Biblical Names of Literary Jewesses*

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THE JEWESS HAS a well-defined function in literature. For more than four centuries, "typical" Jewish beauties, dark-haired and sad-eyed, have served as literary sex symbols – *femmes fatales* to Gentile heroes and foils to the less erotic "flaxenheaded" Gentile heroines, and because feminine Biblical names are informed with a romantic aura of Oriental charm and sexual magnetism, the Jewish heroine has been given Biblical – most frequently Old Testament – names.[1] Each name carries a certain connotation derived from the Biblical narrative from which it originated, and it is this criterion by which usage of a given Biblical name in literature is frequently determined. The popularity of the name, the frequency of its utilization, depends on its dramatic-romantic connotation, rather than on the specific legendary or historical prominence of a given Biblical figure.

The apocryphal story of sultry Judith of Bethulia established the name Judith as archetypal for Jewish literary *femmes fatales.* The name first appears in a thirteenth century Old English epic. "Judith," and in a Middle High German poem of the same century, by the same name. A play, "Judith and Holofernes," from Pesaro, Italy, in 1489, was followed by a wave of Judith dramas during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. The dramatic context of this early utilization of Judith is almost identical with the original Biblical narrative. The extraordinary daring and self-sacrifice of this beautiful woman, who saved her city from certain defeat and destruction, is idealized both in the Biblical text and in these dramatizations: Judith's fierce courage in leaving the protection of her city walls and sneaking into the enemy camp at night, her seductive entry into the enemy general's tent and her departure with his severed head, the subsequent panic and confusion of the enemy, are potent elements of both sacred heroism and feminine irresistibility. The name Judith came to represent both.[2]

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[1] (The term "Biblical" will, for the purposes of this paper, refer to the Old Testament.) Practically all the well-known names are utilized: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Abigail, Naomi, Ruth, Esther and Judith. The post-Biblical Berenice and the New Testament Salome and Herodias are utilized to a lesser extent.

[2] The meaning or the name *Yehudith,* the feminine equivalent of *Yehudi,* "Jew," renders it especially appropriate for Jewesses. Indeed, "Judith" and "Jewess" are synonymous.

The early sixteenth century poem of Croatian humanist Marko Marulic, "Judita" (1521), the German playwrights' Sixtus Birck ("Judith," 1532), Hans Sachs ("Die Judit mit Holoferne ob der belegerung der stat Betulia," 1551) and Schonneaus ("Juditha," 1574), versions of the theme follow closely the Biblical account, and so does the Catholic treatment of Luca de Calerino ("Giuditta e Holoferne," Naples, 1540) and G. Francesco Alberti ("Oloferne," 1594). The name Judith continued to convey feminine virtue triumphant over wickedness in the seventeenth century work of the Spanish Felipe Godinez ("Judit y Holofernes," 1620), in the Russian play "Lyudit" (1674), in the German Opera "Judith" by Andreas Tschernning and in John Greenleaf Whittier's poem "Judith at the Tent of Holofernes" (1829).

Friedrich Hebbel, however, introduced a new element – that of tragedy – in his famous "Judith" drama, thereby adding a psychological dimension to the Judith-name. It is this new and more complex image which is conveyed in subsequent literature. The Judith of Richard Wetz's opera "Judith" and of Reznick's opera "Holofernes" reflects this rather modern connotation. In the nineteenth century novels of Max Krell ("Judith in Saragossa") and E. Danzby ("Die neue Judith"), and also in Carl Gutzkow's drama "Uriel Acosta," the name Judith evokes an atmosphere of both tragedy and heroism. Gutzkow's play influenced the American, Henry Harland, whose beautiful young Judith, like her Biblical counterpart, commits a murder and emerges as the conqueror of evil, in "Mrs. Peixada." Another American author, Thomas B. Aldrich, however, reverts to the "Biblical" Judith in his drama, "Judith and Holofernes."

The twentieth century literary Judith incorporates several Judith features: heroism, tragedy, fatal feminine charm: Thomas S. Moore, "Judith," 1911, staged in 1916; Arnold Bennett, "Judith," 1919; Henry Bernstein, "Judith," 1922; Bartholomeaus Ponholzer, "Judith, die Heldin von Israel," 1927; Ricardo Moritz, "Giuditta," 1938; Francisco Villaespesa, "Judith," 1913. Georg Kaiser's "Die jüdische Witwe" (1911), on the other hand, is the only comical treatment of the Judith theme, while Lascelles Abercombie's "Emblems of Love" (1912) utilizes Judith to express suffragette aspirations, and Jean Giraudoux's "Judith" (1931) emphasizes the erotic aspect of the name. Alfred Andersch's dark-haired, handsome Judith, a German Jewess, in "Sansibar, oder der letzte Grund" (1965) whose heroic escape from the Nazis is seen as an act of defiance and of courage, stands simultanously as a symbolic journey into the tragedy of hopelessness.

In contrast to the image conveyed by the Judith name, the name Esther is devoid of dark implications of tragedy and psychological complexities. It evokes a picture of wholesome simplicity, bright warmth, kindness, unassuming yet magnetic charm and innocence bordering on

naiveté. The Biblical Esther, a lovely young Judean in Persian exile, enchanted the emperor Ahasuerus and he made her his queen.[3] The Jewish queen's heroic deed on behalf of her people consisted of approaching her emperor husband without his invitation – an impetuous act likely to arouse royal disfavor and incur capital punishment for her – and pleading for their fate after a decree had condemned them to extinction.

The earlier Esther plays, those of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, perpetuate the Biblical aspect of the name, while seventeenth century drama utilizes it allegorically to suit contemporary political needs. These allegorical interpretations do not, however, alter the positive connotation of "Esther." Mathieu's "Esther" (1585), Lope de Vega's "La Hermosa Esther" (1610), P. du Ryer's "Esther" (1644), Desmaret's "Esther" (1670), and even Racine's "Esther" (1689) are uniformly kind and charming. The Esthers of later literature conform to the above pattern. Both Stephanie ("Wer war wohl mehr Jude?" 1773) and Goethe ("Puppenspiel Esther," 1774) present charming young Jewesses named Esther. Anna M. Porter's Esther in "The Village of Mariendorpt" (1819) is a loyal, intelligent, lovely young woman. Grillparzer's Esther ("Esther," 1861) is gentle and sweet, even though an earlier treatment of the Jewess by this famous German poet is rather negative. Balzac's Esther in "Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes" radiates beauty and goodness, Vogüé's Esther in "Les morts qui parlent" is an intelligent actress of great beauty, Thomas Wolfe's Esther in "The Web and the Rock" is a warm, selfless, brilliant woman. Harold Robbins' (a contemporary popular author) tender, affectionate Jewish wife in "The Dream Merchants" is also called Esther. Henry Roth's Esther in "Call It Sleep" and Ornitz's Esther in "Haunch, Paunch and Jowl" are both pretty, warm and wise. Cases' Estrella Ascarza in "Las Hogueras de Israel" is a soft, lovely creature.

The most extensive use of the name Rachel (Rahel, Raquel) for the literary Jewess is in Spanish literature, where it entered via a historical romance between a Castillian king and a beautiful Jewess of that name. The twelfth century Spanish ruler, Alfonso VIII's scandalous love affair with Rahel Formosa of Toledo inspired Romero's epic poem, "El martíria de la Jevon Hachnel," Lope de Vega's famed drama, "Las paces de los reyes y la judía de Toledo" (1617), Mira de Mescua's play, "La desdichada Raquel" (1635), Ulloa y Pereyra's "La Raquel" (1650), Bautista Diamante's "La Judía de Toledo" (1667), Vincente Huerta's "La Raquel" (1778), Asquerino's "La Judia de Toledo o Alfonso VIII" (1842), etc. In these plays Rachel is a beautiful seductress, alternately tender, strong, and passionate. The Biblical Rachel (from *rahel*, "lamb," in Hebrew)

[3] *Esther* is derived from the Persian *Istahar*, meaning, "star."

also was a woman of beauty and passion. It was for her love that Jacob labored seven years, and then seven more, but her happiness ended abruptly, when she died young, of childbirth. Yet it is evident that the Rachels of these plays owe their characterization more to Rahel Formosa than to their Biblical prototype.

Brandes' "Rahel, die schöne Jüdin" (1790), Franz Grillparzer's "Die Jüdin von Toledo" (1855) and Gunther Walling's "Rahel von Toledo" (1870) also portray the famous Spanish Jewess. So does Jaques Cazotte's "Rachel ou La belle juive." The Russian author, Kukolnik's Rachel in "Prince Kholmsky" (1840) is a striking beauty in love with the Russian prince. Another Rachel of the same author ("The Statue of Christoph in Riga") finds herself in similar predicament: she is enamored of a Russian nobleman. Lazhechnikov follows suit: he, too, portrays a Rachel in his "The Daughter of the Jew" (1849) as the beautiful magnet for the attraction of Russian nobility. Proust's Rachel is a mistress of a prince. Rachel of Halevy's opera, "La Juive" is also fashioned after the tragi-romantic image of the Biblical plus medieval Rachel; so is Dorothy Gerard's Recha in her work by the same name (1890). Maupassant's Rachel in "Madmoiselle Fifi" (1886) is a lovely, high-spirited, patriotic French Jewess, and Enacryos' Rachel in "La Juive" (1904) is an attractive Zionist in love with a rabid anti-Semite.

Lessing introduces Recha, a non-Rachel Rachel: the intelligent, sexually unsophisticated foster daughter of the good Jew Nathan – a true daughter of the Enlightenment – in his "Nathan der Weise" (1744). This Rachel resembles the Biblical Rachel in name only. Recha of Steinberg in "Menschen und Menschensituationen" (1787) and Rachel of Thomas Wade in "The Jew of Arragon; or the Hebrew Queen" (1830), like Lessing's Rachel, are no longer "typical" Rachels; their primary function is to mouth the liberal objectives of the Enlightenment.[4]

Miriam, or Mirah, or Mariam (Mariamne), or Mary, entered literature from three ancient sources: the earliest is Miriam, sister of Moses of the Old Testament, the second, Mary, mother of Jesus of the New Testament and third, Mariamne, wife of Herod of post-Biblical literature. The variations Mariam, Mariamne, or even Mariamond, are the most prevalent in literature. From Carew's Mariam in "The Tragedy of Mariam" (1613), Tristan L'Hermite's "Mariamne," Elijah Fenton's "Mariamne," Voltaire's "Mariamne," Hebbel's Mariamne in "Herodes und Mariamne" (1847) and Derzhavin's Mariamond in "Herod y Mariamond" (1809), the name stands for the unfortunate Hasmonean princess who fell victim to Herod's persecution mania. The figure of this beautiful queen doomed to

[4] Thomas Wade's "The Jew of Arragon; or the Hebrew Queen" is also based on the Alfonso VIII-Raquel romance; scene of action was transferred to Arragon "for metric purposes."

senseless arbitrary death inspired fictionalization, rather than the considerably less dramatic figure of Miriam, Moses' sister, or the hallowed Mary-figure.

Mariamne's tragic fate lent unique bitter-sweet connotation also to the Miriam and Mary (Marie) versions of the name assigned to later Jewesses in literature (ironically, "Miriam" or "Mariam" may be derived from the Hebrew root *mar* "bitter"). Lottich's Jewish heroine in "Wer war wohl mehr Jude?" (1783) is named Marie; Anley's Jewess is Miriam in the play of the same name (1829); Hawthorne's mysterious heroine in "The Marble Fawn" (1860) is also Miriam. Premonitions of tragedy are evoked by Felix Dahn's Miriam in "Ein Kampf um Rom." George Eliot's Mirah in "Daniel Deronda" (1876) is, on the other hand, a most optimistic figure. So is Disraeli's Miriam, who comes closest to the Biblical Miriam in her role as the sister, not the sexual partner, of the hero, "Alroy" (1831).

Rebecca of the Bible, wife of Isaac, aroused with her striking beauty the passion of a Philistine king. The Rebeccas of "Ivanhoe" by Sir Walter Scott (1819), of "Rebecca and Rowena" by Thackeray, of "Femme de Claude" by Alexandre Dumas (fils) (1873), of "Sang de races" by Bertrand (1899), of "Christ has arisen, oh my Revekka" (poem) by Pushkin have varied roles with a common romantic denominator – the effect of the Jewess' magnetic charms on the Gentile hero.

The names Ruth and Naomi derive from the touching tale in the Hagiographa of the beautiful Moabite (Ruth) who faithfully follows her mother-in-law (Naomi) to Israel, the country of her deceased husband (significantly, Naomi changes her name to Marah after the sudden death of her husband and two sons, explaining," Call me not Naomi [meaning "pleasant"], call me Marah [meaning "bitter"] for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me").[5] Herman Melville's Ruth in his massive narrative poem, "Clarel," Farjeon's Ruth in "Fair Jewess" (1897) and John Updike's Ruth in "Bech; a Book" are young, attractive heroines; Anatole France's Noemi in "La Mannequin d'Ossier" (1896), Stenne's Noemi in "La Dîme" (1873) and Otto Ludwig's Noemi in "Die Makkabäer" (1852) are mature women. Lermontov's Noemi in his "Spaniards" and Feuchtwanger's Naemi in "Jud Süss," on the other hand, are young tragic characters.

The literary character of Leah, however, does not seem to conform to the image conveyed by the Biblical heroine. In the Biblical account, Leah is made to play second fiddle to her younger, prettier sister, Rachel the wife explicitly preferred by their husband, Jacob. Her only evident distinction was to provide Jacob with six sons (and Israel with six tribes) and one daughter, while the beloved Rachel was less prolific. Yet, Bon-

[5] Ruth 1:20

nières' Lia in "Les Monachs" is an extraordinary beauty beloved by a Gentile, as are Kompert's Leah in "Christian und Leah" and Theophile Gautier's Leah in "La Juive de Constantine" (1846). Du Maurier's Leah is a mysterious, exotic beauty in "The Martian" (1897), Chirikov's Leah is a handsome young intellectual in "The Jews" (1904), Paul Lindau's Leah is an elegant, gracious lady in "Gräfin Leah" (1880) and Pearl S. Buck's Leah is a strikingly beautiful, spirited young girl in the "Bondsmaid." Otto Ludwig's two Leah's – one in his "Die Makkabärin" and the other in "Die Makkabäer" – approach the Biblical association of the name: the first Leah is the older, not-so-beautiful wife of Judah Maccabi, and the second portrays a loving mother.

Many prominent and popular feminine figures of the Old Testament have not, save in relatively rare instances, lent their names to literary characterization. Among these are Debrah, Johebed, Dinah, Tamar, Zipporah.

Debrah, the prophetess and military heroine, Johebed, the brave mother of the infant Moses, and Zipporah, his long-suffering wife (Miriam, Moses' sister would also belong to this category had her name not been redeemed from literary obscurity by tragic Mariamne), by the "unromantic" nature of their roles – their historical significance nothwithstanding – failed to inspire secular literature.

Dinah and Tamar, on the other hand, owe their relative exclusion from literature to the conventionally embarrassing roles their Biblical protagonists played. Dinah, the daughter of Jacob was raped by the Canaanite prince Shehem, this being the first recorded rape in history. Tamar, the daughter of King David was raped by her half-brother, Amnon, and then publicly shamed by him. An earlier carrier of the name, the daughter-in-law of Judah, son of Jacob, enticed her father-in-law into illicit sexual intercourse disguised as a sacred harlot. Thus, sexually tainted Dinah and Tamar did not enjoy literary popularity.

It is surprising, however, that the name Jessica, although familiar as a result of Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice," is virtually absent from subsequent literature (an exception is Jessica in the Countess of Blessington's "The Jew's Daughter," [1840] who is a carbon copy of Shakespeare's Jessica). This neglect may be due to the obscurity of the name in the Biblical text. Jessica is the English equivalent of the Hebrew *Yisca* "will be anointed," a name briefly mentioned in Genesis 11:29: "Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Yiscah."

Marlowe's use of the name "Abigail" provides a parallel to Shakespeare's use of the name "Jessica." Although as a literary character Abigail was to exert great influence on the fictional image of the Jewess, the name failed to make a similar impact. Later authors chose to assign other Biblical names – which carry a more memorable dramatic-romantic con-

notation by virtue of their original association with dramatic-romantic roles in Biblical narratives – to their heroines who may otherwise have fulfilled roles identical to that of Marlowe's Abigail. For the Biblical Abigail, wife of Nabal, distinguished herself, not by a spectacular deed as an irresistible *femme fatale*, like Judith, or as a woman of extraordinary charm, like Esther. Her name is not primarily associated with a romantic episode as is the name of Rachel, Rebecca or Ruth, but rather with a less dramatic commodity – an act of kindness and charity (toward the rebel army of young David, later to become king).

Accompanying the drive for the assimilation of Jews into European culture during the period of Enlightenment, literary Jewesses were often assigned non-Biblical names. While this change in part reflected the practice by some Jews of abandoning their traditional Biblical names during this period, in part it was a device by well-meaning literary champions of the Jews to minimize the latter's Palestinian (Hebrew) origin and the age-old stigma attached to it; assigning European names to Jewish heroines was to impress the Gentile public with the essential "similarity" of the Jew to his Gentile milieu.

Smollett's Emilia was followed by Dibdin's Emily, Goncourt's Manette, Weil's Couronne, Maupassant's Raphaele, Besant's Francesca, Huysman's Vanda, Bourget's Fanny, Teramond's Emma, Savoir's Helene, L. Daudet's Minna, Hermann's Jettchen, Schnitzler's Else, Lazhechnikov's Natalia Ivanovna, Reyes' Antolina, Ibanez's Luna, Pujol's Julia, and by the Helens, Dorises, Tillies, Marjories and Shirleys of twentieth century American fiction.

Yet, the Anglicized, Gallicized, Germanized, etc., names given to Jewish literary heroines are in surprising minority. First and foremost, it is the Biblical name which creates the original aura for that somewhat mysterious, magic feminine figure, the dark erotic Jewess whose function in literature is "to remind men of love."[6]

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[6] James Michener, "The Source."