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Jael the Death Mother: A Darkly Humorous Examination of Judges 4

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Abstract

Dark humor, building on irony, often serves as a powerful tool for confronting serious subjects in a disarming way while subverting expectations. In Judges 4, the biblical text employs dark humor to emphasize the unexpected role of Jael. Instead of a defenseless, passive woman, Sisera encounters Jael as a ‘death mother’—a figure who inverts the traditional maternal role of nurturing life by bringing about death. This dramatic shift in expectations imbues the narrative with dark humor. The humor extends into the poetic rendition in Judges 5, where Jael, a foreign woman, answers Deborah’s call while Israel’s own tribes fail to do so. This contrast critiques the state of Israelite society, highlighting how Jael did more for Israel than many of its own people. Ultimately, Jael’s actions embody the phrase *sic semper tyrannis* (“thus always to tyrants”), as she exemplifies how unlikely agents can be employed by God to mercilessly crush despots.

Keywords: dark humor, Jael, Judges 4, death mother, narrative criticism

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Introduction

Dark humor¹ is something that people recognize but may have difficulty defining. This difficulty stems, in part, from the fact that dark humor neither functions like knock-knock jokes nor standup comedy, but instead often comes embedded in a larger narrative. Authors and directors incorporate it into books, movies, and TV shows, but it can also appear in everyday conversations. Unlike a knock-knock joke, people often do not know they are experiencing dark humor until they are in the middle of it or have reached the end. Dark humor pervades numerous layers of society through entertainment media, though it often goes unnoticed as narrative device where the plot makes use of dark humor but may not necessarily announce that to the audience. Often, dark humor serves as a feature of storytelling, and one can find it even in ancient writing, including the biblical corpus.

One biblical book that expresses dark humor is Judges. It begins with irony by contrasting what the audience expects to happen with what *actually* occurs in the narrative, and by contrasting the words the characters speak with the actions that the narrator records, as in the case with Jael telling Sisera not to fear when he should in actuality be afraid of her (Judg 4:18, 21). Then, once irony has been established, Judges intertwines dark humor with irony in tandem with storytelling elements, such as plot, characterization, and conflict resolution, in order to engage the audience about difficult subjects. As Robert Alter says, “every culture, even every era in a particular culture, develops distinctive and sometimes intricate codes for telling its stories, involving everything from narrative point of view, procedures of description and characterization, the management of dialogue, to the ordering of time and the organization of plot.”² Alter’s observations provide an important framework for reading Judges, particularly for understanding how irony and dark humor shape its narrative techniques.

Irony serves as the starting point for understanding dark humor. What dark humor contributes is the addition of gruesome and subversive elements, including difficult topics such as deception, death, and rape. Dark humor can make these topics easier to engage with because the audience encounters them in a different way than through their typical heaviness. This type of engagement allows the author to relate numerous consequential stories without focusing primarily

¹ Also known as dark comedy, black humor/comedy (*humour noir*), or gallows humor.

² Robert Alter, “How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible’s Annunciation Type-Scene,” *Prooftexts* 3, no. 2 (1983): 115.

on tragic elements but instead to provide commentary on the state of a society that allowed these events to occur in the first place.

There are also differing types of comedy, including satire and dark comedy that do not necessarily intend to produce laughter.³ Understanding the goal of dark humor as something other than laughter is essential for understanding its function in Judges and elsewhere. One contemporary example is Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.⁴ Though not a traditional comedy, *Sweeney Todd* utilizes dark humor in the midst of gruesome storytelling. It would be a mistake to assume that the author's use of humor means that he or she intends for the reader to burst into hysterical laughter. Instead, dark humor can function in a way that relieves tension, makes the audience think, or even helps cope with tragedy, meaning that dark humor often occurs at the point where comedy and tragedy meet. The story of Jael serves as an excellent case study for dark humor. Instead of a defenseless, passive woman, Sisera encounters Jael as a 'death mother'—a figure who inverts the traditional maternal role of nurturing life by bringing about death.

In this article, I first examine how irony functions within the narrative world of Judges. I then show how dark humor builds upon irony to create its own distinctive comedic framework. Applying this concept to Jael in Judges 4,⁵ I argue that she embodies a common darkly humorous trope by subverting expectations: she adopts a maternal role while concealing her lethal intentions. Although she appears to care for Sisera, she ultimately becomes a "death mother," lulling him into a false sense of security before killing him.

Irony

Humor of any sort can be difficult to pinpoint because it is subjective, contextual, and can accomplish a range of outcomes. Dark humor, in particular, is versatile, and thus can be tricky to perceive. Harold Bloom rightly suggests that "defining dark humor is virtually impossible because

³ Melissa Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 9. See also Eivind Berggrav, "Humor and Seriousness," *Dialog* 22 (Sum 1983): 207.

⁴ *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, directed by Tim Burton (Hollywood: DreamWorks Pictures, 2007), DVD.

⁵ My goal in this article is to focus primarily on Judg 4 because of the interconnectedness between dark humor and storytelling. However, I will also provide support from Judg 5 as it has elements that show the mothering nature of Jael.

its manifestation in great literature necessarily involves irony, the trope in which you say one thing and mean another, sometimes the opposite of what is said.”⁶ Therefore, understanding irony is key to comprehending dark humor. Though Edwin Good claims that “irony, like love, is more readily recognized than defined,”⁷ he still makes an attempt: “irony... begins in conflict, a conflict marked by the perception of the distance between pretense and reality.”⁸ This is a necessary starting point, since irony lives in the realm of contradictions; “irony by definition communicates on more than one level simultaneously.”⁹

Therefore, the narrative itself becomes essential to understanding the humor, as irony cannot be divorced from the story that contains it. One must consider the Bible in a literary light to see ironic elements.¹⁰ Melissa Jackson, who focuses on feminism and humor, also notes the importance of narrative, along with a variety of comedic examples. She acknowledges that humor exists in other forms, but that storytelling is a typical way to express humor.¹¹ Stand-alone verses struggle to convey any comic elements, especially irony, since it relies on the audience understanding the expected outcome of a story.

To comprehend irony, one has to perceive the information presented and its incongruity with the reality of the situation. Irony can take different forms. For example, in *Mulan*, dramatic irony occurs because the audience knows Mulan is a woman, but the army does not. The story presents a different reality from the “true” one. All of Mulan’s friends believe her to be a man, whereas the audience knows her secret. Thus, the reveal only shows the characters, not the audience, making the irony contained to the story itself.¹²

Because of the dual nature of irony, it can easily be mistaken for something else or overlooked entirely because “the ironic criticism requires of its hearers and readers the burden of recognition, the discovery of the relation between the ironist’s ‘is’ and his ‘ought.’ And to use the

⁶ Harold Bloom, “Volume Introduction by Harold Bloom,” in *Dark Humor*, ed. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2010), xv. Cf. Andrew Dominic Giorgetti, “Building a Parody: Genesis 11:1-9, Ancient Near Eastern Building Accounts, and Production-Oriented Intertextuality” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2017), 360–361.

⁷ Edwin Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 13.

⁸ Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 14.

⁹ Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 14. Cf. Graham S. Ogden, “Irony or Humor?—The Case of Ehad in Judges 3.12-30,” *BT (Ap, O Practical Papers)* 53 (October 2002): 442.

¹⁰ Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 9–10.

¹¹ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 3.

¹² *Mulan*, directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures, 1998), DVD.

ironic method is to risk the failure of this recognition, the misunderstanding of the ironist's criticism."¹³ Irony serves as a useful literary device that often adds depth to works, but if overlooked, it can drastically change the tone of the whole piece. Irony has a sense of subtlety that one can easily miss, especially in works separated by long periods of time and great cultural differences, because it is neither stagnant nor universal but rather flexible, to change based on "position and perspective."¹⁴

Understanding the irony may not come naturally at first, but once the aspects of the story become clear, it becomes easier to recognize. Lillian Klein focuses on the effects of irony throughout the book by asserting that "in spite of tradition to the contrary, [the] basic premise is that the book of Judges is a structured entity in which elements are shaped to contribute to the integrity and significance of the whole; that is, it is organized through narrative form—exposition, main narrative and resolution—and a dominant (though by no means sole) structural device of opposing perspectives: irony."¹⁵ This is a great first step, but ultimately one must go beyond irony to reach dark humor, which I discuss in the following section. Klein stops with irony, but in Judges, irony functions as a steppingstone to dark humor instead of the culminating piece of the story. Irony shows contrast and unexpected surprises, whereas dark humor builds upon these ideas while creating a darker and more meaningless world.

Yet, irony is a crucial piece, and Klein has understood its preeminent role in storytelling. She believes that "irony cannot be grasped until the statement has been read (or heard) completely" because it is the "perception of the distance between pretense and reality."¹⁶ Only by understanding the original statement and then perceiving the divide between it and "reality" does one begin to recognize irony.

Since irony brings into conflict perception and reality, it often contains two opposing viewpoints. These opposite poles of irony contain one aspect immersed in tragedy and the other in comedy.¹⁷ In fact, irony not only exists in both tragedy and comedy as separate entities but also becomes the bridge between the two, and "it is therefore clear that we cannot simply classify irony

¹³ Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 31.

¹⁴ Ruth L. Smith, "Morals and Their Ironies," *JRE* 26 (Fall 1998): 383.

¹⁵ Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, BLS 14 (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1989), 11.

¹⁶ Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 195. Cf. Colebrook, *Irony*, 16.

¹⁷ Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 25.

as a category of laughter.”¹⁸ Irony’s goal is not laughter but awareness of contradiction. While the audience may be amused to watch Mulan desperately try to hide her gender from those around her, a real danger exists in that she could face execution should others discover her secret. When Shang finds out she is a woman, the occasion is not humorous or joyous at all but somber and serious. The situation preserves the irony but not the humor.

Dark Humor

With a solid foundation as to how irony functions, one can now begin the journey into the realm of dark humor. The term *dark humor* occurs neither in the Hebrew Bible nor the ancient Near East. Instead, dark humor has an interesting, but largely contemporary history. However, Ze’ev Weisman rightly attests that “the use of later and even modern terms for the study of ancient literature, and of the Hebrew Bible in particular, is permissible as long as the scholar is aware of the risk involved.”¹⁹ Weisman successfully shows satire,²⁰ specifically political satire, in the Hebrew Bible, and a similar case can be made for dark humor, despite its being a more recently coined term. He posits that “the features which characterize satire as a literary phenomenon did exist in the Bible, hundreds of years before satire was fashioned as a ‘genre’ in the classical world,”²¹ and the same argument can be made about dark humor. In fact, dark humor and satire have many overlapping elements because the nature of dark humor is often satirical.²²

Some of the difficulty in defining dark humor stems from people’s aversion to discussing it. Even in Jon E. Roeckelein’s 2002 book *The Psychology of Humor*, he only specifically references dark humor in a single sentence, stating, “‘black comedy/absurdism’ reflects existentialists’ concerns of the potential meaning, and meaninglessness, inherent in modern life.”²³ While Roeckelein’s observation provides a good starting point for understanding dark humor, the

¹⁸ Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 21. Patrick O’Neill also uses a metaphor of a bridge to discuss irony linking comedy and tragedy. He notes that irony is a contrast of reality and the ideal. For further information, see Patrick O’Neill, “The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour,” in *Dark Humor*, eds. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby (New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2010), 92.

¹⁹ Ze’ev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible*, SBL SemeiaSt (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 1.

²⁰ Satire and dark humor have many overlapping features, but both can exist without the presence of the other. See O’Neill, “The Comedy of Entropy,” 92.

²¹ Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible*, 4. See also, Giorgetti, “Building a Parody,” 42–52.

²² See O’Neill, “The Comedy of Entropy,” 92. This can also be true of parody. For example, Giorgetti notes that Isa 14:4–21 is likely a parody that mocks Sargon II’s death in battle. The lament becomes a mockery of the king and “subverts all the hubris and injustices” tied to him and Assyria. See Giorgetti, “Building a Parody,” 48–49.

²³ Jon E. Roeckelein, *The Psychology of Humor: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2002), 54–55.

concept extends far beyond the scope of this brief description. While the absurdity and meaninglessness of life may prompt dark humor, it goes beyond mere woe born from existential dread.

One can consider dark humor as the “opposite of joviality, wit, or sarcasm. Rather, it is partly macabre, partly ironic, often absurd turn of spirit that constitutes the ‘mortal enemy of sentimentality’”²⁴ or it can be defined as “mean humour which is variously grotesque, gallows, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, cosmic, ironic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these.”²⁵ Dark humor has a wide range of potential attributes, but regardless, it builds on irony, invites the reader consider the society of the story, and helps people cope with tragedy. Its goal is not laughter but understanding. It is “a refusal to treat what one might regard as tragic materials tragically, and this not as a cheap method of shocking or evoking irreverent laughter, but because the comic approach is for them clearly the only remaining approach that is artistically acceptable.”²⁶ Furthermore, dark humor has multiple functions. Francesca Aran Murphy describes dark humor as a world “in which we laugh, however bad it gets, *in order to survive*” and claims that such humor “includes darkness and death.”²⁷ Roeckelein also recognizes humor as a coping mechanism in that it fosters alternate perspectives in difficult situations, development of relationships, and counteractive measures for negative emotions.²⁸

Violence and Survival

Stories in the book of Judges are notoriously violent and traumatic, and it is within these narratives that one finds aspects of dark humor. E.T.A. Davidson recognizes both the comedy and the terror in Judges. She acknowledges the variety of comedy in Judges, including “slapstick, farce, irony, satire, parody, riddles, games, puzzles, out-of-the-ordinary heterogeneity, [and] exaggeration,”²⁹ though she also emphasizes the preeminence of irony.³⁰

²⁴ André Breton and Mark Polizzotti, *Anthology of Black Humor* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), vi.

²⁵ O'Neill, “The Comedy of Entropy,” 80.

²⁶ O'Neill, “The Comedy of Entropy,” 83.

²⁷ Francesca Aran Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation: Paradise Lost and Regained in Biblical Narrative* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 24, emphasis original.

²⁸ Roeckelein, *The Psychology of Humor*, 268.

²⁹ E. T. A. Davidson, “The Comedy of Horrors,” *Proceedings* 23 (2003): 39.

³⁰ Davidson, “The Comedy of Horrors,” 40.

Tragedy and comedy can co-exist within the same passage. Dark humor occurs at this type of crossroads. Patrick O'Neill, in describing what he calls the "grotesque," compares it to irony in that both are "a sort of no man's land between comedy and tragedy, as it is in a deeper sense between both of them and the absurd. Tragedy represents a world of order, where any infraction is summarily judged; comedy, in both its benign and derisive forms, also asserts the primacy of order; the grotesque represents the incursion of disorder, typically associated with physical abnormalities, deformations, and perversions."³¹ This fusing of realms makes it difficult to comprehend the complexities of dark humor, which is one potential reason why scholars often overlook it.

Furthermore, Louise Cowan described dark humor as "the most misunderstood mode of comedy" and the "least considered in any comic theory."³² Perhaps this stems not only from the unpleasant subject matter of dark humor but also the difficulty of classifying it, even more so than other forms of comedy, and determining what exactly its objective is. Terry Heller believes that dark humor requires holding humor and seriousness, particularly seriousness pertaining to horror, in tension, even though they represent opposing realities.³³

Humor is also a tool for survival. The Israelites had to survive in dire circumstances more than once. One of the central episodes of the Hebrew Bible was the Babylonian Exile. Such devastating experiences shaped the biblical authors and the way they wrote. Those who face tragedy in real life are more apt to use humor in their writing. For example, "the ability of biblical authors to use humor and comedy as a strategy for survival in the midst of exile and oppression receives ample representation in fundamental texts of the biblical heritage. Biblical comedy contains the power both to subvert and transform political, social, and religious structures."³⁴ Humor is a survival strategy and a coping mechanism, perhaps dark humor most of all. If the only options are despair or laughter, dark humor combines both and creates a third space where the abhorrent becomes humorous. Dark humor is also subversive, allowing people to speak about subjects that might otherwise be taboo. It shows the flaws of society and demands change.³⁵

³¹ O'Neill, "The Comedy of Entropy," 94. For the purposes of this article, "grotesque," here is used synonymously with "dark humor," though O'Neill sees it as one singular type of dark humor.

³² Louise Cowan, "Introduction: The Comic Terrain," in *The Terrain of Comedy*, ed by Louise Cowan (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1984), 13.

³³ Terry Heller, "Notes on Technique in Black Humor," in *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, vol. 2 of Garland Studies in Humor, ed. Alan Pratt (New York: Garland Pub, 1993), 210.

³⁴ J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 11.

³⁵ Cf. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 27.

However, dark humor often suffers from neglect in discussions of humor across a variety of disciplines due to the difficulty of defining it and unpleasant subject matter.

Mother, Temptress, or Warrior?

The following section examines the dark humor specifically in the story of Jael in Judges 4. Jael is a woman in her home during a battle. She already creates a stark divergence from what one expects to find in a story that focuses on the downfall of a general. Not only is it surprising to find a woman as a central figure in this narrative, but she neither carries a sword nor appears as though she would be able to affect the outcome of the battle at all. Moreover, Jael is a foreign woman, and foreign women are not often portrayed favorably in the Bible (cf. Delilah, Jezebel, Solomon's wives), though Ruth provides a good exception. Because most foreign women occupy negative roles in biblical narratives, one might expect Jael to function similarly to Delilah. However, after inviting said general into her home, Jael again defies both gender and typical narrative expectations as well as her own words of reassurance, by murdering him with a tent peg. Following this, she seemingly nonchalantly meets Barak and brings him to see the dead man. Jael's lack of reaction to her intense and surprisingly unexpected actions creates the aforementioned contrast between the character and the world she inhabits.

While beginning to examine this passage, one of the biggest points of contention in interpreting Judg 4 and 5 involves the characterization of Jael. Is Jael seducing Sisera or acting motherly towards him? Is she an example of a woman warrior —almost a mercenary—or some combination of the three? Often, interpreters provide a highly sexualized reading of the events in Judg 4 and 5—and given that dark humor often contains sexual undertones or actions, such an interpretation would not seem out of place. But is that the case? The characterization of Jael directly ties into the dark humor in the narrative. Therefore, the first step in understanding the humor in this passage requires examining the role she plays. This section argues that Jael is best understood through maternal imagery, portraying herself as a mother caring for her son rather than primarily as a temptress or a warrior, while still drawing on elements of all three.

The Case for a Mother

C.G. Jung describes the archetype of the mother as vast because it can be literal in mothers and grandmothers or more figurative in beings such as goddesses or the virgin Mary.³⁶ Yet, the mother archetype is not always positive as it includes ambivalent examples in the goddesses of fate and malevolent figures such as witches.³⁷ However, the archetype of the mother figure frequently fulfills her role in stories by protecting another person, often male, from an outside threat, typically another male, such as when Sarah protected Abraham from foreign rulers who would kill him in order to have her (cf. Gen 20:1–11).³⁸ However, this figure typically “drops out of the story after some crucial transition is accomplished for one of the divinely favored heroes.”³⁹ This is not the case in Judg 4. The narrative ends with Barak coming to find Sisera dead, so the story does not continue after Jael’s supposed act of mothering. Instead, she sees everything through to the conclusion.

Sisera’s mistake in this account results from the fact that “he finds refuge with a woman who, for all appearances, is a nurturing mother, but who turns out to be a cunning assassin.”⁴⁰ The idea of Jael as a mother may be fitting given that Deborah receives a motherly title in the poem (5:7). The song also mentions Sisera’s own mother (5:28), meaning that motherhood features as a pervasive theme in Judg 5.⁴¹ Therefore, motherhood, in some aspect, appears as a common characteristic of the women in this narrative. Though the mothers are not equal and do not function in the same capacity, all the main female characters play the role of mothers to some extent.

³⁶ C. G. Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine*, trans R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 109.

³⁷ Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine*, 109–110.

³⁸ James G. Williams, *Women Recounted*, BLS 6 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1982), 55. Sarah fulfills this role despite the text’s silence on her opinions and feelings about this occurrence. Though this may have been Abraham’s choice even against Sarah’s will, she succeeds in executing the role of the protective mother who has shielded another character by her sacrifice.

³⁹ Williams, *Women Recounted*, 58.

⁴⁰ J. Cheryl Exum, “Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests are Being Served” in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 72. See also Sara Järlemyr, “A Tale of Cross-Dressers, Mothers, and Murderers: Gender and Power in Judges 4 and 5,” *SEÅ* 81 (2016): 55.

⁴¹ Klein notes comparisons between the Israelites, particularly Deborah, and Sisera’s mother and her wise ladies. She posits that “the personal and selfish concerns of this mother contrast with the image of Deborah as a mother in Israel, and Deborah’s wisdom contrasts with that of the ‘wisest ladies’ of Sisera’s mother.” Klein also shows that whereas the Israelites refused to take spoils, Sisera’s mother express curiosity as to what he will bring back after the battle. However, this is highly ironic as “Sisera has himself been ‘plundered’, and by a woman,” showing the unique situation of the power women in this narrative possess. See Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 45.

In addition, other verses support the idea of Jael behaving as a motherly figure. The MT mentions Jael covering Sisera twice, but LXX A goes farther when it claims καὶ συνεκάλυψεν τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ (“and she covered his face”). Considering this version, Jack Sasson sees Jael as a mother figure and offers a comedic rendition of this affair: “Sisera enters the tent and does not object to Jael stuffing him under a cover. He then pokes his head out to ask for a drink. Jael gives him milk and then slips the cover over him.”⁴² Another example comes from Gregory Mobley, who proposes, “She provides milk, tucks him in, and silently tiptoes around so as not to wake her sleeping baby.”⁴³ Sasson and Mobley’s imagery proves humorous and may even fit the tone of this passage.

Reading either the MT or LXX A, one can conclude that “treated as a child, Sisera will act as one,”⁴⁴ and he meets these expectations when he begins to order Jael around (4:20) like a child demanding attention from a parent. Despite his orders, Sisera depends on Jael for shelter and nourishment, ultimately putting her into the position of protector against those who would harm him.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, “Sisera’s trusting response to her deceptively maternal nurturing has deadly consequences.”⁴⁶ This mother does not support him with the unconditional support that the Judg 5 mother does.

Susan Ackerman also sees a connection between Jael and the mother figure and suggests that Judg 5:27 refers to Sisera lying between the legs of a new mother who just completed delivering the baby, as opposed to a type of sexual imagery. She also takes the idea of Jael giving milk as motherly, contending that even the Midrashic interpretation of her giving breast milk to him should also be understood as motherly because it reflects how mothers feed their babies.⁴⁷ Ackerman’s analysis might go too far. Most Midrashic interpretations appear hyper-sexualized, not necessarily supporting a view of Jael as primarily a mother. However, her broader argument—

⁴² Jack M. Sasson, *Judges 1–12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2014), 268.

⁴³ Gregory Mobley, *Judges: Once upon a Time in Israel*, Readings (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2023), 47. Cf. Boda and Conway, *Judges*, 273; and Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 105. Bal posits that milk has narcotic properties and that wine would be a more appropriate drink for lovers preparing for a sexual encounter.

⁴⁴ Sasson, *Judges 1–12*, 268.

⁴⁵ Sasson, *Judges 1–12*, 275. Cf. Elie Assis, “The Choice to Serve God and Assist His People: Rahab and Yael,” *Bib* 85 (2004): 83.

⁴⁶ Eric Christianson, “The Big Sleep: Strategic Ambiguity in Judges 4–5 and in Classic Film Noir,” *BibInt* 15 (2007): 535.

⁴⁷ Susan Ackerman, “What If Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?” *BibInt* 8 (2000): 40. See also Sasson, *Judges 1–12*, 268; and Järlemyr, “A Tale of Cross-Dressers, Mothers, and Murderers,” 55.

that some imagery should first be considered within the context of motherhood rather than immediately interpreted sexually—has merit.

The possibility also exists that the ideas of “mother” and “seductress” intermingle,⁴⁸ or as Caryn Tamber-Rosenau says, “to lure Sisera, Jael serves him up a stereotypical mother, played to the hilt, with a side order of implied seduction.”⁴⁹ If Tamber-Rosenau’s perspective proves correct, such actions may have helped put him at ease. He felt the comfort of a mother but also, seemingly, the power over a woman who found him desirable. Susan Niditch claims that Jael “is heroic and liminal, a warrior and seducer, alluring and dangerous, nurturing and bloodthirsty.”⁵⁰

The expectations of the women and men invert in this story: women appear as forceful whereas the men appear cowardly.⁵¹ This inversion contributes to the narrative's dark humor. The military general, who would ordinarily be the source of danger, becomes the victim, while the seemingly vulnerable woman becomes the agent of his downfall. Within this inverted space, one can end up with Cheryl Exum’s concept of the “good mother” (Deborah)⁵² who takes care of Barak and the “sinister mother” (Jael) who appears to be nurturing but then murders Sisera.⁵³

The idea of a death mother is not outside the archetype as Jung notes that “on the negative side the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate.”⁵⁴ Though these more shadowy aspects are a feature of mothering, they are not typically the first ones brought to mind when one considers a mother, which is why these are the features of mothering that one should seek within dark humor. Regarding the story in Judg 4, the idea of Jael as a “sinister

⁴⁸ Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2011), 66.

⁴⁹ Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag: Gender and Performance in the Hebrew Bible and Early Jewish Literature*, Biblical Intersections 16 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2018), 97.

⁵⁰ Susan Niditch, “Eroticism and Death in the Tale of Jael,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy Lynne Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 45.

⁵¹ Smith, Bloch-Smith, and Crawford, *Judges 1*, 250. Cf. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 106.

⁵² Though Deborah is a self-proclaimed mother in Israel (Judg 5:7), and fits nicely in Exum’s comparison, several other examples of a good mother exist in the Hebrew Bible. In particular for Judges, Samson’s mother functions in this capacity as an angel of the Lord appears to her prior to her husband to inform her about an upcoming pregnancy (13:3) and she appears rational and calm (13:23) whereas her husband seems to panic (13:22). She and her husband even discouraged Samson from seeking out Philistine women (14:3), which is what ultimately led to his downfall. Samson’s mother appears as wise, obedient to God, and caring of her son.

⁵³ Exum, “Feminist Criticism,” 70–74. Smith, Bloch-Smith, and Crawford also reference this in *Judges 1*, 250. Järlemyr similarly refers to Jael as a “death mother.” See Järlemyr, “A Tale of Cross-Dressers, Mothers, and Murderers,” 52. I use this term interchangeably with “sinister mother.”

⁵⁴ Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine*, 110.

mother” places her in contrast with Deborah, though the text never portrays her in a negative light. Rather Judges seems to highly regard both Deborah and Jael. Despite both women functioning as heroic characters, with the idea of a good/sinister mother, each one fulfills different aspects of the same role.

To look at a similar example in more contemporary media, in some ways, Jael could be thought of as the Other Mother from *Coraline* who disguises herself as a mother to lure in children for the purpose of keeping their souls.⁵⁵ The plot of this macabre animated movie focuses on an eleven-year-old Coraline who moves into a new house. She feels neglected by her parents and decides to explore the house where she finds the Other World, which contains a version of her parents, but with button eyes. The Other Mother creates a warm and welcome environment. Then, she informs Caroline that she can stay in the Other World, but she must agree to have buttons sewn onto her eyes. The rest of the movie revolves around a battle of wills between Caroline and the Other Mother with Caroline learning that the Other Mother lured other children in the same way and took their souls. The Other Mother offers a warm and safe environment, but she does so in order to entrap her victims. In the case of Judges, instead of keeping Sisera’s soul, Jael disguised herself as a mother to lure him into a false sense of security so she could kill him.

The mother characterization of Jael has diverse elements of nuance. Though not a good mother, Jael initially appears to hold the standard mothering characteristics, including warmth and comfort. Seemingly, she takes care of Sisera and provides for him. However, her characterization as a “death mother” does not mean the text condemns her. She may be shrewd but, because of her shrewdness, she single-handedly takes down Israel’s threat.

The Death Mother

Ultimately, the jury lingers undecided on what to make of Jael. Carolyn Sharp asks: “heroine or barbaric murderer? The history of interpretation of Jael is fractured by passionate ambivalence about her.”⁵⁶ What, then, does this mean for dark humor? Jael’s story, like Ehud’s (Judg 3:12–30), is dark, but is it humorous?

⁵⁵ *Coraline*, directed by Henry Selick (Portland: Laika, 2009), DVD.

⁵⁶ Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, 103. See also Assis, “The Choice to Serve God and Assist His People,” 88.

Authors adopt role reversals like those in the stories Ehud and Jael for a variety of reasons. Sometimes role reversals occur “to escalate the dramatic effect and reverse expectations, and sometimes to horrify and/or scare the audience.”⁵⁷ In this case, though the implied audience may not experience horror, they would likely experience surprise. The cultural expectations do not naturally lead to this type of conclusion. Instead, the shock of the role reversal becomes darkly humorous because the plunderer has become the plundered and the conqueror has been conquered by the most unlikely of people.

In mocking Sisera’s condition, especially when viewing him as a helpless child, this great military man and threat to all Israel becomes nothing before a woman with no known military prowess. Israel’s general may fear going to war with him, but Jael puts him to bed as if he were merely a fussy child. She then becomes the “death mother,” the antithesis of the life-giving mother: “instead of creeping up to him to make sure he is comfortable or to fix his blanket, as a real mother might, Jael creeps up to kill him. Instead of watching out for his life, she deals death.”⁵⁸ Klaas Spronk echoes this idea of a death mother, even if he does not use that exact terminology. He describes the scene of one showing motherly care, where while Sisera asks for things, Jael simply acts as a mother would, and her final act is the subversion of all her previous care, where she kills him instead of protecting him like a real mother would.⁵⁹

Furthermore, Job 1:21 offers another image of “supernatural images of Death as a mother,” creating a link between motherhood and death, which is not uncommon in other ancient Near Eastern cultures.⁶⁰ However, mothers are not limited to death imagery, but they also come in the form of monsters. For example, Tiamat threatens to kill her children, the midrashic Lilith murders infants despite being Adam’s first wife, and Medea kills and eats her children, and this idea even carries over to imagery in the Bible, such as Isa 28.⁶¹ In the case of Judg 4, Jael, as a “death mother,” subverts Sisera’s own expectations since he had entrusted his care and safety to her.

⁵⁷ Järlemyr, “A Tale of Cross-Dressers, Mothers, and Murderers,” 57.

⁵⁸ Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 111.

⁵⁹ Klaas Spronk, *Judges HCOT* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers & Booksellers, 2019), 157. He makes this statement in contrast to the argument that Jael is a type of prostitute in Proverbs 9:15–16.

⁶⁰ Christopher B. Hays, “Sheol as a Monster,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Monsters*, eds. John W. Morehead and Brandon Grafius (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 228. Another example of this is found in the text on a sarcophagus of Merneptah where the Egyptian goddess Neith tells pharaoh that she is his mother and his coffin.

⁶¹ Hays, “Sheol as a Monster,” 229.

Jael, as a strange woman, has the benefit of being part of Jabin's allies, but must gain Sisera's trust by other means. As a woman, she appears harmless but that alone does not guarantee Sisera's confidence. Therefore, Jael takes on a mothering role to position herself as someone Sisera could intrinsically trust as he would his own mother.

After taking advantage of this trust and killing Sisera, Jael nonchalantly goes to meet Barak with the intention of showing him Sisera's body. What he sees echoes the story of the "sinister mother," or as Tamber-Rosenau says, "instead of a peacefully sleeping infant, what he sees is a grotesque parody: Sisera, reduced to a child in the last moments of his life, is lying down and tucked in, yes, but he has been pinned to the ground by a tent-peg through his head."⁶² The audience remains unaware of what happened to Jael following this encounter or even if she receives a reward for her actions.

Moreover, by understanding Jael's characterization and the role of interpreters, one can note, along with Johanna Bos, "as Yael's deceptiveness has been exaggerated, so both her victim's helplessness and her violence receive an emphasis in the translations and commentaries which the text does not warrant. The violence of the story is disturbing, but so is all the violence which one encounters in the Bible, whether it is perpetrated by women or by men."⁶³ Some suggest that the violence was borne out of desperation as Jael was trying to stave off a would-be rapist or seeking revenge against a rape that already occurred.⁶⁴ Instead of this view, Mark Boda and Mary Conway observe that "Jael's actions are no more violent than those committed by men in the context of war, and she simply used the weapons available to her."⁶⁵ Though this is not the only time in Judges that a woman using household tools causes a warrior to come to a shameful end as Abimelech fears dying by the hands of a woman with a millstone (9:53–54).

Jael functions as a warrior in battle. She uses trickery to put her target at ease and then kill him. The methods may differ, but the structure remains the same. These factors do not negate the dark humor of the account or Jael's characterization as a mother figure whose maternal role enables her deception. When considering the intertwined nature of comedy and violence in the Hebrew Bible, Jackson states, "violence permeates the Hebrew Bible, and it permeates the comedy of the

⁶² Tamber-Rosenau, *Women in Drag*, 114.

⁶³ Johanna Bos, "Out of the Shadows," in *Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power*, eds. Exum, J. Cheryl, and Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos, *Semeia* 42 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 52.

⁶⁴ See Boda and Conway, *Judges: Longing for a Leader*, 283.

⁶⁵ Boda and Conway, *Judges: Longing for a Leader*, 274.

Hebrew Bible.”⁶⁶ Murphy echoes this sentiment, “Ehud and Jael are pragmatists in desperate situations; they are heroes and heroines on the lower reaches of a purgatorial comedy. In the assassinations of Eglon and Sisera, the narrator does not romanticize violence but spells out how the deed of death is done. This is underdog comedy: the humour must be cold, rather than hot-blooded; laughter at death is grim.”⁶⁷ Murphy aptly sums up the nature of humor within these stories by discussing how the author uses humor in connection to death. Neither story presents the character’s emotions, but “cold” seems a great descriptor of the plot and characters given the fast-paced nature of the narratives.

The humor here remains tied to the characterization of Jael. Jael’s gender plays into the humor as “she reverses the implicit expectations of her husband and the Israelite army, she reverses the expectations of the implied audience, and she reverses the expectations of the hapless Sisera.”⁶⁸ This ironic subversion leads the reader into dark humor. The audience expects one thing, but they receive another. They expect Jael to lean into some type of traditional feminine role, and to some degree, they receive that in her mothering, but she goes beyond all expectations when she becomes a war hero. The humor in this passage is evidenced by the dramatic role reversal of the characters where Jael morphs in the “death mother,” and brutally kills Sisera.

The humor from Judg 4 carries over into the poem where the audience learns that whereas some of the tribes of Israel failed to answer Deborah’s call, Jael, a foreign woman took up the mantle. This also provides a commentary on the state of Israelite society because whereas the tribes failed to show up when summoned, Jael, a foreign woman did more for Israel than them. In contrasting Jael to Israel, Israel is found lacking. Ultimately, Jael’s actions embody the phrase *sic semper tyrannis* (“thus always to tyrants”), as she exemplifies how unlikely agents—like a foreign woman acting as a mother—can be employed by God to mercilessly crush despots and bring about justice from oppressive tyrants.

⁶⁶ Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible*, 230.

⁶⁷ Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation*, 93.

⁶⁸ Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, 103.

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