

Lightly revised unpublished presentation made at the Chicago SBL, November 1994¹

Did I lose it at the Movies?

It is a pleasure to participate on this panel. I pontificate to you beyond my own very thin slice of expertise, and under such circumstances, I find it best to camouflage behind biographical fragments. I should therefore tell you that in the years that were crucial to my maturation, movies—especially movies on biblical motifs—repeatedly confirmed to me that I had a past and

¹ Session 157 “Gender and Cultural Criticism Consultation” 1994 SBL (Chicago) meetings.

J. Cheryl Exum, University of Sheffield, Presiding

Respondents: Francis Landy (University of Alberta) & Jack M. Sasson (University of NC, Chapel Hill).

Jennifer A. Glancy, Le Moyne College

Slavery and Representation

ABSTRACT: This paper will consider the representation of slavery in biblical epics, in Christian and Jewish writings of the Greco-Roman era, and in twentieth century biblical scholarship over against the popular representation in the Sword and Sandal genre film *Demetrius and the Gladiators*. I shall examine ways that a spectator’s identification with the perspective of the slave owner and of the slave affects assessment of slavery and its effects. Of particular interest will be the representation of women as slaves and slave owners.

[See now her “The Mistress of the Gaze: Masculinity, Slavery, and Representation,” in Alice Bach, ed., *Biblical Glamour and Hollywood Glitz* (*Semeia* 74; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 127-46]

David M. Gunn, Texas Christian University

Bathsheba Goes to Hollywood and Other Adventures

ABSTRACT: This illustrated presentation traces two stories. The first is that of the biblical Bathsheba, told pictorially in (for example) medieval illuminated manuscripts, renaissance printed Bibles, and baroque painting. The second is a celluloid story of Hollywood star Susan Hayward. The stories intersect in the 1951 movie, *David and Bathsheba*, in which Hayward co-stars with Gregory Peck. A study in gender, culture, and the Bible as visual image.

[See now his “Bathsheba Goes Bathing in Hollywood: Words, Images, and Social Locations,” in Alice Bach, ed., *Biblical Glamour and Hollywood Glitz* (*Semeia* 74; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 75-101.]

Alice Bach, Stanford University

Who Is Salome and Why Is She Dancing in Technicolor

ABSTRACT: This multimedia presentation analyzes the dialectics of gender inscribed in both the filmmaker’s and the spectator’s gaze and the ways in which film articulates anatomies of the visible. The presentation focuses upon the Fifties film *Salome*, starring Rita Hayworth in the title role, and Charles Laughton as Herod, Judith Anderson as Herodias. I will argue that through the movement of spectacles, both Hellenistic and Roman, the female body is revealed as the fantasmatic site of cinema. I deal primarily with (1) the crossover of a biblical narrative unit into the American popular domain, and (2) the Hollywood impulse to dwell on the fetishization of the female body, which transforms the short narrative in the Gospel of Mark into a combination religious romance and bodyscape. Most startling is the transformation of Salome into a pious Christian princess who tries to save John the Baptist from his well-known fate.

[See now her “Calling the Shots: Directing Salome’s Dance of death,” Alice Bach, ed., *Biblical Glamour and Hollywood Glitz* (*Semeia* 74; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 103-26.]

gave me a backbone with which to face the future. I know that this sounds terribly pathetic; so let me explain to you why and thus provide you with an opening for to my remarks.

Experiencing the Divine in Beirut

Born in Aleppo, Syria, I grew up in Beirut, Lebanon, a Jew in an Arab country, just after Israel earned its independence. For Jews, Lebanon was no Nazi Germany, and there was much freedom to practice our faith, but privately so. This meant that we could safely take display our religious symbols around synagogues and private homes; but we could not bring them out in public. Because the average Muslim and Christian Lebanese could not easily make a distinction between Jewish and Israeli symbols, it came very unwise for anyone to flash Hebrew letters or the Star of David, and doubly foolish for any Jewish person to display pride of pedigree. One more observation. Because Judaism in Arab-speaking countries generally partook of the dominant Muslim culture, except during festivals such as Passover, there was a tendency to gravitate away from biblical historicism and to favor the moral and ritual foundations of our faith.

Came the “Bible movies,” especially those in splendid color, exported from post-WWII America and arriving in drove to Beirut as I was entering teen-agehood in the early 50s. If the showing of these movies was not banned outright, the entire Jewish congregation flocked to them, seeing them repeatedly—ironically enough mostly on Shabbat afternoon—provided of course that we purchased tickets before its eve. Once there, we all wallowed vicariously in our symbols, in our Hebrew script, and in a history that leapfrogged that of the people who were keeping us shackled and mute. In these movies, I discovered that my biblical heroes resembled actors that even non-Jews admired. Like Gregory Peck (in *David and Bathsheba*), my ancestors walked taller than the Jews I knew; like Victor Mature (in *Samson and Delilah*), they browbeat their foes by their mere presence. Even our Jezebels (Paulette Goddard) were coveted by 90% of our antagonists. In fact, it made no difference if such movies were based on Old Testament, New Testament or even post-testaments. We walked out from such movies slightly beatified and could not wait to get together with our friends, so that, behind closed doors, we could exchange notes on the detail. All this is to say that I never “Lost it at the Movies,” to use Pauline Kael’s title; to

the contrary, I found it there—every time. (On another occasion, I might even tell you how much my scholarship was affected by these fond memories.)

I was of course too young to recognize how these movies were meant to play with Christian Americans, the targeted audience, and I certainly was not yet American enough to realize how coded they were with anti-communist messages. I simply attributed the manifest distortions from the only script I knew, the Bible, to be due largely to American ignorance of Hebrew. I forgave all, as long these movies had enough ostrich feathers, stout-hearted heroes, ravishing heroines, brutalized foes, and Jewish stars; the last, in every sense of the phrase.

The Last Picture Show

The last biblical picture I saw before leaving Beirut in mid-1955, was, as it happens, *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), and I must thank Dr. Glancy for flipping me back so many years. Until I re-viewed it recently, I remembered it mostly as a talky picture in which Victor Mature lost his marbles, choosing to waste the use of biceps that God had given him with which to vanquish the Philistines. The spiritual dilemma facing him as *Demetrius*—to die a martyr or fight and thus risk eternal perdition—was meaningless to me; for I lived in a world where, on all sides, loving God meant fighting those who would compromise his promises. The issue of Christian freedom versus Pagan slavery was totally lost on me who (and I must be confess it), viewed the rise of Christianity as the most sinister milestone in the history of my people.

If I lamented Victor Mature's fall from Hebraic grace, I was very pleased that Susan Hayward was taking on new life as Messalina. I had always wanted to believe that when Hayward was Bathsheba in another picture, she knew what she was doing, bathing on a Jerusalem rooftop that faced the palace, probably the only taller building in the region, where lived Gregory Peck, the only worthy king not to march out with the army raised to propel his (and God's) glory. Like Ishtar or Aphrodite of the myths who disrobes to attain her peak power, Bathsheba had armed herself for the type of combat that Hebrew writers occasionally would allow women to win. As Messalina, I had expected Hayward to go far and was totally disappointed to find her achieving a Christian sort of apotheosis. Even then, I already knew that

Messalina, the true Messalina, would not have betrayed herself like that. I will tell you why presently.

Slavery

I have dwelled with this vision of Hollywood's biblical oeuvre, because you might be interested to hear how non-Americanized (admittedly juvenile) eyes and minds once appraised these movies. But I think it might prove useful to dwell a bit longer on an adolescent's faculty as I turn to Dr. Glancy's essay on "Slavery and Representation," which I found very stimulating. My argument here is that movie-goers are not likely to worry about the truth of how slavery played in downtown Jerusalem or Rome. Notwithstanding her many excellent remarks on that score (citing Finley, Halperin, Bartchy and Wiedemann), they are not very relevant to our theme. Moreover, because Americans—and in fairness, many other people—tend to lack introspection on social levels, I find it difficult to believe that makers of *Demetrius*—let alone its viewers—would have had the American experience of a racially based slave system in mind. In fact, even as we Americans fought the Nazis and condemned them for their appalling racism, we experienced no irony, as our liberating armies remained segregated. Let us recall, too, how shocking to the system was the breakdown of segregation when it occurred in the early 60s.

Therefore, to think that the slavery as depicted in *Demetrius* was, naively or otherwise, rehearsive of pre-Civil War experience is difficult for me to embrace. Hollywood was never in the business of creating historicizing similitudes, especially those that could sear the mind; rather, it channeled all its resources to coincide with its audience's range of emotions. Even in *Schindler's List* (1993), Hollywood could not bring itself to deal with sordidness realistically; witness how, even in the scenes preceding the entrance to the gas chambers, the disrobed Jews looked far too healthy and well fed for the torment and abuse they had experienced. Similarly, I seem to recall that in movies such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Androcles and the Lion* (1952—a youngster's favorite!), Hebrew slaves live in houses with nice knickknacks on the mantles and the Christians were the cleanest bunch that lions were ever fed.

I found myself more in sympathy with the discussion of the link between slavery and masculinity. Here too I must enter caveats. To begin with, when Hollywood treats slavery, not

only is it never the brutal, chattel, kind; almost always it is a slavery that is caught in a state of flux, just as it is about to be transfigured by death or liberation. Amazingly enough, it was not necessary for this transition to have been scripted pre-figuratively; instead, until relatively recently Hollywood relied on its audience's devotion to a major myth of Americanism, "the journey from slavery to freedom."

Therefore, in Bible movies, slaves such as Ben-Hur could still ripple their muscles years after they were thrown to Roman galleys and every woman remained insipidly fetching, whether entering or exiting slavery. Within this framework, the masters—be they Romans, Egyptians, Philistines or the like—remained arrogant and deemed beyond moral improvement. We knew that because they had British accents.

Sex and Passion

When it came to sexuality, Hollywood knew mostly of two types: the "predator" and "the victim," types that occasionally were reduced simply to the "the aggressor" and "the aggressed." I do not think that this classification was a matter of gender, but more of character-roles (in the Vladimir Propp sense), although I admit that often enough in the biblical epics the roles were distributed respectively to men and to women. If we were to deal with the assignment of character-roles in these films syntactically, we might notice that conventionally, the "aggressed" or "victim" eventually acquired a power over the aggressor or predator. In biblical narratives, this turnabout usually meant that someone beyond redemption normally got religion. In Hollywood, history must forever submit to higher codes. This is why the Messalina of our film could never have met her historical fate. At the age of 28 (or 31), the real Messalina was executed in the very same gardens that she had obtained by falsely accusing its owner of treason. I have always regretted not having taken Susan Heyward to the 1953 showing of *Sins of Jezebel*.

The Dance

How to respond to Alice Bach's cornucopia of details rattled me for a long time. What was my role, I asked myself? Was I to comment on her version of what went in movies on Salome or to evaluate her observations on Salome in art and literature? Much as I loved her imaginative encapsulation of the Salome story, I have only light judgment on it. I have therefore resolved first to entertain her opinion that "Salome... is a place-holder for all the biblical literary figures caught in the tropes of wine, women, and death." I would then reflect on the permutations of one biblical scene as handled in the arts.

Not every story that ends in women killing men is of the same cloth. What happened this past month in Union, SC, when Susan Smith drowned her two sons, offers a better entry to what Ya'el did to Sisera than equation with Salome. Sisera found death rather than comfort from the woman who, with milk and cover, treated him as a child. In Esther, the denouement came when the king transferred on Haman his own sexual need for Esther. By most plausible readings, Haman was not brought low by misreading sexual signs, but by not knowing that they even existed. Judith and Holofernes may well be manifestations of the theme Alice is entertaining. The story plays on Delphic ambiguity ("God will deliver Israel if it has sinned"), on misunderstood (on Holofernes' part) allusions to Judith's "lord," and on the laws of kashrut. We should keep in mind, therefore, that Holofernes lost his head when trying to seduce Judith, and not the other way around. Beauteous and bedecked though Judith may have been to his eyes, Holofernes was a fool to expect hanky-panky from a woman who brings kosher food to an orgy. So, unlike Delilah and, for the sake of argument, Salome—Ya'el, Esther and Judith do not comfortably belong to the same company, let alone the same theme.

Let me turn to the second topic. In the gospels, Salome, Herodias's daughter, dances before Herod and his guests. Pleased, Herod makes a promise that, at Herodias's instigation, eventually he translates into the execution of John the Baptist. Until the 19th century, most commentators, including worthy church fathers, did not link the Baptist's death with anyone's sexual desires—not Herod's, not Salome's, not Herodias's and certainly not the Baptist's. The lesson drawn then was about dancing and the lewdness it inspires. So vehement and consistent was the attack on dancing as perversion that Ruskin found it necessary to berate those "who

would read of the daughter of Herodias dancing before Herod, but never of the son of Jesse dancing before the Lord....”

For Salome to fully transform into the prototype of the femme fatale of recent centuries required a rewrite of each of the characters: Herodias often took on the Classical and Hellenistic roles of the nursemaid, often that of procuress or facilitator of trysts. Herod became a lecherous older person. Most likely, he was also deemed impotent. Despite her transformation, Herodias knew of her husband’s limitations. Although writers (Flaubert in “Hérodiades,” one of his *Trois contes*) and opera composers (such as Massenet in *Herodias*) could fashion for Salome a pre-history, she generally remained largely unchanged, as far as age and sexuality is concerned. Even when the conversion of John the Baptist into a major player turned Salome into a proto-vampire figure, her dance remained her most erotic credential. It is my contention that this feature of Salome, her embodiment of the dance rather than her sexuality, that was most readily exploited by the biblical movies. Alice Bach’s montage is also very much to this point, for it was the dance sequence that she mounts out of a half dozen movies fragments—not the eroticism or the vampirism of Salome—that seem to me to have taken control of the whole production. I am very sensitive to the fact that while she could not interfere with the poses, steps, gestures, and costumes, because they were snipped as such from each movie, Alice did in fact had them obey a single musical line rather than retain the polyglot imagination of movie directors.

Salome, therefore, is the dance. I agree with Alice who found Rita Hayworth’s dance “as salacious as the heroine of a hygiene film made for bored seventh graders.” Even when Hollywood recognized the dance as the primary metaphor for Salome, in their movies they generally failed to communicate it as a conviction. There, the sensual dances she is made to perform seem to me to misfire. It is as if I were watching the Olympics where the sauciness gymnasts and skaters display exudes from their bodies but not their desires.

We are still left trying to understand how and why during the recent centuries, men felt so threatened by Salome as to demonize her. This is a subject for another convocation and certainly not for me; but I would urge a look at what happened to the dance in the 19th century, when it

moved from the palaces and the opera (ballet) to the cabaret by middle-class bourgeois. Who did they see dance when they watched women— their daughters, wives, or mistresses?

I do not know; but I am not surprised at the literature that Alice cites (among them Huysman's *A rebours*), about men launching frenzied counterattacks against a demonized Salome, once they saw her dance. In their writings, some had her killed, others just maimed; but it remained for Hollywood to devise for her the most pitiless of fates.² In the movie bearing her name, she is made to marry a commoner. To salt the wound, they turned her Christian—no doubt the very ancestress of Marabel Morgan, author of an immortal guide to the perplexed wife, *The Total Woman* (1973).

Jack M. Sasson

² For a nice study of the development of "Salome" imagery, see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1986.