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The Disidentification of Mordecai: A Drag Interpretation of Esther 8:15

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THE DISIDENTIFICATION OF MORDECAI: A DRAG INTERPRETATION OF ESTHER 8:15

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ABSTRACT

There is a particularly visually striking image that appears in Esth 8:15: Mordecai, the persistent critic of Persian imperialism, parades through the city enrobed in the regalia of the royal court. This odd image has long been seen as a moment of disquiet in Mordecai's arc. By treating this behavior as an act of drag, we will show that Mordecai's actions are not only entirely in keeping with his rejection of the Persian hegemony but are also strikingly revealed anew. José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification provides a lens through which to view the interplay between politics and drag, such as in Mordecai's story. Together with Jack Halberstam's reflections on the art of the drag king, Mordecai's entire story is recontextualized. The themes of unstable, contested masculinity, rejection of Persian power, status as an ethnic other, and Mordecai's political scheming are woven together in his disidentificatory drag. He adorns himself as if the Shushan fortress and willingly appears before the whole city. This action recalls not only his forced appearance at the hands of the villainous Haman (Esth 6:10–11) but also directly harks back to the introductory images of the fortress itself. By undertaking a comparative analysis of the terms used in each description (Esth 1:6; cf. 8:15) the drag theme emerges more strongly. In so doing, Mordecai reveals the fallibility of the very thing he performs, denaturalizes its assumed power, and brings into focus the possibility of alternative presents and futures

In Esther 8 we are offered a curious presentation of Mordecai

וּמֶרְדֵּכַי יֵצֵא מִלִּפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּלְבוּשׁ מַלְכוּת תְּכֵלֶת וְחָזָר וַעֲטָרַת זָהָב גְּדוּלְתָהּ וְתַכְרִיף בָּיִז וְאַרְגָּמָן
וְהָעִיר שׁוֹשָׁן צָהָלָה וְשִׂמְחָה

Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Susa [Shushan] shouted and rejoiced (Esth 8:15).¹

For a character who has emphatically rejected both the Persian empire and its clothing previously, Mordecai's emergence wearing the full regalia warrants a closer look.² In order to understand this seemingly odd

1. All English translations provided are from NRSV.

2. Cf. Esth 4:4.

description of Mordecai's emergence from the king's palace, we put forward a drag interpretation of this verse and of Mordecai. When seen through a drag lens, Mordecai's actions are not necessarily so incongruous with his previous activities throughout the book where he has been seen rejecting the Persian king and empire, albeit subtly (e.g., Esth 3:3; 4:4). Rather, by wearing the royal garb in Esth 8:15, Mordecai's performance as Persian contains significant aspects of parody, excess, and mockery akin to drag that demonstrates his critique of the construction of hegemonic authority (i.e., the Persian empire) in the book of Esther.

Esther 8:15 serves as a denouement for Mordecai's gender performance and builds on three distinct aspects that allow him to carefully craft then enact his drag. First, Mordecai himself comes into view, and almost immediately emerges as someone with a fluid, intangible gender that later enables him to overlay his drag performance over his somewhat sparsely painted gender. Much of his manhood is left to inference, and where his masculinity is signaled it is also shown to be of limited success. There is little attention to power or authority, progeny and lineage, homosocialization, or violent demonstrations of manhood on which to construct an image of a quintessentially manly man. What matters in Mordecai's case is that he presents as something of a blank canvas on to which the Persian performance can be overlaid. Through processes of stabilization and layering Mordecai is thus able to present a strikingly stable performance of gender which becomes most apparent (only) when he comes into clearest view in Esth 8:15.³ Second, we move to examine drag's ability to reveal problematic power dynamics and politics. José Esteban Muñoz describes such acts as those of disidentification.⁴ Disidentification is the intentional performance of that which one is not, for the precise purpose of bringing that thing into question and under scrutiny.⁵ When Mordecai begins his drag

3. J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 232–263. Halberstam argues that drag performers, particularly drag kings – those performing as male characters – are most effective when their own gender is ambiguous or can be successfully hidden behind the layers of the performed character. The hiddenness of the individual's underlying gender in contrast with the visible performance helps to stabilize and bring credibility to the drag act itself. Additional layers can be added to emphasize or diminish aspects of the performance, in particular to add campness, parody, or highlight power dynamics that warrant further critique. See also J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

4. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 11, 97.

5. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 97.

performance, he is not just bringing into question gender roles but also the other hegemonic power structures that are operating in or signaled by that performance, i.e., the Persian court. In preparation for his performance, Mordecai's disidentification is signaled through contrasting masculinities, aesthetics, and social norms prevalent in the Persian court. The significance of Mordecai's disidentificatory action becomes particularly apparent in the comparison between his self-asserted performance in Esth 8:15 and his earlier display orchestrated by Haman in chapter six. How Mordecai's performance is communicated to the audience forms the third and final part of our analysis. Drag performers create and carefully construct their characters through clothing and gesture.⁶ They adopt expected motifs and presentations of that which they are performing and in doing so, transform the power dynamics represented in that thing into an embodied show on the body of the performer. For example, in order to bring into question and demonstrate the performativity of gender roles, drag queens frequently over accentuate femininity and its established motifs through makeup and flamboyant hairstyles. These take to excess the extravagances of the hair and beauty regimes of cisgender women in everyday life. Even in the book of Esther the commodification of feminity and its construction into a high femme performance is necessary for the women presented to Ahasuerus (Esth 2:12). Esther, and the other women of the harem, endure twelve months of beautification and formation into the only acceptable form of courtly womanhood. Meanwhile drag kings use understatement, quiet gesture, and limited speech to highlight the hyper-present masculinity that denaturalizes something that rarely attracts critical focus.⁷ Drag, therefore, pays attention to what is expected in each performance and draws attention to it, whether by over- or underplaying it. The body and embodiment of the performance, along with all its accoutrements, feature heavily in any act of drag, and subsequently this analysis. As such, our analysis will recognize the significance of clothing, accoutrements, and gesture – which themselves are ubiquitous themes in the book of Esther and its subsequent scholarship – in order to examine Mordecai's drag.

6. J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 232.

7. J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 258.

1. INTRODUCING MORDECAI

While men abound in the book of Esther, research on gender typically focuses on the women in the narrative – namely Esther herself, Vashti, and the trafficked women of King Ahasuerus’s harem – and their sexualization.⁸ Consequently, Mordecai’s gender, and that of the other men in the narrative, is not as readily considered. However, it is Mordecai’s gender that makes a drag interpretation so credible and warrants closer attention. Mordecai’s gender, specifically his performance of masculinity, is presented as an ambiguous picture that does not neatly fulfil the expected and accepted paradigms of masculinity in the Hebrew Bible. This, in turn, makes him all the more successful and striking a drag performer: he is so engaging that the political themes and drag-ness of the show are easily overlooked in just another performance of masculinity. Yet there is far more to it than that, and its construction and performance soon becomes visible.

Mordecai first appears in Esth 2:5–7. He is a Jew whose heritage boasts a connection to the Benjaminites and he is also the uncle of Esther who he has “adopted as his own daughter” (Esth 2:7).⁹ Even in this brief introduction is a striking contrast between Mordecai and Ahasuerus, whose extravagant, hedonistic introduction in Esther 1 sets the scenes for hegemonic masculinity in the Persian court. *Contra* Ahasuerus, Mordecai does not host exaggerated banquets for the numerous (male) governors or nobles he rules over (Esth 1:3–8). Also, unlike Ahasuerus, Mordecai has no named wife or other immediate family members (cf. Esth 1:9). While Vashti, Ahasuerus’s first (named) wife, is revealed in order to be removed so she can make space for Esther, Mordecai’s lack of a spouse is particularly noteworthy. It is not necessarily unusual for men in the Hebrew Bible to be introduced without a specific citation to their wife – plenty are – but there is a noticeable lack of *any* mention to a family life beyond his adoptive connection to Esther. In other words, we see none of

8. For example, D.F. Sawyer, “Queen Vashti’s ‘No’ and What It Can Tell Us About Gender Tools in Biblical Narrative,” in *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field* (ed. Y. Sherwood; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); E.S. Dunbar, “For Such a Time as This? #UsToo: Representations of Sexual Trafficking, Collective Trauma, and Horror in the Book of Esther,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 15/2 (2019); Nicole Duran, “Who Wants to Marry a Persian King? Gender Games and Wars and the Book of Esther,” in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible* (ed. C.A. Duggan; SBLSS 44; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); and L. Day, “Power, Otherness, and Gender in the Biblical Short Stories,” *HBT* 20/2 (1998).

9. The link to Mordecai’s Jewish heritage and his biological relationship to Esther is necessary to establish her Jewishness, something essential to the progression of Esther’s own narrative.

the almost obligatory indicators of conformity to heteronormative expectation.¹⁰ We regularly see men in the Hebrew Bible taking wives and begetting children in accordance with their covenantal stipulations with God.¹¹ Mordecai clearly feels no such compulsion to marry or procreate, and that in itself is noteworthy.¹²

Mordecai's lack of family has been commented on by scholars who then identify him with the gender and sexually ambiguous characters of the eunuchs in the book of Esther. Timothy Beal argues that Mordecai is a character who is always on the threshold with other marginal figures like the eunuchs and it is his lack of a wife and family that places him here.¹³ In a similar vein to Beal, Randall Bailey briefly notes that Mordecai is closely associated with the eunuchs in the book, asking: "Why is Mordecai hanging around with the eunuchs?"¹⁴ For Bailey, there seems to be an assumption that because Mordecai lacks the expected family relations of a wife and children, he is failing the rigid expectations of what it means to be a man; Mordecai instead exists in the same liminal gender space as the eunuchs.¹⁵ These reflections highlight how powerful the relational indicators of spouse and children are in conferring gender in the ancient world. Without the obligatory markers of cohesion to *heteronormative*

10. Jack [Judith] Halberstam emphasizes how characters without the obligatory markers of heterosexual relationships or partners and/or links to their own parents and children appear as failures of heteronormative expectation. To withhold such context symbolizes an intentional rejection of such a heteronormative drive. J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

11. Exemplars of this expected behavior includes Abraham (Abram) and Sarah (Sarai) in Gen 15:17–21 where the narrative centers on this need to produce a child and carry on the Israelite lineage; Moses and his marriage to Zipporah in Exod 2:21–22; and David and his plethora of wives and children in 1 Samuel.

12. "In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. [Kish] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—He was father to Hadassah – that is, Esther – his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father or mother." (Esth 2:6–8a). These details may be generalized but provide sufficient context, just, to locate Mordecai. This is in contrast with a character like Sarai/h who lacks sufficient detail at point of introduction (see J. Henderson-Merrygold, "Gendering Sarai: Reading Beyond Cisnormativity in Genesis 11:29–12:20 and 20:1–18," *Open Theology* 6/1 (2020): pp. 496–509; pp. 499–500). Nevertheless, there are sufficient other details in Mordecai's story to indicate gender instability.

13. T.K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 52, 73.

14. R.C. Bailey, "That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah! The Interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther," in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (eds. R.C. Bailey, T.B. Liew, and F.S. Segovia; SBLSS 57; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), p. 243.

15. R.C. Bailey, "That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!," p. 243.

expectations, Mordecai's coherence within *cisgender* norms is also called into question. Beal and Bailey will willingly withhold Mordecai's manhood for such transgressions. They prove Jack Halberstam right as he persuasively observes how a lack of familial context, especially where that appears forgotten and thus omitted, can rupture cis- and heteronormative gender expectations.¹⁶ The result is a gender nonconforming character and someone who struggles for coherence, recognition and even narrative attention.

Lack of coherence within *heteronorms* is understandable as Mordecai fails to provide any indication of his marital status. However, the degendering, or at least de-manning by Beal and Bailey is all the more striking when Mordecai's story is contrasted with Boaz's (Ruth 2–4). Like Mordecai, Boaz is a mature, unmarried man. At the point of introduction, neither has biological children or a wife despite their apparent age and social status, nor is there any record of either man having had them, but that is where their stories diverge. For Hugh Pyper, Boaz's story is one in which it is possible to read from a homonormative perspective to see a man who has found sexual companionship from amongst his (male) servants.¹⁷ Then, when Ruth enters his life to secure a future for her and Naomi, Boaz's queerness is hidden through his role in impregnating his new wife (Ruth 4:13).¹⁸ Ruth is subsequently praised by Naomi as being better than seven *sons* (v.15), further emphasizing her status and erasing Boaz. Though Boaz features no further after that point, even with Naomi naming the child, he never has to defend his status as man in the way that Mordecai does, in no small part because of the former's "success" in procreating. In the verse that marks his departure from the narrative, Boaz has achieved two markers of desirable heteronormative masculinity: marriage to a woman and fatherhood.¹⁹ Mordecai, by contrast, is

16. J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, pp. 69–82.

17. H. Pyper, "Boaz Reawakened: Modeling Masculinity in the Book of Ruth" in *Interested Readers. Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J.A. Clines* (eds. J.K. Aitken, J.M.S. Clines and C.M. Maier; Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2013), pp. 445–458.

18. Boaz's marriage to Ruth and news of the birth of their son are both recounted in the same verse, which is also the final point at which Boaz features in the Book of Ruth. "So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son" (Ruth 4:17).

19. For an alternative reading of Boaz's masculinity and heteronormative fulfilment of producing progeny see, R.A. Purcell, "Playing the Man in the Book of Ruth: Reshaping the Masculine Ideal," *BibInt* (2020): pp. 1–23. Purcell argues that Boaz never fully achieves the ideal masculinity as set out in the Hebrew Bible, including producing progeny. Instead, it is Ruth who best characterizes this ideal, in part, by initiating the sexual contact with Boaz, and thus complicating Boaz's identity as the אִישׁ גְּבוּרָה

degendered because he never demonstrates those same heteronormative “achievements”. Instead, his child, Esther, arrives through adoption.

Esther’s adoption by Mordecai serves to bolster *and* undermine his gender, contributing to reflections such as those of Beal and Bailey. That he has no wife to bear – or even to fail to bear – a child is more striking when one just spontaneously appears for him to bring up (Esth 2:7). Even in adulthood Esther does not bring a child to secure Mordecai’s lineage. Indeed her sojourn in the harem en route to becoming queen relies upon her childlessness.²⁰ Unlike Boaz, homonormativity cannot make way for the lauded heterofuturity associated with reproduction. This provides a space for Boaz to make a swift exit from view but Mordecai is afforded no such opportunity.²¹ Rather Mordecai’s story is only just beginning at the point he and Esther are introduced. He has more in common with Charles Dickens’s Scrooge (*The Christmas Carol*) or George Eliot’s *Silas Marner*. Like Mordecai, these men do not demonstrate expected heteronormative masculinity, typified by childbearing, though both also

אִישׁ ("man of valor") and as an exemplar of hegemonic masculinity. Laura Quick likewise brings into question that Boaz produces offspring and whether he is ever responsible for impregnating Ruth. L. Quick, "Bitenosh's Orgasm, Galen's Two Seeds and Conception Theory in the Hebrew Bible," *DSD* 28 (2021): pp. 38–63. Rather than Boaz providing the זֶרַע (literally "seed" but also "semen" and "offspring") that results in their son Obed, Quick argues that, grammatically it is God who provides the seed, or זֶרַע (Ruth 4:12–13). According to both Purcell and Quick, then, Boaz does not achieve these two markers of heteronormative masculinity, perhaps suggesting that his queerness still remains at play. 20. The beautification regime outlined in Esth 2.12 makes specific note of the use of myrrh in the treatments applied to the women under the oversight of the court’s eunuchs. The erotic value of myrrh and its cosmetic function are already apparent (L. L. Quick & E. Lyell, “Clothing, Conformity and Power: Garment Imagery in the Book of Esther.” *Vestus Testamentum* (2021): 1–21; L. Quick, “Decorated Women: A Sociological Approach to the Function of Cosmetics in the Books of Esther and Ruth.” *Biblical Interpretation* 27 (2019): 254–371). However, myrrh also has a long-understood function as an abortifacient, especially amongst upper class women in antiquity (Z. Rzeźnicka & M. Kokoszko, “Wine and Myrrh as Medicaments or a Commentary on Some Aspects of Ancient and Byzantine Mediterranean Society.” *Studia Ceranea. Journal of the Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe*, 9 (2019): 615–655; E. Eyben, “Family Planning In Graeco-Roman Antiquity.” *Ancient Society* 11/12 (1980): 5-82). Considering myrrh to function in this way recalls the bitter waters of Numbers 5:18–22 which describe inducing miscarriage. While not immediately apparent in the description of polishing, burnishing or scouring (מְרִיקָה) members of the harem or their overseers may well have made use of myrrh’s medicinal, as well as cosmetic, function to ensure those women presented to Ahasuerus were appropriately childless and apparently virginal. Such recognition of the sexual and reproductive economy within the harem also offers a rationale for the extended duration of each woman’s tenure, contra Quick & Lyell. The medicinal use of myrrh in reproductive health within the Hebrew Bible, notably Esther, warrants further consideration by biblical scholars and archaeologists.

21. L. Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). See also Michael Warner’s discussion of the drive to reproduce as part of what he calls reprosexuality, a correlate of heterosexuality. M. Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet.” *Social Text* 29 (1991): pp. 3–17.

have strong misanthropic tendencies prior to taking on the mantle of adoptive fatherhood. For Lee Edelman, Scrooge and Silas represent initially nonconforming men who are forced to ultimately conform to the imperative to commit to the future through a commitment to a Child.²² Edelman sees such acquiescence as an indication that the nonconformity that was so rich in each case is lost in the transition to parenthood. However, Halberstam and Muñoz are both more open to plural identities where noncompliance with heteronormative expectations indicates a disquiet, a dis-ease, with those very expectations. It can become a space for disidentification rather than acquiescence, as happens in Mordecai's story.²³ What becomes clear though is that Mordecai's bachelor status, in combination with his lack of biological descendants and his adoption of Esther, create an unstable, queer masculinity.²⁴ Where Boaz could overcome this in just one verse, through marriage and procreation, Mordecai is left in such a precarious position that comments such as Beal and Bailey's can credibly degender the man. Yet he acquires an almost passing privilege that comes with Mordecai's status as Esther's adoptive father.²⁵ So long as she is in his life, he can be regendered via his status as honorary dad. This is, at best, tenuous and fragile, and swiftly forgotten about when we arrive in Esth 9:29 where Esther is identified through her mother, Abihail, not Mordecai.

22. L. Edelman, *No Future*, pp. 42–67.

23. J.E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 139. “The act of accepting no future is dependent on renouncing politics and various principles of hope that are, by their very nature, relational.” Mordecai's relationship with Esther locates his relational politics, even if it has come about through an unconventional route.

24. Such instability can, perhaps, add to the queerness inherent in the picture of Mordecai, which struggles to escape Beal and Bailey's condemnation. As Muñoz writes, “Queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence. Historically, evidence of queerness has been used to penalize and discipline queer desires, connections, and acts. When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight, queer present, who will labor to invalidate the historical fact of queer lives – present, past, and future.” J.E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 103. The image of Mordecai the spy is later consolidated in Esth 2:21–23, where he is once again amongst the eunuchs and hears a plot to kill Ahasuerus; this he reports to Esther who, in turn, reports it to the king.

25. Passing privilege describes the way someone from a minority group can appear, and be received as if, a member of a more privileged group – so long as their outsider status does not become sufficiently obvious or threatening to that privileged group. Passing is not necessarily desirable or laudable, but rather reflects the power of the dominant group who expect conformity and grant (or withhold) privilege based on whether someone “passes” or not. For further discussion of this in a transgender context, see J. Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Second Edition (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2016), pp. 176–180; J. Serano, *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2013), pp. 181–196.

It is not only the complexity of Mordecai's family connections and relationships that make him an atypical man in the book of Esther. Throughout the text, Mordecai's actions are not those that are expected from "Mordecai the man." Rather, his actions fit the accepted and expected feminine gender performances, notably his actions around gaining power and winning. In the Hebrew Bible, it is warfare and violence that are the typically expected ways that men gain and assert their power and, therefore, are the things that are traditionally associated with masculinity in these texts, or so David Clines argues.²⁶ Mordecai, however, does not assert or gain his power through such aggressive means. Instead, he acquires his power through more feminine strategies, i.e., those of diplomacy. Rather than take part in violence, Mordecai uses the power of his words to get his own way, often in an indirect manner. He is hardly the quintessential example of forthright, direct, and open persuasiveness between one man and the next.²⁷

When Mordecai does go about challenging this edict and the actions of the imperium, he does so indirectly through a eunuch, Hathach, and through Esther (Esth 4:4–17).²⁸ These indirect actions are a far cry away from the violence expected from displays of masculinity in the Hebrew Bible. It is not even an example of Mordecai demonstrating his networking skills with other men, associated with male bonding, or his willingness to bring conflict into the open.²⁹ In fact, he is not even honoring the social expectation that he only interacts with other men; rather he opts to form a partnership with a woman and a eunuch.³⁰ That words and the associated tools of rhetoric and persuasion are particularly

26. D.J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (LHBOTS 205; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p. 217. See also, H. Washington, "Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible: A New Historicist Approach," *Biblical Interpretation* 5/4 (1997): pp. 324–363, pp. 329–331. Washington argues that it is typically violence against a feminine object that is central to masculine identity in the Hebrew Bible.

27. Clines describes a certain skilfulness in speech amongst powerful male figures in the Hebrew Bible that translates into effective persuasiveness. At its best such persuasiveness has the power to transform the plans of man and god alike, such as in the cases of David and Moses. D.J.A. Clines, "Dancing and Shining at Sinai: Playing the Man in Exodus 32–34" in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (ed. O. Creangă; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), pp. 54–63, 56–57; D.J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties*, pp. 219–221.

28. See also Esth 2:21–23 and n. 20 above.

29. D.J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties*, pp. 223–225; 228–231.

30. Clines repeatedly describes the significance of being a womanless man in his model of biblical manhood. See D.J.A. Clines, "Dancing and Shining at Sinai", pp. 57–59; D.J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties*, pp. 219–221.

feminine strategies has been highlighted by Tikva Frymer-Kensky who states that

[Women] 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 persistence (nagging); and they can trick and deceive when they cannot persuade... They are all methods of indirect power, used by people who cannot take direct action: women, and subordinate men.³¹

Mordecai's use of these strategies, then, brings into question his masculinity as he appears to conform more to these feminine strategies than those of Hebrew Bible masculinity. Anne-Mareike Wetter also notes this correlation between Mordecai's actions and feminine strategies. Wetter argues that Mordecai's masculinity in the book of Esther is "as contested as Esther's religious and ethnic identity," which is to say, very.³² Mordecai is no אִישׁ גִּבּוֹר הַיָּל, or "man of valor"³³ despite the overarching framework of violence and warfare in the text.³⁴ As such, Wetter argues that Mordecai occupies a deficient masculine role within the narrative.³⁵

Throughout this introduction to Mordecai, what has emerged clearly is that Mordecai's masculinity is unstable. Whether approaching his portrayal in Esther from queer, masculinist, or feminist perspectives, questions about the credibility and authenticity of his masculinity emerge clearly. Not only does Mordecai fail to demonstrate the attributes of a man – whether of valor or not – but he is degendered because he threatens heteronormative expectations. He represents quite a collection of discernible shortcomings that add up to someone who does not just quite conform to the demands of masculinity enough.

Mordecai's ambivalence towards the masculine expectations placed upon him is palpable. He is happy spying amongst the eunuchs but is not found amongst the men. He is the willing adoptive father to Esther, but he does not demonstrate any interest in heterofuturity or reprosexuality; in

31. T. Frymer-Kensky, *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006), p. 187.

32. A-M. Wetter, "On Her Account": *Reconfiguring Israel in Ruth, Esther, and Judith* (LHBOTS 623; London: T&T Clark, 2018), p. 150.

33. אִישׁ גִּבּוֹר הַיָּל, "man of valor," is often used alongside descriptions of men as warriors or to describe their prowess as men of war. For example, Naaman is described as such in 2 Kgs 5:1 despite being a leper. David is portrayed likewise, minus the leprosy, in 1 Sam. 16:18. A similar construction occurs in Nah. 2:3–4 where the shields of the warriors are made red, and the soldiers are dressed in crimson. It is also interesting to note that these men are sometimes associated with the Benjaminites (e.g., 1 Chr. 8:40 and 1 Sam. 9:1) and that despite being a Benjaminite, Mordecai is not included in such an association.

34. A-M. Wetter, "On Her Account," p. 150.

35. A-M. Wetter, "On Her Account," p. 150.

other words, he cares not for wife or progeny of his own. He persistently appears at the margins, just beyond clear view and displays more concerted femininity than masculinity. He is a complexly gendered character, and one for whom the relationship between man, maleness, and masculinity seems fluid.³⁶ As such, he presents as someone whose gender becomes most tangible in the deliberate act of a drag performance. Indeed, as Halberstam observes, performing in drag gives space for a performance rich in theatrically and mobility of roles that temporarily stabilizes something otherwise fluid, namely the artist's gender.³⁷ And as that performance comes to the fore, there is ample opportunity to bring in shade and depth that create the context for a powerful, inescapable critique of the very thing being performed. With that in mind we now turn to setting up Mordecai's drag act.

2. DRAG AS DISIDENTIFICATION

Drag is not just about genderfuck or even gender play. It does not only work to confound and destabilize the normative construction of gender through its performance.³⁸ While this is its most familiar form it is only one aspect of an inherently multifaceted performance. Drag is most powerful and effective when it brings into focus a richer, more nuanced context and invites the audience to look afresh at what is being revealed. This is particularly pertinent in Mordecai's show, as he is revealing not only a critique of valorized masculinity but also brings into sharp relief the hegemonies of the Persian court, where he remains an outsider. So, when Mordecai drags the court, he is performing a disidentificatory

36. Even in this nascent reading of Mordecai's gender, the complexity in his story resonates with Jo Henderson-Merrygold's "cispicious" reading of Sarai/h's gender (Genesis 11–23); J. Henderson-Merrygold, "Gendering Sarai". Henderson-Merrygold argues that clearly identifiable masculinity in Sarai's story challenges the assertion of her cisnormative womanhood. With Mordecai, the recognition of his femininity could elicit a similar conclusion.

37. J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 263.

38. J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 125. Butler captures drag's critique of gender and the exposure of its performative function when they write "To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that 'imitation' is at the heart of the heterosexual [emphasis original] project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior or original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations...In this sense, then, drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim to naturalness and originality." While Butler's comments on drag have been contested, their comments here help to highlight how gender is performative and constantly constructed rather than innate or natural. It is subversive as drag uses the ideals that gender is constructed from as the basis for the performance, exposing that gender itself is a practice of repeated routine.

practice. Muñoz defines disidentification as “a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology.”³⁹ Disidentification is

about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs encoded messages of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.⁴⁰

In this disidentificatory mode, drag resists and unsettles the hegemonic constructions of dominant ideology when the drag performers intentionally perform as something that they are not, such as their gender, ethnicity, class. Indeed, disidentification creates space for individuals to make visible their disquiet with such hegemonies visible without needing to identify, to assimilate, or to develop counteridentities and utopian versions of self and community.⁴¹ For Muñoz such disidentificatory practices become all the more apparent through performance by queers of color, especially where those performances emerge from a location of multifaceted, intersecting marginalization. The performance itself, then, has the power to reveal the complexity of raced and classed gender modalities as well as the other power dynamics that contextualize each actor.

Mordecai’s status as an ethnic outsider to the court is made explicit in Esth 2:5 and is a repeated motif throughout the story (3:4). That he is also an insider to the narrative can also be seen as permission giving when it

39. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 97. Muñoz continues by differentiating disidentification from counteridentification when he writes, “Disidentification resists the interpolating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of the self within the social. It is a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification. Counteridentification often, through the very routinized workings of its denouncement of dominant discourse reinstates that same discourse.”

40. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 31.

41. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, pp. 11–12. “Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that opts neither to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of the dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this ‘working on and against’ is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.”

comes to embracing the drag-ness of performance itself. It is an insider joke, and one to which we are all invited – but that does not make Mordecai’s critiques any less biting nor his performance less powerful. Mordecai’s otherness builds on his nonconforming gender, as introduced above, but does not stop there. There are countless nods and tantalizing morsels embedded in the narrative to support Mordecai’s construction of his disidentificatory drag character.

The first component comes through the competing masculinities of the court, typified by Haman’s repeated assertions of his own phallic power. He will happily abuse anyone who crosses his path, and treats Ahasuerus, amongst others, as a pawn in his own game. While Haman is not Mordecai’s rival in either the court or his drag performance, Haman represents the very masculinity celebrated in, and associated with the Persian court, that Mordecai wants and needs to bring into parodic focus.

Haman is the antithesis of Mordecai. Haman is introduced immediately after Mordecai has spied on Ahasuerus’s duplicitous eunuchs and reported them to Esther (Esth 2:21–23). While this news was reported in Mordecai’s name (v. 22) and “recorded in the book of annals at the instance of the king” (v. 23), Mordecai is notably absent from male space once again. So, when Haman is appointed to the highest office in Esth 3:1, it is a striking juxtaposition between the two men. Mordecai then rejects the command to bow to Haman, something justified by his otherness, his Jewishness. Haman’s resultant anger (v. 5) and subsequent plot to kill the Jews (vv. 8–15) reinforces the image of the violent, persuasive, murderous man, in contrast with Mordecai’s quiet, calculated gentleness.⁴²

Mordecai’s response to Haman’s plot, as enacted by Ahasuerus, is to distance himself entirely and visibly from the court in a taster for his later performance. After ripping his clothes, he opts for sackcloth and ashes before heading “through the city wailing with a loud and bitter cry; he went up to the entrance of the king’s gate, for no one might enter the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth” (Esth 4:1–2). Here we see how gender play, including through dress, begins to reveal ways of *disidentifying* from the dominant culture. Now Mordecai is making visible his *not* fitting in for all to see, something that is a helpful prelude to the later performance.

42. Here, Haman fulfills all Clines’s requirements for successful masculinity, with one exception: no reference is made to Haman’s beauty. Otherwise, his performance is rounded and a comprehensive success. See D.J.A. Clines, “Dancing and Shining at Sinai”, pp. 55–59; D.J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties*, pp. 212–243.

A performer who does not dress according to the male/man-female/woman binary of hegemonic gender ruptures, resists and unsettles that dominant binary and ideology of gender in their performance. In doing so, it opens up a space that has previously been unthinkable; a space of gender expression that is not simply one or the other and requires a strict adherence to this model of either/or. Indeed, drag does not require anything more than performing a carefully constructed identity that differs, perhaps only subtly, from the actor's quotidian gender expression. Such is the case for Mordecai, who's masculinity is unstable rather than absent. It does not appear to adequately match the forms celebrated in either the Hebrew Bible or in the Persian court. In the juxtaposition between Mordecai and Haman we see man and other, cast across class, ethnicity, and gender; while Haman is the successful man, Mordecai is left in his shadow.⁴³ Yet that gives Mordecai leverage as disidentificatory drag thus recodes binaries to create and open up other modalities and ways of being that reject the dominant script. It offers a clear recognition that gender is inextricable from other power dynamics, but it does so by using the dominant narrative or code as the medium to do this.

Mordecai's understated, but sincere, gestures throughout the book demonstrate that he consistently acts in ways that emphasize his disidentification and its prelude to his drag performance in Esth 8:15. Mordecai's Jewishness has been stressed on multiple occasions throughout the book, and many have already been mentioned. In Esth 3:3–4, Mordecai's Jewishness is stressed again when he is questioned why he has seemingly disobeyed the king's command and he answers that he is a Jew with the implication being that he does not need to obey the king's command because he is not one of them. Here the emphasis on his Jewishness serves as a shorthand for his different mode of behavior, one that lacks the exaggerated hyper-reality of the Persian imperial court. This characterization of Mordecai as the understated and marginal Jew does not fade as we continue into the text. In fact, his quiet – sometimes unspoken – sincere, earnest rejection of Persian excess is a persistent motif in Mordecai's behavior even before he is paraded publicly by Haman in Esther 6 (Esth 2:11, 19, 21; 3:2–6; 4:1–17; 5:9). These actions recall Halberstam's description of the skill of the drag king in making visible

43. Further details of Haman's successful masculinity are found in Esther 5, where reference is made to Haman's wife and his many sons along with his great wealth and sizeable number of friends (Esth 5:10–11).

that which is otherwise treated as natural and beyond critique.⁴⁴ In Esther 8:7, he is described as “the Jew Mordecai,” in a designation given right before his Persian performance. Mordecai’s non-Persian character remains a key identifier of his character throughout the book. The book ends with a reminder of this when it states in Esth 10:3 that “Mordecai the Jew was next in rank to King Ahasuerus.” That he is not one of them is clearly seen in his rejection of Persian clothes in Esth 4:4. This rejection is found amidst a sustained picture of Mordecai’s rejection of Persian hegemony. His rejection of the clothing offered by Esther goes hand in hand with his empowering of the queen to make her politics explicit. Meanwhile he is able to remain in the margins preparing for his own moment of performance by once again drawing attention to attire and power in the same breath. Mordecai, therefore, has been earnestly disidentifying with the Persian empire, and all that it represents, before his final performance in Esth 8:15.

Regarding genderfuck, drag uses the same behaviors and expected performances of gender that it is critiquing *as a way to critique it*. In fact, it renders them hyper visible precisely to aid such critiques. In order to question the dominant script of gender, the performer incorporates expected gender performances into their act. Yet there is a nascent awareness that this in itself is not usually expected, or at least that is the case for viewers who recognize that they are watching drag. The result is a way of being that has previously been unthinkable within the normative framework, creating a space that not only exposes the framework that it disrupts but also empowers those who do not traditionally fit within these expected modes of being. The emerging opportunity for Mordecai’s drag comes when Mordecai receives the reward Haman has been cultivating for himself (Esther 6). Mordecai, not Haman, is dressed in royal regalia in thanks for service to Ahasuerus (Esth 6:11). For Haman, the humiliation comes in having to adorn Mordecai then parade him through the city square, proclaiming Mordecai’s celebrated status (cf. 6:12–13). On completion of the parade Mordecai promptly returns to his usual state and location, reminding readers that this is *not* drag. This is a forced and non-consensual performance. Nevertheless, it offers a tantalizing insight into both how and what can be achieved by making a drag show that builds on this glimpse of power dynamics combined with regal attire.

44. J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 235. See also, J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 58.

Drag then is unsettling in its nature and Muñoz argues at its heart, drag works by “creating an uneasiness, an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric.”⁴⁵ That drag aims to unsettle is, perhaps, made clearer with Muñoz’s citation of Félix Guattari where drag is understood to disturb the ideas of the audience with an aim to “trouble them, to stir up uncertain desire-zones that they always more or less refuse to explore.”⁴⁶ As such, whatever Mordecai does must effectively trouble and subvert the social fabric even as he relies on textile fabrics to build the vessel for his critique.

Drag, then, is not just limited to cracking open and creating new modalities within gender expression, but it also includes an examination of other hegemonic structures and facets of identity that are frequently intertwined within that drag performance. For Muñoz, this is an essential contribution of the drag art form and locates it more visibly in wider intersectional, queer and postcolonial praxis.⁴⁷ For example, Muñoz writes of a drag king who performs as a risible, machismo, middle aged Cuban. The performer in this case is not just revealing the presence of a man in their performance but how his identity also encompasses narrow-minded politics, xenophobic nationalism, misogyny, and homophobia.⁴⁸ In this performance, the drag king is not just bringing into question and unsettling only the gender binaries that their performance adopts; they are also critiquing all these other aspects of the identity of that which they perform. Muñoz’s Cuban drag king shows how intertwined these identities are and through careful, intentional layering, the different facets of that identity are newly revealed.⁴⁹ By incorporating these other facets of identity into their performance, the performer is not just opening up and unsettling the dominant script of gender for critique, and perhaps mockery, but also the nationalism, xenophobia, etc., that is also inherent in this performance. From this example, then, drag is not merely about gender critique but about holding up to scrutiny the hegemonic structures that shape our daily lives and work to disenfranchise and exclude those

45. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 100.

46. F. Guattari, *Soft Subversions* (ed. S. Lotringer; trans. D.L. Sweet and C. Wiener; New York: Semiotext[e], 1996), p. 37, cited in J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 99.

47. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 135. “Drag’s elasticity extends to depict various subjectivities that traverse not only gender identification, but also national, class, and geographic identity coordinates.”

48. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, pp. 119–141

49. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 135. Drag “renders visible the mechanisms of privilege that such subjectivities attempt to occlude.”

who do not easily conform to or those who do not naturally fit these structures. It is this depth of meaning that comes to the fore as Mordecai moves more actively into the realm of a disidentificatory drag performer. He has all he needs, thanks to Haman, to craft his show. Then, when Haman is executed for his part in conspiracy to commit genocide against the Jew (Esth 7:10), the stage is clear for Mordecai to bring his carefully constructed performance of masculinity into full view.

3. MORDECAI'S DRAG PERFORMANCE

When Mordecai finally embarks on his drag show he brings the themes we have identified to this point together with the tools of the drag performer's trade: costume, accoutrement, and gesture. When he appears dressed in royal robes, they are not only the attire of the elite, as seen in the interaction with Haman (Esth 6:10–11), but also recall the image of the very fortress we glimpsed in the first chapter of Esther (1:6–7). From the moment of his appearance in such attire, we are challenged to use Mordecai's drag show to look back over all the clues we have been given, and to see how he invites us to identify the mechanisms of privilege through his mimicry.⁵⁰ These cues are often significant elements of the drag performance as they visually blur the behaviors and appearances that are expected from performers, whether those be the expected behaviors of gender or some other hegemonic structure. In this section we examine how Mordecai dresses up in the royal garb as part of his parody of the Persian empire as his dress directly harks back to the textual introduction to the Persian empire in chapter one of the book of Esther. We demonstrate that Mordecai is taking up the clothes of the empire to invite the audience to mock it through the unsettling image that he is producing, but also to critique it through his disidentificatory drag.

While Mordecai's sackcloth and ashes have already drawn attention, along with the royal attire, he is not the only person for whom clothing features significantly in this tale. Clothing is itself a significant theme in the book of Esther and Mordecai's dressing up has often been the subject of scholarly interest.⁵¹ Of particular notice is Mona West's argument that

50. Cf. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 135, 141.

51. See, for example, L. Quick & E. Lyell, "Clothing, Conformity and Power: Garment Imagery in the Book of Esther." *Vestus Testamentum* (2021): 1–21; S. Billington, "Social Standing, Agency, and the Motif of Cloth and Clothing in Esther," in *Dress Hermeneutics and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Antonios Finistis; LHBOTS; London: T&T Clark, forthcoming); J. Siebert-Hommes, "'On the third day Esther

in Esth 8:15, Mordecai is engaging in an act of cross-dressing.⁵² When Mordecai puts on the royal vestments, he is – at least for West – challenging the established notions and boundaries of identity in the book of Esther.⁵³ The language of cross-dressing, especially with the inclusion of West’s chapter in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, alludes to gender play and drag, even though West does not construct such themes explicitly in her argument. Rather, the challenge arises from an individual dressing as something that they are not, whether that is a man dressing as a woman or a Jew dressing as a Persian.⁵⁴ Mordecai dressing up in the Persian royal clothes, then, shatters the binarism of Jew/Persian, in which these two identities are kept as distinct entities.⁵⁵ By dressing as a Persian, Mordecai, a Jew, blurs the lines of identity as it creates a so-called third mode of articulation and being that does not conform to one nor another.⁵⁶ This third mode of articulation becomes the hybrid space of these two identities, of Jew and Persian.

However, while West’s argument is persuasive and highlights Mordecai’s Persian dress, by framing Mordecai’s act in Esth 8:15 as one of drag, we can see that he is going beyond merely challenging the rigid binaries of identity in the book of Esther. Instead, by viewing Esth 8:15

put on her queen's robes' (Esther 5:1): The Symbolic Function of Clothing in the Book of Esther." *European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis* 1 (2002):

http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/02_1/siebert.htm; J. Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and Hidden Reading* (Siphrut 6; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), pp. 124–125; S. Bahar, "Coming Out as Queen: Jewish Identity, Queer Theory, and *The Book of Esther*," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 13 (2012): 172; J.J. Spoelstra, "Mordecai's Royal Vestments: Princely and/or Priestly," *OTE* 32/1 (2019): 178–179; and M. West, "Esther," in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (eds. D. Guest, R.E. Goss, M. West and T. Bohache; London: SCM, 2006) p. 279; D.J.A. Clines, "Reading Esther from Left to Right: Contemporary Strategies for Reading a Biblical Text," in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in celebration of forty years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* (eds. D.J.A. Clines, S.E. Fowler, and S.E. Porter; JSOTSup 87; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), p. 39; L. Day, *Esther* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), p. 95; C.M. Bechtel, *Esther* (IBC; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), p. 59; S.B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (SBLDS 44; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), pp. 61–72. These examples are far from exhaustive but provide a brief overview of the variety of scholars who have noted the theme of clothing in the book of Esther. Many of these studies also note the distinctly political function of such clothing (see, in particular, Siebert-Hommes, Grossman, and Spoelstra).

52. M. West, "Esther," p. 283.

53. M. West, "Esther," p. 284.

54. Moreover, as bio or hyper drag highlights, drag need not cross from one side of a gender binary to another. Rather, bio drag or hyper drag shows that it is possible to perform different gender expressions even if one’s assigned sex matches the gender being enacted (e.g. drag queen performances by artists assigned female at birth (AFAB); drag kinging by those AMAB).

55. M. West, "Esther," p. 284.

56. M. West, "Esther," p. 284.

through a drag lens, we can see how Mordecai’s emergence may be understood as a subversive and powerful critique that invites examination of that which he performs as: the Persian empire. The hybridity of the cross-dressing identified by West is combined with a highly gendered performance that recalls and mocks Haman’s earlier manning off – all while serving to call out the hegemonic power of the Persian empire and its treatment of outsiders, notably the Jews.

To understand Mordecai’s performance as the Persian empire, we must first examine how it is constructed in the text; what exactly is Mordecai parodying? The construction of the Persian empire begins in chapter one of the book and it is predominantly done through feasts. In the first chapter of the book of Esther, three feasts are described. The first feast is for all of King Ahasuerus’s ministers, officials, armies, and provincial governors (Esth 1:2–3) and is a feast of excess as it lasts for over 180 days and the guests experience “the vast riches of [the Persian] kingdom and the splendid glory of his majesty” (Esth 1:4). The next feast for Persian subjects is no less excessive. At this second feast we are also provided with a description of the palatial setting of this second feast (Esth 1:6). The third and final Persian feast in this opening chapter is Vashti’s feast where she hosts a feast for the women at the Persian palace (Esth 1:9).⁵⁷

These opening chapters serve as our introduction to the Persians and their empire, and these feasting scenes and all their details form the basis for our knowledge and understanding of the Persian empire. We do not get long introductions to each of the key characters in the Persian empire; there is no detailed description of King Ahasuerus or Haman, of their clothing or otherwise. Instead, the text supplies us with these feasting scenes and at the second of these feasts, in Esth 1:6, we are provided with a detailed description of the palace in which the feast takes place:

תָּוֵר כִּרְפָס וּתְלֵלֹת אֲחוּזוֹ בְּחַבְלֵי-בָוֶז וְאַרְגָּמָן עַל-גְּלִילֵי כֶסֶף וְעַמּוּדֵי אֶשֶׁן מִטּוֹת זָהָב וְכֶסֶף עַל
רְצֵפֹת בַּהֲט־נִשְׁשׁ וְנָר וְסִקָּרֹת:

There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and coloured stones.

Clearly this is the image that matters, even though it is the adornment of a building not a person. In this vivid description of King Ahasuerus’s

57. For a further discussion of how feasting links to the construction of the Persians in the book of Esther, see K. Gwyther, "Feasting and Fasting: Hybridity in the Book of Esther," *OTE* 34/1 (2021): pp. 60–67.

palace, the centre of Persian rule, there are some noticeable similarities between this description and the subsequent description of Mordecai’s regalia when he emerges from the king’s presence in Esth 8:15:

וַתֵּצֵא מִלְּפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּלִבוֹשׁ מַלְכוּתִי תְּכֵלֶת וְחֹר וְעִטֶּרֶת זָהָב גְּדוּלָּה וְתַכְרִיף בִּיזָן וְאַרְגָּמָן וְהָעִיר שִׁוְשָׁן צָהָלָה וְשִׂמְחָה

Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Susa [Shushan] shouted and rejoiced.

The similarities between these two accounts has often been noted within scholarship.⁵⁸ Joshua Joel Spoelstra notes that a direct comparison between the two texts would be difficult given the presence of the *hapax legomenon* תַּכְרִיף.⁵⁹ He rightly acknowledges the similarity in language and terms used to describe both the royal palace in Esth 1:6 and Mordecai’s later dress in Esth 8:15.⁶⁰ This shared language between the two accounts centers on the use of striking colors used to describe both the Persian palace and Mordecai’s vestments,⁶¹ which are detailed as follows:⁶²

Esther 1:6		Esther 8:15	
There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings	חֹר בְּרָפֶס וְתַכְלֶת	from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white	מִלְּפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּלִבוֹשׁ מַלְכוּתִי תְּכֵלֶת וְחֹר
tied with cords of fine linen and purple	אֲחוּזֹת בְּחֻבְלֵי־בִיזָן וְאַרְגָּמָן	and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool	וְתַכְרִיף בִּיזָן וְאַרְגָּמָן
There were couches of gold and silver	מִטּוֹת זָהָב וְכֶסֶף	with a great crown of gold	וְעִטֶּרֶת זָהָב גְּדוּלָּה

58. See, for example, J.J. Spoelstra, “Mordecai’s Royal Vestments,” pp. 183–184; L. Day, *Esther*, p. 139; and J. Screnock and R.D. Holmstedt, *Esther: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Baylor Handbook on the Hebrew Bible; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), pp. 44–47.

59. The word בֵּהַט is another *hapax* which appears in Esth 1:6, rendering a direct comparison of the two texts problematic.

60. J.J. Spoelstra, “Mordecai’s Royal Vestments,” p. 184–185.

61. Quick and Lyell also note of similarities between the description of Mordecai's clothing in Esth 8:15 and descriptions of the royal court elsewhere. L. Quick and E. Lyell, "Clothing," p. 21. In particular, they highlight that the use of the term זָהָב ("gold") is only used to describe Mordecai's crown, the drinking goblets of the royal court in Esth 1:7, and Ahauserus' spectre (Esth 4:11; 5:2; 8:4). This royal use of the term throughout the book serves to reinforce that there is no misunderstanding that Mordecai is performing as the Persian court in Esth 8:15.

62. The order of the text has been altered so as to offer the clearest comparison.

When placed side-by-side, the similarities between the two texts become notably clear. Yet the rationale for such similarities has remained an unresolved point of similarity. Mordecai's dress in Esth 8:15 is linguistically connected to the book's introduction to the Persian empire in Esth 1:6; the parallels between the two are inescapable. We are offered no other real visual description of this empire, nor of the king himself. Yet that does not stop Mordecai finding some visual image around which to create his drag show; he uses the only imperial image provided, that of the palace. Our drag-informed interpretation provides a rationale for Mordecai's choice: he is dragging the Persian empire itself as well as those who seek to serve its interest.

Those interests are most visibly served by the figures of Ahasuerus and Haman. As we have noted, there is no physical description of either, but there remains the juxtaposition between the masculinities of Haman and Mordecai in Esther 6. Even when Mordecai is attired in Ahasuerus's clothes, to Haman's anger, there is still no description of the clothes themselves. Now without the inherited royal vestments, Mordecai must find another way to convey the link to the hegemonic power. It is not a case of Persian cross dressing or imitation, but rather is that camp, mocking, presentation of an ersatz form of identity that is recognisably constructed. It is not fake, in that the performance is sincere and carefully crafted. Where Mordecai had previously been paraded by Haman, now he demonstrates the gestures he wants to have acknowledged. Despite being previously quiet, understated and perpetually in the margins, now he is a visible representation of the city's shouts and rejoicing (Esth 8:15). He is whipping up a frenzy inspired by his presentation in blue and white robes with crown and mantle: he is there to be seen and what a striking image he presents.

Through his adornment and his public performance Mordecai's drag act is carefully constructed for maximum effect. He is known from his earlier reluctant tour with Haman, but now he presents himself differently in both attire and demeanor. He relies on the familiarity of the earlier image to call into question the valorization of hegemonic masculinity that Haman's parade and Mordecai's unwilling involvement typified. In doing so he calls out all who unquestioningly celebrate such idealized masculinity, and reminds the viewers of the tragic fate of Haman. Mordecai's excessiveness is a cautionary tale: get lost in this idealization and you too could be killed or find yourself lost in a fortress of your own making. His tacit mockery of such a position reminds his audience, as the

best drag shows do, that such masculinity is a performance and a choice whether or not it is presented as drag. Yet there is a further element of Mordecai's act that reveals the drag and disidentification at the core of his show. Mordecai has made the grand fortress, the seat of the entire Persian empire, into just one man in a costume.⁶³

When performing as the fortress Shushan, drag extraordinaire, Mordecai has shown that there is no depth or true power to the Persian imperial court. It may be adorned with fine cloths and treasure, but in another's hands it can be undone just as easily. Mordecai's show reveals, almost inescapably, that the success of the court and all it is built on is no more real, tangible, or enduring than a staged performance for the gratification of the viewer. It is a sham, and there is no more to it than Mordecai's parody can and does present. In other words, through a simple act of drag, the majesty of the court – along with everything it purports to cherish and value – comes to an end the minute the performance does. And Mordecai calls time. Not only on his own performance, but on that of the court and its vassals, because now everybody in the city knows there need be no right of this king, Ahasuerus, or, for that matter, any other.

While Mordecai could have mockingly portrayed the court or sent up the valorized forms of masculinity without making such clear use of disidentificatory drag models, we find his performance is particularly powerful because he deploys such tools so effectively. His own unstable, perhaps queer, masculinity is rendered even less visible than that of the men he parodies. Similarly, his identity as an ethnic other, and a marginal figure in the court life, allows him to play with then weaponize the very symbols of success and imperialism he finds all around him. He is “recycling and recoding” the script of the Persian empire that we find in the book of Esther, as per Muñoz's instructions for disidentificatory drag.⁶⁴ In doing so, Mordecai finds a space for minority resistance within an oppressive regime that sought to “annihilate” (Esth 3:15) him and his people.

63. Once again, this calls to mind the success of the Cuban drag king's act which has deployed parody, camp extravagance, heckling, and gaudy spectacle to disidentify with problematic aspects of majoritarian culture. Muñoz reflects: “these productions, in turn, remind us that identity politics does not need only to be rooted in essentialized notions of the self and simplistic understanding of resistance, but rather that it is essentially a politics of hybridity that works within and outside the dominant public sphere, and in doing so contests the ascendant racial, sexual, and class strictures.” J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 141.

64. J.E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 31.

4. CONCLUSION

Mordecai remains far from a man's man, except on the brief occasions where he reveals the shortcomings of the other men's masculinity. He is far happier in the company of Esther and the eunuchs, his only direct conversation partners. Without the traditional family ties and his lack of commendation in the text as a man of war, Mordecai fails to meet the expected paradigm of hegemonic masculinity in the Hebrew Bible. But it is in this very failure to uphold hegemonic masculinity that we find the space of Mordecai's resistance in the book of Esther. The resistance is not a full-blown revolution that riots in the face of Ahasuerus nor one that openly rejects the Persian hegemony. Rather, this resistance takes place through a carefully constructed drag performance that is built on Mordecai's gender instability. This drag performance is disidentificatory as Mordecai uses the same tools that trap him within this system in order to critique it, shown in the book of Esther by his parody (via his dress and clothing) of the Shushan fortress. By putting on the royal robes in Esth 8:15, he becomes the embodiment of Shushan fortress, the seat of the Persian empire and its hegemonic masculinity, imperial power, insider privilege, and authoritative voice just long enough to show that such things do not exist in more than a fragmentary form for anyone. There is nothing more to Mordecai's performance, and all that is entailed within it, than his costume; being Persian is simply the ability to put on a good show. Perhaps it is Mordecai, in his not-quite masculinity and parody of the court, who holds the most power in this text as he is able to expose the systems for what they really are.