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Wine, Women, and Revenge in Near Eastern Historiography: The Tales of Tomyris, Judith, Zenobia, and Jalila

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Introduction

This paper deals with the remarkable similarities between stories from three different cultural traditions: the Greco-Roman story of Tomyris, the biblical story of Judith, and two Arabic stories—one about Zenobia, queen of Palmyra, and another about Jalila, the cousin of the epic folk hero al-Zir. I will use the comparison between these four Near Eastern tales as an exegetical tool, and study them as a group in order to better understand the individual versions. In the words of the folklorist William Hansen:

The juxtaposition of narratives belonging to the same family is in itself a cognitively and aesthetically pleasurable experience for the investigator, revealing creative surprises that emerge when clusters of similar narrative ideas are shaped in unpredictable ways by different narrators in different societies in different times, each text lending insight into a neighboring formulation.¹

These four stories deal with wine, blood, and revenge, and in each of them a woman, the heroine, plays an important role in exacting this revenge. I will analyze

the relationship between these elements,² and use anthropological literature to study the symbolic meaning and ritual role of wine, blood, revenge and women in the cultures of Near Eastern antiquity.

In her structuralist analysis of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry on vengeance, Suzanne Stetkevych has argued that in such poems, blood vengeance is presented as an inverted commensal meal.³ Here I will argue that in these prose narratives from various Near Eastern backgrounds, blood vengeance by women is presented as inverted childbirth or as an inverted wedding. When placed in this network of metaphorical relationships, curious details from the individual tales that have hitherto puzzled modern readers will become more intelligible.

The Sources

The four stories studied here are found in a number of sources. The first story is the one about Tomyris, queen of the Massagetae, and her conflict with the Persian emperor Cyrus in the 6th c. BC, as told by the

¹ William Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (Ithaca, 2002), 25.

² Compare the approach of Nicole Duran, "Having Men for Dinner: Deadly Banquets and Biblical Women," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35 (2005): 117–24.

³ Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca, 1993), 65.

Greek historians Herodotus (5th c. BC) and Polyaeus (2nd c. AD).⁴ Second comes the *Book of Judith*, written directly in Greek during the 2nd/1st c. BC or translated from a Hebrew original that is now lost. Although later excluded from the Hebrew Bible, *Judith* was part of the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and the earliest Protestant bible translations. Shorter versions of Judith's story were written down during the Middle Ages in Hebrew and in Judeo-Arabic by Jews living in Islamic lands; these shorter texts will here be referred to as the "midrash versions."⁵ The account about the historic Zenobia, queen of Palmyra (d. 3rd c. AD), is our third story, as preserved in Classical Arabic literature. The oldest complete versions of this Arabic Zenobia Legend are found in the works of the Islamic historians Tabari and Mas'udi (10th c. AD),⁶ but her story probably already circulated in a similar form among Christian Arabs before Islam.⁷

Fourth and finally is the opening episode from the *Story of al-Zir*, an orally transmitted folk epic set in pre-Islamic times (5th c. AD), popular among both Muslim and Christian Arabs,⁸ and written down in Middle Arabic in various recensions since the 18th c. AD. For

brevity's sake, this opening episode will be referred to here as "the story of Jalila." I refer to two texts that represent two different recensions of the *Story of al-Zir*. First is the "Tunis" version, a 20th c. AD printed edition, an example of what Gavillet Matar calls the "Poetic Egyptian recension," summarized by Lyons in his *Arabian Epic* as version A.⁹ Second is "We 822," a manuscript from Johann Wetzstein's Berlin collection of Oriental manuscripts, dated ca. AD 1785, edited and translated by Gavillet Matar as *La Geste du Zir Sālim*. This text is an example of the "Syrian recension," corresponding to Lyons' version B.¹⁰

Prior Comparisons between these Heroines and their Stories

Classical Tomyris and biblical Judith have been compared by European writers and artists since the Middle Ages.¹¹ In Dante's *Divina Commedia*, their victims Cyrus and Holofernes dwell side by side in the same section of Purgatory.¹² In the last decade, biblical scholars have again drawn attention to the parallels between the Tomyris and Judith stories, arguing that the *Book of Judith* was composed by a Hellenized Jew who read about Tomyris in Herodotus' *Histories* and modeled his biblical heroine after the Massagete queen as a literary homage.¹³

⁹ *Qisṣat al-Zir Sālim Abū Layla* [sic] *al-Muhalhil al-kabīr wa-qatl Kulayb wa-mā jarā lahu ma'a Jassās b. Murra min al-ḥurūb wa-l-ahwāl* (Tūnis: Maṭba'at al-Manār, 20th c.), 1–12; Gavillet Matar, *Geste*, I, 27; Malcolm C. Lyons, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-telling* (Cambridge, 2005), III, 651–53; and see also his *The Man of Wiles in Popular Arabic Literature: A Study of a Medieval Arab Hero* (Edinburgh, 2012), 29–33.

¹⁰ Gavillet Matar, *Geste*, We 822 ff. 1a–21a (both Gavillet Matar's edition [vol. I] and her translation [vol. II] refer to the pagination of the manuscript); Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, III, 651–53.

¹¹ Margarita Stocker, *Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture* (New Haven, CT, 1998), 16. Compare, for example, Conrad Meit's statue *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (1525) with Georg Pencz' engraving *Tomyris with the Head of Cyrus* (1539).

¹² Dante, *Divina Commedia*, "Purgatorio," 12th canto.

¹³ Dilys Naomi Patterson, "Re-Membering the Past: The Purpose of Historical Discourse in the Book of Judith," in *The Function of Ancient Historiography in Biblical and Cognate Studies*, ed. Patricia G. Kilpatrick and Timothy D. Golz (New York, 2008), 114–15; Lawrence M. Wills, "Jewish Novellas in a Greek and Roman Age: Fiction and Identity," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 42 (2011): 159–60; Jeremy Corley, "Imitation of Septuagintal Narrative and Greek Historiography in the Portrait of Holofernes," in *A Pious Seductress: Studies in the Book of Judith*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits (Berlin, 2012), 35–36.

⁴ Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.204–14; Polyaeus, *Stratagems*, 8.28.

⁵ A. M. Dubarle, *Judith: Formes et sens des diverses traditions* (Rome, 1966), II, 98–177. See also Deborah Levine Gera, "The Jewish Textual Traditions" and "Shorter Medieval Hebrew Tales of Judith," in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Stories across the Disciplines*, ed. Kevin R. Brine et al. (Cambridge, 2010).

⁶ Tabari, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (al-Qāhira, 1960–69), I, 756–71, trans. Moshe Perlmann as: *The Ancient Kingdoms, The History of al-Tabari: An Annotated Translation*, vol. 4 (Albany, NY, 1987), 138–50; Mas'udi, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (al-Qāhira, 1948), I, 93–98; *Les Prairies d'or*, trans. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, corr. Charles Pellat (Paris, 1965), II, §§ 1046–58. See also: Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, "La 'Caída de Palmira' o la 'Historia de Zenobia y Ğaḍīmah' contada por la tradición norarábiga," *Anaquel de Estudios Árabes* 23 (2012): 88–96.

⁷ Earlier references to her story are found in a poem by the Christian Arab poet Adi b. Zayd. In Tabari's *History*, the Zenobia Legend is embedded in an account of the Christian Arab kings of al-Hira, and one of the characters in the legend swears by both pagan gods and by Christ. Tabari, *History*, I, 761–62; Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London, 2003), 474–77; David S. Powers, "Demonizing Zenobia: The Legend of al-Zabbā' in Islamic Sources," in *Histories of the Middle East: Studies in Middle Eastern Society, Economy, and Law in Honor of A. L. Udovitch*, ed. Roxani Margariti Eleni et al. (Leiden, 2011), 133–38; Monferrer-Sala, "Caída de Palmira," 83–108.

⁸ Marguerite Gavillet Matar, *La Geste du Zir Sālim d'après un manuscrit syrien: présentation, édition et traduction annotées* (Damas, 2005), I, 42–43.

Table 1—Main roles in the four stories

<i>Heroine</i>	<i>Tyrant</i>	<i>Wise Advisor</i>
Tomyris	Cyrus	Croesus
Judith	Holofernes	Achior
Zenobia	Jadhima	Qasir
Jalila	Tubba	Tubba's geomancer

In a previous article, I have pointed to the parallels between the *Book of Judith* and the life of Zenobia as presented in Arabic literature.¹⁴ There I argued that the similarities between *Judith* and the Arabic Zenobia Legend can be explained if one assumes that these two works were written by authors who both used the same model: an earlier written text that predated the *Book of Judith* but that is now lost.

In this article I will extend the comparison to another work from Arabic literature, which deals with a fourth heroine, Jalila. Her story is less well known than that of the other three women: as an oral folktale transmitted in Middle Arabic, it was not considered as serious historiography or literature by pre-modern Arabic critics, and has consequently not become part of a classic literary canon.¹⁵

Parallels in Plot Structure

When we study these four stories together, we find that they have a similar structure. All feature the same set of protagonists: each heroine opposes a tyrant (see Table 1): Tomyris confronts the Persian emperor Cyrus; Judith, the Assyrian general Holofernes; Zenobia, the

Iraqi king Jadhima; and Jalila, the Yemeni king Tubba. Each tyrant is assisted by a wise counselor: Cyrus is advised by Croesus, Holofernes by Achior, Jadhima by Qasir, and Tubba by his geomancer. In addition, in the story of Jalila, an important role is played by her cousin Kulayb.

In addition to the fact that these four stories feature the same types of protagonists, they all contain the same motifs, in this case ones famous from accounts of the Trojan War. All four stories contain a Cassandra motif, a Sinon motif, and a Clytemnestra motif; and three of them contain a Trojan Horse motif.¹⁶ These may be defined as follows. The “Cassandra Motif” indicates that, when his wise counselor warns him about the enemy, the tyrant does not heed his advice, but punishes him instead. In the “Sinon Motif,” a man switches sides and joins the enemy. In some cases this is done as a stratagem in order to gain the enemy's trust and defeat him from within.¹⁷ The “Trojan Horse Motif” means that the enemy is presented with a fatal gift.¹⁸ And, finally, the “Clytemnestra” or “Judith Motif” signifies that the heroine takes revenge on the tyrant—her husband or suitor—by getting him drunk on wine and murdering him in his bed.¹⁹

¹⁶ Following the examples set by folklorist S. Thompson and students of Arabic folktales H. El-Shamy and M. Lyons, these motifs are named after their manifestations that have become most famous in Western culture: the biblical story of Judith and the Graeco-Roman stories about the Trojan War. It should be noted that such names do not imply that these biblical and Graeco-Roman examples provide the oldest form of the motif from which all other variants derive.

¹⁷ “K2040.1.1§ Partisan (patriot, spy, soldier, etc.) leads enemy to believe that he is switching sides: enemy betrayed and defeated”; “K2042 Crow gets to owls pretending that crows have cast him out,” Hasan M. El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions of the Arab World: A Guide to Motif Classification* (Bloomington, 1995), I, 258, and *Types of the Folktale in the Arab World: A Demographically Oriented Tale-Type Index* (Bloomington, 2004), 661; 1124. For a number of examples of this motif see also Franz-Christoph Muth, “Zopyros bei den Arabern: Streiflichter auf ein Motiv Herodots in der arabischen Literatur,” *Oriens* 33 (1992): 231–37, 247–57.

¹⁸ “K753.2§ Capture by smuggling soldiers into city in two-compartmented chest”; “K754.1 Trojan wooden horse—[smuggling soldiers into city]”; “K2357.16§ Strategy to get into enemy city: fighters smuggled past defenses (gate),” El-Shamy, *Folk Traditions*, I, 239, and *Types of the Folktale*, 661, 1114, and 1128; “T27 Trojan horse motif—men in chests etc.,” Lyons, *Arabian Epic*, II, 479; “Golden Ram—Trojan Horse,” Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread*, 169–76, and “Trojanisches Pferd,” in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (Berlin, 2010), XIII, 954–57.

¹⁹ “K872 Judith and Holofernes: girl from enemy camp chosen to sleep with intoxicated general kills him in bed”; “K873.1 King

¹⁴ Johan Weststeijn, “Zenobia of Palmyra and the Book of Judith: Common Motifs in Greek, Jewish, and Arabic Historiography,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 22 (2013): 295–320. Earlier, Judith Weingarten had already shown that the Arabic Zenobia Legend contains various motifs found in other Near Eastern tales: “The Zenobia Romance,” *Zenobia: Empress of the East. Exploring Zenobia's World: The Incredible Rise and Fall of the City of Palmyra*, 13 June 2008, <http://judithweingarten.blogspot.nl/2008/06/zenobia-romance.html>; accessed Nov. 2015.

¹⁵ Louis ‘Awad has linked the *Story of al-Zir* to tales of the Trojan War and the *Oresteia*, comparing Tubba, Jalila and Kulayb with Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus; see his *Uṣṭūrāt Ūrist wa-l-malāḥim al-‘arabiyya* (al-Qāhira, 1968), 31–41. Pormann and Lyons believe such parallels are mere coincidences, but in light of the fact that the episode about Jalila contains four major motifs that are also found in the stories about the capture of Troy (see next section), it appears that some of ‘Awad's findings should be reevaluated. Peter E. Pormann, “Classics and Islam: From Homer to al-Qāṣida,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 16 (2009): 220–23; Lyons, *Man of Wiles*, 29.

Table 2—Parallels in plot structure in the four stories. Parenthesized numbers denote the sequence in which the motifs are found in the respective variant

	<i>Cassandra motif</i>	<i>Sinon motif</i>	<i>Trojan Horse motif</i>	<i>Clytemnestra/ Judith motif</i>
<i>Story of Tomyris</i>	Croesus warns Cyrus that he should not consider himself immortal; Tomyris warns Cyrus not to attack her but her advice is not heeded (2)	Croesus switches to the side of his enemy Cyrus (1)	Persians (Herodotes) or Massagetes (Polyaenus) pretend to retreat and leave bowls full of wine for their enemy (3)	Tomyris intoxicates (Polyaenus) and murders her suitor Cyrus (4)
<i>Book of Judith</i>	Achior warns Holofernes not to attack the Israelites but his advice is not heeded and he is banished (1)	Achior switches to the side of his enemy the Israelites (2)	—	Judith intoxicates and murders her suitor Holofernes (3)
<i>Arabic Zenobia Legend</i>	Qasir warns Jadhima not to marry Zenobia but his advice is not heeded (1)	Qasir pretends to switch sides to his enemy Zenobia (3)	Qasir brings Zenobia bags full of luxuries in which soldiers are hidden (4)	Zenobia intoxicates and murders her suitor Jadhima (2)
<i>Story of Jalila</i>	Geomancer warns al-Tubba that the chests of dowry are filled with soldiers but his advice is not heeded and he is killed (3)	Kulayb pretends to switch sides to his enemy al-Tubba (1)	Kulayb and Jalila bring al-Tubba chests full of dowry in which soldiers are hidden (2)	Jalila intoxicates and Kulayb murders her suitor al-Tubba (4)

Table 2 provides an overview of the motifs that are shared by the stories of Tomyris, Judith, Zenobia, and Jalila. Numbers between brackets denote in what sequence these motifs are found in each variant. In all four stories, the Cassandra motif precedes the Clytemnestra motif, but the place of the Sinon and Trojan Horse motifs is different in each variant.

In Herodotus' version of the Tomyris story, the Trojan Horse stratagem of leaving wine for the enemy to get him drunk is executed by the Persians, but in the version recorded by Polyaenus, this ruse is executed by the Massagetae. The *Book of Judith* does not contain a Trojan Horse motif, and there the Sinon motif is not a ruse but a case of sincere defection: Achior, after being expelled to the Israelites by Holofernes, sincerely embraces their religion.²⁰ Croesus can also be seen as a sincere defector: when, after fight-

ing Cyrus for years, he is about to be burnt alive by him on a pyre, he suddenly switches sides and becomes his trusted advisor.²¹

The fact that the same motifs are found in each of these four stories forces us to revise earlier theories about the possible relationships between them. Instead of arguing that the author of the *Book of Judith* borrowed directly from Herodotus' account of Tomyris, or that the *Book of Judith* and the Arabic Zenobia Legend are based on the same written *Vorlage*, the best hypothesis is that these four texts are variants of the same Near Eastern tale type. This tale type was used to create stories in which the characters bear different names, but in which the plot remains more or less the same. There probably existed many oral

given sleeping potion and then beheaded in his bed by his wife"; "K1510.1 Adulteress kills home-coming husband"; "Q411.2.1 Undesired suitor killed asleep in his tent"; "T173 Murderous bride," Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of the Folk-Literature* (Bloomington, 1975), IV, 348; 398; V, 362; Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins* (Berkeley, 1959), 488–90.

²⁰ For the analysis of Achior as a blind version of the Sinon motif see Weststeijn, "Zenobia of Palmyra."

²¹ Herodotes, *Histories*, 1.86–88. On Croesus as a wise counselor: Heinrich Bischoff, *Der Warner bei Herodot* (Leipzig, 1932), 43–5; Richmond Lattimore, "The Wise Advisor in Herodotus," *Classical Philology* 34 (1939): 24–35; Henry R. Immerwahr, *Form and Thought in Herodotus* (Cleveland, 1966), 74–75. For a comparison of Croesus with Ahikar the Wise, another Sinon figure, see: Stephanie West, "Croesus' Second Reprieve and Other Tales of the Persian Court," *Classical Quarterly* 53 (2003): 419–33. On Tomyris as a Wise Counselor see Deborah Gera, *Warrior Women: The Anonymous "Tractatus de Mulieribus"* (Leiden, 1997), 191–92.

variants of this particular tale type in the Near East. In the words of William Hansen:

The concept of [...] an international tale type frees us from having to assume that one of the ancient stories derives from the other or that one or the other of these ancient stories must be the original of the type merely because it is the earliest attestation that we happen to have.²²

Each of the four variants treated here was transmitted in a number of slightly different oral recensions, in which the protagonists bear the same names but minor details vary. Some of these recensions were written down or reworked by literary authors. While the episode about Jalila, as part of the *Story of al-Zir*, continued to be transmitted as an oral story up into the 20th century and—even when recensions of it were written down—was always considered a folktale, versions of the three other variants dealt with here were included in texts that later became classics (Herodotus, the Bible, Tabari's *History*) and as such became part of the official literary and artistic canons of their respective cultures.

These four stories are about the downfall of greedy, lascivious tyrants: they have a structure with the conqueror conquered, the ravisher ravished, the deceiver deceived. As stories of war, they contain stratagems for the capture and defense of enemy territory. These stratagems are acts which are disguised as the opposite of aggression: the enemy appears to offer gifts (Trojan Horse motif), his love (Clytemnestra/Judith motif), or his friendship (Sinon motif), but in the end these gifts, love, and friendship are not only fake but also fatal.

The Sinon role can be considered as the non-sexual counterpart to the Judith role. Both lover and defector cross over to the other side, (pretend they want to) join their enemy, abuse his hospitality, and destroy him from within. Both bride and defector are examples of the morally-ambivalent mediators between opposites that according to Lévi-Strauss play such a central role in myths: they are go-betweens who adopt the ways of the enemy in order to bring him down.²³ According to Walter Burkert, the Trojan Horse, Sinon, and Judith stratagems all derive from a similar scapegoat ritual:

an animal, a polluted man, or a chaste but desirable woman volunteers to be given up to the enemy, who then receives this scapegoat to his own harm.²⁴

In the tale of Jalila, gifts, lover, and defector all travel in one direction, but in the other stories we find a mutual exchange of objects and people. Judith travelling and defecting to the Assyrian camp provides a mirror image to Achior travelling and defecting to the Israelites.²⁵ Zenobia who befriends, deceives and takes vengeance on Jadhima provides a mirror image to Qasir who befriends, deceives, and takes vengeance on Zenobia.²⁶ These inversions create a chiasmic structure that strengthens the conqueror-conquered, avenger-avenged theme of the stories.

Another such inversion is provided by the Cassandra motif, as it constitutes the symmetrical reversal of the Judith, Sinon, and Trojan Horse motifs.²⁷ While the lies told by the fake lovers, defectors, and gift-givers are believed, the truthful words of the sincere warners are ignored or considered false. When Qasir lies to his enemy Zenobia she believes him, but when he tries to warn his master Jadhima the latter ignores him. The Cassandra motif is further linked to the Sinon motif because it is often the wise counselor who defects to the other side, as happens in the cases of Croesus, Achior, and Qasir.

In this paper, I will focus on the Clytemnestra/Judith motif because it constitutes the culmination to the series of motifs that makes up this tale type. In the stories discussed here, the heroine is *pars pro toto* for her oppressed people: Jalila stands for her oppressed tribe, Tomyris stands for the Massagetae, Zenobia stands for her city Palmyra, and Judith ("Jewess") stands for her city Bethulia ("Virgin") and the Jewish people. The male aggressor's desire to deflower the heroine is a symbol of his desire to take her city and conquer her country. His failure to sleep with her represents his failure to subject her people in general.²⁸ Moreover, it is the Judith motif that brings about the downfall of the greedy and lascivious tyrant. In the tales of Tomyris, Judith, and Jalila, the scene in which the heroine kills her enemy even provides the dramatic

²² Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread*, 488.

²³ Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley, 1979), 67.

²⁴ Ibid., 59–77; Jacob Stern, "Scapegoat Narratives in Herodotus," *Hermes* 119 (1991): 305.

²⁵ Toni Craven, "Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith," *Semeia* 28 (1977): 88.

²⁶ Powers, "Demonizing Zenobia," 154–55, 161–62.

²⁷ See also Stern, "Scapegoat Narratives," 310–11.

²⁸ Burkert, *Structure and History*, 76.

finale to the plot. Not surprisingly, in their renderings of the stories of Tomyris and Judith, artists have chosen to depict this particular scene as the one event that sums up the entire narrative.

In the tales themselves, the Judith scene in which the heroine murders the tyrant is foregrounded by a concentration of details that (at first reading) appear bizarre, as will become clear below. Most importantly, the Judith scene is the point at which the elements of wine, blood, women, and revenge, which play such an important role in these stories, come together. In the following, after a summary of the four tales, I will analyze the ritual and symbolic aspects of these elements, and study the literary effect of their combination.

Tomyris

According to Herodotus, when Cyrus, the future founder of the Persian empire, was still in his mother's womb, his grandfather dreamed that a vine grew out of his daughter's genitals and covered the whole of Asia (1.108). Cyrus grew up to be a conqueror and subjugated various peoples, one of whose kings, Croesus, switched to his side and became his trusted advisor (1.86–88). Cyrus, however, was not satisfied with what Heaven had allotted for him. Encouraged by "his birth, because of which he seemed to be something more than mortal" (1.204.2), he intended to conquer the country of the Massagetae, in what is now called Turkestan. This people, who worshipped the sun as their only god, were ruled by a widowed queen called Tomyris. Cyrus sent her a message inviting her to become his wife, but she declined his advances, as she understood that the Persian emperor was only interested in her kingdom.

When Cyrus makes preparations to invade her country, Tomyris warns him that he could not know if this endeavor would turn out favorably for him, and advises him to be content with ruling his own country. Cyrus does not heed her admonition. All of his Persian counselors urges him to go through with the affair; the wise Croesus, however, echoes the advice of Tomyris, and warns the emperor that he is not an immortal, but a man whose fortunes might change. Yet Croesus also believes that it would be shameful for Cyrus if he "should yield and give ground before a woman." Croesus explains that the Massagetae are noble savages. Their strength (as well as their weakness) lies in the fact that they are unacquainted with

the decadent luxuries of Persia; as nomads, they only drink milk and have never tasted wine. Croesus advises Cyrus to resort to subterfuge and use the diet of the Massagetae against them. He should invade their country, set up camp there, and make the preparations for a feast, "providing many bowls of unmixed wine," and then retreat back to Persia.

The night after crossing into Massagete country, Cyrus has a dream warning him that he would die in this land, but he misinterprets this dream and continues with Croesus' plan. He prepares a feast and retreats; the Massagetae invaded his camp thinking they had chased him away, drink their fill of wine, and fall asleep drunk. Then the Persians return and kill or capture the Massagete soldiers, among them the queen's son. Tomyris sends Cyrus a message: he had no reason to be proud, for he has not defeated her son in battle but tricked him with a drug, this "fruit of the vine, with which you Persians fill yourself and rage so violently that evil words rise in a flood to your lips when the wine enters your bodies." She swears to take revenge if he does not give her back her son: "I shall give even you who can never get enough of it your fill of blood."

Again, Cyrus ignores Tomyris' warning: he does not release her son. When the effects of the wine have worn off, the latter kills himself in captivity. Tomyris attacks the Persians and defeats them; Cyrus is killed on the field of battle. The Massagete queen fills a wineskin with human blood, and when she finds Cyrus' dead body, pushes his head into the skin and declares: "Just as I threatened, I give you your fill of blood."²⁹

As Herodotus himself notes, already in his time, "many stories were told of Cyrus' death," and he argues that he merely picked the one that seemed "the most credible" to him.³⁰ Indeed, a different version

²⁹ Compare Herodotus, *Histories*, 4.62.

³⁰ Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.214.5, and also 1.95.1. On this question see also H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "The Death of Cyrus: Xenophon's 'Cyropaedia' as a Source for Iranian History," in *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*, II, ed. H. W. Bailey et al. (Leiden, 1985), 459–71. For a list of the various Greek and Latin accounts of the Tomyris story that have come down to us, see Gera, *Warrior Women*, 187. Note further that a number of similar stories about the confrontation between a Near Eastern conqueror and neighboring steppe peoples and their queens have been preserved: Cyrus' great-grandfather Cyaxares defeats the Scythians by getting them drunk on wine (Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.106). After he has taken her husband prisoner, Cyrus is defeated in battle by the queen of the Sacae,

of the Tomyris story is preserved by the later Greek author Polyaeus. As noted above, in Polyaeus' version of the Tomyris story, it is the Massagete queen who uses the Trojan Horse stratagem on Cyrus: *she* retreats and leaves a great quantity of wine in *her* camp. When the Persians plunder these provisions and get immoderately drunk, she returns with her army and slays them all while they are too drunk to stand up straight. Cyrus is among the ones who are killed and then cut to pieces by Tomyris. According to the account of Polyaeus, it is therefore Tomyris who, like Judith, Zenobia, and Jalila, makes her suitor drink his fill of wine as part of the ruse to kill him. In the version of Herodotus, Tomyris makes her suitor drink his fill from the contents of a wineskin only after his death, and this time the skin is not filled with wine, but with blood.

It does not have to be the case that the version given by Herodotus is the oldest and original version of the Tomyris story, and the one given by Polyaeus merely a late adaptation of Herodotus' classic. It is one of the tenets of folktale research that "it is arbitrary to identify the earliest published versions with the original story since for the most part it is essentially chance that this or that oral text was committed to writing and survives to our day as an artifact of the past."³¹

Judith

According to the *Book of Judith*, Nebuchadnezzar has sworn to take revenge on the Israelites because they have refused to assist him in one of his wars (Jdt 1:12; 2:1) and he sends his Assyrian general Holofernes to fight them. Holofernes lays siege to a Jewish city, and (according to some of the midrash versions) exercises his *droit du seigneur*: he commands that every new bride from the city should be brought to him to be deflowered.³² His wise advisor Achior warns Holofernes not to attack the Jews, for as long as they do not sin they will remain invincible (5:17–21). Just as with the Massagetae, both the strength and the weakness of

the Israelites lies in their diet: as long as they eat only kosher food, they cannot be defeated, but the moment they trespass and start eating forbidden foods, they can be easily subjugated (11:10–19).

Holofernes ignores the warning of his counselor Achior not to attack the Jews and swears that when he takes his vengeance upon them the mountains will become "drunk with their blood."³³ The general banishes Achior, preferring to listen to the advice of his other counselors. They tell him that he can exact his revenge³⁴ on the Israelites without losing a single one of his men: he should cut off the city's water supply in order to force the Jews to surrender or die from thirst.

In the city, however, the beautiful Judith devises a ruse to wreak vengeance upon Holofernes.³⁵ She washes and perfumes herself, puts on her most beautiful clothes, takes a skin with kosher wine and a bag filled with kosher food, and goes to Holofernes' camp. In the midrash versions, the city's guards are reluctant to let her go because they fear she will lose her chastity among the enemy.³⁶ Brought before Holofernes, she confirms to the Assyrian general that no one can exact revenge³⁷ upon the Jews as long as they eat only kosher food, but that they are about to trespass. The Jews have become so thirsty that they are about to drink the tithe of the wine that should be preserved for the priests, or even drink the blood of their cattle.³⁸

Holofernes is not only pleased with Judith's words but also blinded by her beauty and invites her to sleep with him and get married. According to the midrash versions, Judith agrees to this proposal, but claims she is "impure," so intercourse has to be postponed to the next day when her period will be over. These

³³ Jdt 6:4–5. The idea that blood or wine which is spilt on the ground is "drunk" by the earth is found in many Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Jean-Paul Roux, "Blood," in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Detroit, 2005), 986; M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 1997), 236–37, 575.

³⁴ Jdt 7:15. Morton S. Enslin ed., *The Book of Judith: Greek Text with an English Translation* (Leiden, 1972), 104, n. 15: ἀνταποδώσεις ἀνταπόδομα, "retaliate with a retaliation."

³⁵ Judith's act is labeled as or compared to an act of vengeance in Jdt 8:35, 9:2, and 13:20.

³⁶ Dubarle, *Judith*, II, midrashim 5.3; 7.3; 8.3.

³⁷ Jdt 11:10. Reading ἐκδικᾶται as a form of the verb ἐκδικάζω, "to avenge." See Enslin, *Book of Judith*, 138, n. 10. The Dutch Statenbijbel also translates this verb as 'to take revenge' (11:8). "Want over ons geslacht wordt geen wraak genomen, en het zwaard overweldigt het niet, tenzij dat zij tegen hun God gezondigd hebben."

³⁸ Jdt 11:11–15. Enslin, *Book of Judith*, 35 and 139 n. 12.

and her husband later plays the role of wise counselor to Cyrus (Ctesias' *Persica* as summarized by Photius 36a–37a). When threatened by Alexander the Great, the wife of the leader of the Dahae gets her husband drunk on wine, cuts off his head and brings it in a bag to Alexander's camp (Curtius, *History of Alexander*, 8.3.1–15).

³¹ Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread*, 413.

³² Dubarle, *Judith*, I, 84; 92; 98 and Gera, "Shorter Medieval Hebrew Tales," § 12.

statements by Judith, that she is willing to sleep with Holofernes but that she is impure, are not found in the biblical version of the story. Both the midrash and the biblical versions do mention, however, that Judith goes to a fountain outside the camp to wash herself that night (12:6–9). Holofernes invites Judith to his tent, where a sumptuous purple canopy is erected above his bed (10:21); he offers to share his wine, but she only wants to drink the kosher wine she has brought with her. The Assyrian general drinks more “than he had ever drunk in one day since he was born” and falls asleep in his bed. Judith takes his sword that hangs above his bed, cuts off his head, pulls down the canopy and puts the head in her food bag.

Judith returns to her city where she shows the inhabitants the purple canopy and Holofernes’ severed head and tells them God has protected his handmaid from becoming “polluted by sin” in the enemy tent (Vulgate 13:20). In the midrash versions, the city’s guards only open the gate for her after she has shown them the bloodied head to prove to them she hasn’t lost her chastity among the enemy.³⁹ The Israelites mount Holofernes’ head on the battlements of their city, and chase away the leaderless Assyrian invaders. Judith dedicates the purple canopy at the Temple in Jerusalem (16:19).

It is interesting to note that the details of a more explicit sexual nature (Holofernes’ sleeping with every new bride; the guards’ fear that Judith will prostitute herself in the enemy camp; Judith’s statements that she is impure but that she would have liked to sleep with Holofernes) are only present in the midrash versions and not in the biblical *Book of Judith*. Scholars disagree whether these details were part of the oldest version of Judith’s story and were censored by the Bible’s editors and translators, or whether they were only added at a later stage by the medieval midrash authors.⁴⁰ The fact that the biblical version does contain the motif that Judith washes herself in the fountain, which becomes less meaningful without her supposed impurity, speaks for the first option.

Zenobia

According to the Arabic Zenobia Legend, when Zenobia’s father is killed on the field of battle by the

Iraqi king Jadhima, she succeeds him as king of Palmyra and vows revenge. Zenobia decides to use a ruse and writes to Jadhima that the reign of women only tends towards ill-repute, so she proposes to marry him and join their kingdoms together.⁴¹ Although his wise counselor Qasir warns him that this proposal is a trap, Jadhima prefers the opinion of others who advise him to accept it. The Iraqi king travels to Palmyra and is brought before Zenobia, who lifts up her skirt and shows him that her pubic hair has been braided.⁴² “Do you see the vulva of a bride?” she asks him rhetorically.⁴³ “This is not because we lack barbers or razors; it is a custom of men.”

Zenobia tells Jadhima that she has heard that the blood of kings is a cure against burning thirst.⁴⁴ She prepares a cup for him and gives him wine to drink until he is drunk. Then she orders her servants to cut his veins. The text specifies that “out of respect for royalty, kings were not decapitated except in battle.” Zenobia collects Jadhima’s blood in the cup from which he has just drunk wine. She tries to make sure that not a single drop is spilt outside the bowl, for she has been told that so long as the king’s blood does not

⁴¹ In Mas’udi’s version, it is Jadhima who asks Zenobia in marriage (*Muruj*, I, 93).

⁴² That Zenobia’s pubic hair is braided could be a reference to the practice of braiding a virgin’s vulva closed with her own hair, guaranteeing her virginity until the wedding night. See Monferrer-Sala, “Caída de Palmira,” 93, n. 56.

⁴³ Tabari, *History*, I, 760, has: *a da’b ‘arūs tarā? Da’b* can mean “custom,” which would contrast nicely with “custom of men” (*shīma mā unās*), but also “toil,” as in the effort of a true bride to remove all her body hair. Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (New York, 1955), I, 840. Powers, “Demonizing Zenobia,” 152, translates “the handiwork of a bride.” For the translation “custom of a bride,” see also J. Derek Latham’s review of Moshe Perlmann’s translation *The Ancient Kingdoms* in *BRISMES Bulletin* 14 (1987): 194. Mas’udi, *Muruj*, I, 94 has *matā’ ‘arūs*: “the vulva of a bride.”

⁴⁴ The word used here for “cure,” *shifā’*, comes from a root that not only means “to cure” but also “to quench one’s thirst (for revenge).” Tabari, *History*, I, 760, has *kalab*, “hydrophobia, burning thirst,” while Mas’udi, *Muruj*, I, 95, has *khabal*, “insanity.” On the blood of the executed as salvific, see Christina von Braun, “Blood,” in *Brill Dictionary of Religion* (Leiden, 2006), 187–88. On the blood of kings as medicine against madness and on bleeding kings to death as a sacrifice, see W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions* (New York, 1956), 369; and Henri Lammens, “Le Caractère religieux du *thār* ou vendetta chez les Arabes préislamites,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 26 (1926): 111–12, n. 6. Powers, “Demonizing Zenobia,” 152, argues that if Zenobia needed a cure against madness she must have been *majnūn*, i.e., mad or possessed by a jinn.

³⁹ Dubarle, *Judith*, II, midrashim 3.13, 4.13, 5.13, 7.13. See also Gera, “Shorter Medieval Hebrew Tales,” §§ 7–8.

⁴⁰ J. Steinmann, *Lecture de Judith* (Paris, 1953), 17–18; Dubarle, *Judith*, I, 134; Gera, “Jewish Textual Traditions,” §§ 13–14; Gera, “Shorter Medieval Hebrew Tales,” § 10.

fall on the ground, his murder will not be avenged.⁴⁵ Her efforts are in vain, for a drop of Jadhima's blood is spilt and falls on the ground. "Zenobia wanted to preserve his blood so she put it in a piece of cotton in one of her perfume containers."⁴⁶

To avenge his master's death, Jadhima's servant Qasir pretends to defect to Zenobia. He tells her that Jadhima's successor has banished him after he had advised Jadhima to accept Zenobia's marriage proposal. When Qasir gains Zenobia's trust, he proposes to bring her treasures from Iraq. However, when he returns with a caravan of Iraqi clothes and perfumes, soldiers are hidden in the camel bags. Once inside the city, they capture Palmyra and kill Zenobia.

Jalila

The *Story of al-Zir* deals with a blood feud between two Arab tribes, Qays and Yemen. The feud begins when al-Tubba, ruler over Yemen, invades the land of the Qays and hangs their leader, the father of Kulayb. Tubba, who is drunk all day, likes to drink wine "from the neck of emirs" and sleeps with a different virgin every night.⁴⁷ To avenge his father, Kulayb uses a ruse. He disguises himself as a poet, goes to the tyrant Tubba and tells him about a beautiful woman called Jalila (who is in fact Kulayb's own cousin, to whom he is betrothed). Tubba orders Kulayb to fetch Jalila for him,⁴⁸ and she travels to his castle dressed as a bride with her wedding entertainers and a caravan of camels that carry chests filled with her dowry. Kulayb has hidden armed tribesmen in these chests and disguised himself as Jalila's jester. He warns that he will

"decapitate anybody who approaches his mistress," but these words are taken as the joke of a harmless buffoon.⁴⁹ Tubba has a dream that is interpreted by his geomancer as a warning that he will be killed with his own sword by a man called Kulayb.⁵⁰ The geomancer further warns his lord that he has seen in the sand that soldiers are hidden in the chests of dowry. Tubba, however, pays no attention to his words. He chooses to listen to the counsel of others who advise him to go through with the affair and let Jalila's caravan enter his castle, and he has his geomancer decapitated.

Tubba is blinded by Jalila's beauty, drinks wine until he is drunk, and then sends everybody else away so he can sleep with her.⁵¹ Jalila tells him that she is impure, so they will have to wait until her period is over, which in her case lasts eighty days. "I do not accept copulation during menstruation," she says: "I swear by the life of your head that my flow of blood will not stop for eighty days."⁵² Tubba does not believe her and Jalila tells him that if she sees her jester dance, the bleeding might stop.⁵³ The king grants her her wish and Kulayb asks Tubba for his sword to perform a sword dance. Tubba refuses, but Jalila appeals to him until he concedes and allows Kulayb to fetch his sword that hangs above his bed. When Kulayb attacks Tubba, the king recognizes his true identity. Kulayb announces that he is taking revenge for the death of his father,⁵⁴ stabs Tubba with his own sword,⁵⁵ and soaks a white piece of cloth in the king's blood. Then he puts his lips on the wound and drinks the blood of his victim, making sure that not a single drop is spilt on the ground.⁵⁶ On the top of Tubba's castle, Kulayb

⁴⁹ We 822, ff. 7b-10a.

⁵⁰ Tunis, 2-3. See also We 822, ff. 10a-b.

⁵¹ We 822, ff. 10b-14a.

⁵² Lyons, *Man of Wiles*, 33. Compare Lev. 12:1-5.

⁵³ Tunis, 9.

⁵⁴ On the Arab avenger shedding his disguise, making himself known and announcing for whom he takes vengeance, see Lammens, "Caractère religieux," 105-106, 108.

⁵⁵ In contrast to Judith, Kulayb does not decapitate his enemy while he is asleep, but kills him while he is awake, for it is an Arab custom that "a sleeping person [. . .] must not be killed by an avenger, for spilt blood cannot be washed away by killing a sleeper." Alois Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins* (New York, 1928), 398; see also Lammens, "Caractère religieux," 94.

⁵⁶ At the end of the *Story of al-Zir*, when al-Zir takes revenge on the murderer of his older brother Kulayb, he also drinks the blood from his victim's wound without letting a single drop spill on the ground, and in this case al-Zir makes sure that he drinks *all* of his victim's blood: We 826, f. 48a. On drinking the blood of the enemy, see Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 313, 338, and *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (London, 1990), 296. On drinking the blood

⁴⁵ Powers (ibid.) says that "for the cure [against Zenobia's alleged demonic possession] to work, it was essential that not one single drop of royal blood spill on the ground," but the story actually states that Zenobia tries to avoid spilling blood so no counter-revenge will be taken. On the notion that blood which does not fall on the ground does not have to be avenged: Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 369 n. 1; 417 n. 5; West, *East Face of Helicon*, 575, 578.

⁴⁶ Tabari, *History*, I, 761: *istabqat al-Zabbā' dammahu fa-ja'alathu fī bīrs quṭn fī rab'at lahā*. Tabari's editor Ibrahim quotes another manuscript that reads *istashfat al-Zabbā' dammahu*: "Zenobia took his blood as a cure," or "Zenobia sought to quench her thirst (i.e., for revenge) with his blood." Mas'udi, *Muruj*, I, 95, has *istashfat dammahu wa-ja'alathu fī barniya*, translated by Pellat as "Zénobie fit clarifier le sang de la victime et le conserva dans un vase" (§ 1049).

⁴⁷ We 822, ff. 1b-7b. On drinking from the neck of emirs to humiliate them, see Marguerite Gavillet Matar, *La Guerre de la chamelle: La geste de Zir Sālim* (Paris, 2001), 252 n. 23.

⁴⁸ Tunis, 7.

hoists the blood-soaked cloth as a flag “red like the planet Venus.”⁵⁷

Wine, Blood, Revenge, and Women

As we can see, in all these stories the elements wine, blood, revenge, and women play an important role. Apparently, stories with this combination were very successful throughout the Near East, for at least four variants were told in a number of recensions by pagan Greeks and Arabs, as well as by monotheist Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Moreover, recensions of these stories were then not only committed to writing, but some were selected by authors of sacred scripture, or by such major historians as Herodotus, Mas’udi, and Tabari to be included in their works.

What is the reason behind the popularity of this combination of wine, blood, revenge and women? To answer this question, I will study the symbolic meaning or ritual function of these elements in the cultures of Near Eastern antiquity. I will analyze the relationships between these elements and study what literary effect is created by combining them.

The individual variants contain some curious details. Some of them appear bizarre: a woman who strips to show that her pubic hair has been braided; another woman who claims that her period lasts eighty days, but that it will stop as soon as her jester performs a sword dance.⁵⁸ Other details strike us because they are not only strange but extremely bloody and barbaric: dipping a dead man’s head in a wineskin filled with blood; collecting human blood in a wine cup and then preserving it among one’s perfumes; drinking blood from the enemy’s wound or hoisting a flag soaked in

human blood. Then there are details that are neither fantastic nor extreme, but the function of which are not immediately clear: some have wondered why the *Book of Judith* tells its readers that inside Holofernes’ tent, his bed is placed under a canopy; and why the story further highlights that detail by explaining that Judith brought this purple canopy back to her city and later dedicated it in the Temple in Jerusalem.⁵⁹ Here I will show that the curious details in the individual variants will become more intelligible if, against the background of the symbolic and ritual aspects of wine, blood, women and vengeance, we study these stories as a group.

Wine and blood

Blood and wine are ambivalent liquids, in that they carry a broad range of symbolic meanings in Near Eastern cultures. Blood can be both polluting and purifying. Due to its impurity, the consumption of blood was taboo in Judaism, early Christianity, and Islam.⁶⁰ At the same time, blood can be cleansing, salvific, and the source of life and fertility.⁶¹

Like blood, wine is a symbol of fertility, and also both purifying and polluting. The ecstasy caused by drinking alcohol was seen as a way of making contact with the divine, which makes wine a sacred beverage. At the same time, drunkenness causes physical and mental impairment. Islam provides a good example of the fundamental ambivalence attributed to wine: while its consumption is forbidden to the believers

of a sacrificial victim straight from the wound, see Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 338. On drinking the enemy’s blood straight from the wound, see E. S. Drower, *Water into Wine: A Study of Ritual Idiom in the Middle East* (London, 1956), 10–11; Musil, *Manners and Customs*, 528.

⁵⁷ We 822, ff. 14a-19b; ff. 26b-27b. E. N. Haddad, “Blood Revenge among the Arabs,” *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 1 (1920): 104, describes how, in a different context, a rag dipped in the blood of a murdered man is hoisted as a flag.

⁵⁸ Various theories to explain why Zenobia’s pubic hair is braided include: that she had not been with a man for a very long time: Robert A. F. L. Woltering, “Zenobia or Al-Zabbā: The Modern Arab Literary Reception of the Palmyran Protagonist,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 17 (2014): 28; that she was possessed by a jinn: Powers, “Demonizing Zenobia,” 151–52; that it was a prophylactic: Monferrer-Sala, “Caída de Palmira,” 93 n. 56.

⁵⁹ According to Schmitz, the canopy is a “highly interesting narrative detail,” and the fact that it is mentioned four times in the story is “highly symbolic”: Barbara Schmitz, “Holofernes’s Canopy in the Septuagint,” in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Stories across the Disciplines*, ed. Kevin R. Brine et al. (Cambridge, 2010), §§ 8–9, quoting Erich Zenger, “Das Buch Judit,” in *Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit*, I (Gütersloh, 1981), 498. According to Susan Kim, “Bloody Signs: Circumcision and Pregnancy in the Old English Judith,” *Exemplaria* 11 (1999): 292–94, the canopy symbolizes Holofernes’ foreskin, and according to Lawrence M. Wills, the canopy symbolizes “Holofernes’ hymen” (*Ancient Jewish Novels: An Anthology* [Oxford, 2002], 92).

⁶⁰ Lev. 17:10–14; Acts 15:29; Qur’an 2:173.

⁶¹ Richard Tapper, “Blood, Wine and Water: Social and Symbolic Aspects of Drinks and Drinking in the Islamic Middle East,” in *Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, ed. Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper (London, 1994), 229; Roux, “Blood,” 985; Von Braun, “Blood,” 187; Jacob Milgrom, “Blood,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Detroit, MI, 2007), 772.

on earth, as the drink of immortality it is a reward for them when they dwell in Paradise.⁶²

Due to their rich symbolism, wine and blood play an important role as ritual beverages in Near Eastern religions, especially during the commensal meal, when the priest sacrifices a victim at the altar and the believers eat its flesh and drink its blood, or, as a substitute for this blood, red wine. Such a ritual meal could be a case of human sacrifice and cannibalism, as in the Christian mass where the priest at the altar witnesses the transubstantiation of the wine in the chalice into the blood of Christ and then gives it to drink to the congregation. This blood is purifying and life-giving: it cleanses the believers of their sins and grants them eternal life.⁶³

In general, wine is a symbol of the positive, purifying aspects of blood. Spilt wine, however, is a symbol of violently shed blood: both are polluting transgressions that need to be washed away. At the Jewish Sabbath, a cup of wine is blessed and passed around among the dinner guests. At Pesach, however, some of this wine is ritually spilt on the ground to symbolize the blood shed during the exile in Egypt.⁶⁴

Wine and revenge

What is the link between wine and revenge in these four stories? In the first place, making the enemy drink alcohol to the point of drunken stupor is an essential part of the ruse used to take vengeance on him. Secondly, the relationship between wine and revenge in these stories is also a case of poetic justice, in the way that intemperance leads to death. The reckless amount of alcohol drunk by the ruler is echoed in the barbaric way he is murdered and his corpse defiled. The fact that the enemy gets drunk on red wine and is killed in such a bloody way leads to a cinematic effect: in the drinking scene, red wine flows copiously when the cup is refilled again and again, while in the scene of the murder this is echoed by a copious flowing of red blood.⁶⁵

The third link between wine and revenge has to do with the symbolic and ritual aspects of wine, blood, and revenge. Like wine and blood, revenge has ritual

and religious aspects.⁶⁶ In Arabic culture, pagan as well as Islamic, an avenger was compared to a pilgrim. From the moment he swears revenge until he fulfils his vow and exacts his vengeance, the vendettist assumes a self-imposed status of impurity, *iḥrām*. During this period, he abstains from washing, combing, shaving, using perfume, having sex, or drinking wine.⁶⁷ This is similar to a pilgrim on the *hajj* to Mecca, a ritual that already existed in pre-Islamic times and was incorporated by Islam. Just before the pilgrim enters *iḥrām*, he ritually shaves the hair on his head, and from that moment on abstains from shaving, intercourse, and wine until the end of the pilgrimage.⁶⁸ The Qurʾān prescribes (12:196): “And shave not your heads, till the offering reaches its place of sacrifice.” The pilgrim concludes the *hajj* by ritually slaughtering an animal (the offering), after which he leaves his status of *iḥrām* and returns to daily life. An avenger concludes his status of *iḥrām* by killing his enemy: in vengeance, the murder of the enemy has the same function as the ritual sacrifice of an animal victim.⁶⁹

Another ritual aspect of revenge is the notion of *ghasl al-dam bi-l-dam*, washing away blood with blood. When an act of violence is committed, the blood lost by the victim is unclean, and this unclean, unavenged blood pollutes his relatives whose duty it is to retaliate. The only liquid that can clean such a stain is the purifying blood of the criminal. His blood needs to be shed in order to wash away the pollution caused by the unavenged blood of the first victim.⁷⁰

While drinking wine is a metaphor for drinking human blood, drinking human blood is a metaphor for taking revenge. Compare the expression “I could drink his blood,” or “bloodthirst” as metaphors for the desire to avenge oneself on someone. In Arabic, the root *sh-f-y* literally means “to cure or quench one’s

⁶² Lammens, “Caractère religieux,” 83–127; Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 55–83, 161–205.

⁶³ Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 481–85; Lammens, “Caractère religieux,” 85–87, 92, 121. When Kulayb is killed, his sister and daughters do not wash their hair until he is avenged. Gavillet Matar, *Guerre de la chamelle*, 22. Note that Judith appears to have taken a reversed vow: in her usual state she was celibate, fasting, and wearing sackcloth, but after she has sworn revenge she bathes, perfumes, dresses her hair, and puts on her most beautiful clothes in preparation of a night of feasting (Jdt. 8:4–6, 9:1, 10:1–4).

⁶⁴ Wael B. Hallaq, “Forbidden,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (Leiden, 2002), II, 224.

⁶⁵ Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 65–80.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 62, 174.

⁶² Tapper, “Blood, Wine and Water,” 215–31.

⁶³ Roux, “Blood,” 986–87; Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 65–72; Erhard J. Wiedenmann, “Lord’s Supper/Eucharist,” in *Brill Dictionary of Religion Online* (Leiden, 2006).

⁶⁴ Drower, *Water into Wine*, 10.

⁶⁵ Compare Powers, “Demonizing Zenobia,” 162.

thirst,” and hence, metaphorically, “to satisfy one’s desire for revenge.”⁷¹

This link between drinking wine, drinking human blood, and taking revenge is found in all four stories discussed here. In the story of Tomyris, it is the enemy, who, as part of the act of vengeance, is symbolically forced to drink human blood from a wineskin. In the *Book of Judith*, Holofernes swears he will wreak revenge on the Jews in such a way that the mountains will become “drunk with their blood.” In the Arabic Zenobia Legend, the drinking of human blood is alluded to by the statement that the blood of kings is a cure (*shifā*) against “burning thirst,” by the fact that Zenobia collects her enemy’s blood in a wine cup, and by the fact that she preserves this blood among her perfumes, to be taken as a cure or to quench her thirst.⁷² In the epic of al-Zir, it is the avenger Kulayb who literally drinks the blood of his enemy. By drinking the purifying blood of his victim, Kulayb cures himself of the pollution caused by the murder of his father. One could also say that Kulayb, who has abstained from wine since the moment he has sworn revenge, now breaks his fast by drinking his fill of blood.⁷³

Wine and women

In the stories of Tomyris, Judith, Zenobia and Jalila, a link is established not only between revenge and wine, but also between revenge, wine, and women. Because women were generally not trained in physical combat, it was deemed unlikely that they could defeat a man in an open fight. In these stories, getting her enemy drunk is presented as an essential element of a woman’s strategy to take revenge on a male adversary. Again, these murders are also cases of poetic justice. Because temperance was seen as a manly virtue, intemperate drinking was seen to lead to an unmanly death: getting killed by the hand of a woman, a humiliating end in the macho culture of Near Eastern antiquity. In

the Zenobia Legend, for example, Jadhima is labeled as effeminate at the moment of his death.⁷⁴

Just as the relation between wine and revenge, the relation between wine and women is based on the symbolic and ritual aspects of wine: wine is associated with aspects of femininity, such as menstruation and motherhood, or with the interaction between men and women, such as weddings and intercourse.

Wine and female fertility

In the societies of Near Eastern antiquity, women did not wage war or take revenge; these were considered male tasks. Conventionally, the only blood women shed was their own blood: during menstruation, when they lost their virginity on their wedding night, and in childbirth.

Menstrual blood is almost as ambivalent a symbol as other blood and wine. On the one hand, menstrual blood was a symbol of fertility and seen as the “wine of the gods”; on the other it was considered highly polluting.⁷⁵ A woman soiled by menstrual blood was compared to a man soiled by unavenged blood.⁷⁶ Just the pollution of menstrual blood is cleaned by water and perfume, the pollution of unavenged blood is cleaned by the purifying blood of the criminal.⁷⁷

When, in the midrash versions of her story, Judith tells Holofernes that she cannot sleep with him because she is impure, and that she will clean herself that night in the fountain outside the enemy camp, one can interpret this to mean—as Holofernes probably did—that she is polluted by menstrual blood. Her words, however, might also be interpreted as containing a hidden threat: Judith is actually polluted by unavenged blood, and will cleanse herself that night by shedding Holofernes’ blood. Likewise, when Jalila tells Tubba she is polluted by menstrual blood, and that her period lasts for eighty days but will stop as soon as she sees her jester perform a sword dance, one can interpret this to mean that she is polluted by unavenged blood and that her impurity will stop as soon

⁷¹ Lane, *Lexicon*, I, 1574; Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 77.

⁷² On the act of vengeance as a cure for the avenger, see Lammens, “Caractère religieux,” 93, 120–21.

⁷³ Compare Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 72. On drinking after the act of vengeance, see also Lammens, “Caractère religieux,” 86, n. 2, and 121. In the same vein, Zenobia, who has not shaved, washed or perfumed herself since she swore revenge, now purifies herself by using her enemy’s blood as a perfume: compare Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 174 n. 30.

⁷⁴ Mas’udi, *Muruj*, I, 95. For the reading “effeminate,” see *Les Prairies d’or*, ed. and trans. C. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille (Paris, 1864), III, 193; Monferrer-Sala, “Caída de Palmira,” 93.

⁷⁵ Von Braun, “Blood,” 188.

⁷⁶ Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 66–67, 175.

⁷⁷ “Men’s cleansing themselves of the pollution of unavenged blood is equated with women’s washing and perfuming themselves after menstruation,” *ibid.*, 173.

as Kulayb makes Tubba bleed.⁷⁸ When Zenobia preserves Jadhima's blood among her perfumes, it is suggested that after her self-imposed period of impurity as an avenger, during which she remained unshaven, unwashed, and unperfumed, Zenobia cleanses herself by using Jadhima's blood as a perfume.⁷⁹

The connection between menstrual blood and fertility was based on the fact that women are fertile as long as they have their menses.⁸⁰ Because the menses stop when the mother is pregnant and as long as she breastfeeds, ancient physicians reasoned that during pregnancy the menstrual blood is drunk by the infant in the womb, who feeds on it, and that after birth this blood is transformed into milk so the mother can continue to feed the newborn. Greek doctors compared the menstrual blood that feeds the infant to wine, and the womb to a wineskin filled with human blood.⁸¹ Among Jews and Middle Eastern Christians, a vessel filled with wine symbolized the womb,⁸² and such a vessel was carried in front of a bride to symbolize her future fertility.⁸³

The equation of wine with womb and motherhood is made twice in the story of Cyrus: at its beginning, just before his birth, and at its end, just after his death. Cyrus' story starts when he is in his mother's womb, with the dream that a vine grows out of her vagina. His story ends when Tomyris, a bereft mother, puts Cyrus' head in a wineskin filled with human blood. Here, according to the classicist Yurie Hong, Tomyris puts his head back into a symbolic womb.⁸⁴

By making Cyrus drink blood, Tomyris takes revenge for his bloodthirst. By making Cyrus quench his thirst from a wineskin, she takes revenge for the

fact that he has made her son drink his fill of wine.⁸⁵ By using a symbolic womb, an attribute of femininity and motherhood, she stresses the fact that as a woman she takes revenge for the murder of her son, a son whose innocence is made poignant by the fact that up to his fatal meeting with the Persians, he had only drunk milk.

In fact, it was not Cyrus who murdered her son: he killed himself. Cyrus did, however, cross a boundary and set in motion a chain of events that led to this son's death. Tomyris is an instrument of the heavens, which punish Cyrus for his intemperance, for the fact that he was not satisfied with what Fate had allotted to him, and for believing himself immortal. From this perspective, putting Cyrus' head back into a womb serves as a posthumous reminder that he is not a god but a man who, like all men, is born from a woman and who, like all men, is mortal.

Wine and Eros

Wine is not only a symbol of fertility, but also the drink of love, lust, and sex. The wine god Dionysus was accompanied by satyrs and nymphs who gave themselves unrestrainedly to both sex and drinking. Wine is the drink of love in the Song of Songs, and in Islamic mystical poetry drunkenness symbolizes the union with the Beloved, God. Throughout the Near East, from Greeks and Romans to Arab Muslims, wine was drunk in erotic settings: in the company of courtesans, of singing and dancing girls, and while reciting love poetry. Wine and Eros were compared because they had similar effects: inebriation and love caused ecstasy, but drunkenness and love also caused blindness.⁸⁶

When Tubba and Jalila meet, her servant girls sing and dance while Tubba drinks wine, and Jalila recites a poem for him with Bacchic content. Tubba is so elated by her performance and her beauty that he states that

⁷⁸ Note the irony when Jalila explains her impurity to Tubba: "By the life of your head, the bleeding will not be cured (*shafat*)!"

⁷⁹ On blood as symbolic perfume, see *ibid.*, 174 n. 30.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁸¹ Lesley Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford, 1994), 65, 215.

⁸² Drower, *Water into Wine*, 11, 68, 78, 183 n. 2, and 253.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 62. See also Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period: Fish, Bread, and Wine* (New York, 1956), VI, 157.

⁸⁴ Yurie Hong, "Cyrus, Tomyris, and the Nature of Maternal Revenge in Herodotus' 'Histories,'" unpublished 2009 conference paper, and "Reproductive Retribution: Cyrus' Death and a Mother's Revenge in the 'Histories,'" abstract for a paper presented at the 103rd Annual Meeting of the *Classical Association of the Middle West and South* (2007), <http://www.camws.org/meeting/2007/program/abstracts/03E4%20Hong.htm> (accessed Nov. 2015).

⁸⁵ On the relationship between wine and blood in this story, see further Immerwahr, *Form and Thought*, 161–67; Michèle Rosellini and Suzanne Saïd, "Usages de femmes et autres nomoi chez les 'sauvages' d'Hérodote: Essai de lecture structurale," *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa: Classe di Lettere e Filosofia* 8/3 (1978): 969; and François Hartog, *Le miroir d'Hérodote: Essai sur la représentation de l'autre* (Paris, 1980), 181.

⁸⁶ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, VI, 30–43; Suzanne Stetkevych, "Intoxication and Immortality: Wine and Associated Imagery in al-Ma'arri's Garden," in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. J. W. Wright Jr. and Everett K. Rowson (New York, 1997), 210–32.

she has “made him drunk without wine.”⁸⁷ Tubba appears unaware that this state of ecstasy also makes him lose his guard. In a similar vein, it is said of Judith and Holofernes that “her beauty took his mind prisoner” (Jdt. 16:9).

*Wine and Wedding: the Rite of the Canopy*⁸⁸

As the drink of love, sex, and fertility, wine plays an important role in Near Eastern wedding rituals.⁸⁹ In Jewish weddings, a blessing is spoken over a cup of wine, and this cup of wine is used in turn to bless the couple, who both drink from it. This ceremony takes place under a chuppah (or canopy) that symbolizes the bridal chamber in which the marriage is consummated. Both the drinking of wine by the couple and the canopy therefore symbolize intercourse.⁹⁰ In Christianity, the union of woman with man in a wedding is compared to the union of the believers with Christ when they partake in the commensal meal of the sacrament, and at the wedding ceremony the bride and groom drink the wine of communion.⁹¹

After the Jewish couple have drunk from the blessed cup of wine, the groom smashes it, thereby symbolizing the rupture of the bride's hymen: the spilt wine symbolizes the blood lost by the virgin.⁹² In the same vein, a sealed wineskin at a wedding symbolizes a virgin's sealed womb.⁹³ As part of the ceremony of Jewish weddings in the past and traditional Muslim weddings up to this day, after the couple have retired to the wedding chamber for some time, a bloodstained cloth is shown to the guests, as proof that the bride was a virgin and that the marriage has now been consummated. The bride preserves this virginity cloth as a kind of wedding contract.⁹⁴

In all four stories, weddings or the promise of intercourse play an important role. Cyrus and Zenobia send marriage proposals to Tomyris and Jadhima. In the midrash versions, Holofernes asks Judith to marry

him.⁹⁵ Jalila is discovered by Tubba's scouts on the eve of her wedding to Kulayb, and when summoned by Tubba she brings him a dowry and her wedding entertainers, and demands a marriage contract from the tyrant.⁹⁶ Judith ritually cleanses herself before her union with Holofernes, but because drinking from the same wine symbolizes actual consummation, she refrains from sharing his food and drink. The sumptuous canopy over Holofernes' bed, put up in the tent where they both drink wine, is not only a symbol of his power and decadence, but also a reference to the ritual wedding chuppah and thus another symbol of intercourse. It is this canopy that Judith brings back with her to Bethulia and later ritually dedicates at the Temple of Jerusalem. To the elders of Bethulia, who, according to the midrash versions, believed she would give up her chastity at the enemy camp and “prostitute herself to an unclean uncircumcised one,”⁹⁷ she presents the bloodied head of her suitor Holofernes and the purple canopy as some kind of inverted virginity cloth.⁹⁸ It is proof that she has remained chaste like a virgin bride, but this time it proves that it was not the bride but the groom who lost his blood: instead of the wedding, Judith's revenge has been consummated.

In traditional Muslim marriages, it is customary that, in preparation of her wedding night, a bride ritually cleanses herself by removing all her body hair. When Zenobia in a seductive gesture lifts up her skirt to Jadhima and reveals that her pubic hair has not been shaven but rather braided, and asks him the rhetorical question: “Do you think these are the preparations of a bride? This is a custom of men!” she in a single gesture reveals her true identity: she is in fact not a bride, but an avenger. Although a woman, she has taken upon herself a male task and sworn to take vengeance for her father, not shaving or having sex until her vow rather fulfilled.⁹⁹ Like the statement by Judith and Jalila that they are “polluted,” Zenobia's revelation that she has not removed her pubic hair works on two levels. Superficially, the heroines use menstruation or

⁸⁷ We 822, ff. 15a-b.

⁸⁸ In the Jewish betrothal blessing, the wedding is described as “the rite of the canopy.”

⁸⁹ Drower, *Water into Wine*, 61–79.

⁹⁰ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, VI, 146–62.

⁹¹ Drower, *Water into Wine*, 67–79.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 61–62.

⁹³ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, VI, 157.

⁹⁴ W. Heffening, “Urs,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition (Leiden, 1998), X, 905–906; *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, ed. Suad Joseph (Leiden, 2006), III, 466–68.

⁹⁵ Dubarle, *Judith*, II, 98.

⁹⁶ We 822, f. 14a.

⁹⁷ Dubarle, *Judith*, II, midrashim 5.3; 7.3; 8.3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, midrashim 3.13; 4.13; 5.13; 7.13.

⁹⁹ Compare the seven braids of Samson, whose head had never been touched by a razor as a token of his lifelong vow to God (Judges 16:13–19); or the disheveled hair of the Persian warrior queen Rhodogune, who had taken a vow not to dress her hair or bathe until she had subdued a rebellion against her (Polyaenus, *Stratagems*, 8.27).

unshaven pubic hair as an excuse to postpone having sex with their unwanted suitors. At the same time, by saying that they are polluted or showing that they are unshaven, they reveal themselves to a more perceptive public as avengers.¹⁰⁰

This episode in the meeting between Jadhima and Zenobia brings to mind the tales of the marriage between Solomon and Bilqis, the queen of Sheba, as they have been preserved in Rabbinic and Islamic sources.¹⁰¹ At their first meeting, Solomon tests Bilqis by making her walk over a glass floor under which fishes swim. The queen, who believes there is an actual pond, lifts up her skirt so it will not get wet, thereby revealing to Solomon that her legs are hairy.¹⁰² Solomon says he does not want to marry her in this state and introduces her to the art of body hair removal, which had been unknown in her country up to then (compare Tomyris and her people, who had never tasted wine until introduced to it by Cyrus).¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ On the comparison between the impurity of women who are menstruating and women whose pubic hair has not been depilated, see also Jacob Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba: Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam* (Chicago, 1993), 20, 152.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. On the comparison between Bilqis and Zenobia, see further Fabrizio A. Pennacchietti, "La reine de Saba, le pavé de cristal et le tronc flottant," *Arabica* 49 (2002): 8–9; Axel Havemann, "Die 'Königin von Saba' in der religiösen und kulturellen Tradition des Islam und des Christentums in Äthiopien," *Der Islam* 80 (2003): 132; Weingarten, "The Zenobia Romance"; Jamal J. Elias, "Prophecy, Power and Propriety: The Encounter of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 11 (2009): 66–67; and Powers, "Demonizing Zenobia," 165–68.

¹⁰² According to some sources, it was claimed that Bilqis had hairy legs because her mother was a jinn. Powers, who compares Bilqis with Zenobia and argues that Zenobia collected Jadhima's blood as a cure against demonic possession, deduces that Zenobia must have been possessed by a jinn, and that this was the reason she had braided pubic hair. Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 60, 199; Powers, "Demonizing Zenobia," 151–52.

¹⁰³ There are a number of links and parallels between the legends about Bilqis and the four stories dealt with in this paper. According to some sources, the very same Ḥassān al-Tubba' who was seduced by Jalila was the father of a certain Tadmur (i.e., "Palmyra") bt. Ḥassān b. Udhayna (according to Tabari, Zenobia is the great-great-granddaughter of Udhayna), see "Tadmur: Ibnat al-Tubba' Ḥassān al-Yamānī," in: Shawqī 'Abd al-Ḥakīm, *Mawsū'at al-fulklūr wa-l-asāṭir al-'arabiyya* (al-Qāhira, 1995), 144–45. According to other sources, this Hassan al-Tubba was the brother of Bilqis (Awad, *Usturat Urist*, 35). After the death of Bilqis' father, his throne was occupied by a usurper who used to sleep with a different woman every night. Bilqis sent him a marriage proposal, and, on their wedding night, got him drunk on wine, decapitated him, and mounted his head on the palace gate. Like Tomyris and

When Zenobia tells Jadhima that the reason she hasn't shaven is not that the inhabitants of her city have no knowledge of razors or barbers, she reminds him that the Palmyrans are not as primitive as the inhabitants of Sheba. In contrast to Bilqis, Zenobia is not to be subjected by her suitor. Her reference to barbers and knives is another revelation of her true intent: barbers, in their double role as surgeons, were the professionals who practiced the medical treatment of bloodletting. It will be these barbers with their knives who will cut Jadhima's veins and collect his blood "as medicine."¹⁰⁴ Instead of shaving the bride, they will kill the groom.

At the moment in the wedding of Tubba and Jalila when the guests would expect to be shown a cloth red with the blood lost by the bride, Kulayb shows them a cloth red with the blood lost by the groom, and hoists this blood-soaked cloth as a flag "red like Venus," the goddess of sex and femininity. Instead of proof that the bride has been deflowered, this flag is proof to the world that the groom has been killed and that Kulayb has fulfilled his vow and exacted his revenge.

Revenge by Women as an Inverted Wedding

All four tyrants expect a wedding but get revenge. Instead of the conventional gender roles where the groom penetrates the bride, here the bride penetrates the groom by stabbing his body with a blade.¹⁰⁵ The comparison between wine, blood, ritual sacrifice, and a wedding—where it is not the bride but the groom who loses his blood—is also a part of Christian

her people, Bilqis worshipped the sun as her only God (Qur'ān 27:24). As a queen, she was wise, beautiful, and chaste. Solomon, a king with transgressive sexual behavior who used to sleep with foreign and menstruating women, exchanged letters with Bilqis, as Cyrus did with Tomyris, in which the man is in favor of war, conquest and submission by force, while the woman advises against such actions. After this exchange, Bilqis travels to Solomon at the head of a caravan with Yemeni luxury goods. Lassner, *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba*, 50–51, 73–76, 151–52, 190, 208–10; Powers, "Demonizing Zenobia," 155.

¹⁰⁴ As stated above, Arabic *tashaffā* means both "to be cured" and "to quench one's thirst for revenge." Jadhima's blood is collected in a cup to be drunk both as a cure and to satisfy Zenobia's thirst for vengeance.

¹⁰⁵ On the reversal of traditional gender roles in these stories see: Gera, *Warrior Women*, 18–26; Duran, "Having Men for Dinner," 120; Powers, "Demonizing Zenobia," 176; Geoffrey D. Miller, "A Femme Fatale of Whom 'No One Spoke Ill': Judith's Moral Muddle and Her Personification of Yahweh," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (2014): 241–42.

imagery. Christ is not only the wine in the sacramental cup and the lamb slaughtered at the altar, but also a groom. The sacrifice of Christ at the cross is compared to a wedding between himself and the faithful, where the blood lost by Jesus provides a substitute for the virgin blood that should have been lost by the believer.¹⁰⁶ In this metaphoric wedding, Jesus is both the groom and the sacrificial victim that is served as food and drink to the wedding guests.

In her structuralist analysis of pre-Islamic Arabic poems on blood revenge, Suzanne Stetkevych argues that these poems present vengeance as an inverted meal: instead of a hunter killing an animal to feed and vitalize his living kin, the avenger kills a human being to de-vitalize the enemy's kin and feed the souls of his deceased kin:

The poetry of blood vengeance takes as its metaphorical matter images of blood and its tropical equivalents, especially wine, and operates extensively with imagery appropriate to the communal meal *or the symmetrical inversion thereof*.¹⁰⁷

In these four Near Eastern stories on blood revenge, the victim is also treated by the avenger as if he were food or drink: Cyrus' head is put into a wineskin, Holofernes' head is put into a food bag, Jadhima's blood is put into a wine cup, and Tubba's blood is actually drunk.¹⁰⁸ However, in these four stories about revenge by women, more important than the idea of revenge as an inverted meal is the idea of revenge by women as inverted childbirth or an inverted wedding.

When Tomyris takes revenge for the death of her son and pushes her suitor's head in a wineskin filled with human blood, the symbol of a womb, she makes her enemy undergo an inverted childbirth: instead of a mother pushing a baby out a womb, in order to be born, a mother pushes a grown man back into a womb in order to die.

When Judith shows the elders of her city her suitor's bloodied head and the purple canopy as proof of what happened that night in his bed, she shows them an inverted virginity cloth: like a normal virginity cloth, it is a token of her chastity, but instead of proof that the groom has made the bride bleed in their wedding

night, this token is proof that the bride has made the groom bleed. In the same vein, the Anglicist Susan Kim has argued that Judith's meeting with Holofernes in his tent, her return to her city with his head inside her food pouch, and eventually the moment she takes the head out to show it to her people, constitute a perverted conception that results in an equally perverted pregnancy and childbirth.¹⁰⁹

Like Holofernes, Zenobia's suitor also becomes the subject of an inverted wedding: instead of shaving the bride, her barbers use their razors to kill the groom. Just like a regular bride would preserve a piece of cloth with the blood she herself lost as proof that her marriage had been consummated, Zenobia preserves a piece of cloth with the blood lost by the groom as proof of her revenge.¹¹⁰ The inverted virginity cloth also appears in the story of Jalila, when Kulayb exits the bridal chamber and shows the wedding guests a rag stained not with the bride's but the groom's blood—not as proof that the wedding has been consummated, but as proof that he has exacted his revenge.

Note that the cruel inversions that take place in these four stories can be described by Lévi-Strauss' canonical formula for the structure of myths, as applied by E. Köngäs and P. Maranda to the structure of certain narratives: $F_x(a) : F_y(b) :: F_x(b) : F_a^{-1}(y)$. Here a stands for the villain, b for the hero, and x and y for their respective qualities. The fourth part of this formula tries to describe the transformations and inversions that can take place in the denouement of a story, such as the villain ending up dead as the passive object of an (inverted) characteristic of the hero.¹¹¹

When we use this formula to describe the stories of Tomyris and Judith, we get the following abstract: conventionally, men take revenge, and mothers give birth; when a mother takes revenge, the man ends up as the object of an inverted childbirth. In the same vein, the stories of Judith, Zenobia, and Jalila could be summed up as: conventionally, men take revenge,

¹⁰⁹ Kim, "Bloody Signs," 301–304.

¹¹⁰ Compare Bal'ami's Persian translation of Tabari's *History*, in which Zenobia preserves Jadhima's blood as ransom for the blood of her father: "Zebbâ se fit apporter les vases, y plongea un tissu de coton qui absorba tout le sang, le fit sécher et l'enferma dans une boîte qu'elle plaça dans son trésor, et dit: Voilà la rançon du sang de mon père." Bal'ami, *Chronique de Tabarî (Histoire des envoyés de Dieu et des rois) traduite sur la version persane*, trans. Hermann Zotenberg (Paris, 2002), 303.

¹¹¹ Elli Köngäs Maranda and Pierre Maranda, *Structural Models in Folklore and Transformational Essays* (The Hague, 1971).

¹⁰⁶ 2 Cor. 11:2. The believer is not sinless like a virgin bride, but Christ's sacrifice remakes him into an unblemished virgin.

¹⁰⁷ Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 73 (my italics).

¹⁰⁸ See also Duran, "Having Men for Dinner," 117–18. On food and drink metaphors in the *Book of Judith*, see Weststeijn, "Zenobia of Palmyra," 316–17.

and brides lose blood in their wedding night; when a bride takes revenge, the man ends up with blood lost in an inverted wedding.¹¹²

Conclusion

Despite the fact that they are found in different cultural traditions, the Greco-Roman stories about Tomyris, the *Book of Judith*, the Arabic Zenobia Legend, and the introductory episode to the *Story of al-Zir* are remarkably similar. Apparently, historians like Herodotus, and authors of biblical salvation history appreciated the same metaphors and narrative structures as Arab tellers of oral folktales.

The plots of these four stories contain three types of inversions: conquerors are conquered; liars are believed while truth tellers are ignored; and acts of aggression are disguised as their opposites, as gifts and offers of love and friendship. These inversions in the plot, combined with the notion that blood is not only a symbol of life but also of its opposite, death, pave the way for the most extreme inversion, the presentation of revenge by women as an inverted childbirth or wedding. Those details from the individual variants, that at first sight might seem bizarre, are all related to rituals or symbolism connected to weddings/births, to revenge, or both; and can be understood as such when interpreted against the background network of metaphorical relationships between wine, blood, women and revenge.

The notion that blood symbolizes both life and death, is both pure and impure, and that wine is drunk as a substitute for blood, allows for double entendre and a number of striking parallels and oppositions. Whereas the violently-spilled blood of a victim pollutes his relatives, the blood of his murderer purifies them. While drinking human blood would normally be a horribly impure act, drinking the blood of one's vengeance victim purifies the drinker: to quench her

burning thirst, Zenobia collects her suitor's blood in a wine cup, and in the *Story of al-Zir*, Kulayb drinks his enemy's blood straight from the wound. Both try to make sure that not a single drop falls on the ground, as the pollution of spilt blood would call for further vengeance.

Because menstrual blood is the source of fertility, the loss of menstrual blood pollutes women just as unavenged blood pollutes men. When Judith in the midrash versions of her story and Jalila in the *Story of al-Zir* tell their suitors they are impure, this can mean they are polluted by their menses (and therefore cannot consummate the marriage that night), but also that they are polluted by the unavenged blood of their relatives (and that they will that night consummate their vow of vengeance). No wonder that Jalila's miraculous eighty-day period ends the moment Kulayb performs his sword dance on her enemy. Just as women depilate and have sex only after their period is over, avengers only shave and have sex after they have taken revenge. When Zenobia shows her suitor that her pubic hair has been braided, this can simply mean she is not sufficiently prepared to have intercourse on the wedding night—but also that she has taken the vow of an avenger.

At weddings, wine is drunk as a symbol for love and intercourse, for the life-giving menstrual blood as well as for the blood lost by the bride when she is deflowered. That wine and blood were associated not only with birth, marriage, and femininity, but also with vengeance, provides the metaphorical framework in which revenge by women can be presented as an inverted childbirth or an inverted wedding. At such a wedding, it is not the bride but the groom who bleeds, and while the groom drinks wine, the bride and her people drink his blood.

The material remains from the encounter between the heroines and their suitors are either the results of inverted childbirths, such as the heads put by Tomyris and Judith in the wineskin and food pouch, or inverted virginity cloths, such as Holofernes' canopy, Zenobia's bloodsoaked piece of cotton, or Jalila's blood-red flag: proof that not the wedding but the vow of vengeance has been consummated.

¹¹² Alternatively, Judith's story could be summed up as: pagans murder and Jews eat kosher. When a Jew murders, the pagan ends up as kosher food. Compare Duran, "Having Men for Dinner," 120. On the *Book of Judith* and Lévi-Strauss' canonical formula see also Burkert, *Structure and History*, 75–76.