

and reappearing again in Rev. 2.20, Jezebel is the contradictory, controlling, carnal foreign woman. The common pronouncement (still widely used in the Southern United States), 'She is a regular Jezebel', underlies the imagining of Jezebel beginning with the Rev. 2.20 passage and has referred to countless women, from political queens—including Mary Tudor, Mary Stuart and Isabella I—to movie queens, such as Bette Davis, Vivien Leigh and Elizabeth Taylor.

A sampling from different biblical commentaries, both older and more recent, corroborates this view of Jezebel as sexually evil and a demon woman: Ahab's 'evils...are laid at her door... she came near to bringing the house of David to extinction'.¹ She totally disregarded Israelite law and custom. To these more common reactions add: 'She was a woman of masculine temperament and swayed her husband at will'... 'Jezebel is the foreign influence that is dangerous and brings destruction'.² In

1. R.D. Culver, 'Jezebel', in M.C. Tenney (ed.), *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), III, pp. 589-90.

2. H.S. Gehman (ed.), *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 492. On the masculinity of the Jezebel figure, see P. Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (New York: Greenwood, 1991), p. 153: Black women's history 'has been shaped in the image of Jezebel who deserved what she got because she was other than womanly. And the image of black womanhood as other than womanly has served to confirm black manhood as other than manly, and thus to confirm that the Negro was other and less than fully deserving of racial equality'.

In an early twentieth-century drama (H.M. McDowall, *Jezebel: A Tragedy* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1924]) Jezebel speaks twice her desire to be male: 'Oh, would I were a man that I might go myself with them and face Elijah too' (p. 12); and 'Oh! God! If only I had been a man!' (p. 21). In film representations the Jezebel is termed a 'superfemale' as opposed to the more masculine 'superwoman'. The superfemale is 'a woman who, while exceedingly "feminine" and flirtatious, is too ambitious and intelligent for the docile role society has decreed she play. She is uncomfortable, but not uncomfortable enough to rebel completely; her circumstances are too pleasurable' (M. Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], p. 214). The film image that comes to mind is Bette Davis in her Academy Award-winning role in the 1932 *Jezebel*, in which she plays a Southern woman who schemes and destroys those around her and eventually almost destroys herself. In

JEZEBEL RE-VAMPED

Tina Pippin

Southern women in the United States define Jezebel in the following ways:¹ everything negative; wicked; scheming; whore; cheap harlot; either promiscuous or a complete whore; female form of gigolo; the name has seductive connotations; biblical queen; wife of Ahab; gave her husband bad advice; evil and treacherous; two-faced; one who seduces men and leads them to destruction; a woman who gets around; not ashamed; bimbo; I didn't know what it meant until my roommate called me this; someone who is wild, free, and comfortable with her sexuality; uninhibited, some might say slutty; a beautiful name; a Southern belle with a mind and will and sex drive who is damned for not fitting the stereotype of a helpless, frigid woman; Scarlett O'Hara; Bette Davis in the red hoop dress in the 1938 film; condescending term used for African American women in the time of slavery; Gene loves Jezebel; you're a Jezebel, a flirty girl, light, flighty, aloof or dirty slut; free spirit, happy, cute, very feminine; always a lady (but not always nice); slinky; powerful; ambitious; calculating; ruthless; eaten by dogs; taking pleasure from material things; self-centered; decorated woman; painted face; Cosmo clothes; sensual; she has been given a 'bad rep' by many scholars and people; she is famous for her badness; vamp, vampire, temptress, femme fatale, siren, witch—a woman who takes or ruins the life of another.

The complex and ambiguous character of Jezebel in the Bible serves as the archetypal bitch-witch-queen in misogynist representations of women. Beginning in 1 Kings 16 through 2 Kings 9

1. I conducted an informal survey of college students (ages 18 to 50), Atlanta area artists, and members of both Episcopal and Southern Baptist congregations.

considering Jezebel, her reputation precedes her, regardless of how narrowly or misogynistically the reputation is presented.

The Woman's Bible of 1895 turns to another dimension of Jezebel: 'Jezebel was a brave, fearless, generous woman, so wholly devoted to her own husband that even wrong seemed justifiable to her, if she could thereby make him happy'.¹ In that respect she seems to have fitted completely the Southern Methodist's ideal of the pattern wife entirely fulfilled in her husband! Jezebel is the equal rival of Elijah; both their deeds of genocide are seen as 'savage'.² Cheryl Exum states that Jezebel 'met her death with characteristic audacity: she painted her eyes, adorned her head, and greeted Jehu from her window with a caustic insult'.³

the final scene she rides off toward possible vindication. The *Publisher's Weekly* (March 30, 1992) describes this Jezebel image of Bette Davis from a recent book on the actress, Elizabeth Fuller's *Me and Jezebel: When Bette Davis Came to Dinner and Stayed*: 'Fuller tells us little more about Jezebel herself than that she eats Carnation Instant Breakfast, reads the *Daily News* and smokes Vantage cigarettes by the carton. Davis's fans won't be surprised by her abrasive and distant manner. But they may tire of hearing the star shrieking, "Kee-ryst!" while smashing out cigarettes wherever she pleases, over and over again' (p. 101; reviewer's name not stated).

Teresa de Lauretis expresses a parallel notion in her feminist critique of Derrida: 'Were I to do so, however, I would earn Derrida's contempt for "those women feminists so derided by Nietzsche", I would put myself in the position of one "who aspires to be like a man", who "seeks to castrate" and "wants a castrated woman" ... I shall not do so, therefore. Decency and shame prevent me, though nothing more' (*Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], p. 47).

1. E.B. Dietrick, in E. Cady Stanton (ed.), *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Co., 1895), p. 75.

2. Elijah is 'that much-overestimated "man of God"' (Cady Stanton [ed.], *The Woman's Bible*, p. 75). Ellen Battelle Dietrick adds a contemporary note, calling on the reader 'to imagine why Jezebel is now [1895] dragged forth to "shake her gory locks" as a frightful example to the American women who ask for recognized right to self-government' (p. 75). Are these 'gory locks' also an allusion to Medusa: dread/dreaded/dreadful/dreadlocks?

3. J.C. Exum, 'Jezebel', in P.J. Achtemeier (ed.), *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 489.

I am 're-vamping' the generally accepted view of Jezebel as an evil woman from the biblical to the modern representations of her. Using theories on intertextuality from Bakhtin to Thibault and contemporary film theory, I want to trace the relations between the biblical text and other texts (drama, poetry, film and art). The codes and 'signifying practices' of the presence of Jezebel in a variety of texts have implications for the hermeneutics of gender and sexuality. In other words, the 'trace' of Jezebel is in her adorned face peering through the lattice (representing the face of the goddess Asherah), with the image of her corpse as a vivid reminder of the defeat of the goddess-centered cultures: 'they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands' (2 Kgs 9.35). The text of the goddess is distorted and placed in only negative terms.

I do not intend to uncover or recover a heroic woman figure from the biblical narrative or to redeem a 'bad' woman of the Bible. I want to deal with the cultural representations and the interactions of readers with the image of Jezebel. A rereading of different texts of Jezebel reveals the complexities of 'that cursed woman' who fought to retain her indigenous culture, and the continuation of the 'curse' for all women who claim autonomy—sexual, religious or political.

Jezebel

The term 'jezebel' has ambiguous definitions: from 'unexalted, unhusbanded; or the brother is prince',¹ or 'where is the prince?',² to meaning 'chaste as does the common European name Agnes—quite inappropriate'.³ The term 'jezebel' means the monstrous female—loose and let loose, the loose woman.⁴ Why

1. Gehman, *New Westminster Dictionary*, p. 492.

2. Exum, 'Jezebel', p. 489. E.B. Johnston ('Jezebel', in G.W. Bromiley [ed.], *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], p. 1057) finds a wordplay in Jezebel's name: *zebel* is made a pun in 2 Kgs 9.37 with the word 'dung' (*dmn*).

3. Culver, 'Jezebel', p. 589.

4. On the double monster in the mother and daughter relationship see J. Gallop, 'The Monster in the Mirror: The Feminist Critic's Psychoanalysis', in R. Feldstein and J. Root (eds.), *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 13-24. She finds the mother-daughter

is the monster, here the jezebel, so fascinating? What is the 'seduction', the draw into the dangerous darkness where the 'monster' lurks?

As the 'curse on Ham' was used as a justification for slavery of Africans, so 'jezebel' was the designation of the sexually dangerous African American slave woman. The juxtaposition of the images of the mammy and the jezebel served as an apologetic for the exploitation of the female slave. Deborah White¹ describes these divisions in terms of the madonna-whore: the mammy is asexual, loving, warm, maternal, dark-skinned, big, older; she wears formless clothes and covers her hair with a kerchief; she is loyal, religious and pious. The jezebel is sexual, provocative, young, with changing skin color; she is comely,

relationship reflected in groups of women: 'One monster cannot be separated from the other'. I think this idea has interesting implications for the Jezebel-Athaliah connection; is the narrator of 1-2 Kings presenting us with a pair of monsters?

1. D.G. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985). See ch. 1, 'Jezebel and Mammy: The Mythology of Female Slavery'. On p. 46 White states: 'Southerners, therefore, were hardly of one mind concerning African-American women. Jezebel was an image as troubling as it was convenient and utilitarian... On the one hand there was the woman obsessed with matters of the flesh, on the other was the asexual woman. One was carnal, the other maternal. One was at heart a slut, the other was deeply religious'.

Patricia Morton (*Disfigured Images*, p. 10) follows White's argument: 'by labeling the female slave as a Jezebel, the master's sexual abuse was justified by presenting her as a woman who deserved what she got... by labeling the slave woman as a sexual animal—not a real woman at all'. Morton adds (p. 33) that the jezebel was scapegoated: 'still cast as Jezebel, the black woman was assigned responsibility for the supposed sins of black as well as white men'. See also V. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 35-39. In discussing the Jezebel in Rev. 2, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza rightly draws on the Southern tradition: 'Like the historical queen Jezebel, she has served in Western thought as the archetype of the sexually dangerous woman. During the time of slavery, for instance, the image of Jezebel, the whore, became the controlling image of black womanhood in white, elite, male propaganda' (*Revelation: Vision of a Just World* [Proclamation Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991], p. 135). There is no solid evidence of the extent to which the jezebel title was used to describe these women.

promiscuous, provocatively dressed; a breeder, rebellious, a whore.

The white masters created these images to control and dominate the female slave. The mammy represents the desire for a positive image for African Americans. The jezebel was an excuse for masters to justify their own adolescent and later adulterous behavior. White women blamed the jezebels in order to deny the rape and oppression of slave women. The jezebel acted out of the constraints of race and gender. The African cultural norms of women having children before marriage and of exposing more of their bodies in the field as they work were misunderstood by whites. The whole system was based on the white male, which left white women finding ways to discredit the slave women.

So jezebel is not an abstract sign but a real physical presence, for antebellum culture and also in popular culture in the United States. Can one get outside the popular culture meaning of Jezebel?

Re-Vamped

Recent biblical scholarship reveals the ambiguity of the character Jezebel and the religious or political rather than sexual intention of her painted face in the murder scene. But the term 'jezebel' has a distinct social meaning that is biblical (in Hosea; Ezek. 16; the 'strange woman' of Proverbs; the false prophetess of Rev. 2). Whoring and fornication is associated with strange religion and strange culture. Claudia Camp remarks that in the story of Naboth's vineyard, the Deuteronomist Historian may have blamed Jezebel for Ahab's deed: 'shifting of the blame to the foreign woman forms part of that era's polemic on the dangers of intermarriage'.¹ The jezebel schemes with both her mind and

1. C.V. Camp, '1 and 2 Kings', in C.A. Newsom and S.H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press/John Knox, 1992), p. 104. Camp is following Alexander Rofé on this point. Peter Ackroyd states that 'Jezebel becomes a type; into her figure is projected in detail the hostility to what is believed to be alien practice' (P.R. Ackroyd, 'Goddesses, Women and Jezebel', in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt [eds.], *Images of Women in Antiquity* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983], p. 256). E. Boulding (*The Underside of History: A View of Women through Time*

body. She has 'been around'—in foreign territory (Tyre; Africa), and she brings danger with her. Therefore, her body must be destroyed. Look closely at the remains: skull; feet; palms of her hands (2 Kgs 9.35).

Tom Robbins recreates a modern Jezebel/Salome in his book *Skinny Legs and All* and questions the tradition handed down in Western culture. The main character, Ellen Cherry, thinks to herself:

What had Queen Jezebel done to earn the distinction as our all-time treacherous slut: In the Bitch Hall of Fame, Jezebel had a room of her own; nay, an entire wing. For fixing her hair and applying makeup? Was it implied that she went to the window to flirt with the rebel warrior? And if so, was that so wicked that it should wreck her reputation for three thousand years? The trinillennial lash bat?

As Ellen Cherry walked the rain-rippled pavement of Seattle, bumpershooting from restaurant to restaurant in search of a job, she bore upon her back the weight of a skull, a pair of feet, and the palms of two hands. The nails of the feet were lacquered vermilion, a pretty ribbon fluttered from a lacuna in the skull. And she would wonder as she walked, 'What is the Bible trying to tell us?'

That Satan is a hairdresser?

That Elizabeth Arden ought to be fed to the poodles?¹

Mieke Bal points to the Jezebel narrative as an 'ideo-story'; that is, a story taken out of context. Bal gives the example of a

[Newbury Park: SAGE Publications, rev. edn, 1992], p. 209) adds: 'Foreign women were dangerous role models for Israelite women, with their political ways and priestess notions. We shall see the same scenario played out again 1,000 years later, in the Christian church fathers' distrust of pagan women and their priestess tradition. The sexual seduction aspect of this struggle is, I suspect, a male rationalization'.

1. T. Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All* (New York: Bantam Press, 1990), p. 33. Robbins's protagonist Ellen Cherry considers Jezebel her 'doppelgänger'. He describes her search for the biblical Jezebel: 'she had procured a Bible and gone searching for the lurid details of Jezebel's debauchery. From Sunday school, she had a hazy picture of a thoroughly immoral harlot who costumed herself like a rock 'n' roll vamp, but she couldn't recall a single biographical fact. Imagine her surprise when the Old Testament Book of Kings informed her that Jezebel was a royal—and faithful—wife' (*Skinny Legs*, p. 32).

tabloid story, 'Devilish Ladies who Everybody Loves to Hate', which includes 'Lilith, Jezebel, Delilah, and...Sappho... The combination of the four figures is a function of the principle of coherent reading... Both within and between the four stories, contradictions and problems are repressed'.¹ That Delilah is not a liar or that Jezebel is not an adulteress gets lost in the ideology. The reproduction of popular mythology is a priority in the reading process.

This reading of Jezebel in predominantly sexual terms is socially grounded, a social semiotics which draws on Bakhtin's heteroglossia. The textual voices on Jezebel are many; they overlap, origins unknown (except the general patriarchal culture which is women's context). Paul Thibault promotes a 'neomaterialist social semiotic', uniting theory and practice into the study of semiotics.² Thibault is involved in asking ethical questions of theory, asking to what extent intertextual theorizing challenges existing hegemonic relations. In other words, intertextuality is grounded in a social context or community with certain dominant assumptions about how the world operates. The sign 'jezebel' is imbedded in social relationships and in a range of 'texts'. As John Frow states,

1. M. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), p. 11.

2. P. Thibault (*Social Semiotics as Praxis* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991]) defines social semiotics as a theory that moves semiotics 'beyond its self-identification with many of the foundational ideological assumptions of Western culture' (p. 3). Social semiotics is connected with social heteroglossia as follows: 'The systems of voices in the social semiotic, including potentially unvoiced meanings and practices, comprise the relations of social heteroglossia through which relations of alliance, consensus, opposition, conflict, and co-optation among voices are positioned and articulated in specific texts and intertextual formations' (p. 25). T.E. Morgan ('Is there an Intertext in this Text? Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality', *American Journal of Semiotics* 3.4 [1985], p. 8) relates this point: 'Indeed, culture itself, or the collection of signifying practices in a society, is radically intertextual'. On the materiality of language see J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (trans. M. Waller; New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

Texts are therefore not structures of presence by traces and tracings of otherness. They are shaped by the repetition and the transformation of other textual structures.¹

Jezebel is not an image but *images*, a plural form.

The whoring Jezebel is of course the most seductive image. In discussing seduction and prostitution in Flaubert, Ross Chambers writes:

In the homosocial world, literature must pose, in order to gain acceptance, as a figure of powerlessness, helpless or charming: a child or a woman... Literature, in short, must camp it up.²

Thus, the passage in Revelation 2 stands out: Jezebel refuses to repent and continues to beguile and fornicate. 'Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead' (Rev. 2.22-23). And the Jezebel in 2 Kings 9 paints her face and fixes her hair boldly to face death and fulfillment of the prophecy of the enemy. What would the apocalyptic Jezebel say to the narrator John in reply? What would Queen Jezebel say to the narrator of her life story? Are there only traces, skull and feet and palms of the hands and dead children?

An outside Jezebel has invaded the text, a Jezebel who would proclaim (as did Ellen Cherry's cynical mother Patsy in *Skinny Legs and All*), 'Of the Seven Deadly Sins, lust is definitely the pick of the litter'.³ But the biblical Jezebel does not seek or find sexual pleasure. Looking out from the lattice, Jezebel is framed. She is also imprisoned. In the biblical text, as well as in early twentieth-century 'devotional fiction', Jezebel is a prisoner in her own palace; she never leaves or confronts men (like Elijah) on the outside. Jezebel remains inside; acting behind the lattice. All attempts to colonize her fail.

The colonial nature of the Jezebel text and the oppression of the Jezebel voice is apparent in the sadistic retelling of her death.

1. J. Frow, 'Intertextuality and Ontology', in M. Worton and J. Still (eds.), *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 45.
2. R. Chambers, 'Alter Ego: Intertextuality, Irony and the Politics of Reading', in Worton and Still (eds.), *Intertextuality*, p. 155.
3. Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, p. 106.

In her book on the effects of imperialism on the reading process, Laura Donaldson calls for a 'materialist-feminist semiotics' that 'requires that we not only recognize how micrologies of power keep certain information systems in place while simultaneously suppressing others but also resist the temptation of an unmediated politics of meaning'.¹ The discourse on Jezebel is guided through the colonial mind. The image of the Other, the foreign, the dangerous and thereby seductive woman is used against medieval women and slave women and Southern women who break with tradition. Tom Robbins attempt to decolonize Jezebel:

Jezebel. Jezebel. Painted Queen of Israel. I am praising thee, O Queen of Israel. Whore of the Golden Calf. Strumpet of Baal. Jezebel. Slut of Samaria. Our queen whom the dogs are eating. The watercourse of the Jews is flowing through thee. Jezebel. My Queen. Whose daughter is ruling in Jerusalem. From whose womb is pouring the House of David. Mmm. Jezebel. Priestess of Fornication. Mmm. Queen of Spades. Queen of Tarts. O Jezebel, you are my queen, I exalt thee and praise thy sandals.²

The image of Jezebel is difficult to identify iconographically; her portrait and scenes of her life are rare.³ Still, she is imaged as the temptress. Both men and women are drawn to her. Even though 2 Kgs 9.37 pronounces that 'no one can say, This is Jezebel', the irony is that 'This is Jezebel' is exactly what people have said ever since this Deuteronomic proverb. Even though in popular Western culture to be called a Jezebel is not a compliment, there is a strange connection to/disconnection from Jezebel. Women read themselves as Jezebel, 'as having the 'Jezebel spirit'.⁴ Are we happy or satisfied when Jezebel is splattered and trampled by horses and eaten by dogs? Are we

1. L.E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminism: Race, Gender and Empire Building* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 120-21.
2. Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, p. 348.
3. The Index of Christian Art at Princeton University lists about twenty representations of Jezebel up to 1400 CE. Of these there are approximately ten portraits; the rest are from three scenes of her life.
4. An older woman student of mine recently commented that Jezebel is that (or any!) evil woman who steals husbands. Then she added with a wink, 'There's a part of Jezebel in me'.

happy when Rhett Butler walks away?¹ What have we done with the story of Jezebel? Is her story continually recolonized, reopened, the brief scenes of her life re-enacted and reinscribed?

1. The obsession with this *Gone with the Wind* figure of Scarlett prompted a second novel and a made-for-TV movie. At the tryouts for the role of Scarlett in Atlanta recently, after much deliberation, the part was not filled.