



The Womantasch Triangle: Vashti, Esther and Carol Gilligan

(A DEVELOPMENTAL LOOK)

by Susan Schnur

The figures of Vashti and Esther, clearly in origin full-moon pre-spring relatives of the ancient mythological lifecycle goddesses, come down to us, in the Book of Esther and in rabbinic midrash, so disfigured and devalued that it is hard to know how to begin resurrecting them.

But let's start with Harvard psychologist Carol Gilligan, whose research shows us that females' self-esteem is highest before puberty, but then we turn into women, males enter our consciousness, and it all goes to hell.

FIRST VASHTI

In the Book of Esther, Vashti is that pre-pubescent Gilliganesque girl—self-confident and self-determining (who does what's right for herself and says "no" to the boys), but she is punished for her assertiveness, and she therefore "grows up," as it were, into Esther, a female who submits much more graciously to patriarchal domination. The rabbis take an almost erotic delight in hating Vashti and they kill her off (Lilith redux); the midrash lasciviously describes Vashti's head "brought before the King on a platter." Ahasuerus is neatly freed up to start all over again with the new, young trophy wife named Esther.

So where does Vashti, the dead girl, go? The Book of Esther has at its thematic core the same ancient fertility myths in which one goddess or another serves metaphorically to explain winter's death and spring's resurrection. If Vashti were, for example, Demeter's daughter Persephone (instead of being Esther's disowned 'daughter'), she would go down to Hades and then eventually rejoin her mother on

Earth. If she were the young Inanna, she would remove herself from ordinary life (the *Megillah's* harem is a distorted echo of this), and descend into the Underworld, where she would sacrificially rot on a peg, be transformed, and return to Earth a larger, wiser, more creative goddess—no longer patroness of fertility alone, but also of death and resurrection, the new ruler of the now-conjoined Earth, Sky and Underworld. From the Underworld, one returns bearing gifts—not *shalach manos*, mind you, but gifts only acquirable *down under*: Wisdom, Letting Go, Awe and Gratitude.

Inanna's "rotting" is an initiation into understanding the inexorable cycle of life—that each one of us is born, ages and dies, only to be born again from the earth in some new form—maybe as humus, maybe through our children. *Death is a part of life*. Vashti, in parallel fashion, makes a sacrifice in Hell (in this case, the palace) too: she says "NO"—understanding full well that she will suffer terrible consequences. But unlike Inanna, the wisdom Vashti derives from her self-determination is confiscated by the text and never conveyed to her 'daughters.' Vashti's resurrection is that she exits, stage left, only to be replaced in the next act by a freshly minted queen with a new name and no memory.

Let's imagine, say, that Vashti had been a part of the ancient Greek women's ritual of the Thesmophoria. She would not, then, have resurfaced solely as a "head on a platter" at the King's supper club; rather, she would have encountered an "older sister" in the Underworld, someone who came before her and is wiser, and who inducts *her* into wisdom. But the *Megillah* keeps its significant women isolated from one another, erasing any suggestion that there might be significant female interaction. (In Esther's case, of course, the text goes so far as to make her an orphan.) Hardly anything, as we know, is as scary to patriarchal men as two women alone in a room together. *Vide*: Lilith and Eve, Sarah and Hagar.

The fullness of human development depends on Esther circling back to the girl within (Vashti) and carrying her into womanhood.

DANCING NUDE

Queen Vashti is summoned by the King to dance nude, in a clear bastardization of fertility myths. Queen Inanna, for example, to jump-start spring's fertility, herself summons King Dumuzi, ordering him to "plow my vulva!"

Vashti's King, on the other hand (not, like Dumuzi, epithetically called "caresser of the navel, caresser of the soft thighs") functions on a stage with no mythological overtones, and the text Vashti finds herself in—a repudiation of Inanna's—seems to take particular sadistic pleasure from disempowering and humiliating her. Vashti's agency is reduced to her ability to say "NO" when the King orders her, a Playboy bunny, to strip before a mob of drunks at his house party.

What's in it for Vashti? She dies—the assertive girl-child dies, the one who is not afraid to be assertive, not afraid to displease the males. The *Megillah* kills off not only Vashti, but the whole cycle—death, rotting, rebirth, the whole awakening, empowering experience. It's a deliberate theft, a humiliation. She doesn't get to re-emerge as a woman. *There ain't no journey at all!*

To borrow a phrase from the writer Deena Metzger, "In a sacred universe, she [Vashti] is holy; in a secular universe, she [Vashti] is a whore."

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

The Demeter-Persephone myth expresses an interesting cultural compromise: the emotional centrality of mother-daughter bonds (hence Persephone gets to spend a part of each year with Demeter) and the inevitable severing of that bond when the girl grows up. (Persephone, raped by Hades, eats a seed—ahh, shades of the hamantasch!—and must stay with Hades, Lord of the Underworld, during the other part of the year.)

In the *Megillah*, however, Vashti is, of course, punished, and is not allowed—ever—to bring her laundry home to Mama Esther's house. Esther's early debutante world coarsely compartmentalizes women, too. Like cattle in a cattle chute, each girl arrives from Harem A, spends one night with King Ahasuerus (chapter 2:14) and then returns, via chute, to Harem B.

Keeping mothers and daughters apart finds resonance in the story of Zeus and Metis. The pregnant Metis gets tricked by Zeus into becoming small, at which point Zeus swallows her. When the baby, Athena, grows to adulthood, she emerges from her father's head—with no sense that she had ever had a mother who might have taught her anything, or, in any way, 'birthed' her. In this way, women's stories, too, get 'swallowed' by patriarchal ones like the *Megillah*. Vashti is 'swallowed' up by the story—to keep Esther from picking up any bad habits.

JUST SAY YES

Who among us, as a teenager, hasn't had Vashti's experience of saying "NO" to a boy and getting punished for it? Really, though, what if Vashti had said "YES"—follow *that* storyline out. Poor Vashti was double bound; it's lose/lose.

And a final Vashti question: What if the text had let her grow up? *When Vashti dies, we girl readers die with her*, every goddamn Purim—warned not to take good care of ourselves. Frozen in Vashti-land, banished. What if we let Vashti talk, follow her story? What if we imagine what she might have gone on to do besides getting transmogrified into Esther? What if we let her become *herself*?

In a sacred universe, she would not be treated like an object by abusive men, she would not be forbidden access to her sister, mother, daughter, be forbidden to take her transformative journey. In a sacred universe, she would be holy.

THEN ESTHER

Purim's origins, scholars generally agree, derive from an ancient full-moon pre-spring Persian holiday; Esther is descended from the Babylonian Ishtar (who derives from Inanna) and Mordechai from the Babylonian Marduk. (These gods are allied against the Elamite goddess, Vashti, and the god Humman, that is, Haman.) Ishtar, a universal lifecycle goddess, also rules the morning star and evening star, so Esther's Hebrew name, Hadassah, means "myrtle," which has *star*-shaped flowers, and leaves which are vulvate or boat-shaped, again that fertility symbol that goes back over 30,000 years to engravings on cave walls.

Ishtar was a virgin-warrior, and Esther can be seen as a translation of that—compared to Vashti, she's a virgin, and she's a warrior for her people. Ishtar is also the moon goddess, her story described in the moon's phases (for example, an absent moon depicts Ishtar losing her clothes on the way to the Underworld). In the *Megillah*, the Queen's being ordered to appear in the King's "underworld" nude is a corruption of this.

In the process of mythological assimilation, Ishtar and Isis, over time, take on each other's traits. Esther's capacity to overturn the Jews' fate (the death warrant *fatwa* put on Jewish heads by Haman) derives from Isis's famous capacity to keep death away from her faithful followers. And Isis's well-known boast, "I will overcome Fate," which she proceeds to do, is echoed in Esther's valiant statement ("If I perish, I perish," chapter 4:16) which the Queen utters when she appears before Ahasuerus *without* his royal permission. Esther, like Isis, overcomes fate, because the King, against the odds, stretches out to her his golden scepter, thereby allowing her to live. For many women, this part of the *Megillah* tells a deeply moving Jewish story about female courage.

But unlike the goddess Ishtar, who has power in her own

The Seated Lady
of Pazarzik,
Stone Age.

right just like a male god, the less ancient Esther (like the Virgin Mary, who can intercede with God but who *isn't* God) can only intercede with the King, but has no power for herself.

SEPARATED AT BIRTH

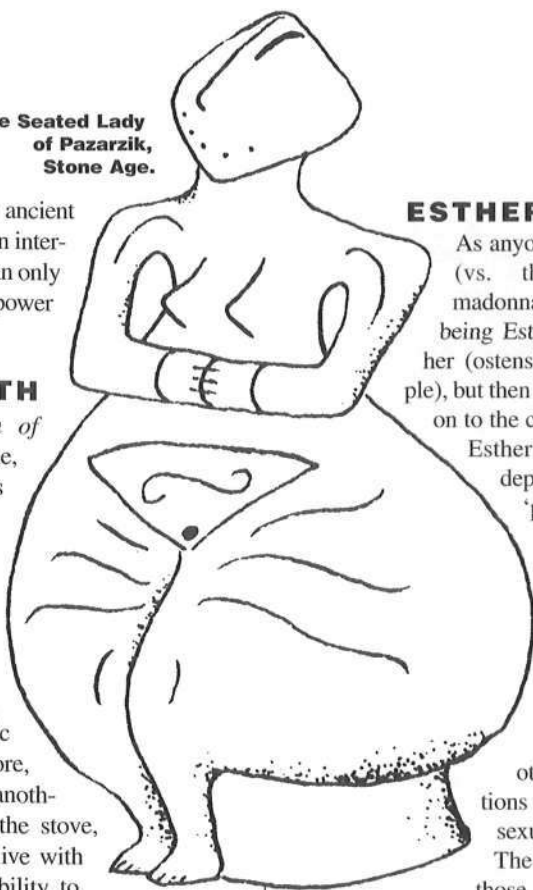
Gerda Lerner, in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, argues that, over time, the "Great Goddess, whose powers are all-encompassing (mother, warrior, creator, protector), loses her unified dominion, and becomes split off into separate goddesses." Vashti and Esther are heiresses to this split.

Of course, the split becomes a male projection. Men seek the erotic from one source (Vashti, the whore, the mistress), and nurturance from another (Esther preparing banquets at the stove, mother, wife, madonna). Women live with this split, and we thus lose the ability to connect our own sexuality, our own bodies, to the sacred, to the universe.

For women today, the real loss is not as much the suppression of female rites, as it is the *deprivation of consciousness*. In other words, it is the rare woman these days, in hating her body, who even *thinks* to make a connection between her body and the Earth's body, her breasts, vulva, thighs and the Earth's, her seasons and cycles and the Earth's. This is a big loss, both in terms of our self-esteem and sense of well-being, and in relation to women's sense of spiritual connection.

Inanna's sacred erotic experience which brings on April's showers and May's flowers devolves, in the Book of Esther, into Vashti as whore. Queen Esther becomes adored by the rabbis, but Vashti gets split off as a dirty body, coarse nature.

If you have any doubts about the propagandistic effectiveness of Vashti's utter demonization in rabbinic misogynist texts, here's an experiment. This Purim at synagogue, count how many girls dress up as Vashti (zero; just a guess). Ask the little Esthers why they aren't dressed up as little Vashtis. Write down their answers. Ask what Vashti did to make her so "bad." (My daughter's friends generally reply that Vashti "said NO to the King." We discuss whether it is bad to say 'NO' to males. Does that mean you should say 'YES' to males? Etc.) Invite all the little Esthers to your next Rosh Hodesh event, and help them burn all their old misguided answers in a big black cauldron. Call the event "We're All Witches" (all right, "We're All Sisters" will do).



ESTHER'S ANOREXIA

As anyone who has been on the idealized (vs. the devalued) side of the madonna/whore split knows, it's no picnic being Esther, either. The male rabbis love her (ostensibly because she saved her people), but then the rabbis piggyback other virtues

on to the courageous lass just to confuse us: Esther's tiptoeing wifely style, her dependence on the King, her title of 'prophetess' (which is very odd, given that the *Megillah* is a highly secular book).

Most creepy of all, though, is the rabbis' lewd, peeping Tom-ish interest in exactly *how* Esther is beautiful. In the midrash, they literally quantify and rank her beauty vis-à-vis other Jewish women, and descriptions of the exact quality of Esther's sexual appeal take up many pages.

The rabbis sound remarkably like those classic fathers of anorexic girls

who feel compelled to comment to their daughters, "You've gained weight at college," or "Your roommate's a knockout." These contemporary Esthers, as we all know, get their sad revenge.

EARLY SPRING: HEALING THE SPLITS, CIRCLING BACK

Vashti and Esther, of course, are in coalition, not opposition. The journeys of females—Isis, Demeter, Inanna—are not journeys to find answers, *they are journeys to gather something together, to make things whole*. Even the Shekhina, the female aspect of the Jewish God, gathers up lost souls. Isis gathers up the parts of Osiris. Demeter searches for her daughter. Our themes, as contemporary women, are the same: to restore something that has been separated, to reconnect body and soul, to reunite Vashti and Esther, to integrate and reclaim the feminine that has been lost or abandoned in human history.

Esther must circle back to carry Vashti across the threshold into telling her story. And it is not just the girl's story that must be retold and reheard, it is also our mothers' stories—Vashti, Esther, and *their* mothers' stories, Ishtar, Demeter, and all the rest.

To be nourished with only male images of what's female and what's divine and what's Jewish is to be badly malnourished.

So let us reclaim the womantasch, and tell the **whole** *Megillah*.

