Between Two Kings: Rewriting Michal from a Jewish feminist perspective? by Yael Barham-Smith

Abstract
Judaism, for all its many cultures, ethnicities and denominations, is predominantly a patriarchal religion. Following the Jewish traditions of interpretation and exegesis of the Tanakh4 (Hebrew Bible), some Jewish feminists have advocated biblical reinterpretation as a way to improve women's standing within Judaism. Rewriting a biblical story f rom the position of a previously objectified or silenced character can expose the biases that may have been obscured in the original version because of its focalisation through male characters. Exploring new points of view in a well -known narrative can also be an effective way of turning a monologic discourse into a dialogic one. In these ways a text can create new reading positions for a reader, countering the domination of one subject position or one ideological stance. *The Secret Book of Kings* by Yochi Brandes (2016) and *Queenmaker* by India Edghill (2003) are two texts that rewrite the story of the rise and rule of King David. Both seek to destabilise the perceived heroism of the second king of the Hebrew people. These two novels focalise the story through the character of Michal, daughter of Saul and wife of David, giving her a voice and, perhaps, some measure of agency. By focussing on this heroine, rather than on the male figures who are traditionally central to the plot, the texts seek to create a female implied reader, one that occupies an active subject position that is missing f rom the original biblical version of the story.

Alicia Ostricker writes to Judaism I am marginal. Am woman, unclean. Am Eve. Or worse, am Lilith. Am illiterate. Not mine the arguments of Talmud, not mine the centuries of ecstatic study, the questions and answers twining minutely like vines around the living Word, not mine the Kabala, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet dancing as if they were attributes of God. These texts, like the Law and the Prophets, are not me. (Quoted in Gubar 299)

The experience of being Jewish is one that is fundamentally influenced by gender. In Judaism, the male is always privileged over

the female. Male experience is the normative experience of Jewishness; it is through men that Judaism is defined (Plaskow 1). The male Jewish identity, centred on but not limited to masculine religious duties, differs vastly from the Jewish female experience and the limited roles that underlie it in traditional Judaism. This is because Judaism values prayer and study and these have traditionally been the reserve of men. Women have historically been confined to non-religious roles within Judaism, excluded from full participation in their own religion and tradition.

It is the critique of this subordination of the female Jewish experience that is at the heart of Jewish feminism, part of third-wave, multicultural feminism that emerged in the late twentieth century. Jewish feminists explore Jewish religious and secular culture, highlighting patriarchal dominance and seeking to make it more inclusive and accepting of women's experience. Jewish feminists working in different fields have proposed different methods of effecting a change in these patriarchal modes of thought. In literary studies, Jewish feminist scholars highlight the invisibility or objectification of female authors and characters in Jewish literature written in English and other diaspora languages, analysing texts that display a potentially Jewish feminist discourse and evaluating their effectiveness in representing a less androcentric representation of Judaism.

For a Jewish story to be successfully feminist, it needs to be a dialogic text: constructing different 'subject positions' or different ideological standpoints for an implied female reader and thus representing multiple ways of being a Jewish woman. This is in contrast to a monologic text whose underlying ideology constructs only a traditional representation of Jewish female identity.

A way of constructing a more dialogic representation of Jewish womanhood is to recreate or recapture the voices of previously silenced or marginalised female characters in the Tanakh1, the central text of Judaism. Alice Bach, among other feminist biblical scholars, has pointed out how biblical portraits of women tend to perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes, (1), thereby objectifying female characters who become silenced figures in a male story rather than viable subject positions for the female reader. Rewriting a known Biblical story from the position of a previously objectified character can thus be an effective way of turning this patriarchal discourse,

with its monological reader positions, into a dialogic one. Texts 1 The canon of Jewish holy texts, comprising of the Torah (the Five Books of Moses), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). Together they form the basis for the Christian Old Testament. that rewrite biblical narratives from female points of view can give Jewish cultural heroines a voice they do not have in the original versions of their stories. By focussing on the female characters of a story, rather than on the male focalisers, these texts can create a female implied reader, one that is missing from the originals. In doing so, these new versions can effectively challenge the traditional interpretation of the Tanakh, on which so much of Jewish identity and culture is based, thus countering the domination of one subject position or one ideological stance.

Two recent novels, *The Secret Book of Kings* by Yochi Brandes (2008/2016) and *Queenmaker* by India Edghill (2003), both rewrite the biblical story of King David from the point of view of Michal, his wife. In Judaism, the Davidic saga is central to the formation of a unifying Jewish identity because of David's transformation of Israel from a tribal culture into a centralised, hierarchical monarchy. Retelling this story through a female focaliser allows for a re-examination of David's status as a hero and of the patriarchal, hierarchical kingdom he founded.

The accepted version of the story of King David is that which is told in the biblical books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles and Psalms. During the reign of Saul, the first king of Israel, the Philistines invade the kingdom and Goliath, giant champion of the Philistines, issues a challenge to single combat. Saul's court musician, a young shepherd named David, accepts. He succeeds in killing Goliath using only a sling and a small stone. The killing of Goliath leads to the demoralisation of the Philistines and they are defeated. As a reward, Saul makes David commander of his armies. Saul also rewards David with the hand of his daughter, Michal, in marriage. David's growing popularity with the army and with the nation of Israel, however, turns Saul against him and the king plots David's death. David flees into exile. After years of conflict, Saul and David finally reconcile and Saul proclaims David his heir. When the Philistines attack Israel again, Saul and his son Jonathan are killed in battle. David is then anointed king of all Israel, captures Jerusalem, makes it his capital

and brings the Ark of the Covenant to it. David rules successfully for decades and is succeeded by his son, King Solomon.

In *The Secret Book of Kings*, the story of David's rise to power is told by Michal, daughter of King Saul and first wife to David. In this text David is not the hero of Jewish legend, but a treacherous usurper. Michal watches as David steals the kingdom from her father and her brother. Once David's treachery becomes apparent to Saul, he annuls David and Michal's marriage and gives her to a new husband, Paltiel. Years later, despite this separation, David claims Michal for his harem when he finally becomes the undisputed King of Israel. Michal spends the rest of her life locked away in his palace, away from Paltiel and their child. Although she is initially intensely loyal to David, Michal's love for him cannot survive his repeated betrayals. Despite his vows to the contrary, David eventually kills Paltiel and murders the remaining heirs of the House of Saul including Michal's son, Nebat. By the time David dies, Michal is left isolated with no hope of escape from the royal palace. Michal's only chance of survival is to feign madness. She does this for twenty years, throughout the reign of King Solomon, in order to conceal the existence of her grandson, Shelomoam, son of Nebat, the last remaining scion of the House of Saul and true heir to the throne of Israel.

In Brandes's text Michal narrates her own life and the story of King David. This narration forms the middle section of *The Secret Book of Kings* and is embedded in

Shelomoam's narration of his birth, life and eventual, unwilling assumption of the throne of Israel. The characterisation of Michal is central to Brandes's representation of Shelomoam as a worthier alternative to David and his heirs, Solomon and Rehoboam. Before Michal's section, Shelomoam is a callow youth, self-involved and petulant. Hearing Michal's story changes him and allows him to become a just ruler. Through her, he is able to expose and heal the trauma inflicted on his family and the kingdom by David's usurpation. Michal's negative portrayal of David justifies Shelomoam's leadership of the rebellion against David's heirs.

Despite having a voice to tell her own story in *The Secret Book of Kings*, however, Michal's agency is constantly undermined in the text. In the Bible itself, Michal appears and speaks only twice, once to

alert David to Saul's plot to kill him and to help him escape (I Sam 19:11-17), and once to berate David for dancing in front of the Ark of the Covenant (II Sam 6:20-23). In both episodes, Michal displays bravery and confidence. One therefore has to wonder at the authorial decision to portray Michal as a powerless witness to her own destruction in *The Secret Book of Kings*. Michal may tell her own story here, but she is denied the power to defend either herself or her family against David's ruthlessness. Michal's victimhood is especially problematic when one considers that she is the main female focaliser in the novel. In identifying with Michal, a female reader is required to identify with a position of powerlessness and this has clear implications for the construction of an active female subject position in the work.

Michal is ultimately silenced in this book. In her section of the text she is able to narrate her own story, her words unmediated by any other character. In retelling her story, however, Michal concludes that it is her propensity to speak her mind that is to blame for the destruction visited upon her family.

A sober, painful assessment of my few and failed years of marriage led me to the conclusion that I'd been to blame for everything. Had I taken care to hold my tongue like a mature, responsible wife, none of the damage and destruction would have occurred. Merab and Abner had managed to infect Father with their hatred of David only after I'd given them the poisoned arrows with my own hands. (Brandes 190).

Silence is seen here as a fundamental characteristic of a good wife and, by extension, a good

woman. Michal attributes the breakdown of her marriage to her inability to keep silent, not to any fault on David's part. These self-recriminations give rise to an anxiety in any reader who identifies with her. The implied reader in Michal's narrated section is an ambivalent one who internalises Michal's guilt while at the same time being able to see through her self-deception and recognise David's culpability.

Although she narrates her entire life-story, once this section ends Michal speaks again only to support Shelomoam and his decisions unreservedly. Because of the first-person narration of Shelomoam's second section, "The King," the reader is no longer privy to Michal's

thoughts. This is an unavoidable result of this kind of narration, but it serves as a way in which Michal is silenced and obscured. The vibrant, tortured voice of the woman who has suffered so much becomes subsumed by the two-dimensional character of the pliable grandmother Shelomoam perceives her to be. Apart from telling him the truth about his ancestry Michal takes no other active part in Shelomoam's rise to power.

Michal's words are also often misconstrued, misquoted or overshadowed by the male characters throughout the text. The most glaring example of this occurs during Michal's public confrontation of David as he celebrates the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem. This episode is central to the text's portrayal of David's manipulation of historical events and his entrapment of Michal within his version of reality. Michal's sole motivation in this episode is publicly to shame the king into granting freedom to her and her son. David reacts by signalling to his heralds to alter the words she speaks to him. Instead of a plea for freedom, her speech, unheard by the vast majority of the crowd, is changed into the contemptuous, sneering criticism recorded in II Samuel 6:20. Michal may have meant to force David to free her, but she succeeds only in further destroying her reputation and her father's legacy (Brandes 231-233).

Michal is not only silenced by the male characters, she is likewise rendered voiceless by her own plots too. Central to her masquerade as a madwoman is her paralysed silence alternating with wordless screams. The safety of her grandson rests on this disguise. This is silence by choice, but one she is forced to continue until the end of her life in order to protect Shelomoam and his growing family.

It is significant that neither Michal, nor the other the female characters, can escape their entrapment in a male-dominated society. They all remain subordinate to male rule, immobilised by their circumstances and unable to develop their own potency. True, Michal, who is virtually voiceless in the books of Samuel and Kings in the Bible, is given her own voice and undermines the received patriarchal belief in the heroism of David; but she tells her story from the centre of her own imprisonment. Her storytelling is the only resistance available to her. Eventually even her voice is repressed and silenced by the more active male protagonists of the story and she dies quietly off-stage. She cannot effect change and so

has no real agency. *The Secret Book of Kings*, therefore, is unsuccessful in creating an empowered female subject position because of its compromised portrayal of Michal. Thus, it ultimately fails both as a feminist rewriting of history and as a dialogic representation of Jewish womanhood.

Queenmaker by India Edghill offers a more positive adaptation of the Michal / David story. As with the Brandes text, *Queenmaker* details David's rise to power and his usurpation of Saul's kingdom. The reader is again afforded a front-row seat to the great events of the books of Samuel and Kings, focalised this time *only* through the first-person view of Michal. Like *The Secret Book of Kings*, Edghill's work presents a revisionist version of the Davidic story, constructing David not as a hero but as a shrewd and ruthless usurper. Moreover, in representing David as having control over the historic record, *Queenmaker* also destabilises the biblical story, calling into question its veracity. It is in the narrative differences between the two versions, however, in Michal's status as queen and how her infertility is portrayed, that *Queenmaker* succeeds in creating a more empowered subject position for the implied female reader.

The biblical story of David is one of rampant patriarchal power: one king, supported by a male priesthood, usurps another's throne and forges a vast kingdom through war. *Queenmaker* portrays Michal's limited subversion of this patriarchy through her attainment of power in David's harem and in her subsequent manipulation of the royal succession. Michal cannot restructure her society, she cannot rewrite the rules of patriarchy to emancipate herself. She can, however, gain a measure of control over the fate of the kingdom and this allows *Queenmaker* both to represent (marginal) female agency and to reimagine how patriarchal success may be dependent on the ability of one woman to wield limited power.

Throughout *Queenmaker*, Michal is under the control of men who have the power of life and death over her. She passes from one form of patriarchal control to another and has no ability to influence her own fate until right at the end of the story. For David, Michal symbolises the crown of Israel: to own her cements his claim to the throne (Edghill 248). But in this novel, David wants more than just Michal's hand in marriage. He wants to own her entirely (Edghill 152), to suppress her identity. David's emotional abuse of Michal is

calculated to render her completely submissive to him. He uses his position of king and husband, with the power of life and death over her and those she loves, to ensure that he becomes her 'everything' (Edghill 373). It takes the entire text for Michal to understand that David's motivation has always been to control and dominate her life. Only at the very end is she able to let go of both her love and hatred for David. With him no longer possessing an emotional leverage over her, Michal is finally able to free herself and gain a mental independence from him (Edghill 366).

While it may seem that Michal is completely at the mercy of the patriarchal power structures which surround her, she does exercise a degree of agency. She alone is able to use her bitterly-won status as queen to manipulate the succession to the throne of Israel. She is able to ensure that *her* candidate becomes the next all-powerful king. Moreover, she does this by making use of a quality traditionally regarded as a female handicap within a patriarchal world-view. Michal is barren.

In contrast to *The Secret Book of Kings*, *Queenmaker* stays true to the biblical narrative in that Michal is never able to bear a child (II Samuel 6:23). Infertility traditionally equates with a lack of female power and status in a patriarchy. If a woman's function is to bear sons and if she cannot perpetuate masculine rule by doing so, then she has no place in a male dominated society. But rather than a disadvantage, in this text Michal's infertility becomes an unlooked-for source of power. Crucially, she is able to deny David a son of the blood of king Saul to legitimise his dynasty. David's constant hope of begetting a son on her and his continued attraction to her non-pregnant body mean that Michal is able to subvert the traditional fate of the infertile woman. Her barrenness actually guarantees David's interest and so Michal never loses her position as his chosen queen. Without a child of her own Michal is ideally placed to become step-mother to the future King Solomon. She carves out a position of power as the surrogate mother of the future king within an over-whelmingly patriarchal society and so is able to manipulate the very system that would seek to dominate her.

Because of Michal's authority and influence as queen, then, Edghill's *Queenmaker* presents a more powerful subject position for the implied female reader. This text, however, cannot be considered

a perfect feminist retelling of the Davidic saga. It is true that Michal is able to appropriate a traditional site of female disempowerment (infertility) and use it to her own advantage. There are, however, limits to the power she can actually wield. She can influence the succession to the throne of Israel, but, as in *The Secret Book of Kings*, it is only to replace one patriarchal regime with another, however benign. The right of men to rule and the power men hold over women within the narrative is never challenged.

Neither of the versions of the Michal story that have been examined here can therefore be considered as entirely successful in constructing a dialogic subject position for the implied female reader by portraying an emancipated, powerful female agency. The representations of Michal in both these books fail to construct a really powerful female character. The cultural construction of women within these texts remains that of subordinates within a patriarchal system, one they may influence but one they cannot fundamentally change. While *The Secret Book of Kings* and *Queenmaker* both retell Jewish history from a female perspective, neither of them is ultimately successful creating a truly feminist narrative.

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