, especially pages 98-99, for a full exploration of Jael’s tent, their domestic space, as a feminised space. [↑](#footnote-ref-681)
682. Rich, *Woman*, 13; Madigan and Munro, “Gender,” 117; Weiss, *Ethical*, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-682)
683. Wijk-Bos, *Reformed*, 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-683)
684. Women are expected to care for children within the domestic sphere (Gordon, “Woman’s,” 285, Shanahan, “Playing,” 129; Madigan and Munro, “Gender,” 117; Rich, *Woman*, 25; Gillespie, “Childfree,” 122; Hays, *Cultural*, 2-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-684)
685. Weiss, *Ethical*, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-685)
686. Bronner, “Valorized,” 87; Gottlieb, “Three,” 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-686)
687. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-687)
688. J. Cheryl Exum, “‘Mother in Israel’: A Familiar Figure Reconsidered,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Westminster Press, 1985), 73–85, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-688)
689. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-689)
690. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-690)
691. Bal, *Death*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-691)
692. Sasson, “Breeder,” 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-692)
693. See pages 96-108, especially pages 107-108, for more on Jael’s space as a gender ambiguous marker. [↑](#footnote-ref-693)
694. Exum, “Whose Interests,” 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-694)
695. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-695)
696. Sterman, “Themes,” 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-696)
697. Anderson, *Women*, 97; Lloyd, *Doubly*, 31; Sjoberg and Gentry, *Mothers*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-697)
698. Bledstein, “Judges,” 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-698)
699. Olam, “Poem,” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-699)
700. Hackett, “Violence,” 357. [↑](#footnote-ref-700)
701. Anderson, *Women*, 97; Beynon, *Masculinities*, 56; Asher-Greve, “Essential,” 432; Catalina-Ionela Rezeanu, “The Relationship Between Domestic Space and Gender Identity: Some Signs of Emergence of Alternative Domestic Femininity and Masculinity,” *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 6/2 (2015): 9—29, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-701)
702. Sasson, “Breeder,” 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-702)
703. Bal, *Death*, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-703)
704. Violence and killing as masculine behaviours are discussed in the previous chapter on ‘Killing Sisera.’ See pages 83-88, especially pages 86-87, for this discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-704)
705. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 7; Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 126; Sharp, *Irony*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-705)
706. Fuchs, “Literary,” 133; Bach, *Women,* 204; Friedman, Horwitz and Resnick, “Child,” 585. [↑](#footnote-ref-706)
707. Hays, *Cultural*, 3; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-707)
708. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-708)
709. Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-709)
710. Bal, *Death*, 212 [↑](#footnote-ref-710)
711. Murphy, *Rewriting*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-711)
712. Jael’s performance of violence is an aspect of their motherhood that is not evident in the framework of motherhood demonstrated by Sisera’s mother. There is, however, violence in Sisera’s mother’s motherhood, but it is not enacted by her in the same way as it is by Jael and Deborah. Sisera’s mother uses language of a violent and sexual nature. The text relays that “she keeps saying to herself, ‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoils: a woman or two for each man, colourful garments as plunder for Sisera, colourful garments embroidered, highly embroidered garments for my neck—all this as plunder?’” (Jdg. 5:29-30). Although she discusses violence in the form of plundering and raping, she does not enact violence. The link between Jael’s motherhood and Sisera’s motherhood with regard to violence is that the violence that Sisera’s mother envisages her son undertaking is the violence that Jael performs against that son on behalf of Jael’s own children. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Jael arguably violently sexually assaults Sisera as Sisera’s mother envisages her own son doing to other women. Thus, violence is apparent in both performances of motherhood but in different capacities. One is an active engagement, the other is a passive imagining. [↑](#footnote-ref-712)
713. Assis, “Hand,” 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-713)
714. Tamber-Rosenau, “Mothers,” 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-714)
715. Bal, *Death*, 24; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 18; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 93; Frolov, “Sleeping,” 310; Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-715)
716. Washington, “Violence,” 361; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 406; Robert B. Chisholm Jr, “What Went on in Jael's Tent? The Collocation והכימשב והסכתin Judges 4.18,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 24/1 (2010): 143—144, 143; Bal, *Murder*, 134; Brenner, “Triangle,” 133; Niditch, “Eroticism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-716)
717. See the ‘Thesis Introduction,’ pages 21-23, for an explanation of gender reversal and reasons why I view framing Jael as performing gender reversal as problematic. [↑](#footnote-ref-717)
718. Brownmiller, *Against*, 271; Ellen Rooney, “‘A Little More than Persuading’: Tess and the Subject of Sexual Violence,” in *Rape and Representation*, ed. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver (New York: Columbia University, 1991), 87—115, 90-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-718)
719. Caroline Blyth, “Terrible Silence, Eternal Silence: A Feminist Re-Reading of Dinah’s Voicelessness in Genesis 34,” *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009): 483—506, 485. [↑](#footnote-ref-719)
720. Paul Hoffman, “Freedom and Strength of Will: Descartes and Albritton,” *Philosophical Studies* 77 (1995): 241—260, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-720)
721. Washington, “Violence,” 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-721)
722. Brenner, *Intercourse*, 178; Alice Bach, “Reading the Body Politic: Women and Violence in Judges 21,” in *Judges: A Feminist Companion*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 143—160, 143; Bal, *Death*, 215; Susan Griffin, “Rape: The All-American Crime,” *Ramparts* 10/3 (1971): 26—35, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-722)
723. Bal, *Murder*, 134; Yee*,* “Hand,” 116; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-723)
724. Yee*,* “Hand,” 116; Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 17-18; Alter, “Line,” 635. [↑](#footnote-ref-724)
725. Greenough, *Undoing*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-725)
726. Washington, “Violence,” 361; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 406; Chisholm Jr, “Jael's Tent,” 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-726)
727. Greenough, *Undoing*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-727)
728. Brownmiller, *Against*, 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-728)
729. Brownmiller, *Against*, 376-377. [↑](#footnote-ref-729)
730. Catherine N. Niarchos, “Women, War, and Rape: Challenges Facing The International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 17/4 (1995): 649—690, 650; Brownmiller, *Against*, 376; Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape; Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 42; Fortune, “Rape,” 197; Stephanie Riger, “The Fear of Rape: A Study in Social Control,” *Journal of Social Issues* 34/7 (1981): 71—92, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-730)
731. Niarchos, “Women,” 650; Brownmiller, *Against*, 376; Projansky, *Watching* Rape, 42; Fortune, “Rape,” 197; Riger, “Fear,” 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-731)
732. Niarchos, “Women,” 650; Fortune, “Rape,” 197; Brownmiller, *Against*, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-732)
733. Niarchos, “Women,” 650. [↑](#footnote-ref-733)
734. Fortune, “Rape,” 196; Washington, “Violence,” 361; Brownmiller, *Against*, 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-734)
735. Brownmiller, *Against*, 385; Gordon and Washington, “Rape,” 323; Washington, “Violence,” 331; Ken Stone, *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-735)
736. Brownmiller, *Against*, 271; Conly, “Seduction,” 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-736)
737. Leah Rediger Schulte, *The Absence of God in Biblical Rape Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-737)
738. Frymer-Kensky, “Gender,” 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-738)
739. Alice A. Keefe, “Rapes of Women/Wars of Men,” *Semia* 61 (1993): 79—97, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-739)
740. Schulte, *Absence*, 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-740)
741. Schulte, *Absence*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-741)
742. Anderson, *Women,* 40-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-742)
743. Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili, “Was it Rape? The David and Bathsheba Pericope Re-examined,” *Vetus Testamentum* (2011): 1—15, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-743)
744. Schulte, *Absence*, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-744)
745. Washington, “Violence, 346, 352; Abasili, “Rape,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-745)
746. Washington, “Violence, 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-746)
747. Frymer-Kensky, “Gender,” 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-747)
748. Alice A. Keefe, *Woman’s Body and the Social Body in Hosea* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-748)
749. Reeder, “Deuteronomy,” 314-315. [↑](#footnote-ref-749)
750. Reeder, “Deuteronomy,” 314-315. [↑](#footnote-ref-750)
751. The Pornoprophetic texts or the Latter Prophets are “biblical books attributed to named persons designated ‘prophets’ by the text and its interpreters” (Athalya Brenner, “Preface,” in *The Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 13—21, 13). They have been termed ‘Pornoprophetics’ due to the way they represent women; “Pornography is representation that objectifies women, exploits sexuality as means of domination, expresses hostility, and imputes defilement” as the Latter Prophets do, note Gordon and Washington (Gordon and Washington, “Rape,” 311). In addition to this, Setel understands the distinct features of pornography to include a negative portrayal of the female or feminine, whilst the male or masculine is depicted as the norm by which femininity is measured against (T. D. Setel, “Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea,” in *Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*, ed. L. Russel (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 86—95). All these features are present in the Latter Prophets and have led to them being labelled as Pornoprophetic texts. For more on Pornoprophetic texts see the following studies: Robert P. Carroll, “Desire Under the Terebinth: On Pornographic Representation in the Prophets- A Response,” in *A Feminist Companion to The Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 275—308, 277; Bach, “Reading,” 143; Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes, “The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: an Analysis of Ezekiel 23,” in *The Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 244—256, 248; Julie Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel; The City as Yahweh’s Wife* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholar Press, 1992), 26; Weems, Battered, 2; Deryn Guest, “Hiding Behind the Naked Woman in Lamentations: A Recriminative Response,” *Biblical Interpretation* 7/4(1999): 413—448, 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-751)
752. Brad E. Kelle, *Writing and Reading War; Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 102-103, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-752)
753. Washington, “Violence,” 330. [↑](#footnote-ref-753)
754. Gordon and Washington, “Rape,” 322; Johanna Stiebert, *The Construction of Shame in the Hebrew Bible; The Prophetic Contribution* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-754)
755. Rey, “Re-Examination,” 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-755)
756. Washington, “Violence,” 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-756)
757. Keady, *Rape*. [↑](#footnote-ref-757)
758. Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 110; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Gender and Law: An Introduction,” in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 17—25, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-758)
759. Jessica M. Keady, *Rape Culture Discourse and Female Impurity: Genesis 34 as a Case Study*, 05 October 2007, https://  
     shiloh-project.group.shef.ac.uk/rape-culture-discourse-and-female-impurity-genesis-34-as-a-case-study/. [↑](#footnote-ref-759)
760. Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-760)
761. Gordon and Washington, “Rape,” 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-761)
762. Naomi Graetz, *Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-762)
763. Rey, “Re-Examination,” 50, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-763)
764. Schulte, *Absence,* 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-764)
765. Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010)*,* 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-765)
766. Schulte, *Absence,* 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-766)
767. Bal, *Death*, 215; Yee, “Hand,” 116; Tamber-Rosenau, *Women*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-767)
768. Brownmiller, *Against*, 384. [↑](#footnote-ref-768)
769. Weiss, *Ethical*, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-769)
770. Mayfield, “Deborah,” 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-770)
771. Weiss, *Ethical*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-771)
772. Conly, “Seduction,” 112; Hoffman, “Freedom,” 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-772)
773. Sharon Cowan, “All Change or Business as Usual?; Reforming the Law of Rape in Scotland,” in *Rethinking Rape Law; International and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Clare McGlynn and Vanessa E. Munro (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2010), 154—169, 155-156; Christine Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie: Kant On Dealing with Evil,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15/4 (1986): 325—349, 333; Weiss, *Ethical*, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-773)
774. Bach, *Women*, 186; Gravett, Bohmback, Greifenhagen and Polaski, *Introduction*, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-774)
775. Weiss, *Ethical*, 200; Klein, *From Deborah*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-775)
776. Milillo, “Rape,” 201; Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (New York: Cornell University, 2001), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-776)
777. Brownmiller, *Against*, 256; Conly, “Seduction,” 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-777)
778. bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman, Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-778)
779. Conly, “Seduction,” 97, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-779)
780. Hoffman, “Freedom,” 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-780)
781. Vanessa E. Munro, “From Consent to Coercion; Evaluating international and domestic frameworks for the criminalization of rape,” in *Rethinking Rape Law; International and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Clare McGlynn and Vanessa E. Munro (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2010), 17—30, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-781)
782. Conly, “Seduction,” 112; Guest, *Beyond*, 92; Abasili, “Rape,” 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-782)
783. Conly, “Seduction,” 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-783)
784. Guest, *Beyond*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-784)
785. Abasili, “Rape,” 6, 14; Conly, “Seduction,” 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-785)
786. Conly, “Seduction,” 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-786)
787. Weiss, *Ethical*, 197-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-787)
788. Niditch, *War*. [↑](#footnote-ref-788)
789. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory*, 117. For a discussion of woman’s weapons see the ‘Thesis Introduction,’ especially pages 25-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-789)
790. Yee*,* “Hand,” 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-790)
791. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-791)
792. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-792)
793. Guest, *Beyond*, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-793)
794. Margarita Stocker, *Judith Sexual Warrior; Women and Power in Western Culture* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-794)
795. Rachel Adelman, “Seduction and Recognition in the Story of Judah and Tamar and the Book of Ruth,” *A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 23 (2012): 87—109, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-795)
796. Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 70; Judith McKinlay, “Negotiating the frame for viewing the death of Jezebel,” *Biblical Interpretation* 10*/*3 (2002): 305—323, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-796)
797. Guest, *Beyond*, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-797)
798. Bach, *Women,* 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-798)
799. Bach, *Women,* 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-799)
800. Nancy M. Tischler, *Legacy of Eve; Women of the Bible* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 68-86; Bach, *Women,* 186; Guest, *Beyond*, 124; Mary Ann Rossi, “Androcentrism,” in *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 5—6. [↑](#footnote-ref-800)
801. Hoffman, “Freedom,” 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-801)
802. Fortune, “Rape,” 196; Roland Littlewood, “Military Rape,” *Anthropology Today* 13/2 (1997): 7—16, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-802)
803. Wright, “Deborah’s,” 351; Lori Hope Lefkovitz, *The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 114; Brenner, *Israelite*, 119; Frolov, “Sleeping,” 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-803)
804. Brenner, *Israelite*, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-804)
805. Frolov, “Sleeping,” 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-805)
806. Frolov, “Sleeping,” 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-806)
807. Lefkovitz, *First Stories*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-807)
808. Lefkovitz, *First Stories*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-808)
809. Lefkovitz, *First Stories*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-809)
810. Niditch, *War*, 114; Exum, “Whose Interests,” 72, Klein, *From Deborah*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-810)
811. Exum, “Shared Glory,” 20; Exum, “Whose Interests,” 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-811)
812. LXX B is often translated as depicting Jael as approaching Sisera “secretly.” Pietersma and Wright, *A New Translation*, 207) or as “in secret” (Zoella, *Analytical-Literal Translation,* 30) rather than as “softly” as the Hebrew is most often translated. Consequently, the LXX B supports my interpretation of Jael’s stealthy approach even more explicitly than the Hebrew does by overly labelling Jael’s advance as being performed “secretly.” [↑](#footnote-ref-812)
813. Niditch, *War*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-813)
814. Niditch, *War*, 113; Frolov, “Sleeping,” 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-814)
815. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 92-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-815)
816. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-816)
817. For more on מַקֶּבֶת (*maqqebet*) translated in Jdg. 4:21 as “hammer” see Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Enhanced*, 666. [↑](#footnote-ref-817)
818. There are a number of possible interpretations for the Hebrew term *bəraqqātow*. For a brief consideration of this see page 5, especially fn 19 for differing ways this term has been translated, including temple, mouth, head and neck. The LXX A depicts Jael as penetrating Sisera’s “jaw” in 4:21 and in 5: 26. Pietersma and Wright, *A New Translation*, 207). While it is unclear whether this penetration occurs from the side or through the mouth, it can be interpreted as feeding into this oral imagery of penetration. [↑](#footnote-ref-818)
819. Kirk-Duggan, “Inside,” 75; William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 347; and Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives,” 393; Jarlemyr, “Tale”; Fewell, “Judges,” 69; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-819)
820. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-820)
821. Fewell, “Judges,” 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-821)
822. Fewell, “Judges,” 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-822)
823. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-823)
824. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-824)
825. James Davidson, “Dover, Foucault and Greek Homosexuality: Penetration and the Truth of Sex,” *The Past and Present Society* 170 (2001): 3—51, 48; Stone, “Woman,” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-825)
826. Klein, *From Deborah*, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-826)
827. Bal, *Murder*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-827)
828. Niditch, “Eroticism,” 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-828)
829. Ackerman, *Warrior,* 59; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 20; Niditch, *Judges,* 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-829)
830. Brenner, *Israelite*. [↑](#footnote-ref-830)
831. Adelman, “Seduction,” 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-831)
832. Ackerman, *Warrior,* 59; Bal, *Murder*, 102; Niditch, *War*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-832)
833. Bal, *Murder*, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-833)
834. Bal, *Murder*, 103, (italics in original); Yair Zakovitch, “Siseras Tod,” *Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93/3 (1981): 364—374, 365. I rely on Bal’s summary of Zakovitch’s discussion as Zakovitch’s text is not available in English (Bal, *Murder*, 103). [↑](#footnote-ref-834)
835. Bal, *Murder*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-835)
836. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-836)
837. Nathan LaMontage’s *The Song of Deborah in the Septuagint* shows that the sexual implications of the tent peg are present in the Greek form of Jael’s narrative, as are the sexual and destructive implications linked to *šāḏūḏ*. He notes that the “item to which she [Jael] stretches out her right hand is used generally for pegs, but is also used metaphorically of anything small and insignificant, demonstrating how easily he [Sisera] is killed. Jael does not merely kill him, but the construction *τοῦ εἰς τέλος ἀχρείωσαι* implies that she rendered him incapable or useless before killing him” with many of the same implications of *šāḏūḏ,* as argued by Tamber-Rosenau (Nathan LaMontage, *The Song of Deborah in the Septuagint* (Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 115;Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 114). [↑](#footnote-ref-837)
838. Bal, *Death*, 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-838)
839. Bal, *Murder*, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-839)
840. Bal, *Murder*, 131, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-840)
841. Bal, *Murder*, 131, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-841)
842. Stone, “Woman,” 80; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 71; Yee*,* “Hand,” 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-842)
843. Yee*,* “Hand,” 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-843)
844. Yee*,* “Hand,” 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-844)
845. Yee*,* “Hand,” 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-845)
846. See pages 110-112, in Chapter 2, for more on the tent peg and hammer being constructed as tent pitching tools and thus as feminine gender markers. [↑](#footnote-ref-846)
847. Niditch, “Eroticism,” 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-847)
848. Caroline Blyth, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34; Interpreting Dina’s Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2010), 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-848)
849. Niditch, “Eroticism,” 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-849)
850. Niditch, “Eroticism,” 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-850)
851. Brenner, “Triangle,” 133; Niditch, “Eroticism,” 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-851)
852. Niditch, “Eroticism,” 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-852)
853. Niditch, *War*, 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-853)
854. Niditch, “Eroticism,” 50; Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-854)
855. Guest, *Beyond*,94. [↑](#footnote-ref-855)
856. Thiem, “Gendered,” 460. [↑](#footnote-ref-856)
857. Dilys Naomi Patterson, “‘Honoured in Her Time’; Queen Shelamzion and the Book of Judith,” (PhD diss., Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2002), 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-857)
858. Patterson, “Honoured,”227. [↑](#footnote-ref-858)
859. Niditch, “Eroticism,” 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-859)
860. Bal, *Death*,228; Niditch, “Eroticism,” 50; Niditch, *War*, 115; Ackerman, *Warrior,* 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-860)
861. Brenner, “Triangle,” 102; Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 17; Gottlieb, “Three,” 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-861)
862. Bal, *Murder*, 134; Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34; Bach, “Reading,” 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-862)
863. Brenner, “Triangle,” 102; Bal, *Murder*, 134; Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-863)
864. Jael’s tools, the tent peg and hammer, are discussed as gender ambiguous gender markers in detail in the earlier chapter on ‘Killing Sisera.’ Please see pages 108-115, especially pages 114-115, for this discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-864)
865. Jael’s act of violence, despite being constructed as a masculine act, is discussed in the previous chapter on ‘Jael’s Motherhood’ as an act of motherhood. Jael is a violent mother who acts to protect their children, the Children of Israel. For a detailed discussion of Jael’s violence as a performance of motherhood see pages 154-157. [↑](#footnote-ref-865)
866. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Jael’s feminine behaviours are readily merged with mothering behaviour in commentaries on Judges 4 and 5. The conflation of femininity and motherhood are pervasive, made clear in Tamber-Rosenau’s comment that “maternal imagery [is often used] to describe childless female characters, and that even women’s non-childbearing activities are framed in the language of reproductive futurism” (Tamber-Rosenau, “Mothers,” 201). For this thesis the problem is not that Jael’s feminine behaviours are framed as mothering behaviours, but that only Jael’s feminine behaviours feed into interpretations of Jael’s gender and that when Jael’s femininity is conflated with motherhood, as it so often is, many of Jael’s other roles are overlooked rather than all being viewed as simultaneously valid aspects of Jael’s character in a holistic manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-866)
867. Others who read the rape as reversed rape include Conway, Chrisholm Jr and Zucker and Reiss, to name a few (Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*,17; Chisholm Jr, “Jael's Tent,” 143; Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-867)
868. Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*, 23, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-868)
869. Mayfield, “Deborah,” 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-869)
870. Guest, *Beyond*, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-870)
871. Ackerman, *Warrior*, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-871)
872. Ackerman, *Warrior*, 72, (italics in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-872)
873. Ackerman, *Warrior*, 68-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-873)
874. See this ‘Thesis Introduction’ for an explanation of gender markers, especially pages 23-26. Women’s weapons, as a specific set of gendered markers in the Hebrew Bible, are addressed on pages 25-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-874)
875. Klein, “Spectrum,” 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-875)
876. Klein, *From Deborah*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-876)
877. Klein, “Spectrum,” 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-877)
878. Klein, “Spectrum,” 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-878)
879. Klein, *Triumph*, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-879)
880. Klein, *Triumph*, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-880)
881. Other scholars who recognise Jael’s seduction of Sisera and Jael’s use of sexual behaviour to lure Sisera into a position of vulnerability include the following studies: Bledstein, “Judges,” 40; Exum, “Shared Glory,” 32; Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 27; Kirk-Duggan, “Inside,” 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-881)
882. Mayfield, “Deborah,” 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-882)
883. Mayfield, “Deborah,” 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-883)
884. Niditch, *War*, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-884)
885. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-885)
886. Exum, “Whose Interests,” 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-886)
887. Williams, “Ambiguity,” 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-887)
888. Bledstein, “Judges,” 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-888)
889. Bal, *Death*,212-213. [↑](#footnote-ref-889)
890. Bal, *Death*, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-890)
891. Bledstein, “Judges,” 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-891)
892. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-892)
893. Reis, “Uncovering,” 27; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-893)
894. Reis, “Uncovering,” 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-894)
895. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-895)
896. Assis, “Hand,” 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-896)
897. Assis, “Hand,” 9, (bold in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-897)
898. Assis, “Hand,” 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-898)
899. Assis, “Hand,” 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-899)
900. Weiss, *Ethical*, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-900)
901. Olam, “Poem,” 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-901)
902. Olam, “Poem,” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-902)
903. Bal, *Murder*, 124; Brenner, “Triangle,” 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-903)
904. Eckert and McConnell-Ginnet, *Language*,165. [↑](#footnote-ref-904)
905. Laurie A. Rudman and Peter Glick, *The Social Psychology of Gender; How Power and Intimacy Shape Gender Relations* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008), 110; Donaldson, “Hegemonic,” 645 fn 7; Clines, *Interested*, 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-905)
906. Donaldson, “Hegemonic,” 645 fn 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-906)
907. While Heber is understood by most commentators, such as Conway, Reis, Fewell and Gunn, Matthews and Benjamin, to name a few, as Jael’s husband, there is reason to believe *Heber* should be understood as a reference to Jael’s clan or tribe as explored on pages 54-55 (Conway, *Sex and Slaughter*; Reis, “Uncovering”; Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling”; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*.) This argument was convincingly put forward by Malamat (1962) and is adopted, in part, by Ackerman (Malamat, “Mari”; Ackerman, *Warrior*). [↑](#footnote-ref-907)
908. Reis, “Uncovering,” 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-908)
909. Reis, “Uncovering,” 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-909)
910. Conly, “Seduction,” 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-910)
911. Sharon Cowan, “All Change,” 155-156. [↑](#footnote-ref-911)
912. Onara O’Neil, “Between Consenting Adults,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14/3 (1985): 252—277, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-912)
913. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-913)
914. Madigan and Munro, “Gender,” 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-914)
915. D. F. Murray, “Narrative structure and technique in the Deborah-Barak story, Judges IV 4-22,” in *Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament*, ed. J. A. Emerton (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 155—190, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-915)
916. Conly, “Seduction,” 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-916)
917. Conly, “Seduction,” 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-917)
918. Zucker and Reiss, “Subverting,” 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-918)
919. Conly, “Seduction,” 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-919)
920. Sisera’s mother makes it clear that battle fatigue would not be enough to prevent him from having sex, since he is expected to rape ‘a girl or two’ (Jdg. 5:30). [↑](#footnote-ref-920)
921. Elie Assis, “Man, Woman and God in Judg 4,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 20/1 (2006): 110—124, 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-921)
922. Bledstein, “Judges,” 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-922)
923. There is ambiguity regarding how *baś·śə·mî·ḵāh* (“rug” NRSV) in Jdg. 4:18 should be translated. For example, Bal comments that this could be interpreted as Jael “clos[ing] the curtain of the tent” (Bal, *Death*, 92), Zucker and Reis translate it as a “rug/blanket” being draped over Sisera (Zucker and Reis, “Subverting,” 36) and Soggin recognises that it could be translated as “a curtain,” “a covering” or “a sheet” (Soggin, *Judges,* 62). Reis’s interpretation of *baś·śə·mî·ḵāh* as indicating Jael “cover[ing] him with her body” since it could mean “to lead, lay, rest one’s weight upon” is yet another possible translation and makes evident the ambiguity regarding the translation of *baś·śə·mî·ḵāh.* Such lack of translational clarity is also present in the LXX’s rendering of the Hebrew into Greek since there is a discrepancy between LXX A and LXX B, highlighting the ambiguity of the Hebrew text. According to Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright the LXX A here reads as “skin curtain” in English, whereas the LXX B reads “garment” (*A New Translation of the Septuagint, and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included Under That Title*, ed. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007), 207). While this appears to be a minor and unimportant difference it highlights the ambiguity of the Hebrew text. It is worth noting that different translations can be considered to lend themselves to different interpretations ranging from hospitable to motherly to sexual— especially Reis’ translation of the rug/curtain/garment being read as Jael’s body, which is sexually implicit. [↑](#footnote-ref-923)
924. Reis, “Uncovering,” 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-924)
925. Bal, *Death*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-925)
926. Niditch, *Judges*, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-926)
927. Ackerman, *Warrior*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-927)
928. Fewell and Gunn, “Controlling,” 392. [↑](#footnote-ref-928)
929. Assis, “Man,” 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-929)
930. Williams, “Ambiguity,” 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-930)
931. Karen L. Bloomquist, “Sexual Violence: Patriarchy’s Offense and Defence,” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse; A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 62—70, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-931)
932. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 92-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-932)
933. Ackerman, *Warrior*, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-933)
934. Brittany E. Wilson, “Pugnacious Precursors and the Bearer of Peace: Jael, Judith, and Mary in Luke 1:42,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 8/3 (2006): 436—456, 443. [↑](#footnote-ref-934)
935. Ryan P. Bonfiglio, “Choosing Sides in Judges 4—5,” in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 161—175, 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-935)
936. Bal, *Murder*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-936)
937. Lindars, *Judges*, 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-937)
938. Sasson, “Breeder,” 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-938)
939. Bal, *Death*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-939)
940. Assis, “Man,” 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-940)
941. Lindars, *Judges*, 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-941)
942. Bal, *Death*, 95; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-942)
943. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-943)
944. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-944)
945. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-945)
946. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-946)
947. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-947)
948. Olam, “Poem,” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-948)
949. Boling, *Judges*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-949)
950. Frymer-Kensky, *Wake*,139. [↑](#footnote-ref-950)
951. Wijk-Bos, *Reformed*,75. [↑](#footnote-ref-951)
952. Wijk-Bos, *Reformed*,75. [↑](#footnote-ref-952)
953. Riviere, “Womanliness,” 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-953)
954. Caroline Blyth, “Terrible Silence,” 485. [↑](#footnote-ref-954)
955. Claudia Card, “Rape as a Weapon of War,”’ *Hypatia* 11/4 (1996): 5—18, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-955)
956. Taylor, *Playing*, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-956)
957. Bolich, *Dress*, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-957)
958. Reich, “Genderfuck,” 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-958)
959. Greenough, “Queer Eye,” 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-959)
960. Guest’s studies on Jael, namely “From Gender Reversal to Genderfuck: Reading Jael through a Lesbian Lens” and *When Deborah met Jael; Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics*, have not adhered to a rigid binary frame. These studies have not worked to disrupt Jael’s binary femininity and these studies have different aims and focuses than my own. In addition, key terms—such as gender—are used differently in our research with the consequence that Guest’s studies have not interpreted Jael as a nonbinary character. See pages 42-44 for an outline of the divergences and convergences of my study with Guest’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-960)
961. Bronner, “Valorized,” 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-961)
962. Bronner, “Valorized,” 87; Ellen van Wolde, “Ya‘el in Judges 4,” *ZAW* 107 (1995): 240—246, 244; Langeni, “Gender,” 7; Mayfield, “Deborah,” 318. [↑](#footnote-ref-962)
963. Ackerman, *Warrior*, 5; Brenner, *Israelite*, 120; Williams, “Feminine,” 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-963)
964. Sasson, “Breeder,” 345; Niditch, *Judges,* 82; Olam, “Poem,” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-964)
965. Brownmiller, *Against*, 385; Gordon and Washington, “Rape,” 323; Washington, “Violence,” 331; Stone, *Sex,* 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-965)
966. Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 228; Asher-Greve, “Feminist,” 233; Rosenberg, “New Authorities,” 599. [↑](#footnote-ref-966)
967. Rosenberg, “New Authorities,” 577; Tov, *Textual,* 327-328. [↑](#footnote-ref-967)
968. While the Book of Judges in its entirety has been recognised as full of ambiguity (Murphy, *Rewriting*), only the ambiguity of Judges 4 and 5 is of relevance to this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-968)
969. Brenner, *Israelite*, 119-121; Ackerman, *Warrior*, 93-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-969)
970. Assis, “Hand,” 11; Brenner, *Israelite*, 119-121; Ackerman, *Warrior*, 93-94; Reis, “Uncovering,” 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-970)