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USEFUL WOMEN:  
PLAY AND EXPLANATORY ESSAY

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## Abstract

*Useful Women* is a play that centers the voices of Michal, Abigail, and Bathsheba, women who are pivotal in the Davidic narrative of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Kings and then vanish into the textual background. In the play, each of these women have their own narrative arcs as the action of biblical text plays out offstage. Michal is a bitter woman after her last confrontation with David (2 Sam 6:20–23), but her story in *Useful Women* is about romance and found family. Abigail, in B. Megillah 14a, is named as one of the seven women who prophesied for Israel. Her prophecy is that David will become king, his enemies will be vanquished, and his house will be established (1 Sam 25:28–31). At the start of the play, her identity is tied to the success of David's household, and trust in her continued ability to steer him in a moral direction. Her story is a tragedy of disillusionment as she is forced to face the terrible actions of a man she believed in, and her own complicity when faced with the consequences of the king's choices. Bathsheba enters the narrative in 2 Sam 11 as the object of David's lust, his subsequent actions the impetus of the tragic latter half of the king's story. After she gives birth to Solomon in 2 Sam 12:24, she vanishes until 1 Kgs 1–2 when she acts to ensure Solomon's ascension to the throne. For Bathsheba, *Useful Women* is a coming-of-age story as she learns to take and wield power.

The essay portion of this capstone project provides an overview of the relevant portions of the Davidic narrative, followed by my research regarding Michal, Abigail, and Bathsheba as they have been understood in rabbinic texts and modern scholarship, and how different viewpoints are represented in *Useful Women*. The essay on Michal includes additional research on women in the ancient Israelite religion, as women's religious expression is a core part of Michal's character in the play and is raised in rabbinic texts. The essay on Abigail looks at the roles of women in secular life in ancient Israel and how she might have served in David's household and court. The essay on Bathsheba both looks at her textual treatment as well as the scholarship on the role of queen mother.

In "Other Creative Choices" I lay out other major creative choices I made, including the omission and inclusion of aspects of the Davidic narrative and certain characters therein, and moving other episodes to earlier points in the timeline. I also address questions of costumes, staging, and props.

"Play and Midrash: What's in a Genre?" addresses questions of why *Useful Women* is a play and the ways that this format adds meaningfully to the process of hearing women's voices that are silenced in the biblical text. It also discusses the ways in which this play might lay claim to the genre of modern midrash.

The conclusion situates *Useful Women* at this moment both on Broadway and in a broader secular context. It raises the questions that serve as subtext in the play itself: how do women take and use power in a flawed system and how can we support the most vulnerable in our society when the systems of power seek to consolidate that power into the hands of those who have little interest in engaging and enfranchising others.

## Acknowledgements

*Useful Women* was first conceived of as a creative final for Bible 529 and was informed by the rich conversations and insights of all those in the class. I am deeply grateful to all my classmates and especially to our esteemed professor, Dr. Christine Thomas, whose influence can be felt throughout this work.

Dr. Daniel Fisher-Livne, my thesis advisor, also has my deepest gratitude both for his encouragement and questions that pushed me to think more deeply about character development in the play itself, and in my research. I also appreciate his acting as a voice of reason and moderation as we thought through the scope and structure of this project.

My classmates, Rocki Schy-Brunson and Rachael Houser, were invaluable in bringing early drafts of this play to life, editing, and sharpening the dialogue. They have also been stalwart friends, thought partners, and study-buddies. I could not have done this work without them.

Thank you as well to my family, my parents for raising me in a household surrounded by books, instilling in me a joy in reading, writing, and telling stories, and showing me that metaphors can have many levels of meaning. To my mother and sister who supported me in myriad ways throughout rabbinical school (my brothers weren't so bad either). Finally and especially, I want to thank Stewart, who read every draft, put our boys to bed so I could get more work done, and has always been my biggest cheerleader. You are the best.

## Introduction

In the fall of 2022, I sat in on Bible 529, The Drama of King David taught by Dr. Christine Thomas. During the course, our focus was largely on the auxiliary characters in the David narratives that appear in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Kings, particularly the women that surround David and impact his story: Michal, Abigail, and Bathsheba. Most of David's wives are named only in the context of which of his children they birthed (e. g., 2 Sam 3:2–3), Michal, Abigail, and Bathsheba, however, appear at turning points in the story, times when David makes choices that reverberate through all that follows. The women then vanish once their narrative or ideological purpose is complete. Abigail appears to stop David, as God's chosen king, from spilling blood, and then is never heard from again. Michal disappears after it is made clear that David has superseded Saul and no child will be born that unifies their houses. Bathsheba disappears after Solomon's conception and reemerges only to solidify her son's claim to the throne. As readers, we see only fleeting glimpses of these three extraordinary women before David once again seizes the spotlight.

It was during this class that I was introduced to the concept that in retrospect feels obvious: the Bible was largely written by men and for men, and that much of scholarship on the Biblical texts was not neutral, but rather from the male perspective. In "The Pleasure of Her Text," Alice Bach puts it this way:

All this time scientific scholars have been telling it slant, reading from the male point of view. The typical reader response to female characters has held them in thrall to the dominant male figures, who are accepted as the keystone of each narrative unit. Female character is defined by male response. Often the perception of female characters as "flat" results from scholars' crushing

assumption that male authors have created male characters to do the bidding of their male god. A hermeneutical version of the old-boy network.<sup>1</sup>

Bach looks at Abigail not as merely a “flat” narrative tool in David’s story, but as the protagonist in her own narrative of 1 Sam 25. Looking at Abigail as protagonist, we see a strong woman who uses sexual codes of behavior in subversive ways, using her good sense to work within the constraints of her society to achieve her desired ends. When we view 1 Sam 25 as a narrative with Abigail as the protagonist rather than an axillary character in a larger story, we begin to view her as richer and deeper character by reading her characterization more closely, and we’re invited into her life in a very different way – with both curiosity and imagination. Bach pushes for more in how we engage the character of Abigail, calling on her readers to think of Abigail as something other than Naval’s or David’s wife, and instead imagine how she might relate to other women:

We know she is strong and decisive; might she be capable of sustaining friendships, perhaps with Michal and Bathsheba?... Might Abigail comfort Bathsheba on the death of her baby? Did Michal return as "primary wife"; or had that position been claimed by Ahinoam, mother of Amnon, David's eldest son? Was Abigail's gift of pronouncing the right words at the right time necessary to keep peace among the wives of the monarch?<sup>2</sup>

From these questions and the other readings in that course, *Useful Women* was born. My goal in creatively engaging with these characters was to follow Alice Bach’s model of realizing Biblical women fully as protagonists of their stories rather than as means to further David’s. I wanted to see the effects they would have on each other and how they

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Bach. “The Pleasure of Her Text” in *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical & Historical Texts*, edited by Alice Bach, (Trinity Press International, 1990). 41.

<sup>2</sup> Bach, “Pleasure,” 44.

would grow together, and I wanted to lift voices that were silenced in the Biblical narrative.<sup>3</sup>

I did not set out to write a play, but over the course of about 15 hours, the first (much shorter) version of what was then called *David's Women* spilled out of me, the characters of Michal, Abigail, and Bathsheba clear as if I could hear them whispering their lines into my ear. Likewise clear was that these characters would have opposing trajectories: Michal, the abandoned wife who came to hate where she once loved would slowly learn to love and trust again; Abigail, the wise woman who tells David he will be king would be forced to face the violent reality of David's quest for power. Aspects of Bathsheba's story are present in the Biblical text: in 2 Sam 11:1–12:25, she's a young married woman who loses both husband and child because of David's lust. Later, in 1 Kgs 1–2, we see her emerge to ensure her son's ascent to kingship, and once he is crowned acting as queen-mother to secure his throne, but no hint is given of how she transformed from victim to victor.<sup>4</sup> In my play, Michal's arc is a romance, Abigail's is a tragedy, while Bathsheba's is a coming-of-age story.

*Useful Women* as a play weaves together several threads of my rabbinical studies and personal interests, including my background in creative writing, portrayals of

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<sup>3</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, "Murder They Wrote: Ideology and the Manipulation of Female Presence in the Biblical Narrative," in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, edited by David J.A. Clines and Tamara C. Eskenazi, 176–98. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 119. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Bathsheba's story begins in 2 Sam 11:1– 2 Sam 12:25, a literary unit that stretches from David's first sight of Bathsheba through the birth of Solomon. In 1 Kgs 1:11–31 she returns to orchestrate Solomon's ascent to kingship. Bathsheba appears for the last time in 1 Kgs 2:13–25, in a scene that removes Adonijah, Solomon's competitor for the throne, fully securing her son's kingship.



women in biblical and rabbinic texts, and the midrashic impulse of both exegesis and eisegesis.<sup>5</sup>

Although David is the central character in the biblical narrative, he is never seen in the play. He is a force in the background, one his wives must live with and navigate around. David is figure who drives the plot in many ways, and yet the play is set in women's space, their narrative arcs forming in both reaction to and defiance of David's.

In the following pages, I provide an overview of the David narrative starting with why and how Saul lost divine favor, since it is referenced in *Useful Women*, and then proceeding with the points that inform the plot and dialogue of the play. I will then offer a deeper discussion on the Biblical characters of Michal, Abigail, and Bathsheba and how they are portrayed in *Useful Women*. Throughout those character profiles, I will discuss decisions and research that pertain to those characters, and will follow with other choices made in the play. The final sections will discuss the format and genre of *Useful Women* and to what extent we might consider the play "modern midrash," and finally I will contextualize this play in both theater and gender dynamics.

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<sup>5</sup> Naomi Mara Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), xxix. I use the term "midrashic impulse" to distinguish this work from traditional Midrash and more modern forms of Midrash.

## The David Narrative

The Davidic narrative in 1 and 2 Sam and 1 Kgs covers the length of David's life from the time he is selected by God to be the next king in 1 Sam 16 to David's death in 1 Kgs 2:10.<sup>6</sup> This narrative is foregrounded in the biblical text and serves as a backdrop for the action in *Useful Women*.

### ***Life and Death of Saul:***

David's story, and even more so Michal's story cannot be told without understanding Saul's rise and fall. Saul is chosen to be king of Israel three times, first by Samuel during a misadventure involving a lost donkey, then by lot, and finally after demonstrating his prowess in battle (1 Sam 9:3–10:24, 11:12–15 JPS). Yet he loses divine favor quickly when he offers sacrifices without Samuel (1 Sam 13:13–14), and when he fails to follow God's instructions, relayed by Samuel, to destroy completely the Amalekites, leaving both their king alive and taking the best of their animals to offer as sacrifices (1 Sam 15:1–23). Nevertheless, Saul continues to serve as king for several years until he falls in battle against the Philistines, either by suicide or, ironically, by an Amalekite warrior (1 Sam 31:1–10; 2 Sam 1:1–10).

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<sup>6</sup> 1 and 2 Sam and 1 Kgs served almost exclusively as the narrative source for *Useful Women*, though I made use of the genealogies in 1 Chr in two cases: I used of both names given for Abigail's son by David, given as Chileav in 2 Sam 3:2 and as Daniel in 1 Chr 3:1, with Dani serving as the nickname given to Abigail and David's deceased child. I also used Eshbaal for the name of Saul's son and Meriv-baal for Jonathan's son, since their names given in 1 and 2 Sam appear to be a derogatory epithets meaning "man of shame" and "from the mouth of shame," neither of which would be appropriate for Michal to use (1 Chr 8:33–34).

### ***David's Rise to Power***

David's rise to power begins while Saul is still king in Israel, making David's increasing popularity a threat to the declining king. In 1 Sam 16–18, David comes to Saul's attention as a musician who can sooth his madness. Young David then defeats Goliath, the Philistine champion, and begins to earn a reputation as a warrior. During this time, David and Jonathan, Saul's son and Michal's brother, develop a very close relationship.<sup>7</sup>

Driven mad by an evil spirit, Saul attempts to kill David with a spear (1 Sam 18:11). When that fails, he tries to entrap David and have him killed indirectly by sending him to fight the Philistines, with marriage to his eldest daughter Merav as incentive. Rather than giving Merav to David, he marries her to another and then offers Michal in marriage if David can bring back 100 Philistine foreskins as a bride price. David brings back twice what Saul had asked and Michal and David are wed (1 Sam 18:17–29). After his plan fails, Saul again tries to kill David with a spear, but David dodges the strike. Saul, then tries to capture David while he sleeps and have him killed. Michal learns of the plan and orchestrates David's escape, giving him time to get away by putting their *teraphim*, a type of ancestral figure, in their bed to disguise his absence (1 Sam 19:1–17).

David flees, but Jonathan continues to meet with and support David while Saul pursues him. However, David does not again meet with Michal. She is given by Saul to Palti or Paltiel son of Laish as a wife (1 Sam 25:43–44). The next several chapters cover the game

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the relationship between Jonathan and David, see Saul M. Olyan, "Surpassing the Love of Women," in *Authorizing Marriage? Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions*. ed Mark D. Jordan, Meghan T. Sweeney, and David M. Mellott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 7–16.

of cat-and-mouse between Saul and David, as David amasses an army. Twice during that time, David is provided with the opportunity to kill Saul, and instead very publicly demonstrates that he chose not to do so (1 Sam 24:5–16; 1 Sam 26:7–17).

### ***Abigail, Intelligent and Beautiful***

After protecting herds in the Carmel, David asks that his troops join in a household's celebratory feast and is rebuffed by Nabal, the householder. David is enraged and prepares his 400 men to attack the household and every person in it. Word gets back to Abigail, Nabal's intelligent and beautiful wife, who acts quickly to put together a feast and brings it to David and his men. Using her powers of persuasion, she cautions David against bloodshed while predicting that he will be king, his enemies will be destroyed, and his house will be established. Abigail then tells Nabal about her actions, and he dies ten days later. When David hears, he sends his men to collect her for him as his wife, a role she accepts with humility and alacrity. David has also married Ahinoam of Jezreel (1 Sam 25).

### ***Samuel's Death and the Necromancer of Endor***

After Samuel's death, Saul continues to fight the Philistines (1 Sam 25:1). Uncertain of his success, he seeks out a necromancer to raise the shade of Samuel but faces difficulty since he had banned the use of such magic and had its practitioners exiled and killed (1 Sam 28:3). Saul learns of a necromancer at Endor and approaches her in disguise (1 Sam 28:7–12). Despite her fear, she raises the shade, describing him as an old man wearing a

*me'il*, a robe (1 Sam 28:14).<sup>8</sup> Samuel's shade reiterates that God has forsaken Saul and predicts that the deaths of Saul and Jonathan will soon follow (1 Sam 28:19). There's a strong element of irony here – Saul bans the necromancers and soothsayers because they're an unsanctioned (but not ineffective) means of divination. Yet when Yahweh won't answer Saul, he turns to these forbidden practices. This is the third time that Saul acts in ritually unsanctioned ways despite his supposed religious zeal.

### ***The Deaths of Saul and Jonathan***

While David is engaged with rescuing his people from the Amalekites, Saul and Jonathan battle again against the Philistines. David allows 400 fighters to flee and takes their herds as spoil (1 Sam 30:1–20), an ironic mirror of Saul's earlier battle against the Amalekites, when he loses God's favor for allowing Agag to live and takes the best of their beasts to offer as sacrifices.

Jonathan and two of his brothers die in battle against the Philistines (1 Sam 31:2). Grievously injured and recognizing the coming loss, Saul either falls on his sword or asks a conveniently handy Amalekite to kill him (1 Sam 31:3–4; 2 Sam 1:3–10). Saul's body is then stolen by the Philistines and stolen back by the men of Jabesh-Gilead who bury him under a tamarisk tree and fast for seven days (1 Sam 31:8–13).

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<sup>8</sup> This *me'il* is the reason that Abigail wears the same in the play. She also references Saul's attacks on the mediums and soothsayers in act 3, scene 3.

When David hears the tale from the Amalekite warrior, he has the man killed and performs a song of mourning that reiterates his love for Jonathan, though he fasts only for the remainder of the day (2 Sam 1:11-27).<sup>9</sup>

### ***Civil War***

David is quickly crowned king of Judah in Hebron and commences his fight against Saul's remaining son Eshbaal, who becomes king in Israel (2 Sam 2:1-10). David's general, Joab, loses a brother in battle and holds Eshbaal's general, Abner, responsible (2 Sam 2:23). When Abner chooses to defect to David's side, David orders him to first bring back Michal, and sends the same message to Eshbaal. Eshbaal and Abner agree, much to the sadness of Michal's husband, Paltiel (2 Sam 3:13-16). It is immediately following this scene that *Useful Women* opens.

Despite David's assurance of peace between himself and Abner, Joab murders Abner in revenge for the death of his brother (2 Sam 3:21, 26-30). David offers an abbreviated lament and even more abbreviated fast (2 Sam 3:33-36).<sup>10</sup> Eshbaal is killed in his bed during a midday nap by two captains of his own war bands. They bring his head to David in

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<sup>9</sup> Lyrics from this ballad inspire Abigail's assertion in *Useful Women* act 1, scene 2 that David loved Jonathan. Michal interprets the Amalekite's presence as proof of David's hand in Saul's death, since so many escaped the battle. Although she doesn't explain in the show, she imagines that David could easily have instructed one of the escapees to kill the king for a handsome reward.

<sup>10</sup> The lament, which opens, "Should Abner have died the death of a churl?" provides fodder to Michal's argument in *Useful Women* act 1, scene 2 that David's opponents die quick and convenient deaths. Compare David's brief and very public fasts for Solomon, Jonathan, and Abner to the men of Jabesh-Gilead who fast for Saul for a full week.

Hebron, expecting a warm reception. Instead, David is appalled! He has his men kill the two, cut off their hands and feet, and hang them (2 Sam 4:1–3, 5–12).<sup>11</sup>

### ***David Becomes King of Israel and Brings the Ark to Jerusalem***

David is crowned king and then conquers the city of Jerusalem and establishes it as his capital (2 Sam 4:4, 5:1–12). To unite the secular and religious capitals of his kingdom, David attempts to bring the ark into the city, succeeding with much pageantry on his second attempt (2 Sam 6:1–11, 16–17).<sup>12</sup>

Michal watches the second attempt and goes out to confront him about his display of enthusiastic dancing. They argue publicly as much about David's behavior as his role as Saul's successor. The text then laconically declares that Michal will have no children (2 Sam 6:20–23). Although Michal serves to link David to the house of Saul and thus the throne, we here learn that no child will unite the houses and enable a smooth transition of power.

### ***Bathsheba***

The question of succession – and David's inversion of proper behavior – dominates much of the rest of the narrative and is central to Bathsheba's story. At the time of year when kings go out to fight, David instead remains in Jerusalem. After a nap, he goes for an evening stroll on his roof sees Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite,

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<sup>11</sup> These are the accomplices that Michal refers to act 1, scene 2. Michal sees David's performative grief as establishing plausible deniability.

<sup>12</sup> Note that Saul was cut out of the kingship for offering sacrifices without prophet or priest in 1 Sam 13. David does this during his processional, and he also established his own sons as priests (2 Sam 8:13).

two of David's Thirty, his elite warriors (2 Sam 23:34, 39). Despite her connections to two of his most trusted and loyal fighters, he takes her and lies with her, and all seems fine until she tells the king, "I'm pregnant." David then tries to engineer a scenario in which Uriah will sleep with Bathsheba but he fails in the face of Uriah's loyalty and honor, so he orders Joab to have him killed in battle instead, much as Saul attempted to do to David. Joab does as he's commanded. David marries Bathsheba and she bears him a son (2 Sam 11).

### ***Nathan's Prophecies***

After bringing the ark to Jerusalem, Nathan delivers a prophecy that promises David peace from his enemies, the establishment of his house and throne, a place for his people, and long life (2 Sam 7:10–16).<sup>13</sup>

Immediately following David's seduction of Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, however, Nathan delivers a parable, prophecy, and rebuke that modifies the original prophecy. In responding to the parable, David inadvertently curses himself four times over. While David won't be bodily punished, danger will come for him from within his own household, his house (line, descendants) will be subject to the sword, his wives will be taken by another who will publicly sleep with them, and the child born to Bathsheba will die (2 Sam 12:1–14).<sup>14</sup> David laments and repents when the child becomes ill but ceases when the child dies, much to the consternation of his household. He sleeps with Bathsheba again and she conceives Solomon (2 Sam 12:15–19, 24).

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<sup>13</sup> In verses 2 Sam 7:8, 11, 13–16 we can see parallels to Abigail's prophecy in 1 Sam 25:28–31.

<sup>14</sup> This parallels the action in *Useful Women*, act 3.



### ***Tamar's Rape***

Nathan's prophecy continues to play out when Amnon, David's eldest son, desires his half-sister Tamar. Pretending to be sick, he asks David to send her him so she might prepare and feed him cakes, and David does so. Amnon overpowers and rapes her. After, Amnon hates her and sends her away. Absalom takes in Tamar, and David hears of what Amnon did. Though the king is angry, neither David nor Absalom take immediate action against Amnon (2 Sam 13:1–22).

### ***Absalom***

Absalom then becomes the primary means of fulfillment of Nathan's prophecy. Two years after Amnon raped Tamar, Absalom invites all his brothers, the other princes, to a festival. He gets Amnon drunk, and has his men kill him. The other princes flee (2 Sam 13:23–29). Absalom runs to Geshur, where his grandfather is king. Again, David fails to punish one of his sons – this time for murder. After five years of distance, king summons Absalom and receives him with a kiss (2 Sam 14).<sup>15</sup> Four more years pass as Absalom builds support for his insurrection. He meets his supporters Hebron – where David was crowned – and has himself declared king (1 Sam 15:1–12).

Under threat, David flees Jerusalem with his household, leaving behind ten concubines to keep his house (1 Sam 15:16). Absalom enters Jerusalem, erects a tent on the roof of David's palace (note the location – this is where David first saw Bathsheba) and then

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<sup>15</sup> 2 Sam 13–14 parallel the action in *Useful Women*, act 4.

rapes the ten women that David left behind, literally and figuratively supplanting his father (2 Sam 16:20–22).

The war continues, and Absalom is killed by Joab (2 Sam 18:14). When David learns of his son's demise, he weeps for his lost child rather than celebrating his army's victory and is castigated by his general (2 Sam 19:1–8). David then rallies support and returns at long last to Jerusalem (2 Sam 20:2). He moves the women who had been abused by Absalom to a separate household (2 Sam 20:3).<sup>16</sup>

### ***The Remnants of Saul's Line***

Nearly all those of Saul's line who pose a potential threat to David conveniently die, a fact that Michal notes several times in *Useful Women*.<sup>17</sup> Some years after the war, and after three years of famine, God tells David that there is bloodguilt on the house of Saul for violence done to the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites demand the lives of seven of Saul's descendants, so David has the five sons of Merav, Michal's sister and Saul's daughter, hanged, as well as the two sons of Rizpah, Saul's concubine (2 Sam 21:1–9). Rizpah remains with the bodies of her sons for five months, driving off the birds and predators until David is shamed into burying them properly (2 Sam 21:10–14).<sup>18</sup>

The only exception to this trend is Jonathan's son and grandson, Meriv-baal and his son, Micah. As young men, David swore an oath to Jonathan to be faithful to his house (1

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<sup>16</sup> See *Useful Women*, act 5, scene 1–2.

<sup>17</sup> See *Useful Women*, act 1, scene 2; act 2, scene 2; act 3, scene 2; act 5, scene 1.

<sup>18</sup> This scene doesn't appear in its biblical narrative location in *Useful Women*. It's referenced in act 4, scene 4 and act 5, scene 1 because it was a better narrative fit.

Sam 20:15–16). Meriv-baal was injured as a child when his nurse fled after Saul's death and never fully healed (2 Sam 4:4). When David learns that the boy survived, he gives him all that had belonged to Jonathan, and David commands that the boy eat at his own table (2 Sam 9:1–13). When David flees Jerusalem, Meriv-baal remains behind (2 Sam 16:3). On David's return to Jerusalem, he approaches David and begs his mercy, appearing as one in mourning who did not cut his hair or clean his clothing. David grants mercy to Meriv-baal and allows him to live (2 Sam 19:25–31).<sup>19</sup> It's likely that the oath David swore to Jonathan is why he allowed Meriv-baal to survive, but the inclusion of the details of Meriv-baal's disability suggest that, just as those with disabilities were not allowed to hold priestly roles or offer sacrifices, so too would the disability keep Meriv-baal from being competition for David's throne (Lev 21:17–20).

### ***Solomon is Declared King***

As David nears the end of his life amid the turbulence Nathan prophesied, David's advisors decide that the king needs a *sōkhenet* (סֹכֶהֶנֶת), administrator, so they bring in Avishag the Shunammite, a beautiful young virgin, to be David's new administrator and wife and keep him warm. However, David doesn't sleep with her (1 Kgs 1:1–4).

Perhaps because of his father's weakness and loss of virility, Adonijah, son of Haggit and David's third born, amasses support and has himself declared king (1 Kgs 1:9–10). Nathan approaches Bathsheba, who then approaches David on Solomon's behalf, 'reminding' him of a promise that he had made that Solomon would be his successor (1 Kgs

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<sup>19</sup> See *Useful Women*, act 5, scene 1.

1:13–21). It's unclear whether such a promise was previously made, as it's not elsewhere mentioned in the biblical text. Nevertheless, with Avishag and Nathan as witnesses, David vows that Solomon will be king, and Solomon is crowned (1 Kgs 1:29–40).<sup>20</sup>

Solomon agrees to let Adonijah live pending his good behavior (1 Kgs 1:49–53). After David's death, Adonijah approaches Bathsheba and asks her to intercede on his behalf for Avishag, the wife of David. Bathsheba approaches Solomon, who treats her with tremendous respect (1 Kgs 2:19). Although Bathsheba approaches David earlier with clear persuasive skill, her words to Solomon are brief and stark – she makes no attempt to persuade or soften her son. Seeing the request from his half-brother for what it is – an attack on Solomon's claim to the throne much in the same vein as Absalom taking David's concubines, Solomon puts Adonijah to death, removing his sole remaining competitor (1 Kgs 2:20–25).

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<sup>20</sup> The play ends just before Solomon is crowned.

## Michal

Michal's arc in the biblical narrative is tragic, a story of love squandered that leads to bitterness and isolation. Saul originally offered Merav, Michal's older sister, to David but then Saul gives her to another. We read in 1 Sam 18:20–21:

Now Michal daughter of Saul had fallen in love with David; and when this was reported to Saul, he was pleased. Saul thought: 'I will give her to him, and she can serve as a snare for him, so that the Philistines may kill him.' So Saul said to David, 'You can become my son-in-law even now through the second one.'

Michal is the only named woman in Torah who is said to romantically love another, and yet she has barely entered the scene before she and her love are used as a tool to entrap David.<sup>21</sup> Her emotions, for Saul, are only a means to an end. Saul's plan backfires when Michal, learning of danger for David, comes up with a plan to save him from her father's men who have come for him. She tells David to climb out the window and once he's gone, she uses *teraphim* in the bed with some sheepskin on top to look like David's hair, fooling his pursuers and defying her father.

After David flees, Saul marries Michal off to Palti or Paltiel, son of Laish of Gallim, likely to cut off the claim that David would have to the throne through the king's daughter (1 Sam 25:44).<sup>22</sup> In 2 Samuel 3:13–16 we read of David's demand for her return and Palti's

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<sup>21</sup> Both Rachel and Yoheved are said to love their sons, and the unnamed female narrator of Song of Songs is said to love and desire her paramour, but only Michal is the only named woman who loves another romantically.

<sup>22</sup> Exum, *Murder*, 182.

tearful leave-taking.<sup>23</sup> Palti's tears in this scene serve as a point of contrast for both Michal and David, about whose feelings the text is silent. We don't hear how Michal felt to be summoned back, nor how David felt at the prospect of this reunion. We only have Palti's tears. It is immediately after this leave-taking and reunion that *Useful Women* begins, seeking to fill in what J. Cheryl Exum describes as a "highly significant textual silence that suggests a volatile subtext."<sup>24</sup>

Nothing else is said of Michal until 2 Sam 6:16–23, when Michal looks on David with scorn and castigates him for the untoward display of leaping and dancing he made in bringing the ark into the city. This is a loaded moment, with scholars offering myriad reasons for Michal's scorn beyond those given in the text, including David wearing nothing but an *ephod* and exposing himself,<sup>25</sup> the kingship itself, David superseding Saul,<sup>26</sup> and even a classist disdain for such religious displays.<sup>27</sup> The last suggestion I find particularly ungrounded. Although Saul was a king and came from a wealthy family, there is nothing to suggest that David's family was less well off. Certainly, David was a shepherd when he was first anointed by Samuel (1 Sam 16:11–13), but Saul first encountered Samuel while out looking for his father's lost donkeys and has only a quarter shekel of silver to offer to the

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<sup>23</sup> For historical and legal notes on this demand, see Zafira Ben-Barak, "The Legal Background to the Restoration of Michal to David," in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 119 (JSOT Press, 1991), 74–90.

<sup>24</sup> Exum, *Murder*, 183.

<sup>25</sup> Edith Deen, "King Saul's Daughter–David's First Wife," in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 119 (JSOT Press, 1991), 143.

<sup>26</sup> Exum, *Murder*, 184–186

<sup>27</sup> W.G. Blaikie, "Michal in the Books of Samuel," in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 119 (JSOT Press, 1991), 96.

seer, which he borrowed from his father's servant (1 Sam 9:7–8). As king, Saul is a warrior, as are his sons, and his reign marked by battles with the surrounding peoples, so although his children are raised in the king's house, it's difficult to imagine it being a house of luxury and ease. Whatever the reason for Michal's disdain, the result is the same: the text laconically declares in 2 Sam 6:23 that, "Michal had no children until the day of her death."<sup>28</sup>

There are any number of possible reasons for Michal's childlessness given the preceding argument. It could be that David refused to have intercourse with Michal, or that she was unable to bear children because God closed her womb.<sup>29</sup> For J. Cheryl Exum, denying Michal children is a symbolic way of killing Michal, denying her offspring and continuity.<sup>30</sup> Yet these arguments all place power in the hands of others – David, God, or the narrator, and reflect an understanding of the ancient world in which women have very little control over their own bodies within the confines of marriage.<sup>31</sup> In *Useful Women*, I give Michal control. Michal's confrontation with David was, at least in part, is contrived to ensure that David would not touch her. She could not refuse David directly, so she engineered a way to ensure he would refuse her. She simultaneously pushes the boundaries

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<sup>28</sup> There is one additional verse that mentions Michal, 2 Sam 21:8, in the context of David arranging the death of Saul's other descendants, which reads, "the five sons of Michal, daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel..." Merav is married to Adriel in 1 Sam 18:19, and the Septuagint and Targum both read Merav. Michal is also mentioned in 1 Chr 15:29, a very truncated version of David's triumphant return with the ark which omits Michal's confrontation with David.

<sup>29</sup> Bar-Efrat, Shimon, revised by Marc Zvi Brettler. *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd Edition, ed., Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 616.

<sup>30</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, "The fate of the house of Saul," in *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty*, (Cambridge University Press, 1994) 90. I mention above the theological issues that a child from Saul's line cannot sit on the throne. This is not the end of Saul's line since Merav, Michal's sister, and Rizpah, Saul's concubine, also have children, and Jonathan has a surviving son.

<sup>31</sup> This is true of the modern world as well. Marital rape didn't become illegal in all 50 states until 1993.

she can – women are not confined to the house, allowing her to orchestrate a public confrontation – in order to move the boundaries that she cannot directly affect.<sup>32</sup> Note also that Michal's leaving the house pushes back not only David's public display of piety and power, but within the context of *Useful Women*, it also pushes back on the limits David is placing on women's cultic rules. He has tried to ensure that women are not seen or heard, but Michal's actions act as protest and rebuke.<sup>33</sup>

Michal's earlier use of *teraphim*, a cultic figure of some sort, in conjunction with her confrontation with David after the ark is brought to Jerusalem, have been used to paint a negative characterization of Michal's religious beliefs. In Edith Deen's 1955 character sketch, Michal is described as not believing "in David's God..." nor "understanding David's zeal" when he restores the ark to Jerusalem.<sup>34</sup> David J. A. Clines points out that such a characterization of Michal is unjustified, given that the *teraphim* were found not in Michal's house or bedroom, but in David's – in the house they shared.<sup>35</sup> Any guilt attributed to Michal must likewise be attributed to David.

Condemnation of either David or Michal for the possession of *teraphim* was unwarranted given the diverse religious practices of pre-exilic Israel, a diversity demonstrated in the biblical text itself. In Judges 17–18, for example, we read of a

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<sup>32</sup> In treating Michal's character in this way, I am creating a cause-and-effect relationship that is implied rather than stated in the Biblical narrative. However, for theological reasons Michal and David could not have produced a child who would be in line for the throne based on 1 Sam 13:14 which says that Saul's kingdom will not continue.

<sup>33</sup> This argument is discussed in greater depth in "Other Choices."

<sup>34</sup> Deen, 144

<sup>35</sup> David J. A. Clines, "Michal Observed: An Introduction to Reading her Story," in in *Telling Queen Michal's Story: An Experiment in Comparative Interpretation*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, 119 (JSOT Press, 1991), 43–44.



Ephramite named Micah and his mother who established a household shrine to Yahweh, the Israelite deity, including creating a cultic figure of the deity and the necessary ritual objects including an *ephod* and *teraphim*. Scholars disagree on what precisely these objects are – an *ephod* might be a part of the priestly vestment, or an object for divination attached to that garment. *Teraphim* were most likely some kind of ancestor figurines perhaps used in necromantic rituals. It's even possible to read the text as the *teraphim* wearing the *ephod*.<sup>36</sup>

Judges 17–18 is polemical text, rich in satire, that takes aim at the Northern Kingdom's shrine at Dan, which was established with the cultic figurine objects stolen from Micah's shrine, as well as the shrine's Mushite-Levitical priesthood, since the founding priest abandoned his station within Micah's shrine. Although this text takes place in the days of the Judges, before the kingdoms were established, the text was likely written several centuries later, after the Assyrian deportations in 734/732 BCE or 722/721 BCE since they are referenced in Judges 18:30, but early enough that the memory of the shrine at Dan still looms large enough that there was a need to discredit its practice. Susan Ackerman therefore dates this text the eighth or late seventh century BCE. Biblical polemics exist to argue against something in Israelite society and religious practice – there's no cause to satirize something that doesn't exist. When we read this text as arguing against aspects of popular religious practice, we can draw several conclusions: there was a stream (or several) of Israelite practice that was not aniconic – people made figures of the deity. We also see that there was an accepted practice of having household shrines, including ritual objects like the *ephod* and *teraphim* that persisted beyond the Assyrian conquests, a claim supported by

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<sup>36</sup> Susan Ackerman, *Women and the Religion of Ancient Israel*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 37.

the archeological record.<sup>37</sup> Although *teraphim* are largely written out of common practice in the biblical text, there is ample evidence to show that they were an accepted part of religious practice at various points in pre-exilic Israel.

I draw on Michal's use of *teraphim* in *Useful Women*, where Michal is an advocate for women in public ceremonial and cultic roles, as well as private household worship. David's procession with the ark into Jerusalem represents the androcentric shift in the Yahweh cult, while Michal fights to maintain the historic roles of women in cultic worship.<sup>38</sup>

Support for Michal's position can be found in textual traces in the Bible, and in the archeological record. In the Tanakh, there are several examples of women leading victory and celebratory dances, including Miriam's song in Exodus 15:1–18, 20–21, Deborah in Judges 5,<sup>39</sup> and Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11:34. Likewise we see women as dancers and musicians in religious settings: Judges 21:19–21 speaks of the women who dance at the yearly festival of the Lord at Shiloh, most likely as part of the Festival of the Ingathering/Sukkot, and Psalm 68:25–26 reads:

People see your processions, O God,

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<sup>37</sup> Ackerman, *Ancient Israel*, 40–42.

<sup>38</sup> Cult here referring to the worship of an ancient deity, not a closed and secretive fringe religious group as the term is used today.

<sup>39</sup> Ackerman, *Women and the Religion*, 249–251. Although Barak is named in cosigning the song in Judges 5:1–31, Deborah is named first and the verb “to sing” is rendered in the third person feminine singular, suggesting that only she was named in an earlier version of the text. Likewise, Frank M. Cross and David Freedman. “The Song of Miriam.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14, no. 4 (1955): 237–50, argue that the song in Exodus 15:1–18, which is attributed to Moses in the Masoretic Text, was originally attributed to Miriam, as 15:1 and the song line attributed to Miriam in 15:21 are nearly identical, although the song cuts off immediately after the verse which should have launched Miriam's longer song. Cross and Freedman suggest the text was altered to give credit for the song to Moses, the more famous [male] character, as it's far more plausible that a text would be altered to point to the more famous figure, it's much less likely it would be altered to add in a minor female character.

the procession of my God, my monarch,  
 into the sanctuary,  
 First come the singers, then the musicians,  
 amidst maidens playing hand-drums.<sup>40</sup>

We see in these verses that young women took part in a festive ritual procession enshrining the deity in the sanctuary. We should not assume that all musical performers or singers were women, but they were explicitly part of the cultic ritual.

Excavations from household remains from 12<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE Khirbet Radana and Tel Masos from the same period, 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE Meggido and 10<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century Tel el-Far'ah North, and then the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE towns of Lehav/Tell Halif and Beersheba in Judea (among others) all support the existence of shrine rooms, corners, and courtyards in Israelite households based on structural and material findings, which included female figures in several cities.<sup>41</sup>

If Michal and David had some sort of household shrine, or if Michal herself had one, it's possible that it was dedicated to either both Yahweh and his consort, or perhaps even the consort alone. Jeremiah calls this female deity the "Queen of Heaven," when he condemns those living "in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem" pre-exile, as well as those who fled the Babylonian conquest to Egypt, for baking cakes, pouring out libations, and lighting incense for her (Jer 7:16–20, 44:17). His polemic against such worship again

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<sup>40</sup> For a much fuller picture of women as dancers and musicians, see "'When the Young Women of Shiloh Come out to Dance in the Dances': Women Ritual Musicians in Ancient Israel" in *Women and the Religion of Ancient Israel*, 231–251.

<sup>41</sup> Ackerman, *Women and the Religion*, 65–76. Ackerman offers several examples taken from various excavations, as well as useful diagrams. Cities with female figures included Beersheba (Houses 25, 76, and 430 discussed in detail), Tel el-Far'ah North (House 440), Tel Masos (House 314), and Lehav/Tell Halif.

makes clear how pervasive it was in the common religious practice before the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

In *Useful Women*, Michal serves the goddess Asherah, consort to Yahweh, drawing on 1 Kings 15:13 when Ma'acah, queen-mother of King Asa (r. 911–870 BCE) who was said to have established an Asherah image. Later, in 1 Kgs 16:33 Jezebel, wife of Ahab, worships Asherah. Hezekiah removes an image of Asherah from the Temple compound (2 Kgs 18:4), and Manasseh puts in another in 2 Kgs 21:7 which likely stood until Josiah's purge in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>42</sup> Josiah didn't only remove the Asherah though. In 2 Kgs 23:7 we read: "He broke the houses of the consecrated workers in the House of God at the place where women wove coverings for Asherah." This line suggests that not only was there worship of Asherah at the Jerusalem temple, but also that for some amount of time women lived and worked within the temple precinct and their function there was to serve the goddess Asherah.

While the worship of Asherah is condemned in the biblical text, it's clear that there were several points when the royal cult believed that Asherah should be worshipped alongside Yahweh. Archeological evidence has uncovered terracotta statues of female goddess figures in excavations of Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter, as well as in the Levitical city of Ta'anach that date from the 10<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, which suggests the worship of Asherah alongside Yahweh was an accepted practice for centuries among the common

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<sup>42</sup> Jezebel, in the Biblical text is a granddaughter of Maacah, who in turn was the granddaughter of David's wife of the same name. For more on household worship and shrines, see Ackerman, *Women and the Religion of Ancient Israel*, See also Aaron Greener, "What Are Clay Female Figurines Doing in Judah during the Biblical Period?" TheTorah.com (2016). <https://thetorah.com/article/what-are-clay-female-figurines-doing-in-judah-during-the-biblical-period>.

I also considered the Queen of Heaven, the female goddess named in Jerimiah 44:18.

people as well.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, *Useful Women* presents Asherah worship as normative despite its condemnation in the biblical text.

In the play, David is actively seeking to curtail the cultic roles of women, while Michal's cultic service at Shiloh were meaningful and formative. David, by bringing the ark to Jerusalem and excluding the service of women, delivers a personal and painful blow, as he takes further steps in consolidating his power across the board.<sup>44</sup> David's role in curtailing women's roles is largely creative license. Historically, the displacement of women was part of the larger and longer process of urbanization and centralizing power into the hands of male elites. I would argue however that the displacement of women is nevertheless present in the Davidic narrative. I discussed above the role of women in celebratory dances. Psalm 68:24–25 describes women as part of the musical processional of God into the temple, yet there is no mention of women in 2 Sam 6:12–15, the verses that describe the processional accompanying the ark into Jerusalem. Women are said to be among those receiving food, and Michal does mention women being present but only as spectators (2 Sam 6:19–20).

David's lament for Jonathan and Saul is another example of this displacement. In 2 Sam 1:24, David calls on the "daughters of Israel" to weep over Saul in David's verses of lamentation. Compare this to Jer 9:16–19 which calls for the "dirge-singers" and "skilled women" (Hebrew in both cases is feminine) and asks that they "quickly start wailing for us,

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<sup>43</sup> Phillip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 348–352.

<sup>44</sup> This is another moment in the play where I chose to ignore the Biblical text of 1 Sam 6:1–2 where the ark is moved to Kiriath-Jearim in Gibeah for 20 years, and the parts of 2 Sam 6 that involve David removing the ark from Kiriath-Jearim because Shiloh is where Samuel was born and raised and it would be the more recognizable and pronounceable for audience and actors.

that our eyes may run with tears...” and then the prophet calls the women to “teach your daughters wailing and one another lamentation.” Susan Ackerman argues from that from Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and parallels drawn from across the ancient Near East, that women had some level of official, perhaps even professional role in mourning rituals in pre-exilic times.<sup>45</sup> Although the role was not exclusive to women, in the Davidic narrative only David delivers laments. Moreover, although Ackerman points to David’s words as a proof-text for women’s role in mourning, it only works as such if we conflate the performance of dirges and musical lamentation (as seen in Jeremiah) with the act of weeping. Weeping requires no skill, and the verb David uses, *bekhnah*, is used both for joyous and tragic occasions.<sup>46</sup> Lamentation, *nahi*, is used often in conjunction with a dirge or elegy, *kinah*, in both Jeremiah and Ezekiel in ways that suggest both skill and musical connotations.<sup>47</sup> David only asks for weeping, excluding them from more formal roles.<sup>48</sup>

In *Useful Women*, Michal blames David for the curtailing of women’s roles, but in act 2, scene 2, Abigail points out that it is Saul who had the mediums and soothsayers exiled and killed. This is drawn directly from 1 Sam 28:3–9, when, after Samuel’s death, Saul searches out a woman who can raise Samuel’s shade, despite Saul’s own decree forbidding such actions. The woman fears for her life when Saul approaches her in disguise, suggesting

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<sup>45</sup> Ackerman, 242–246.

<sup>46</sup> Abraham mourning Sarah’s death in Genesis 32:2, compared to Joseph’s joyful reunion with his brothers in Genesis 45:14.

<sup>47</sup> Jer 9:9, 9:19, Ezek 8:14

<sup>48</sup> Jeremiah speaks in the late 7<sup>th</sup> – early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, and Ezekiel in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, all well after the David narrative takes place. Judg 5; 11:34; Ps 68:12–13, 25–26, and others provide strong evidence of women as singers and musicians in earlier periods.

that his decree against this form of divination was enforced with violence. Michal sees a distinction between “sanctioned” worship of Yahweh and his consort and women practicing other forms of divination, but Abigail sees David’s actions as an outgrowth of Saul’s work, continuing to narrow the bounds of what is “right.” The debate remains unresolved since Abigail decides to pick her battles, but as the writer, I see her as winning the argument, David’s work part of a larger trajectory of forming an androcentric cult.

Michal’s scorn for David comes from many sources, but the root of each is emotional pain. Michal loved David in their youth, and in his vigorous dancing as he escorted the ark into the city, he has allowed all the women in attendance to see his body, something that she once treasured. In her eyes, he diminishes them both because she valued him, his love and his sexuality, and he is giving himself away for free to anyone who chooses to look. Moreover, this is the first and only time she has had an outlet to voice her pain at his abandonment after she rescued him from her father. David was in contact with Jonathan several times after David fled, but he takes no actions regarding Michal until it becomes politically expedient to have her back to justify his claim to her brother’s throne.<sup>49</sup> His abandonment, and his response to Michal in the biblical text, are proof for Michal that, like her father, the husband she loved only saw her and valued her for the ways he could use her. In the years since Michal loved and married David, David has risen to power at the expense of her father and brothers. Where Michal had once sided with David, she now believes that David did not deserve her devotion because his rise has come time and again at the expense of her happiness and her family. She sees David loved by Yahweh even when, as in the

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<sup>49</sup> Exum, *Tragedy*, 87–88.

procession, David commits the same actions for which her father was cut off and the injustice is painful. In bringing the ark to Jerusalem, David is also marking a full end to her father's regime and Shiloh as the cultic center, both personal losses for Michal.

Although I have dismissed the classist argument as a source for Michal's words, I would argue that David and Michal have different conceptions of appropriate behavior for a king. David is exuberant and even an exhibitionist in bringing the ark into Jerusalem, but elsewhere in the text he is also impulsive (his conduct with Bathsheba for instance), self-centered (his mourning over Absalom), even passive (failing to punish Amnon). Michal criticizes David for behavior unbecoming of a king, and that criticism is one she makes time and again in *Useful Women* (2 Sam 6:20).

My task as a playwright was not only to communicate these emotional layers, but to give Michal an emotional arc that holds both pain and believable growth. On top of these pieces, I also wanted give Michal a level of freedom and agency in her religious life. In the Talmud (b. Eruvin 96a) this freedom and agency is conveyed when Michal is named as one of the women who wear tefillin.<sup>50</sup> Rather than looking at rabbinic Judaism, I chose to weave in aspects of the ancient Israelite religion and was challenged to do so without bogging down the play with too much explanation of history or metanarrative. This has been one of the major ways in which I expanded the play beyond its original form, and likewise one of the elements that was first on the chopping block when elements felt too slow or unclear.

When I was able to keep religious elements, it was because they held an emotional resonance for Michal and became a source of energy in a scene. Using Abigail as an

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<sup>50</sup> Hecht, *Avigail and Michal*, 43.



emotional foil for Michal was a helpful barometer in figuring out what served the plot and character development, and what was too academic.

Abigail's devotion to David and her different relationship to the deity allowed me to convey opposing understandings of David's character and actions, and that conflict persists even as the two characters come to understand each other better as individuals and eventually become allies in their support for Bathsheba. Abigail largely does not comment on the worship of Asherah itself. This is purposeful, as a way to avoid being seen as speaking for God in ways that do not have textual support.

When Michal confronts David off-stage in the play, she does so knowing that the consequence will be that David will cease to treat her as a wife and will not father children with her. Yet her actions have the additional unintended consequence of limiting her power. In the context of the biblical narrative, David has the power, and women can only access the power granted to them by David. If Michal desires to make change, she can only do so by proxy through Abigail or Bathsheba. None of the women desire power for their own sake, and yet they each have an agenda. Michal has to learn to balance her agenda against her fear of becoming like David and trying to use another woman for her own political expediency.

The confrontation also denies Michal any possibility of biological offspring. Michal is terrified of that kind of love and connection. She has lost everyone she cared for, including David himself. In caring for and being cared for by Abigail and Bathsheba, Michal finds a second family.

## Abigail

In David's interactions with Abigail in the biblical text, David's impulsiveness and temper come up against Abigail's determination, wit, and powers of persuasion (1 Sam 25). Abigail is introduced in contrast to her husband: "The man's name was Naval and his wife's name was Abigail. The woman was intelligent and beautiful, but the man, a Calebite, was harsh and an evildoer" (1 Sam 25:3).<sup>51</sup> His name, Naval, means fool, though he is not a stupid man though – his refusal of David's request for his men to join the feast is filled with Hebrew word play on the names of David's ancestors Obed and Peretz. Yet Naval fails to consider the consequences that his refusal would have for him and his household (1 Sam 25:10).

When Abigail learns of the danger that Naval has brought on their household, she acts quickly and doesn't bother to ask permission of her husband. Her actions are characterized by rapid verb sequences in the Hebrew text: she saw David, she hurried, she dismounted her donkey, she fell on her face to pay him obeisance, and then she speaks, delivering the longest piece of dialogue of any woman in scripture (1 Sam 25:23–24). She begs David's forgiveness, deftly accepting responsibility while also making it clear that her husband is at fault and distancing herself from him. She aligns her work of peacekeeping with God's plans for David and declares a three-fold prophecy that God will establish a "trustworthy house" for David, will hurl away David's enemies, and will make David the

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<sup>51</sup> Abigail's narrative is largely contained in 1 Sam 25 but she is also mentioned in 1 Sam 27:3, 30:5; 2 Sam 2:2, 3:2; 1 Chr 3:1.

leader (*nagid*) over Israel (1 Sam 25:28–31). As Tikva Frymer-Kensky points out, Abigail must convince David that, “fighting the wars of YHWH means that David must not commit any evil. David must not kill Naval and his innocent household. Spilling blood would be a stumbling block, and Abigail convinces David to *save himself* from this error.”<sup>52</sup> Abigail shrewdly convinces David that his forbearance is not for her sake, but for his own so that he is able to continue to receive Divine favor.

Naval dies shortly after learning what Abigail has done, and with his death, at least part of Abigail’s prophecy has already come to pass: an enemy of David defeated. In marrying Abigail, Frymer-Kensky points out:

David now has a proven prophet in his house. In another world this wise woman could have become his trusted adviser and perhaps his official seer. But Abigail, having appeared to predict David’s destiny and ensure it, disappears into his household and is not heard of again.<sup>53</sup>

The Biblical text establishes Abigail as a woman with good sense and a decisive mind, an active woman who runs her husband’s household with self-assurance. She acts as a check on David’s impulsiveness and is heavily rewarded for it by becoming one of his wives. She’s persuasive, but even when she gives the appearance of submission, it is only the appearance. She works within the systems and power structures in which she lives to ensure the outcome she desires and does not shy from playing the handmaid to do so. If Michal is rigid, unwilling to play games of power, Abigail will use every tool in her arsenal to achieve her ends. We get this incredible character in Abigail, and yet, after she marries

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<sup>52</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (Schocken, 2002), 321.

<sup>53</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 323.

David she only appears again in the lists of David's wives and children. She vanishes into the household of the king.

In *Useful Women*, I imagine that alternate world that Frymer-Kensky points to, where Abigail becomes an advisor and administrator to David. In joining his household, she attempts to act as a continued check on his impulsive actions while managing David's household as she had managed Naval's.

On the surface, her stewardship of the royal household and the service she provides to David might seem far-fetched, yet the same role, that of David's *sōkhenet* (סֹכְהֶנֶת), administrator, is given explicitly to Avishag later in the Biblical narrative (1 Kgs 1:3–4).<sup>54</sup> Although this is the only place the feminine version of the term is used in the Biblical text, the masculine form appears in Isaiah 22:15: "Thus said my Sovereign GOD of Hosts: Go in to see that steward [סֹכֵן], that Shebna, in charge of the palace." Avishag serves as both a wife and administrator, acting as a key witness for David's oath to make Solomon king. Since Avishag is only summoned at the end of David's life, *Useful Women* imagines that Abigail previously served the same function, and Avishag is only brought in when Abigail is no longer able to serve.

However, Avishag's role does not come with the power that Abigail wielded; her role is more administrative for David, she is not a leader in the household. Throughout *Useful Women*, Abigail wears a blue robe, a *me'il*, an outer robe worn by the elite and royalty.<sup>55</sup> Samuel is described as wearing a *me'il* (1 Sam 2:19, 28:14), and Abigail's story begins right

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<sup>54</sup> Daniel Bodi, "Avishag: King David's Sokhenet" TheTorah.com (2023). <https://thetorah.com/article/Avishag-king-davids-sokhenet>

<sup>55</sup> King and Stager, 269–271

after Samuel's death is reported in 1 Sam 25:1. The blue *me'il* becomes both a visual link to Samuel and a subtle nod to Abigail as a prophetess, as well as a means of conveying Abigail's relative power and status in David's house. Abigail also extends hospitality to both Michal and Bathsheba, acting as hostess and senior wife, neither role would make sense for Avishag coming so late to the narrative.<sup>56</sup> When Abigail knows that her death is coming, she gives the robe to her chosen successor, Bathsheba.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky imagines Abigail as a live-in prophetess and wise woman to the king, though we never see her in that role in the biblical text.<sup>57</sup> In *Useful Women*, Abigail is both prophetess and wise woman, though she has only one prophecy and it does not serve David. Abigail's limited use of prophecy serves both a dramatic and textual purpose. A too liberal use of prophecy would dilute the power of the scene in which Abigail does deliver a prophecy to Bathsheba in act 3, scene 4. Textually, Abigail is not one of the four women who are explicitly named as a prophetess in the Biblical text.<sup>58</sup> That title is granted to her later by rabbinic tradition (B. Megillah 14a), despite her prophecy preceding and paralleling that of Nathan.<sup>59</sup> Instead, Abigail's role as prophetess is an open question for much of the play, her insightful words often foreshadowing what is to come but stopping

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<sup>56</sup> The hospitality Abigail extends is drawn from Gen 18 and the hospitality that Abraham extends to his guests. The biblical text is ambiguous on whether Abigail is David's second wife or third. She is introduced before Ahinoam in 1 Sam 25, but she is named after Ahinoam in the narrative at 1 Sam 27:3, 30:5, 2 Sam 2:2, in the listings of David's wives and children in 2 Sam 3:2, and 1 Chr 3:1. In the play, Ahinoam is named as second, but Abigail has the role of senior wife based on skill and authority rather than marriage order or children, and she maintains the role despite Michal's return and Amnon's birth to Ahinoam.

<sup>57</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 323.

<sup>58</sup> Those are Miriam (Exod 15:20), Deborah (Judg 4:4), Hulda (2 Kgs 22:14–20, 2 Chr 34:22–28), and Noadiah (Neh 6:14). I follow Susan Ackerman in not counting Isaiah's unnamed wife in this list, since she is never seen to have fulfilled a typical prophetic role of speaking for the deity, *Women and the Religion*, 253–4.

<sup>59</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 322.

short of explicit prophecy, while her empathy for those around her, especially David, keeps her from seeing the darker truths of his character.

In my interpretation, Abigail has acted in good faith to prevent bloodshed and protect her people. Her portrayal in rabbinic literature is less generous – her intelligence and beauty read as both virtues and moral threats. For instance, regarding Abigail's parting words to David, "And when GOD has made my lord prosper, remember your maid." (1 Sam 25:31), in B. Megillah 14b Rav Nachman says, "...There are those who say 'as a duck bends down as it goes, but its eyes observe,'" which Rashi interprets as, "while she is speaking with him about her husband, she is reminding him about herself, that if he [Naval] dies, he [David] should marry her."<sup>60</sup> In this interpretation, a scheming Abigail is keeping her eye out for her next husband even while her husband yet lives.

In *Useful Women*, Ahinoam gives voice to Rav Nachman and Rashi's interpretations of Abigail's character in act 3, scene 1. Voicing the more negative interpretation of Abigail's actions serves both as a tie linking *Useful Women* to its interpretive heritage as well as an invitation to those who would stage or watch the play to think critically as they encounter these characters.

Abigail's story is a tragedy of disillusionment. She begins the play secure in her identity as the prophet who announced David's reign and who later married the king, tying her fortunes and future to his. Abigail is one of David's greatest supporters and advocates, while not being wholly unaware of his faults. She has faith in David, and faith in her own ability to persuade David to moral and appropriate action. In some ways, I imagine Abigail

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<sup>60</sup> For a more in-depth treatment of how Abigail is treated in rabbinic literature, see "Avigail and Michal: The Many Layers of Biblical Figures" by Rebecca Onea Sabin Hecht Rabbinic Thesis, HUC-JIR, 2022.

as the voice of the text as we've inherited it. She doesn't deny that every obstacle to the throne or external threat to David's power dies, but it isn't *David's* fault.

As she comes to know Michal, Abigail's faith in David begins to waver as Michal forces her to see the patterns of David's behavior. When David takes Bathsheba, Abigail begins to question herself as well. As the play unfolds, Abigail is faced with trying to mitigate the impact of David's actions and inactions with less and less success. Believing the failure is at least as much her fault as David's, she works with Michal to build up Bathsheba as a successor since she has some ability to influence David's decisions. When Abigail unthinkingly obeys David in act 5, scene 1, and later learns that she enabled Absalom's violation of David's concubines just as David had intended, Abigail breaks. She loses faith in David, and in herself.

## Bathsheba

When we first meet Bathsheba 2 Sam 11:1 – 2 Sam 12:25, a literary unit that stretches from David's first sight of Bathsheba through the birth of Solomon, Bathsheba has only one line of dialogue: "I'm pregnant" (2 Sam 11:5). In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter calls our attention to the first words a personage speaks because these words will be particularly revealing about the character.<sup>61</sup> David's story hinges on these two words. This moment is the turning point in the narrative of David's rule when his triumphant rise becomes a tragic fall because of he fails to act as a king should. Bathsheba's story hinges on these two words, and she as a character is defined by them. This pregnancy transforms her from wife of a soldier to wife of a king, and her next pregnancy allows her to become queen mother.

The scene opens, "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab and his servants with him, and all Israel... but David remained at Jerusalem" (2 Sam 11:1). It is the time for kings to go out, but David has remained behind, he is not where he is supposed to be nor doing what a king ought to do. Instead, David is home, letting other men fight his battles.

He rises one evening to walk around the roof of his house, and from the roof he sees a woman. Then we read:

David sent and inquired about the woman, saying, 'Isn't that Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, wife of Uriah the Hittite?' And David sent messengers, and he took her, and

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<sup>61</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, new and revised edition. (Basic Books, a Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2011), 59.



she came, and he laid with her, and she washed off her uncleanness, and returned to her house” (2 Sam 11:3 – 4).<sup>62</sup>

In my translation above, David voices his inquiry to an unseen other, revealing that he knows precisely who is bathing in the house nearby. Her connections to David’s most elite and trusted soldiers don’t dissuade him, and he sends multiple messengers to take her. After their sexual encounter, Bathsheba is ritually impure, so she bathes before returning home.<sup>63</sup>

J. Cheryl Exum, in her essay, “Bathsheba Plotted, Shot, and Painted,” expresses surprise that the story of Bathsheba and David is considered by many a ‘love story.’ She writes, “Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, is ‘sent for’ by King David, who has sex with her in a moment of passion. That brief encounter might have been the end of it but for one complication: Bathsheba becomes pregnant.” She further points out that in the biblical text gives no indication that David wanted to marry Bathsheba or carry on an affair with her. Nor is there any textual indication that Bathsheba wanted any kind of relationship with the king. David went to great lengths to ensure that Uriah would accept paternity of the child.

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<sup>62</sup> Translation my own because JPS adds a second speaker that is not clearly present in the Hebrew, and also includes an aside within the translated text about her bathing relating to her period. See note below.

<sup>63</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 147. It’s anachronistic to read Bathsheba’s bathing after laying with the king as a displaced referent to her earlier bath relating to Bathsheba purifying herself after her period for several reasons. First, Leviticus 15:19 states that a woman is impure for a seven day from her menstrual blood – it’s time bound and does not require washing to become pure, although if a man comes in contact with her, he must wash (2 Sam 11:20 – 24). However, if a man ejaculates during intercourse, then both are commanded to wash (2 Sam 11:18). Although 1000s of mikva’ot – pools for ritual immersion – have been excavated, none date to before the Hasmonean period (ca. 140 – 63 BCE). Yonaton Adler, “On the Origins of Tevilah (Ritual Immersion),” TheTorah.com, 2017. <https://www.thetorah.com/article/on-the-origins-of-tevilah-ritual-immersion>

Only when it's clear his machinations will not be successful does David have Uriah killed and marry Bathsheba.<sup>64</sup>

Both my translation and Exum's account of the scene have interpretive layers. Translation is always an act of interpretation and Exum suggests that David acted out of passion (as opposed to a pre-meditated encounter).<sup>65</sup> Because the action in the biblical text is laconic, it is ambivalent. We have a series of verbs, with none of the emotions that drive them. It would be an equally valid interpretation to say that David stayed back from the war knowing that Bathsheba would be alone and vulnerable, without the protection of her husband and father, two of David's elite warriors. This reading works particularly well when read in conjunction with or as foreshadowing for Amnon's explicit and premeditated rape of his half-sister Tamar in 2 Sam 13.

In "Bathsheba Plotted, Shot, and Painted," Exum further shares the interpretations of this scene by other biblical scholars, as well as in classic art and film, all from the perspective of the male gaze. They eroticize the scene, the paintings and movies casting us as viewers and voyeurs complicit with David in gazing on a vulnerable woman. For Exum, the true guilt lies with the biblical narrator who leaves Bathsheba open to the charge of seduction because of the textual ambiguity and withholding her point of view.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> J. Cherly Exum, "Bathsheba Plotted, Shot, and Painted" in *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, 19 – 53. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 215. (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 19 – 20.

<sup>65</sup> A prime example of this could be found in how I interpret this phrase: וַיֵּרָא אִשָּׁה רֹחֶצֶת מֵעַל הַגָּג – in this essay and in the play, I understand this to mean that he [David] saw a woman bathing from the roof," or to say it more clearly, "from the roof, he saw a woman bathing." Since David is already said to be on the roof, I assume that מֵעַל הַגָּג "from the roof" is referring to David, not the woman. However, many interpreters understand this phrase to be describing the location of the woman's bath.

<sup>66</sup> Exum, *Plotted*, 23.

Lillian Klein levels this very accusation:

David's spontaneity – in walking and seeing and taking – reinforces Bathsheba's maneuver in bathing on her roof *at this time*. I suggest Bathsheba may well have been purifying herself on her roof with the hope of 'seducing' King David into seducing her.<sup>67</sup>

In reading Klein's words, one must wonder how Bathsheba would know that the king would take an extra-long nap and go walking on his roof at dusk since there's no indication that this was habitual behavior for the king. Tikva Frymer-Kensky also takes issue with Klein's understanding of events, arguing that saying Bathsheba wanted to seduce the king is like saying a victim of sexual assault today was "asking for it" based on how they dressed, smiled, or went out. Bathsheba was washing, having a private moment. Not only does David violate Bathsheba, we – readers of the text – do the same when we contemplate her beauty.<sup>68</sup>

*Useful Women* gives voice to the ambiguities in the Biblical text, and gives Bathsheba an opportunity to speak for herself, particularly in act 3. Ahinoam assumes that Bathsheba's aim is power, implying that Bathsheba planned to entrap the king, to gain power, while Abigail and Michal speak to the imbalance of power that problematizes the idea of choice in this context. A king cannot seduce a subject whose very life is held by the power of the king. There is no "yes" when there cannot safely be a "no."

Power is central to Bathsheba's arc. When she enters in act 3, scene 1, she is powerless, her life fully out of her control. She's pregnant, mourning the husband that

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<sup>67</sup> Lillian R. Klein, "Bathsheba Revealed," in *Samuel and Kings*, ed. by Athalya Brenner, A Feminist Companion to the Bible [Second Series] 7; (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 53.

<sup>68</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 144–145.

David had killed, and has just had her life destroyed by the selfish choices of another.

Worse, when David receives his would-be punishment for his crime, the prophet Nathan says:

‘Therefore the sword shall never depart from your House—because you spurned Me by taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite and making her your wife.’  
Thus said GOD: ‘I will make a calamity rise against you from within your own house; I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes and he shall sleep with your wives under this very sun. You acted in secret, but I will make this happen in the sight of all Israel and in broad daylight’ (2 Sam 12:10–13).

David has committed the crime, but he is not the one directly punished for it. He will not die for having another man killed. Rather, his wives, his concubines, and his children pay the price for David’s transgressions, though they themselves are innocent.

Facing the loss of her first child, Bathsheba balks at the idea of going to David, and at the idea of continuing to be a victim of her circumstances. She chooses, with Michal and Abigail’s encouragement, to seize the power of David’s attention for her own ends and for the future good of the women in the kingdom at the end of act 3, scene 4.

It is this choice which leads to the very different portrayal of Bathsheba we see in 1 Kgs 1:11–31, when Bathsheba steps back into the biblical limelight to orchestrate Solomon’s ascent to kingship and in 1 Kgs 2:13–25, in a scene that removes Adonijah, Solomon’s main competitor for the throne.

In the later episodes, Bathsheba shows herself to be a worthy inheritor of Abigail’s trust as she works to ensure Solomon will be king. In 2 Sam 11, Bathsheba spoke only two words: “I’m pregnant.” In 1 Kgs 1, her words fill the page and shape the future of the kingdom. We see the first hint of that in how she is introduced in 1 Kgs 1:11 as “Bathsheba

mother of Solomon,” not wife of Uriah or wife of David.<sup>69</sup> As Solomon’s mother, first and foremost at this moment, Bathsheba is focused solely ensuring Solomon, her son, becomes king rather than Adonijah, son of Haggit. The stakes are high: if Adonijah becomes king, Bathsheba tells David, “I and my son Solomon will be counted offenders,” which is to say that they will be killed by Adonijah for some offence or other so that they don’t threaten his crown (1 Kgs 1:21).<sup>70</sup> In an ironic twist, it is Adonijah who seizes the horns of the altar when Solomon is crowned.<sup>71</sup> Solomon graciously allows his brother to live, pending his good behavior (1 Kgs 1:49–53).

Rather than queen, Bathsheba, in the biblical narrative, becomes queen mother, or *gebirah*, a role that was both cultic and political when Solomon is crowned. Queen mothers helped to determine matters of succession, and Bathsheba begins acting in this capacity unofficially when she first petitions David on Solomon’s behalf, and in a more official capacity when she is approached by Adonijah and engineers his execution (1 Kgs 2:13–25). Queen mothers could also serve as regents for minors, aid in matters of diplomacy, and mediate between opposing factions.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Christine Thomas, *Royal Women of Ugarit*, (Routledge, 2024) 164.

<sup>70</sup> There is considerable debate about whether Bathsheba and Nathan were manipulating the aged king, or if the David’s promise was made off-page. It’s left ambivalent in the text of *Useful Women*, but for more information on the debate, see: Carl S. Ehrlich, “Bathsheba the Kingmaker” TheTorah.com (2020). <https://thetorah.com/article/bathsheba-the-kingmaker>

<sup>71</sup> Although not explicitly stated in Torah, this scene as well as Exod 21:13 and 1 Kgs 2:28–34 imply that seizing the horns of the altar was a means of demanding refuge from punishment, perhaps a means of directly seeking protection from the deity. For more on the concept of the seeking refuge from the deity, literal or metaphorical, see Shalom E. Holtz, “Taking Refuge in God beyond the Temple Walls–Psalm 27” TheTorah.com (2022). <https://thetorah.com/article/taking-refuge-in-god-beyond-the-temple-walls-psalm-27>.

<sup>72</sup> Susan Ackerman, “The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 112 (1993), 386.

Although we do not see Bathsheba in any cultic role in the biblical text, Susan Ackerman argues in her essay, “The Queen Mother and the Cult of Ancient Israel,” that worship of Asherah was part of the obligatory cultic role of *gebirah* in both pre-exilic Israel and Judah.<sup>73</sup> She points to Ma’acah, queen-mother of Abijam and Abijam’s son Asa of Judah, who commissioned an image of Asherah, most likely a stylized tree of some sort, which her grandson Asa cut down (1 Kgs 15:9–15).<sup>74</sup> Although it does not say where she put the image, Susan Ackerman argues, “Given this proximity, a temple location seems the most logical place for a member of the royal family such as Ma’acah to place a cult image... Ma’acah, as a member of the Judean royal family, would have assumed the right to erect the cult image she had made in Asherah’s honor somewhere within the Jerusalem temple compound.”<sup>75</sup>

Although much of this research did not remain on the page in the later drafts of the page, they strongly informed the development of Bathsheba’s character and the development of the maternal relationship between Michal and Bathsheba, culminating in the moment when Michal tells Bathsheba she should be the priestess in act 5, scene 4. In becoming queen-mother to Solomon, Bathsheba fulfills her own dream of power, Abigail’s dream of wielding power for the good of a nation, and Michal’s dream of restoring the worship of Asherah and reestablishing the role of women in cultic functions.

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<sup>73</sup> Ackerman, *Queen Mother*, 395.

<sup>74</sup> Ackerman, *Women and the Religion*, 134. This suggests that the title may well be biological but can also be an honorific for a surrogate who holds that role.

<sup>75</sup> Ackerman, *Women and the Religion*, 136.

### Other Creative Choices

The play is set at a pivot point in history, before major urbanization when the society is largely agrarian, and during a time of relative social upheaval marked by the wars described throughout Saul's and David's reigns. In times of upheaval and in the premonarchic period, women in Israelite society experienced relatively high social status and potential for the exercise of power. We might think here of Deborah, judge and prophetess in Judg 4–5, or Micah's mother who managed the household in Judg 17. Carol Meyers' work supports these textual traces with archeological, sociological, and ethnographical evidence that attests to women having important roles in their culture's economy, judicial and legal affairs, and religious observance.<sup>76</sup>

However, as power was centralized and society became more urbanized, over time political and religious power was consolidated into the hands of the male elites. In both the pre-monarchic and the preexilic monarchic periods, archeological evidence points to two areas of household-based life in which women played a particularly important role: bread-making and textile production. These were vital to the household in subsistence economies and thus a potential source of female power. The biblical text also provides evidence of women's roles in bread-making and textile production, and in Jer 7:18 and 2 Kgs 23:7,

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<sup>76</sup> Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, (Oxford University Press, 1988), 19–20.

ironically both texts where these are undertaken for religious purposes related to the worship of the Queen of Heaven and Asherah.<sup>77</sup>

Although I have pointed to the transition from the pre-monarchic to monarchic periods as a time when power was concentrated into male hands, I have condensed that time frame in the *Useful Women*, with Michal blaming David for many of those changes as part of his push to consolidate power. This is extrapolation and not explicit in the biblical text. It is possible that this was true since although women were in attendance when the ark was brought to Jerusalem, there is no sign that they were part of the precession (2 Sam 6:16–17). We also see David as the primary mourner, performing psalms of mourning in the biblical text (2 Sam 1:11–27, 2 Sam 3:26–30), rather than women taking on the task of mourning, a role they held (though not exclusively) in ancient Israel. Nevertheless, as described above, it appears that this centralization of the cult and removal of women and Asherah worship happened over time with periods of expansion and contraction.

*Useful Women* takes place in women's spaces, first in Hebron, and then in Jerusalem. The women are by no means thought to be confined to this space – they can enter and exit at will, but the courtyard is the place where they come together to work and live in community, where they discuss the things that are important in their lives and in the life of the kingdom. In the play, the courtyard is an exclusively female space. This is a creative choice, not one that is supported by text or archeology. This serves two functions: it keeps David offstage, and it heightens the sense of violation when Eliam enters the courtyard, a male intrusion that foreshadows Absalom's.

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<sup>77</sup> Susan Ackerman, "Digging up Deborah: Recent Hebrew Bible Scholarship on Gender and the Contribution of Archeology," *Near Eastern Archeology* 66, no. 4 (2003), 180–181.



Children are also excluded from this space by and large. This is more for the ease of writing and staging the play, though if productions wanted to add verisimilitude, young children could lend additional poignancy to the play's action, particularly a young Tamar between the ages of 9–12 present with Maacah in the first acts, and then Bathsheba's sons in act 4. Tamar is attacked offstage by Amnon between act 4, scene 1 and scene 2. Having her present for the earlier acts of the play creates a relationship between the character and the audience and heightens the emotional toll of her attack. Likewise, having the young Solomon around age 5 and the infant Nathan present in act 4, scene 1 both communicates how much time has passed, and builds audience investment in the fates of the boys.

In Hebron, the courtyard is rougher, since David's reign has known only war, and Abigail not only organizes the king's household, she also oversees the provisioning of the king's warriors and all those who dine in the king's household. Although the stronghold is not in an agrarian setting where women's work and power would be most in evidence, because of the upheaval on ongoing battles, we see Michal grinding the grain needed to make bread in act 1, scene 2. Abigail acknowledges it's not necessary – David is likely amassing both wealth and slaves with his conquests, yet the option remains to do this work. Even within the Davidic narrative, we have support for the idea that women in David's household performed the basic household task of bread-baking, as seen when Amnon asks that David send Tamar to bake for him in his plot to violate her (2 Sam 13:7–8).

Weaving is another core task depicted in *Useful Women*. In the show, it serves as a metaphor as the women work together to build something beautiful, but also specifically for Michal and Abigail as a metaphor for Bathsheba. It's also a nod to the weavers of 2 Kgs

23:7 and their religious work of weaving hangings for Asherah. Either an upright or horizontal loom could be used, as both are attested in this period in the Levant.<sup>78</sup>

In the play, costumes as described pull from the ancient world, as is the hinged, wooden tablet that Abigail and Bathsheba use.<sup>79</sup> As women in the royal household, it's reasonable to believe they would be literate, since literacy was prevalent among the elite in Jerusalem during the united monarchy.<sup>80</sup> However, this is another place where there is certainly space for creativity in the staging of the show since in truth there is little reward in striving for authenticity when the symbols of power and authority – the special uniform (Abigail's *me'il*) and the tablet to connote the work of writing and organizing – translate easily across time and space.

There are some characters and details I chose to omit or tweak for the sake of narrative clarity. I don't mention the early abduction of Abigail and Ahinoam by the Amalekites (1 Sam 29). Ahithophel, Bathsheba's grandfather, is another omission. He is never mentioned directly in relation to Bathsheba, but she is Eliam's daughter, and he is named as Eliam's father in the list of David's thirty mighty warriors (2 Sam 23:34). In the biblical narrative, he defects and joins Absalom's insurrection and advises Absalom to rape David's concubines (2 Sam 16:15–23). When Absalom later doesn't heed the man's advice to pursue David, Ahithophel commits suicide (2 Sam 17:14–23). While he could have added an interesting and complicated dimension to Bathsheba's character, the only place to

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<sup>78</sup> King and Stager, 153–154.

<sup>79</sup> King and Stager, 272, 276–279, 309.

<sup>80</sup> King and Stager, 309–311.

meaningfully name the connection would be at the time when the women are either fleeing the city to escape Absalom, or returning from their temporary exile, and the detail fit well in neither scene. I also moved the deaths of Michal's nephews and half-brothers, Merav's and Rizpah's children, to an earlier point in the play. Although this is a poignant scene, it happens relatively late in the biblical narrative (though it likely happened much earlier since it makes little sense that Saul's actions could be to blame for a famine that happens more than twenty years into David's reign), and it doesn't serve the show to keep its placement according to biblical continuity.

In the play, the ark was brought from Shiloh to Jerusalem, however the sanctuary at Shiloh likely no longer existed when Michal was young. Its destruction is alluded to in 1 Sam 4, when the Philistines capture the ark, and the violent destruction of the Shiloh site is referenced again in Jer 7:12–14. The ark then eventually makes its way to the home of Abinadab in Kiryat-yearim (1 Sam 6:21–7:2). For the sake of simplicity, I referenced the Shiloh site in Michal's memories in act 2, scene 2 because Shiloh is better known and has a clearer north/south contrast, rather than trying to force an explanation of the ark's movements and temporary abodes.

In character naming, I use a mix of spellings, defaulting to English conventions with Abigail and Bathsheba, but using simplified Hebrew transliterated spellings for Avishag, Avital, Haggit, and Merav.<sup>81</sup> Although my preference is for the latter spellings, I use them only with less familiar biblical names. This serves to help phonetically differentiate Abigail from Avital and Avishag.

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<sup>81</sup> This includes using the modern Israeli pronunciation, ending Haggit with the t instead of the th. When the Hebrew pointing yields a v sound rather than a b, I carry that into the English transliteration.

There are two romances in *Useful Women*, one explicit and the other implied. The romance between Michal and Abigail blooms slowly over the course of the play. Both are older when they come together, and neither likely to have more children. There are no prohibitions against female relationships. One could argue that this is an act of adultery, but they are also within the same household and pose no threat to David's paternity or property, the primary concerns of priestly authors of these prohibitions.<sup>82</sup> There is also a brief allusion to Bathsheba having a relationship with Nathan. This is a complete fabrication. Such a relationship would indeed pose a risk to Bathsheba, Nathan, and cast problematic doubts on the paternity of her children. Nevertheless, floating the possibility is a way of naming that Bathsheba's marriage did lack joy and offered Michal, a risk taker, the ability to convey her hopes for Bathsheba's happiness.

A final note on tone: the dialogue in *Useful Women* is purposefully modern without being "of a moment." With few exceptions, the play does not use an elevated register because my goal was to write a slightly more coherent version of how people speak (which is to say that the characters usually finish their sentences, while people do not). Although the play is set in the distant past, using a form of dialogue that signified that temporal difference would run the risk of creating too much emotional distance between characters and audience.

The women refer to each other as hyenas at various points. In earlier drafts, these were references to "catty" behavior, but both because cats were sacred creatures in Egypt during this period and because the references were jarring, I switched the referent to

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<sup>82</sup> Ackerman, *Women and the Religion*, 339.

hyenas. Hyenas are found in the ancient Near East in the biblical period and are referenced in Jeremiah 12:9.<sup>83</sup> The speckled hyena is also matriarchal, a fun additional allusion.

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<sup>83</sup> 1 Sam 13:18 also refers to גִּי הַצְבָּעִים – Place of the Hyena, found somewhere in the territory of Benjamin.

### Play and Midrash: What's in a Genre?

The biblical texts are almost exclusively male-authored and largely speak from the perspective priestly elites. The text's perspectives, including those in what we call the Deuteronomistic History (Josh, Judg, 1–2 Sam, and 1–2 Kgs) are by men, for men, and have an androcentric world view. That often carries polemics *against* the religious practice and power of women,<sup>84</sup> even as they provide hints that such do exist.<sup>85</sup> For instance, the biblical text names Miriam, Deborah, Hulda, and Noadiah as prophets, but no book of woman's prophecy has come down to us. Their prophecies are all mediated and transmitted by men.

As part of that androcentric worldview, to the extent that women in the biblical text can be said to be subjects, they are only considered such in terms of their meaning to or significance for men. Women in an androcentric narrative exist as means by which to move, affect, or harm the male protagonist.<sup>86</sup> David's wives and children are subservient to the plot – they have done nothing wrong, nothing to earn God's punishment, and yet they are punished as a means of punishing David. Tamar is raped because God has chosen to punish David not by external enemies, but by an evil raised within the king's household. Her rape triggers Absalom's revenge, just as Nathan predicted. David's concubines are raped by Absalom because, "I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very

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<sup>84</sup> Ackerman, "Deborah," 180.

<sup>85</sup> Ackerman, *Women and the Religion*, 6–12.

<sup>86</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, "Second Thoughts About Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1.8–2.10" in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan (Sheffield Academic Press, 1994). 75–87.

eyes and he shall sleep with your wives under this very sun.” (2 Sam 12:11). Their tragedies are not truly theirs in the biblical narrative. What happened to them is only noteworthy because of the impact it has on David.

In *Useful Women*, I wanted to change that narrative, to have the lives of women front and center, to show the impact of this violence in their lives and to depict not only how the events of the narrative change them, but how they impact each other. In the introduction to this essay, I mentioned that the earliest draft of this play was called *David’s Women*. The name change to *Useful Women* was part of the work of decentralizing David and focusing on the drives of the women at the heart of this narrative. This work of centering the experience of women could have been done in any number of genres. As mentioned above, I didn’t set out to write a play, yet in retrospect, I realize that *Useful Women* had to be a play because of the way women are silenced in the biblical text.

Abigail has the most speaking lines of any woman in Torah but as soon as Abigail marries into David’s household, she is silenced. After Michal criticizes David, she is silenced. Bathsheba, on whom David’s entire narrative pivots, speaks only two words in her introductory scene. David’s story hinges time and again on the voices of women but we never hear from them after their utility has ended. *Useful Women* had to be a play because we need to *hear* women’s voices.

The biblical narrative rarely looks into the minds or telegraphs clearly the emotions of the characters. While I have provided some emotional cues in the stage directions and dialogue of *Useful Women*, the format of a play in many ways echoes that of the biblical text. The biblical narrative is brought to life and relevancy through interpretation and imagination: each reader and interpreter brings their own worldview, biases, experiences,

and inherited understanding into conversation with the text and with the interpretations of others.<sup>87</sup>

In the Talmud, interpretations, reactions, and connections build one on top another, the source text at its core with centuries worth of interpretation surrounding it, inviting the modern reader to join a conversation over two thousand years in the making. So too the play is brought to life not by an author, who provides the source text, or in this case an interpretation of the biblical source text, but by the many hands involved in staging a play: the director, the set designers, costumers, and actors each build together the staging that the audience views. My interpretation purposefully gives voice to many perspectives, and it still is only a foundation for all that is built on it. Even the audience adds layers of interpretation since viewing, like reading, is not a passive act, but a conversation continued by the viewers' interpretations of and reactions to the play.

In the biblical narrative of David's life, women enter the picture only at major turning points in David's story, and they vanish, their voices silenced (if they're ever heard at all) as soon as they cease to be of use in the narrative. When writing about women who are silenced in the biblical text, *Useful Women* is a vehicle for lifting those voices and conveying their power and their humanity, as well uplifting the voices of all those who bring the play to life on stage.

There is a secondary genre that we must consider as we look at *Useful Women* because of the play's close relationship to the biblical text: modern midrash. To situate

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<sup>87</sup> Naomi M. Hyman, "Introduction" in *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook* (Jason Aronson, Inc., 1997), xviii.



*Useful Women* as a midrashic endeavor, we first must consider our definition of midrash.

Gary G. Porton identifies five characteristics or assumptions that underlie most midrash:

1. The Bible was written with intention and is as it should be – anything that seems amiss or lacunae is there as a clue to deeper understanding.
2. Everything in Scripture is interrelated
3. A single verse can have multiple interpretations
4. Correct interpretations can only be reached by combining faith and reason
5. Midrash is a sacred activity<sup>88</sup>

By this definition, *Useful Women* is not midrash in the traditional sense in that it doesn't explicitly explore in depth the meaning of a verse or series of verses, nor does it look elsewhere in scripture to bring prooftexts for the understanding of the text it wishes to convey. *Useful Women* is not about the language of scripture, a definition of midrash implied by Porton's assumptions. However, Naomi Hyman describes midrash in this way:

Midrash has, in many respects, been the way in which Jews have attempted to put themselves and the issues of the times into the ancient story. Classic midrashim (the plural of *midrash*) address an enormous range of topics, finding a source for each in Torah. Midrash was (and is) a way of filling in the "missing pieces" of the biblical narrative, of praising God and taking God to task, of challenging enemies and of reflecting on what it means to be a Jew. The process of midrash not only offers contemporary Jews an authentic way of making the text our own, but also provides a precedent for such activity.<sup>89</sup>

While Porton was looking at classical rabbinic midrash, Hyman holds both the old and new in her definition, offering a way for them to be in conversation rather than trying to collapse together the old and new, or classical and modern, into a single genre. For Hyman, both

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<sup>88</sup> Gary G. Porton, *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash* (Ktav Publishing House, 1985), 9–11.

<sup>89</sup> Hyman, *Midrash*, xviii.

rabbinic and modern midrash are engaging in the project of enabling the Tanakh to speak broadly to our lives by reading meaning into the text. For the writers of rabbinic midrash, this work often happened through close reading, word by word, creating new meanings to suit their ends by applying distantly related sources.

In *Useful Women*, creating meaning by means of the biblical text comes from filling textual silences by suggesting what might have happened in the scenes omitted from the narrative. As a writer and emerging rabbi, I come to this work from a place of faith, even while the play itself serves as a polemic against the androcentric elements in the biblical and rabbinic texts that seek to silence and sideline women.

## Conclusion

*We are a people in whom the past endures, in whom the present is inconceivable without moments gone by. The Exodus lasted a moment, a moment enduring forever. What happened once upon a time happens all the time.*

- Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel<sup>90</sup>

I stated above my two primary reasons that *Useful Women* is presented as a play: a play allows audiences to hear the voices of women silenced in the biblical text, and actors have the opportunity to express those voices, along with directors, set designers, and all those who contribute to live theater, building the almost Talmudic layers of interpretation that bring a play to life. My third reason is more pragmatic: history and literature both are having a moment on the Broadway stage, often in ways that center over-looked women. As of February 2025, nearly half of all Broadway shows fall into these categories:<sup>91</sup>

### History

A Wonderful Life: The Louis Armstrong Musical  
BOOP!<sup>92</sup>  
Buena Vista Social Club  
Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club  
Chicago  
Dead Outlaw

### Literature & Myth

& Juliet  
Hades Town  
Othello  
Romeo + Juliet  
The Great Gatsby  
The Outsiders  
The Picture of Dorian Gray

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<sup>90</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel and Abraham Rattner, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. 1st paperback ed. (Jewish Lights Pub., 1969), 128.

<sup>91</sup> "Broadway Musicals and Plays, February 2025" on Broadway World, accessed February 16, 2025. <https://www.broadwayworld.com/shows/broadway-shows.php>

<sup>92</sup> BOOP! doesn't fit neatly into either category, but it is about the 1930s cartoon character and her legacy as a cultural icon.

Floyd Collins  
 Good Night, and Good Luck  
 Gypsy  
 Hamilton  
 Just In Time  
 Moulin Rouge!  
 MJ the Musical  
 "Oh, Mary!"  
 Operation Mincemeat  
 Six

Wicked

The past provides us lenses through which to view and understand the present. We look for historical parallels to try and predict what will happen in the future. We can also look to the past for examples of resilience, overcoming, and to provide warnings for what might happen if we fail to act. Shows like *Gypsy*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Chicago*, and *Cabaret* are classics, each of the shows revived time and again, but they have something else in common: they speak about a moment in time from the perspective of the most vulnerable: disempowered women. Certainly, they glamorize those women, but characters like Hunyak, the Hungarian woman in *Chicago*'s "Cell Block Tango" remind us that for those at the edges of society, there is little hope for justice, a truth that still rings painfully true a hundred years after the musical's setting.

Stories have always been a safe way for people to process and understand themselves, to sublimate the tensions within us and seek some type of safe catharsis. The shows adapted from literature all tell deeply human stories – stories about love and loss, finding a place, and growing up and into who they are meant to be.

*Useful Women* is a multivocal drama that holds each of those elements. It is a love story, a tragedy, and a coming-of-age tale. At the heart of all these elements is a modern and timeless question: how, as women, can we take and use power? Is it better to opt out of

flawed systems, or work from within to change them? There is no easy answer, and each of the characters come to a different conclusion. Bringing *Useful Women* to the stage, invites audiences to join in that conversation, to ask how we work within and around flawed systems that don't value the voices that don't currently hold power or actively seek to disempower other voices.

Whether we view Tanakh as history, literature, sacred text, or all the above, it nevertheless tells stories of deeply flawed individuals. For generations, we have come to these verses to find solace and meaning, and to understand ourselves better. In recent generations, women have pushed to find our own voices in these texts, to lift biblical women and imagine how they might speak to us. Alice Bach calls on us to befriend Abigail because friendships become a vehicle of self-definition for women, helping us to clarify aspects of our identity in relation to another who embodies and reflects aspects of the self.<sup>93</sup> How much the more so when we befriend Michal and Bathsheba as well? *Useful Women* takes place at a time when power was being concentrated into the hands of a small, male elite. In befriending Michal, Abigail, and Bathsheba, my hope is that we might find both questions and answers within ourselves about how to answer this moment. We might find within ourselves Abigail's wisdom, Michal's passion, and Bathsheba's patience and ability to grow into who she needs to be for the future of her family and kingdom.

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<sup>93</sup> Bach, *Pleasure*, 44.

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USEFUL WOMEN

by

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## CHARACTERS

ABIGAIL	Prophetess and steward of the king's house, wife of David.
MICHAL	An angry woman, daughter of Saul, first wife of David.
BATHSHEBA	The young widow of Uriah the Hittite, wife of David, and mother of Solomon.
AHINOAM	A proud and hard woman, cruelly practical. Second wife of David, mother of David's oldest son, Amnon.
MAACAH	Daughter of the king of Geshur, wife of David, and mother of Tamar and Absalom.
EGLAH	A strong woman, protective of Avital. A wife of David who is similar to Michal in sentiment. Plays the flute.
AVITAL	Most childlike of David's wives, plays the lute.
HAGGIT	Wife of David, embroiders, sings and plays lyre.
ELIAM	Member of David's Thirty elite soldiers, father of Bathsheba.
SERVANT	An older woman.

## SETTING

The play is set in the women's courtyard of King David's stronghold in Hebron (act 1) and then the women's courtyard of David's palace compound in Jerusalem (acts 2-5). When the play opens, the space is bounded by the suggestion of rough brown stone walls around a rectangular courtyard. This is not the lush palace of the king. The king is still a warrior, and the king's wives contribute materially to the household, working at various tasks in the shared courtyard including weaving, embroidery, bread and cake making, and grinding grain. Bags of grain sit piled to one side. In acts 2-5, the open-air courtyard is surrounded by pillars that hold up the second story of a U-shaped wing of the palace (the second story is not visible). Here too, the courtyard is the locus of women's work, and they continue to support the household.

The courtyard has a **work setting** and a **formal setting**. In the **work setting**, there is a vertical or horizontal loom, materials for hand-grinding flour, a spindle, as well as baskets and materials for sewing and embroidery. There is a low table in the center of the room, upon which are a hinged, waxed wooden board and reed stylus. In the **formal setting**, the work materials are cleared, and the loom is moved to the side. Food is placed on the low table, and large pillows, rugs, potted plants, and two low couches are added. After act 2, scene 2, a lute or other stringed instrument is always present.

In the later acts of the play, there is less evidence of the more intense forms of housework, although the loom is present until the final scene.

## TIME

The play starts circa 1003 BCE, roughly seven years into David's reign over Judah in Hebron. David is on the cusp of solidifying his rule and uniting the kingdoms of Israel and Judah before moving the capitol to Jerusalem. The play spans the next thirty-three years in the lifespan of David's household.

\* A note on the timeline - while some time markers are offered in the biblical text (2 Sam 2:11, 2 Sam 5:4-5, etc.), many of those markers leave space for interpretation. There are discrepancies within the text of 2 Samuel, and when comparing 2 Samuel to 1 Chronicles, as well as debates about when David's reign started, and whether the accounts offered are strictly chronological. The timeline offered below is not intended to be authoritative and there are some elements with which I have taken poetic license.

## ACT I

Scene 1

Courtyard, Hebron

c. 1003 BCE

Scene 2 the year	Courtyard, Hebron	c. 1003 BCE, later in
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ACT II

Scene 1	Courtyard, Jerusalem	c. 1002 BCE
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Scene 2	Courtyard, Jerusalem	Same day
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ACT III

Scene 1	Courtyard, Jerusalem	c. 994 BCE, summer
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Scene 2	Courtyard, Jerusalem	Same day
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Scene 3	Courtyard, Jerusalem	Seven months later
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Scene 4	Courtyard, Jerusalem	One month later
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ACT IV

Scene 1	Courtyard, Jerusalem	c. 990 BCE
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Scene 2	Courtyard, Jerusalem	c. 988 BCE
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Scene 3	Courtyard, Jerusalem	c. 985 BCE
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Scene 4	Courtyard, Jerusalem	c. 980 BCE
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ACT V

Scene 1	Courtyard, Jerusalem	c. 976 BCE
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Scene 2	Courtyard, Jerusalem	c. 974 BCE
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Scene 3	Courtyard, Jerusalem	c. 973 BCE
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Scene 4	Courtyard, Jerusalem	c. 970 BCE
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## ACT I

## SCENE 1

(Day. Hebron courtyard. **Formal setting.** ABIGAIL, AHINOAM, MAACAH, HAGGIT, AVITAL, and EGLAH are present. The women all wear fine, long, loose fitting dresses, belted or girdled at the waist. All wear shades of blue, purple, or red. They wear light makeup and little jewelry, with heavy kohl around their eyes. HAGGIT wears a gold necklace. ABIGAIL wears several gold bracelets and a heavily beaded necklace, as well as a loose blue sleeveless robe over her dress. She wears this robe in every scene until act 5, scene 1 as a sign of her authority.)

(AVITAL strums quietly on the lute, and EGLAH sits next to her, embroidering. The other women are trying to look busily engaged in weaving, spinning thread on a distaff, or embroidering.)

(ABIGAIL paces, looking over a hinged wooden writing board. She chews the end of a stylus.)

(A SERVANT hurries into the room. The SERVANT is about to speak.)

ABIGAIL

(Interrupting)

Is Michal's room prepared? She'll be here any moment. The *teraphim* figures were missing when I last checked.

SERVANT

Yes, mistress. She-

AHINOAM

Abigail, the space won't be any more or less ready because you keep checking.

ABIGAIL

(Interrupting, looking at her list.)

They arrived from Gilboa?

SERVANT

Just before noon. They're in her room. She-

ABIGAIL

(Still checking her list)

We need a jug of sweet water. And more heating for a bath. Did you prepare fresh linens? And we need three sheep for the feast.

SERVANT

Yes, mistress. She-

ABIGAIL

Any sight of her yet?

(SERVANT opens her mouth, but MAACAH speaks first.)

MAACAH

Abigail, most consider it polite to let others finish their sentences.

(MAACAH and ABIGAIL look expectantly at SERVANT.)

SERVANT

(Beat)

She's here, mistress. Her bath is prepared.

(At this announcement, the other wives stand and quickly put away their tools in small baskets to the side of the stage, exchanging them for necklaces and bracelets, and embellishing their makeup, though ABIGAIL doesn't seem to notice.)

ABIGAIL

Why didn't you tell me that at once? We must have a meal ready when she finishes her bath. Bring meat and bread.

SERVANT

Of course, mistress.

AHINOAM

(To EGLAH)

Girl, help me with my hair.

EGLAH

I'm not your servant. Do it yourself.

AHINOAM

I'm David's first wife. Seniority. Do it.

EGLAH

Second wife, or did you not notice that Michal is back? And Abigail wears the coat, not you.

AHINOAM

(Low and threatening)

Help me with my hair, or I'll poison your wine.

MAACAH

Ahinoam, have you ever considered asking nicely?

(To EGLAH)

Eglah, would you please help me with my hair?

EGLAH

Of course, Maacah, I'd be delighted.

(HAGGIT snickers. AHINOAM, seething, grabs AVITAL'S arm and gestures to AVITAL to do her hair. EGLAH moves as though to stop AHINOAM, but MAACAH gestures her to be calm. AVITAL meekly agrees and places a jeweled comb in AHINOAM'S hair. )

AHINOAM

No, further up. Left. This isn't that difficult. No. Lower!

(AVITAL adjusts the comb, futilely trying to follow AHINOAM's directions. AHINOAM snatches the comb and puts it where she wants it.)

(EGLAH helps MAACAH with her hair, and then MAACAH returns the favor while HAGGIT does her own. EGLAH moves to help AVITAL when MAACAH finishes a simple arrangement, and EGLAH's movements are much more tender.)

(A SERVANT enters carrying a serving tray laden with meat, dates, nuts, and pita and deposits it on the central table. ABIGAIL flags the SERVANT before she is able to leave.)

ABIGAIL

We also need a small basin of water and linens.

HAGGIT

(Practical)

She's bathing now. You don't need to wash her feet. They're clean.

ABIGAIL

Ah yes. How foolish of me to want to maintain the highest level of hospitality in the king's household.

(To the SERVANT)

Make sure the water is warm, not too hot.

EGLAH

Meow.

(To AVITAL who looks confused, EGLAH curls her fingers into claws and pretends to swipe at something like a cat.)

(ABIGAIL takes a deep breath and stands straighter as though reminding herself that she is the grownup in the room.)

ABIGAIL

Apologies, Haggit.

(As the other wives finish ornamenting themselves, they take seats or artfully drape themselves. ABIGAIL paces.)

AHINOAM

Where's your vaunted poise, Abigail? Stop pacing like a pigeon looking for seed. The wife of a king should not pace like a farm wife.

ABIGAIL

As a former farm wife, I understand how much work goes in to running a household, and as the wife of a king, I understand what is at stake. Everything must be perfect to welcome Saul's daughter if David is going to secure the north's allegiance. A child from this union-

AHINOAM

(Condescending and enjoying it)

She's hardly necessary for David to take the north. Abner brought her. Eshbaal's warlord has abandoned him.

MAACAH

Abigail, you know that without Abner, Eshbaal's days are numbered. His men won't follow him.

HAGGIT

I am curious how you think a warm welcome is going to make up for David's war against her brother though.

ABIGAIL

(Ignoring HAGGIT)



Conquest is not allegiance. A child born to David of Saul's line would ensure a lasting peace, and unite the kingdoms.

AVITAL

(Aside to EGLAH)

Was that a prophecy?

EGLAH

Not sure.

AHINOAM

(Snide)

So dramatic, Abigail. I don't need to be a prophetess to know that with Saul's daughter or not, David will unite the kingdoms, and we-

(Indicating the other wives, not ABIGAIL.)

-have given him enough strong sons to keep it. Another child would be superfluous.

(SERVANT enters carrying a small tub of water and a linen cloth and then leaves.)

ABIGAIL

(Cold, ignoring AVITAL and EGLAH)

Of course David will unite the kingdoms, but I don't need a prophecy to know that a child of both Saul's and David's lines would ensure a stability that will spare the lives of *your* precious children.

(Pointedly changing topics.)

Michal will be here any moment.

MAACAH

I heard that her husband Palti tried to follow her back here.

(SERVANT shows MICHAL to the room and then leaves silently. Unnoticed, MICHAL looks around as though expecting to see someone who isn't there. She then listens to the other women.)

ABIGAIL

Shouldn't the daughter of one king and the wife of another be above listening at doorways?

EGLAH

Don't be dull, Abigail. How else are we supposed to learn anything?

HAGGIT

You could listen in on conversations when we serve the king's men like the rest of us.

EGLAH

(Shudders)

No thank you. I'll stay with the kids.

MAACAH

If he was that broken up about losing her, don't you think they might have had-

AVITAL

Love?

AHINOAM

Please, as though there's such a thing. Romantic nonsense.

HAGGIT

(Bitter)

Marriage exists for the purpose of amassing land, wealth, and alliances.

EGLAH

Then why did David marry Ahinoam?

(MAACAH and HAGGIT both appreciate EGLAH's barb. AHINOAM scowls and stands, beginning to move toward the door.)

ABIGAIL

Regardless, do not talk about her second husband. We don't want to cause additional distress.

(AHINOAM'S movement catches ABIGAIL's attention and she sees MICHAL. MICHAL straightens her shoulders and lifts her chin before stepping forward. She is clean and dressed, but her eyes are red-rimmed, and she appears wan and tired.)

ABIGAIL

You must be Michal! Welcome home. I'm Abigail. This is Maacah, Ahinoam-

MICHAL

This is not my home.

ABIGAIL

I apologize. I know this was not your father's stronghold, but now that you've returned to David, we hope that it will be a home for you.

MICHAL

(Disdainful)

That is highly unlikely.

ABIGAIL

(Soothingly)

May I offer you some water? You must be tired. Allow me to wash your feet. Would you like a bit of bread?

(ABIGAIL gestures to a table now laden with food.)

And then perhaps you could take some time to rest.

MICHAL

(Stiffening)

I am not a child to be managed.

AHINOAM

Doing great, Abigail.

ABIGAIL

(Ignoring AHINOAM)

I was not attempting to do so.

(ABIGAIL picks up a towel and gestures to a seat.

MICHAL ignores ABIGAIL as she crosses to the platter of food.)

ABIGAIL (Continued)

I was merely attempting to welcome you with appropriate honor.

(MICHAL kneels and begins to eat with a determination that suggests she is done talking. ABIGAIL sets down the towel.)

AVITAL

(To MICHAL, helpfully)

Don't take it personally. Abigail manages all of us.

EGLAH

Did Abner forget to feed you?

HAGGIT

(To MAACAH)

I thought daughters of kings would have courtly manners.

MAACAH

We did in Geshur. Perhaps Saul's children were raised with less... refinement.

MICHAL

(Wiping her fingers on the hem of her gown.)

Fools. It does not matter how we were raised or behave, or what or whom we desire. We are nothing more than tools and pawns, bred and groomed to be tools and pawns. I'm done playing games.

(MICHAL stands and begins to cross the courtyard back to her tent. ABIGAIL steps into her path.)

ABIGAIL

It's true that we are all here because our marriages have provided some benefit to David, but in return we have purpose, meaning.

MICHAL

(Scoffs)

Meaning?

ABIGAIL

We help him to build this nation, to unite our tribes into one kingdom.

MICHAL

(Unimpressed)

My father united the tribes. Your marriages brought David the men, wealth, and land he needed to usurp my father's kingdom. Don't believe that means he cares about you.

ABIGAIL

(Stubborn)

We run his household.

EGLAH

*She* runs his household.

(ABIGAIL glares at EGLAH before returning her attention to MICHAL.)

ABIGAIL

We also help provision the household. And *we* do all that we can to secure his reign and lineage, providing guidance, and establishing his dynasty.

MICHAL

You make babies.

AHINOAM

Some of us do.

MICHAL

That's a lot of self-important justifications for your support of a power-mad warlord. Who are you trying to convince?

ABIGAIL

I just... I want you to see that your life here can be meaningful, that you could be part of a glorious legacy.

MICHAL

I already was. Why should I trade Saul's for David's?

AVITAL

(Confused by the question)

We're married to David.

ABIGAIL

David was chosen by Yahweh and anointed by Samuel.

MICHAL

So was my father, for all the good that did him!

(MICHAL steps past ABIGAIL and exits.)

AHINOAM

(Sarcastic)

You're an excellent hostess as always, Abigail. I can tell she felt welcome.

(The other wives leave the courtyard, leaving ABIGAIL alone still looking at where MICHAL exited.)

(Blackout.)

## ACT I

## SCENE 2

(Early evening. Hebron courtyard. **Work setting.** MICHAL is wearing a plain dress with her collar ripped on the left side above her heart, which signifies she is in mourning.)

(MICHAL kneels on the floor using a hand mill with a cylindrical grinding stone, vigorously grinding grain into flour. ABIGAIL enters and watches MICHAL for a moment before approaching.)

ABIGAIL

If I ask if you're alright, will you throw the grinding stone at me?

MICHAL

I wouldn't risk the stone.

ABIGAIL

That's reassuring.

MICHAL

Go away, Abigail.

(Ignoring her words, ABIGAIL sits on the floor next to MICHAL who continues to grind.)

ABIGAIL

I'm so sorry.

(Beat)

I can't imagine what you're feeling, but I know it's hard to lose a loved one.

MICHAL

Do you feel compassion? Do you empathize with me, Abigail? That's rich.

ABIGAIL

Why can't I be sorry that you're hurting?

MICHAL

Because it's bullshit! You know as well as I do that the king had my brother killed in his bed.

ABIGAIL

(Stiffening)

That's not true. David was here, and you saw what he did to the men who killed Eshbaal.

MICHAL

Yes, I saw him kill his accomplices.

ABIGAIL

Your brother was killed by his own men, Michal. He was betrayed. It's heartbreaking, but it wasn't David.

MICHAL

For a supposed prophetess, there's a whole lot you choose not to see.

(ABIGAIL shakes her head, not offended but denying the accusation.)

MICHAL

(Continued)

How have you not noticed how every obstacle between David and the throne seems to conveniently die? Just because you cannot see the blood on his hands doesn't mean it isn't there. David will do whatever it takes to be king.

ABIGAIL

They've been fighting for years. Why would he bother with assassination now when a clean victory was so close?

MICHAL

Maybe victory was less certain than it appeared. Or maybe he was simply done now that I've been returned. He's cunning. I watched him cozy up to Jonathan and steal his birthright, then he had my father killed-

ABIGAIL

He didn't. He mourned them both. I think- I think he loved Jonathan. He's brought Jonathan's son here. They dine together every night.

MICHAL

My nephew is here as a hostage and a warning to his cousins. David made my father and brother love him, and then he killed them. Shepherd or no, David was a wolf among the flock.

ABIGAIL

Saul attacked him. You know your father planned to kill him. David could have killed him in that cave or in the camp, and he didn't.

MICHAL

He's fastidious. Prefers to bloody other people's hands.

ABIGAIL

(Shaking her head in disbelief.)

I am sorry Michal. I'm sorry that you're in pain. I'm sorry that you've lost so many people that you love.

MICHAL

You should be sorry for supporting that monster.

ABIGAIL

He's no monster, Michal. He's a man who is destined to be great. But I am sorry that his rise has come so often at your expense. I hope you know that I just want you to be- well, I suppose happy might be too much to ask for, but I hope you know that you're not alone.

(ABIGAIL waits for a response but MICHAL ignores her, so she stands and leaves.)

(Blackout.)



## ACT II

## SCENE 1

(Day. Jerusalem courtyard. **Formal setting.** On the loom to the side is the start of a thick tapestry. A tray laden with dried fruits and cakes sits on a table. The wives except MICHAL are all present. The women wear heavy jewelry and makeup.)

(The women play music, dance, and sing in celebration. EGLAH plays the flute, AVITAL the lyre, and HAGGIT and AHINOAM both play some version of hand drum. HAGGIT leads them in singing a joyful Psalm 68.)

(MICHAL storms into the room, and ABIGAIL steps out of the circle to speak with her.)

ABIGAIL

Where have you been? I hoped you might join us to celebrate.

MICHAL

I've been watching our king make a fool of himself.

(The music and dancing halt. MICHAL has everyone's attention.)

MICHAL (Continued)

He couldn't even wear his ephod properly! He showed his 'rings and staff' to every serving woman in the street.

ABIGAIL

(Aghast)

Michal!

AVITAL

(Aside to EGLAH)

Rings and staff?

EGLAH

His penis.

AVITAL

Oh.

HAGGIT

I would give you my gold necklace to say that to his face.

MICHAL

I did!

HAGGIT

Brilliant. You can't actually have my necklace.

ABIGAIL

Oh Michal, could you not have curbed your tongue for one day?

EGLAH

Not everyone is blessed with your good sense, Abigail.

MICHAL

It's not my fault that he didn't wear a loin cloth. You don't even understand what he's doing, do you?

ABIGAIL

He was bringing the ark to Jerusalem.

MICHAL

The Tabernacle is in Shiloh! The ark is ours, Abigail. Not Judah's. Not Caleb's. It belongs to Israel, not here.

ABIGAIL

This is neutral territory!

MICHAL

It's only neutral if your kingdom hasn't been conquered by an egotistical murderous warlord who has systematically killed off your family and used your youthful love to justify his claim to your brother's throne!

MAACAH

Ouch.

ABIGAIL

Michal, I'm--

MICHAL

I'm not finished! Why weren't you out there, Abigail? Aren't you the prophetess who announced that he'd be king? You should be out in front of the people. So why are you in this courtyard? Why are any of us?

ABIGAIL

This is the king's celebration--

MICHAL

Then we should have been out there as the king's household, his wives, escorting the ark, singing and dancing. Since the time of Miriam, it has been women who sing of Yahweh's glory!

ABIGAIL

That was the king's wish. He didn't want any distractions today. The ark is dangerous. Last time they tried to bring it to Jerusalem, a man died!

EGLAH

(To AVITAL and HAGGIT)

But his 'rings and staff' weren't too distracting?

MICHAL

Women have been leading triumphal dances for hundreds of years. We were never a distraction before. If the king and his men don't have the discipline to keep their eyes and minds on their work, that's their problem. It shouldn't be ours.

MAACAH

It pains me to agree with Michal about... anything, really, but she is right. As women of the royal family, we should be leading the musicians.

ABIGAIL

(Defensive)

There has only been one king before. This is a new era. A new city. The old ways are changing.

EGLAH

We may have only had one previous king, but we are not some isolated backwater.

MAACAH

Shouldn't we ensure they're not changing for the worse? I don't want my Tamar cut off from service to the shrine.

ABIGAIL

God has selected David to be king. Who are we to say what is better or worse?

HAGGIT

He's still just a man. I think the 'rings and staff' proved that.

ABIGAIL

Stop with the 'rings and staff'!

MICHAL

Why can't you see it, Abigail? He trying to remove us from our ceremonial roles!

ABIGAIL

To what end?

MICHAL

(Shrugging)

What use is a prophetess who cannot be seen or heard by the people? Who but the king will know what she has told him?

ABIGAIL

(Defensive)

I am here because my common sense is just as useful to him as any prophecy I might declare in the street. So long as he listens to me, what does it matter whether I'm in a procession or not? If women were dancing or not? God chose him.

AVITAL

(Aside to EGLAH)

Wait, so she's not a prophetess?

EGLAH

She didn't say that.

MICHAL

(To ABIGAIL)

Fool. It may not matter to you, but what about all the women who come after?

(SERVANT hurries into the room and speaks to ABIGAIL. The lights lower, but do not completely fade.)

(Blackout.)

## ACT II

## SCENE 2

(Same day, immediately following the previous scene.)

(In the scene transition, AVITAL, EGLAH, HAGGIT, MAACAH, and AHINOAM collect their instruments at leave the courtyard. MICHAL picks from the tray of sweets.)

(SERVANT glances at MICHAL and hurries out.)

ABIGAIL

You failed to mention that you confronted him outside in front of all and sundry. What were you thinking?

MICHAL

(Defiant)

I hate him, and I want him to hate me so much that he cannot stand the thought of getting me with child.

ABIGAIL

(Reeling)

Michal- Your child would bring peace.

MICHAL

My child would be at best a pawn, and more likely the prime target in this hideous political game for David's enemies, or that little monster Amnon, or Absalom, or Adonijah. Worse, he could end up just like them.

ABIGAIL

They're children.

MICHAL

Children grow up.

ABIGAIL

(Softly)

Not all of them.

MICHAL

My point exactly.

ABIGAIL

Why do you hate him so much?

MICHAL

Killing my father and brothers isn't enough?

(ABIGAIL shakes her head.)

ABIGAIL

I don't think that's it. And before you go back to David curtailing our roles, if he is, he's only following your father's lead. Saul had the mediums and soothsayers exiled and killed; that wasn't David.

MICHAL

My father never kept us from serving at the Tabernacle! I served at Shiloh until my first menses. I danced and sang of Yahweh's victories in battle, and glorified Yahweh with the harvests. My father ensured proper worship.

ABIGAIL

By killing the wise women who had power he could not control.

MICHAL

David is better, keeping you out of the public eye and without any independent power?

ABIGAIL

I'm alive.

(Purposefully redirecting)

We spent weeks preparing for today, and David has been all but consumed by his anxiety about pleasing Yahweh and ensuring the safety of his people.

MICHAL

You mean the safety of himself.

ABIGAIL

He was out there, putting himself on the front line.

MICHAL

Whoring himself for adulation!

ABIGAIL

(Losing her temper)

Why are you so determined to hate him?

MICHAL

Because I loved him!

(ABIGAIL waits silently, forcing MICHAL to say more.)

MICHAL (Continued)

I believed in him too, once. He was a musician, good looking, and a little shy. My brother Jonathan's best friend. Then he defeated that giant, and he became a warrior. When he paid twice my bride price to my father I thought... I thought all my dreams had come true.

(Beat)

My father was half mad. He had these rages, paranoia. I helped him escape using my mother's *teraphim*- the statues were almost the right height under the blankets... He never even said goodbye. Never sent word. Never came for me. David was able to sneak into my father's camp while he slept, he met up with Jonathan, but he never came for me.

(Beat)

I moved on. With Palti...I was happy. We were happy. And then David had my father killed, and my brother, and when it became convenient, he destroyed my life again.

ABIGAIL

I'm sorry.

MICHAL

You should be.

(Blackout.)

## ACT II

## SCENE 3

(Evening. Jerusalem courtyard. **Work setting.** There is now a rug on the floor with the pattern from the work in progress that had been on the loom. A new work is half-finished on the loom. The women have aged a few years, and the courtyard has a few new plants and cushions.)

(AHINOAM and HAGGIT sit by a small oil lamp while MICHAL and MAACAH work together weaving at the loom, a torch on the wall lighting their work.)

HAGGIT

How can you keep weaving? I had to give up my embroidery ages ago. I can't work in the dark anymore.

MICHAL

My eyes still work just fine.

MAACAH

And there are a half dozen children in this house who never stop growing.

(ABIGAIL enters. She appears worried and preoccupied. She sits, then stands again and paces.)

MAACAH

Abigail?

ABIGAIL

Hm. Yes?

MAACAH

Are you alright?

ABIGAIL

Of course. Why do you ask?

HAGGIT

You're doing your pigeon impression again.

(ABIGAIL stops pacing and sits, picking up her waxed folding board.)



ABIGAIL

It's nothing.

MICHAL

You're a terrible liar.

ABIGAIL

(Less certain)

I'm sure it's noting.

AHINOAM

(Sarcastic)

Oh, well, since you're *sure* it's noting... maybe you could stop fidgeting like someone put a scorpion in your robe? It's distracting.

MICHAL

Since you haven't touched your thread all night, I can't imagine what she's distracting you from.

(AHINOAM scoffs, stands, and strides out of the room.  
She stops just outside the door to listen.)

(ABIGAIL draws the stylus from where it was securing  
her hair, causing her hair to tumble free, and begins  
chewing on the end as she looks at her tablet.)

HAGGIT

I will bet you a gold earring that she is standing right on the other side of the door.

MICHAL

I'm not taking that bet.

(To ABIGAIL)

Abigail, you'll ruin that stylus. What is going on?

(ABIGAIL glances at the door and lowers her voice.  
Frustrated, AHINOAM leaves.)

ABIGAIL

David summoned me to ask about a woman he saw. He was up on the roof and able to see into some of the homes around the stronghold.

MICHAL

What a lecher.

ABIGAIL

He asked me about Bathsheba- Uriah's new wife, and Eliam's daughter.

HAGGIT

What did he ask you about her?

ABIGAIL

Just... that. Who she was. But he already knew - they're both part of his  
Thirty, his strongest warriors. We hosted the wedding feast before the men  
left to fight.

MAACAH

And you're concerned.

(ABIGAIL looks away, avoiding the others' gazes.)

ABIGAIL

I told him to leave her be. (Beat) He wouldn't take another man's wife.

HAGGIT

(Looking pointedly at ABIGAIL and MICHAL.)

Right.

ABIGAIL

(A rebuke)

My husband was dead and Michal was David's wife first. It doesn't matter.  
He's not reckless enough to take the wife of one of his most trusted soldiers.  
He'll listen.

MICHAL

Keep telling yourself that. Maybe God will hear you.

(Blackout.)

## ACT III

## SCENE 1

(Daytime. **Formal setting.** The women are dressed finely and wearing makeup, just as they had been to greet MICHAL.)

(MICHAL sits alone at the loom, her movements aggressive.)

(ABIGAIL stands to the side, giving instructions to a SERVANT.)

(Fed up, MICHAL stands and crosses to ABIGAIL, interrupting her words to the SERVANT.)

ABIGAIL

Extra linens, three gowns, and kohl. We need fresh water in the ewer-

MICHAL

I thought you said he listens to you, that you warned him against taking the girl.

ABIGAIL

(To SERVANT)

Bring me a basin of hot water and a towel as well. Go.

(SERVANT exits stage left.)

ABIGAIL

(To MICHAL)

Usually he listens. This time he didn't. Please don't be horrible to her, Michal.

MICHAL

Why would I be horrible to her?

AHINOAM

Because you're horrible.

ABIGAIL

(Choosing her words carefully)

You are sometimes abrasive.

MICHAL

I'm not horrible. I'm angry. But I'm not angry at her.

MAACAH

Whether a person was the target of your anger or not hasn't mattered much so far.

(BATHSHEBA, a girl of fifteen or sixteen, appears at the entrance to the courtyard stage right looking uncertain and miserable. MICHAL sees her, and ABIGAIL turns to follow her gaze.)

(The women stand as they see her.)

(SERVANT enters from stage left with a basin of water and a towel.)

ABIGAIL

(Gentle)

Bathsheba, welcome. Please, come in. Would you like some water? May I bathe your feet?

(BATHSHEBA nervously shakes her head.)

ABIGAIL (Continued)

Have you eaten? Perhaps some bread? You're welcome to join us here, or we can-

BATHSHEBA

No. Thank you.

MICHAL

(To ABIGAIL)

She looks ready to be sick.

(BATHSHEBA places a hand over her mouth and slowly backs away.)

MAACAH

I was that way with Absalom and Tamar.

HAGGIT

So it's true. You're pregnant with David's child.

(The women start speaking quickly over one another. Each question lands on BATHSHEBA like a blow, causing her to flinch. She attempts to answer the questions but they come too quickly.)

AHINOAM

Did you know the king would be on the roof?

BATHSHEBA

It was after dark!

EGLAH

Uriah was a Hittite right? One of David's soldiers?

BATHSHEBA

Yes-

AVITAL

How far along are you?

BATHSHEBA

I don't know, three-

AHINOAM

Did you husband really not suspect? I mean, given the servants and messengers, it wasn't exactly a secret.

BATHSHEBA

I don't-

HAGGIT

Did David really send him to the front line to die?

(BATHSHEBA covers her face, her grief still fresh.)

ABIGAIL

(In a commanding yell that would do a general proud.)

Enough!

(The wives quiet, and ABIGAIL speaks more softly, her eyes on BATHSHEBA and her words as much for the girl as the other women in the room.)

ABIGAIL (Continued)

The king is the king. What choice is there in the face of his will?

MICHAL

(Gently)

Come, child. I'll show you to your room. You don't need to deal with these hyenas right now.

(MICHAL leads BATHSHEBA from the room, glaring back at the other women as she does so.)

ABIGAIL

What is wrong with you all? Is that any way to welcome the girl?

AHINOAM

Why are you coddling her?

ABIGAIL

Did you even look at her? She is devastated. She lost her husband. They'd only married last winter.

AHINOAM

And then she married a king! Don't tell me that you believe her an innocent, that she didn't know there was a view into her courtyard from the palace roof.

ABIGAIL

It was evening!

HAGGIT

There was clearly still enough light for the king to see her.

ABIGAIL

To think I worried that Michal would be horrible. Listen to yourselves! Have you become so callous that you see pain and believe guile?

AHINOAM

Have you become so soft that you don't? Amnon uses his big sweet eyes to protest his innocence when honey still drips from his chin. Perhaps it worked when he was five, but at fifteen I would be a fool not to know better.

MAACAH

Amnon is a spoiled wretch, and you still let him get away with putting his hand in the honey pot.

AVITAL

That was Amnon?

AHINOAM

(Ignoring AVITAL)

Anyone is capable of ambition. She traded a soldier for a king. Not so different from you, is it, Abigail?

ABIGAIL

My husband's heart gave out. David had nothing to do with it.

AHINOAM

Who said I was accusing David?

(ABIGAIL looks aghast and shakes her head. She pauses to reel herself in before speaking.)

ABIGAIL

This isn't about me. Whether Bathsheba intended to be seen or not, she is here now, pregnant, and heartbroken. Rather than acting like a pack of hyenas going for the kill, be civil.

AHINOAM

Why? Why be civil to some bit who is poised to displace us in the king's attentions and give birth to yet another contender for the throne?

EGLAH

Because we're not all yapping bitches like you?

AHINOAM

It's not being a bitch to state the obvious. The king hasn't called any of us in weeks, and if you haven't figured out why at this point, well,

(To ABIGAIL, snide)

so much for your vaunted good sense. Or perhaps you haven't noticed a difference? And that child she carries is yet more competition for Amnon, Absalom, Adonijah,... and Ithream, and...

ABIGAIL

No, please, go on. Can you name them all?

(AHINOAM scowls)

AVITAL

(Excitedly naming her son)

My Shephatiah!

ABIGAIL

So what's one more? Or a dozen more?

AHINOAM

Says the woman with no skin in the game.

(ABIGAIL is visibly hurt by this comment.)

MAACAH

Enough, Ahinoam.

(To ABIGAIL)

Abigail, you know that the king's attention is finite. Ahinoam is... Ahinoam, but she isn't wrong about that, at least. If the crown is to go to one of the king's sons, the field is already crowded. If it doesn't go to one of them, well, I'm grateful my Tamar will marry out of this hyena pit.

AHINOAM

And into another. You should know that, king's daughter.

MAACAH

Ah, but you are not in every court.

AHINOAM

If I'm her greatest adversary, then the girl was born under a lucky star.

ABIGAIL

Whether the king is fixated on Bathsheba or not, we all must live together.

This would be much easier if you all would sheathe your claws.

(ABIGAIL leaves through the same exit as MICHAL and  
BATHSHEBA.)

(Blackout.)



## ACT III

## SCENE 2

(Late afternoon. **Work setting.** MICHAL and ABIGAIL sit together weaving on a loom. The courtyard is otherwise empty of people. A lantern glows next to them, allowing them to see their work.)

(ABIGAIL and MICHAL work in strained silence for a few second before ABIGAIL speaks.)

ABIGAIL

Something on your mind?

MICHAL

(Beat)

Did you really think I'd be horrible to Bathsheba?

ABIGAIL (Considering)

You're not cruel like Ahinoam, but you don't bother to hide the disdain you feel for us. Bathsheba is pregnant with David's child, and you've made your feelings about that particular activity abundantly clear. Anyway, it turns out you were not the one I needed to be worried about.

MICHAL

I'm just... just angry. How is it that my father was denied the throne for making a wrongful sacrifice and sparing a man's life, but David can don an ephod and dance through the street playing the priest, abduct a married woman, and have countless men killed, no problem?

ABIGAIL

Who am I to know Yahweh's will? You're allowed to be angry. But you needn't make all of us the focus of your anger.

(Joking)

Perhaps just focus on Ahinoam.

(MICHAL snorts in amusement.)

ABIGAIL

Why were you kind to Bathsheba?

MICHAL

Do I need a reason?

ABIGAIL

You? Yes.

MICHAL

Fair, I suppose. It was clear she didn't want to be here in any sense. How can I be angry at her when she had no choice in the matter?

ABIGAIL

It hasn't stopped you from being angry at anyone else here.

(MICHAL looks at ABIGAIL in confusion.)

ABIGAIL (Continued)

Avital and Eglah were captured in one of David's raids. Avital was fourteen. Maacah was a political alliance, daughter of a king, like you. She'd never met David before they were wed. Ahinoam was exchanged for land. Haggit's marriage sealed the alliance between her father and David. She cried for a week because she loved a shepherd who worked her father's herds.

MICHAL

I didn't know.

ABIGAIL

You didn't care to.

MICHAL

You all seem fine though.

ABIGAIL

Some adjusted more readily. My husband...he supported your father. He antagonized David, trusting his wealth would protect us in the absence of sufficient armed men to stand up to David's raiders. He would not listen to me, and he could not - would not - see what was coming. He was a boor and a fool to think he could withstand David, and his blindness nearly cost us the lives of all our people, people who depended on us for their livelihoods, to say nothing of my own life and virtue.

MICHAL

David was a warlord trying to extort your husband.

ABIGAIL

He was Yahweh's chosen king, and my husband would not listen. When he died... We were a tempting target and I knew David would protect me and my people. Our land is prosperous. The wool we spin and the threads we weave are from my flocks. But we were shepherds, not fighters. God chose David. Samuel anointed him. I was given a message and had a mandate to deliver it,

and in doing so was presented with a way to save my people. I chose to be here.

(Beat)

Others had a longer path. Just because you don't see their pain doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

MICHAL

You're right. I'm sorry.

ABIGAIL

Say that again.

MICHAL

I'm sorry?

ABIGAIL

No, the other part.

MICHAL

You're right?

ABIGAIL

Yes. That's lovely. I'm always a 'fool who can't see what's right in front of her.' It's so nice to have a change of pace.

MICHAL

Shut up, Abigail.

ABIGAIL

(Beat)

I fear David will soon learn that kingship is not necessarily a blessing.

MICHAL

Good.

ABIGAIL

Unlikely.

MICHAL

I hope he suffers. I hate this place, this city, this palace. All of it.

ABIGAIL

(Stung)

All of it?

MICHAL

Look what it has done to us. We are roles, positions. David's wives. Saul's daughter. Not Abigail or Michal. I just want to be Michal.

ABIGAIL

So who is Michal?

(MICHAL looks at ABIGAIL to see if she's sincere, and ABIGAIL nods for MICHAL to continue.)

MICHAL

(Tentative at first, then more confident.)

I used to follow Jonathan like a puppy. He gave me my first bow when I was six.

(Wistful smile)

I could shoot a leaf on an olive tree at thirty paces. I dreamed of being a soldier.

ABIGAIL

I can see that.

MICHAL

My father used to sing to me about Deborah - warrior and prophetess. I wanted to be her when I grew up. Fierce, strong, and wise.

ABIGAIL

You're fierce enough. I can see you terrorizing some Philistines.

MICHAL

Instead, I'm here.

ABIGAIL

Indeed.

MICHAL

When I was old enough, I went to the Tabernacle at Shiloh. I served the priestesses there. I learned the lute and hand drum. We used to dance, my sister and I and the other women, for the grape harvest, for Yahweh, sometime just for the joy of dancing.

(Beat)

My mother had served too, before she died. Her family had served at Shiloh for generations. My father gave me her instruments and her *teraphim* when I married David. I think on some level he knew David would be king, and he wanted me to bear David's children and return to service at the Tabernacle as priestess and Queen Mother to the future king.

ABIGAIL

I see.

MICHAL

You see a bitter and disappointed woman.

ABIGAIL

I see a fierce woman who was denied her calling. A woman with music in her soul that she has been forced to silence. Do you want to have the king's children, to be the priestess and Queen Mother?

MICHAL

Remember when I publicly embarrassed him? I believe that bridge is well and truly burned.

ABIGAIL

Do not be so certain. For a child of Saul's line, David would swallow his pride. He has a temper, but he is practical.

MICHAL

No. Thank you. Definitely not. Besides, David has abolished women's service.

ABIGAIL

We could get you a lute. Or perhaps a bow?

MICHAL

I'm not sure I could hit a horse at thirty paces at this point, let alone a leaf.

ABIGAIL

Pity. It would be a fun way to terrorize Ahinoam.

MICHAL

Abigail! I'm shocked!

ABIGAIL

Liar.

MICHAL

I don't mind the weaving. Grinding grain is cathartic.

ABIGAIL

You don't need to do either of those, you know. David has enough servants.

MICHAL

Spare me. We all have our roles. You and Maacah advise the king and you manage the palace. Ahinoam and Haggit cook and serve at the feasts. Eglah

and Avital mind the children. I do not have the temperament for any of that, but if I'm not useful, then I'm an ornament. And I will not be that.

ABIGAIL

You want to be useful, but not a tool or a pawn. What is the difference?

MICHAL

Choice.

(Beat)

The priestesses wove cloth for the Tabernacle, the alter, and the holy vestments. I used to join in their weaving. I love watching something beautiful and useful take shape, to know that I was a part of its creation.

ABIGAIL

Me too.

(Blackout.)

## ACT III

## SCENE 3

(Daytime. **Work setting**, and a lute and hand drum are visible. ABIGAIL sits rigidly at her table while MICHAL paces behind her.)

(AVITAL keeps lookout stage left, while AHINOAM, EGLAH, HAGGIT, MAACAH, and MICHAL question ABIGAIL.)

MICHAL

(Angry)

Nathan said what?

AHINOAM

She didn't stutter.

MAACAH

Really, Ahinoam, you can't contain yourself even now?

AHINOAM

It's not my fault she asked a stupid question.

HAGGIT

Do we know what precisely is meant by the king's 'women' being taken? Is that us or maybe just the concubines?

ABIGAIL

Does it matter? Would you really offer them up?

HAGGIT

Well...

(MICHAL snorts in disgust.)

EGLAH

I thought you liked Selah.

AVITAL

If one of the neighbors is a danger to us, can't we move?

AHINOAM

(Sarcastic)

Yes, to one of the other strongholds. I'm sure that would prevent the prophecy from coming true.

AVITAL

(Excited)

Great! I'll pack!

ABIGAIL

No, Avital, I'm afraid that's not how prophecies work. Too often the more one acts to foil a prophecy, the more they enable it to come to fruition.

AVITAL

What?

MICHAL

It's very hard to outrun Yahweh's punishment.

AVITAL

Oh.

MAACAH

What about the 'sword never departing from his house' thing? Is that a metaphor, or more literal?

ABIGAIL

I'm not an expert-

MAACAH

You are a prophetess!

AHINOAM

Is she though?

ABIGAIL

(Ignoring both interruptions)

-but I am fairly sure that's a metaphor for violence.

MICHAL

Is there any chance the rest is metaphor as well? The baby?

ABIGAIL

No, that part was clear enough.

AVITAL

She's coming!

(AHINOAM, AVITAL, EGLAH, and HAGGIT flee stage right. MAACAH hesitates a beat and then follows.)

MICHAL

It isn't fair! Why do you have to tell her?



ABIGAIL

Are you offering? Perhaps I should fetch Ahinoam? She couldn't have made it far.

MICHAL

No! But Nathan made the prophecy, and it's David's fault, so why can't they do it?

ABIGAIL

You think they'll do it better?

(BATHSHEBA enters the room carrying an infant in swaddling cloths.)

BATHSHEBA

Do what better?

ABIGAIL

Nothing. Why don't you have a seat? Would you like a drink?

(BATHSHEBA nods. MICHAL moves before ABIGAIL is able and pours a small cup of wine for BATHSHEBA and gives it to her.)

BATHSHEBA

Thank you.

(MICHAL pours a much larger cup which she starts to hand to ABIGAIL. She stops, drains the cup herself, refills it, and hands it to ABIGAIL.)

ABIGAIL

(Beat, amused)

Thank you.

(To BATHSHEBA)

How are you feeling?

BATHSHEBA

My-

(She gestures at her chest and winces.)

They hurt. All the time. Too full, sore, cracked, leaking. And it still feels like my insides are trying to fall out.

ABIGAIL

I remember- I don't miss that part.

(MICHAL looks sharply at ABIGAIL while ABIGAIL steps forward and lifts a hand as though to stroke the baby's cheek but she halts and pulls back.)

BATHSHEBA

Where is everyone? Usually the courtyard is full at this time of day.

MICHAL

They're hiding. Cowards.

BATHSHEBA

Hiding? Why?

(ABIGAIL stands and walks to the loom as she tries to collect herself. She drains her cup of wine and then pours herself another, struggling to control her emotions.)

BATHSHEBA

Abi?

ABIGAIL

(Not facing BATHSHEBA)

There was news.

BATHSHEBA

What news?

MICHAL

(Prompting ABIGAIL)

From Nathan.

ABIGAIL

From Nathan.

(ABIGAIL attempts to shake herself out of her own feelings, she returns to BATHSHEBA.)

BATHSHEBA

Did he foretell some doom or something?

MICHAL

In a manner of speaking.

ABIGAIL

The king is to be punished for... for taking you. And your first husband's death.

BATHSHEBA

It's true then? That the king sent him to the front to die? I know my father believes that.

ABIGAIL

Yes.

BATHSHEBA

Then that's good. I'm glad he's being punished. Uriah served him faithfully for years. Hittite or no, he was honorable and deserved better!

(Looking around at the empty space.)

But that's not why the others are hiding. There's more.

ABIGAIL

Nathan said that the sword will never depart from the king's house. Our house. That his women will be taken by another. And-

(ABIGAIL breaks off, unable to continue. MICHAL stands, frustrated, and paces to BATHSHEBA'S other side, drawing her eyes away from ABIGAIL so she can collect herself without BATHSHEBA'S scrutiny.)

MICHAL

Why should the man not pay for his own crimes when his wives and children could do so instead?

ABIGAIL

(Shrugs helplessly to her question, and then steels herself.)

Bathsheba, the child you carry- Nathan said it will die.

BATHSHEBA

No. No! He's innocent. We're- he's innocent.

ABIGAIL

I know. I'm so sorry.

(BATHSHEBA begins to sob, then flees the room.  
ABIGAIL is also in tears.)

MICHAL

Not to be... well. I notice the king is praying for the fate of one child, not the others, nor the fates of his wives. This is the man that God chose? That Samuel anointed?

ABIGAIL

Timing, Michal.

(ABIGAIL wipes her eyes and tries to pull herself together with mixed success.)

The girl is devastated. Could you question Yahweh later?

MICHAL

I plan to. She'll still be devastated in ten minutes when I go check on her. You first. What is going on? Why is this affecting you so much?

ABIGAIL

(With difficulty)

We had a child, David and I. He was Daniel. Dani. He- he had red hair like his father, and this infectious laugh.

(ABIGAIL swallows heavily and MICHAL offers her a cloth so she can wipe her eyes and nose.)

He was only three. A fever. David was... he was devastated. When I look at David, I still see the man who made his toddler laugh when he tossed him in the air, who would sneak the boy dates when he thought I wasn't looking. He changed, after. He- He knows what it is to lose, Michal. Fear takes us all differently.

MICHAL

You love him.

ABIGAIL

Do you hate me for it?

MICHAL

I don't hate you. Not anymore. I just don't understand why you don't see a problem with David fasting and praying for one child rather than all of us who will suffer for his actions.

ABIGAIL

(Shaking her head)

He's grieving. This isn't the right time to question him-

MICHAL

You're a prophetess of Yahweh and his chief advisor! Isn't your role to question him, to guide his behavior?

ABIGAIL

(Angry at last)

I can only guide him if he listens! I do all I can to ensure my words are heard, but I cannot force him to heed me, not now!

MICHAL

He listens to Nathan!

ABIGAIL

Nathan has a penis!

(Beat, calmer)

Right now he's hurting, mourning. How can you be angry at me for that?

MICHAL

I hate being this powerless when she's hurting. I hate David for causing her pain.

(Beat)

I miss joy. I miss laughter. I hate him for destroying them both.

ABIGAIL

He doesn't control your feelings, only your circumstances. I thought I lost joy when Dani died... but joy is a choice. So is healing.

MICHAL

Maybe you should go to Bathsheba.

ABIGAIL

No, she likes you better.

(MICHAL looks around the courtyard space and then turns resolutely back to ABIGAIL.)

MICHAL

If the king won't pray for us, then I will. In the north, at Shiloh, the priestesses served Yahweh's consort, Asherah, too. I may not be able to serve her in the tent, but she has always been a goddess of the home.

ABIGAIL

We will need all the help we can get.

(Blackout.)

## ACT III

## SCENE 4

(Daytime. **Work setting.** The central table is full of fruit, nuts, date cakes, etc. On one wall there is now a small shrine draped with cloth, a representation of a flowering tree, pomegranates, and date cakes.)

(ABIGAIL works at the table, making notes. MICHAL and MAACAH are weaving. AHINOAM and HAGGIT are embroidering, and EGLAH spins thread on a distaff, while AVITAL plays quietly on the lyre.)

MICHAL

Either stop chewing on your stylus, Abigail, or stop complaining about the trouble of getting new ones.

(ABIGAIL stops chewing. BATHSHEBA enters the room, clearly upset.)

ABIGAIL

(Standing)

What did Nathan say?

BATHSHEBA

He said I have to go!

(BATHSHEBA slumps down onto a cushion. MICHAL leaves the loom and joins her.)

MICHAL

(To Bathsheba)

You went to Nathan? But Abigail can-

ABIGAIL

I told her to go. I had hoped... well. That doesn't matter now.

MICHAL

You can refuse! Just don't go. What is he going to do, march over here and drag you out?

BATHSHEBA

Or send soldiers like last time.

MICHAL

But you just lost the baby.

(AVITAL stops playing, listening in to the conversation, causing AHINOAM, HAGGIT, MAACAH, and EGLAH to tune in as well.)

AHINOAM

(Insincere)

Aw, what's with all the tears?

ABIGAIL

The king has summoned her for the evening.

AHINOAM

She's crying about that?

(To BATHSHEBA)

What is wrong with you? If he summoned me for tonight, I'd already be doing my makeup.

HAGGIT

He's not rejecting you for losing the last one. Only an idiot cries about good fortune.

AVITAL

But, it wasn't her fault. Right?

MICHAL

Since when has that mattered to the king?

ABIGAIL

(Reluctantly)

He never summoned me after Dani died.

AVITAL

Abi, he summons you all the time.

ABIGAIL

(Kindly)

Not for sex, sweetheart. I'm more like his secretary and steward, and I have exceptional organizational skills. I'm useful.

MICHAL

(Aside to ABIGAIL)

You forgot the part where you're a live-in prophetess.

ABIGAIL

I think the king forgot, too.

(ABIGAIL pauses, thinking.)

(The other wives lose interest, turning back to their tasks and side conversations, and AVITAL again begins playing.)

ABIGAIL

You should go to the king, Bathsheba.

MICHAL

Abigail!

ABIGAIL

He doesn't listen to me anymore. He barely listens to Nathan.

MICHAL

But he'll listen to her?

(To BATHSHEBA)

No offense.

ABIGAIL

(To BATHSHEBA)

He called you to him when you were eight months pregnant and waddling like a gull.

BATHSHEBA

I didn't waddle!

ABIGAIL

You did.

MICHAL

Adorably.

ABIGAIL

And he's calling you now while your stomach is still soft and your breasts are leaking.

(BATHSHEBA folds her arms over her breasts.)

ABIGAIL (Continued)

So long as he wants you, you have power. You can guide him, maybe even encourage him to actually listen to me or Nathan.

(MICHAL snorts.)



BATHSHEBA

You want me to manipulate the king with sex.

ABIGAIL

I want you to use the power you have to help the king rule wisely and justly.

MICHAL

By manipulating him. With sex.

ABIGAIL

Michal!

MICHAL

What? You're not wrong. This isn't like life out in the villages. The only power that most of us have here is what the king gives us and the children we give the king. If we want more power, more responsibility, more freedom, more anything, we have to convince him to give it over.

(MICHAL has caught the attention of the other wives.)

AHINOAM

And that is why I'd already be working on my makeup if the king sent for me.

ABIGAIL

(To MICHAL)

Wait, you agree with me?

BATHSHEBA

But you hate him! You're supposed to be on my side!

AHINOAM

What does love or hate matter in games of sex and power?

BATHSHEBA

I'm not heartless like you! I buried my child two weeks ago. Two weeks! How can I keep the king's bed warm when my child is barely cold in the ground?

MICHAL

Bathsheba, this is bigger than you, or me, or any of our myriad problems with the king. The man is rash, impulsive, and temperamental, but he's not impossible to maneuver.

MAACAH

Preach.

ABIGAIL

Goodness, Michal.

MICHAL

You disagree?

EGLAH

She's not wrong.

ABIGAIL

No, but...

(Gesturing to AHINOAM, HAGGIT, EGLAH, and AVITAL)

Timing?

AHINOAM

The world is what it is and the king is who he is. There's nothing to be gained by refusing him, right, Michal?

MICHAL

Go jump in a well.

(MICHAL stands, ready to have it out with AHINOAM, but ABIGAIL intervenes and signals the other women to leave. They obey. MICHAL remains, and ABIGAIL offers a crying BATHSHEBA a handkerchief.)

ABIGAIL

I'm sorry, Bathsheba. But there is much to be gained by going to him, by keeping the king's affection.

BATHSHEBA

I hate him, Abigail!

ABIGAIL

Bathsheba, child, what do you want?

BATHSHEBA

(Confused)

What do you mean?

ABIGAIL

What do you want? Not me, not Michal, not David. You.

BATHSHEBA

I want my baby back! I want David to pay. I want to scream at God. I want- I want to wake up from this terrible dream and find my Uriah whole and safe beside me.

ABIGAIL

Do you know the story of Job?

BATHSHEBA

No?

ABIGAIL

It's an old, old story. There was a man named Job who was faithful to God, and God enriched him with flocks, with many children, whatever his heart desired. And then, to prove Job's faithfulness, God took it all away. His flocks died, and so did his children.

BATHSHEBA

Is David God in this story?

MICHAL

Certainly in his own mind.

ABIGAIL

Michal! Anyway, others accused Job of transgression, but he maintained his innocence. He was angry, despairing, but he remained faithful. And at length, God rewarded Job with twice the bounty he had before.

BATHSHEBA

Did God restore his children?

ABIGAIL

(Beat)

No.

BATHSHEBA

Then what's the point?

ABIGAIL

What has been lost is lost, but if we are faithful, we will be rewarded.

MICHAL

(Sarcastic)

Comforting, Abigail.

ABIGAIL

(Ignoring MICHAL)

We cannot change the past, but we can shape the future. So tell me, Bathsheba, what is the future that you want?

(ABIGAIL kneels at BATHSHEBA'S feet.)

BATHSHEBA

I don't want to feel like my life is being lived somewhere outside of me. I don't want to hate the idea of rising from bed in the morning. I want this

thing that blocks my throat to loosen. This weight on my chest that makes it hard to breathe to go away. I want this knot that twists my stomach until the idea of food makes me sick... I want it to stop. I want to feel like a person, not a wraith.

ABIGAIL

What else?

BATHSHEBA

(Quietly)

I don't want to be a victim.

ABIGAIL

What *do* you want to be?

BATHSHEBA

(Softly)

Powerful.

(Resolute)

I want to be Queen.

ABIGAIL

You could shape the future of this kingdom and our people for centuries. You will be his counterbalance. He is better with you, or will be. Not perfect. Not even good. But better. It is not good for man to be alone. Amnon, David's oldest child, is a monster. His brothers to a one are not much better.

(Spotlights on ABIGAIL and sound changes dramatically to signal that ABIGAIL is prophesying.)

If you go to the king, you'll give him sons. Be sure of your choice, Bathsheba, and one of your sons will sit on the throne.

(MICHAL gasps. ABIGAIL turns to face BATHSHEBA fully, continuing to prophesy.)

David is God's chosen and anointed king. The story will always be about him. You will ensure that it is about us too. When the Temple is built, there will be a space for us, and you will be a queen who is spoken of for millennia.

(ABIGAIL blinks, coming out of the prophecy.)

MICHAL

Was that...?

(ABIGAIL nods.)

MICHAL

Holy God. You really are a prophetess.

ABIGAIL

(With wry humor)

On occasion.

BATHSHEBA

I'll go, Abi. But I don't know how to... what...?

ABIGAIL

Ah, it's been some time since I've been called to the king's pleasure, but this courtyard is full of gossip.

(ABIGAIL looks around to see the empty courtyard.)

Usually.

(MICHAL snorts.)

ABIGAIL

(To MICHAL)

What?

MICHAL

If these hyenas truly knew the secrets to the king's pleasure, they wouldn't be complaining about Bathsheba supplanting them.

ABIGAIL

True.

(To BATHSHEBA)

Keep doing what you've been doing, and watch him to learn his preferences. A man likes to be seen and have his needs anticipated.

MICHAL

(Quietly)

So does a woman.

(Blackout.)

## ACT IV

## SCENE 1

(Daytime. Courtyard is in its informal setting with shrine.)

(ABIGAIL and MICHAL sit together at the loom. AHINOAM and HAGGIT sit on the far side of the room and embroider. MAACAH sits a little distance away sewing a dress that would fit a child of ten or eleven. BATHSHEBA sits by the table, looking at the hinged wooden writing board. She is pregnant, but not heavily so.)

AHINOAM

-and jewels, and iron, and did you see the king's new crown?

HAGGIT

Of course. He was wearing it at the feast last night.

AHINOAM

Did you see Amnon sitting next to him? My son is now a blooded warrior who sits at the king's right hand. Watch, he'll be the next king someday.

HAGGIT

He looked almost as smug as you do. Who said that oldest gets the crown? My Adonijah is already popular with David's men. And the most handsome, too.

AHINOAM

Hah! Handsome? With that chin, and the way his eyes squint?

(ABIGAIL moves as if to stand but MICHAL holds her back.)

MICHAL

(To ABIGAIL)

Wait. Let it play out.

HAGGIT

You take that back!

AHINOAM

No.

MAACAH

(Not looking up from her sewing)

Please Ahinoam, as if your spoiled man-child could possibly be judged fit to be king. The way he carries on, he'll tumble the wrong maid and alienate the court one of these days.

AHINOAM

He's a popular young man, that's not his fault. Women love a warrior. Too bad Absalom was too pretty to get his hands dirty and Adonijah lacks the skill-

HAGGIT

Your little nuisance couldn't wield a sword if it was shoved up his-

BATHSHEBA

Haggit! Ahinoam! The king is well enough, let's not bury him early with this talk of successors. Haggit, Adonijah is very handsome and skillful.

HAGGIT

I know.

AHINOAM

Ahem.

BATHSHEBA

(Amused)

The king is proud of the prowess that all three of your sons showed on the battlefield.

(AHINOAM, HAGGIT, and MAACAH pointedly ignore each other.)

BATHSHEBA

Abigail, I'm going to go see the children.

MICHAL

Give your babies a snuggle for me.

BATHSHEBA

You could snuggle them yourself.

MICHAL

But then I'd miss the pit-fighting in here.

(BATHSHEBA leaves stage right.)

ABIGAIL

(Softly)

You're allowed to hold the children, you know.

MICHAL

I know.

ABIGAIL

Then why don't you?

(MICHAL shakes her head, not answering as she focuses on weaving.)

ABIGAIL (Continued)

Michal.

MICHAL

(Reluctant)

I don't want to get attached. I'm already too attached to Solomon. After what David did to my nephews... I can't- I can't.

(ABIGAIL takes and squeezes MICHAL's hand. MICHAL leans against ABIGAIL and then pulls herself together.)

MICHAL

She's growing up.

ABIGAIL

Bathsheba?

(MICHAL nods.)

MICHAL

The babies are good for her. She's getting stronger.

ABIGAIL

Why don't you sound happy about that?

MICHAL

I'm worried.

(ABIGAIL waits for more but MICHAL doesn't elaborate.)

ABIGAIL

Sometimes, getting answers from you is like coaxing water from a stone.

MICHAL

You keep asking me to put into words things I barely understand myself. It's hard! Be patient or stop asking.



ABIGAIL

You've always gone at your own pace. What's a few more minutes, I suppose?

MICHAL

Is she strong enough to counterbalance David?

ABIGAIL

Not yet, but I think she will be. It's not just about strength- David can't be handled head on. She's learning.

MICHAL

Are we any better than Saul or David, moving pieces on the game board, to ask this of her?

ABIGAIL

She has chosen her own path. Yahweh offers us a future, but it is upon us to walk the offered path or turn aside. We only pointed out the path's existence and possibilities.

(Self-deprecating)

And then we try to get out of the way.

(MICHAL comforts ABIGAIL by briefly laying her head on the other woman's shoulder.)

MICHAL

You make it sound so noble and not at all like we're grooming a child to be a pawn in our political games.

(Beat)

I thought it was hard to avoid a future that's been foretold.

ABIGAIL

Yes and no. It's not about what has been seen and spoken. Destiny is about who we could become based on the choices we will make. Fate is about what's in store for us because of the choices we have made, who we already are. To avoid fate, we have to change who we are, and changing is a lot harder than becoming.

ABIGAIL (Continued)

I need to let her fight her own fights.

MICHAL

She was hurting when she came here, but that woman has a spine of iron. She doesn't cower from Ahinoam or anyone else. She'll be a force to be reckoned with when we're dust and ashes.

(Blackout.)

## ACT IV

## SCENE 2

(Courtyard in its informal setting with the shrine. All David's wives are present except ABIGAIL and BATHSHEBA. MICHAL is at the loom with MAACAH. The others are sewing, spinning, or performing other domestic tasks.)

(SERVANT rushes in stage left.)

SERVANT

Abigail! Where's Abigail?

MAACAH

She's with David, I think.

(SERVANT looks at MAACAH and is momentarily speechless.)

ABIGAIL

(Striding in quickly from stage right.)

I'm here.

SERVANT

(To ABIGAIL)

Mistress, it's Tamar. She's at the gate. She was attacked by Amnon. He forced her.

(The women all react, stopping their activities. There's a long beat of silence before anyone speaks.)

ABIGAIL

Bring her inside, quickly. Has anyone gone to tell David?

SERVANT

Yes, mistress. One of the guards.

ABIGAIL

Hurry! She mustn't be seen.

(SERVANT leaves stage left. BATHSHEBA enters a beat later from stage right. She is heavily pregnant.)

BATHSHEBA

A soldier just said--

ABIGAIL

I know.

AHINOAM

He wouldn't!

MAACAH

You accuse her of lying?

EGLAH

Oh, Amnon very much would.

MAACAH

(Shattered)

Oh, my baby. My Tamar.

(MICHAL embraces MAACAH, holding her upright.  
AVITAL collapses in tears and EGLAH rushes to her.)

AHINOAM

He was sick! He wasn't thinking clearly.

MICHAL

That's a crock and you know it!

MAACAH

What do I-? How do we-?

ABIGAIL

Go to her. Take care of her. Michal, go with her?

BATHSHEBA

I'll go to David and see what can be done.

(ABIGAIL nods and BATHSHEBA exits stage right.  
MAACAH and MICHAL walk toward the stage left exit.)

AHINOAM

We only have her word. She probably seduced him, hoping he would marry her since he'll be king someday.

(MAACAH pivots and launches herself at AHINOAM,  
attacking her.)

MAACAH

Twisted bitch!

MICHAL

(Trying to pull MAACAH off AHINOAM)

Maacah, no! Tamar needs you. Beat her later.

EGLAH

(Helping to pull MAACAH back)

I'll beat her for you.

(MICHAL and EGLAH pull MAACAH off AHINOAM. MICHAL and MAACAH exit left. EGLAH stands between MAACAH and AHINOAM until it is clear MAACAH is leaving.)

(EGLAH returns to AVITAL who is starting to calm down.)

AHINOAM

(Covering one eye, angry.)

She hit me!

EGLAH

If you don't shut your mouth, I will too.

AHINOAM

(To ABIGAIL)

Are you going to let her talk to me like that?

ABIGAIL

Yes.

(AHINOAM is shocked by ABIGAIL's reply. She looks as though she is about to speak and then, looking at EGLAH, stops herself.)

AVITAL

(Hesitant)

Will the king make her marry him?

AHINOAM

You mean *let* her marry him.

(EGLAH moves aggressively toward AHINOAM, but ABIGAIL stops her.)

ABIGAIL

They're only half siblings, but it's unlikely.

(BATHSHEBA returns stage right, clearly angry.)

BATHSHEBA

(To ABIGAIL, deeply frustrated)

He says she can't stay here, and he won't take action against Amnon.

ABIGAIL

(Shocked)

What?

AVITAL

But where will she go?

(MICHAL enters stage left.)

ABIGAIL

(Gathering herself)

We'll send word to Absalom. She's his full sister. He'll care for her.

MICHAL

He's here. He just arrived. Why?

BATHSHEBA

David won't let Tamar remain here. He's worried it would provoke further animosity.

MICHAL

But kicking her out won't? That's absurd!

BATHSHEBA

It's Nathan's prophecy. I think he's afraid he'll lose Amnon if he acts against him.

MICHAL

He's lost Absalom if he doesn't. That boy loves his baby sister.

BATHSHEBA

That boy is a full-grown man who knows how to nurse a grudge.

ABIGAIL

(Shaking her head in dismay)

He's grieving.

MICHAL

He can't let this go unanswered. He'll appear weak- invite challengers.

ABIGAIL

Give him time. He'll change his mind.

MICHAL

Don't count on it.

ABIGAIL

We tackle the problem that's in front of us and ensure Tamar is cared for.

BATHSHEBA

I can speak to Absalom. He'll care for her.

AVITAL

Will David object?

BATHSHEBA

We'll ask forgiveness, not permission. He won't remove her once she's in her brother's house.

(Blackout.)

## ACT IV

## SCENE 3

(Daytime. Courtyard. **Informal setting** with alter. In the middle of the room is a table with dried fruits, a pitcher of water, and cups. The women are present except ABIGAIL. AHINOAM and HAGGIT sit on one side of the room. EGLAH, AVITAL, MAACAH, and MICHAL sit as far from them as possible. All are engaged in some sort of work or conversation, but the tension is high.)

(ABIGAIL enters looking haggard.)

BATHSHEBA

The princes? Are they alive?

ABIGAIL

Amnon is dead. Absalom's feast was a trap to lure him out.

(AHINOAM wails, falling to the floor. The other wives ignore her.)

(The women speak over each other, seeking news of their sons.)

AVITAL

What of Shephatiah?

EGLAH

Ithream?

HAGGIT

Adonaijah?

BATHSHEBA

My boys? Solomon, Nathan?

ABIGAIL

(Seeking to calm the others)

He spared the others. They're returning, and the king sent soldiers to escort them home.

MAACAH

What of- what of Absalom?

ABIGAIL

Fled. I don't know where. I'm sorry, Maacah.

MICHAL

What about Tamar?

MAACAH

Will David pursue him?

(ABIGAIL looks to BATHSHEBA. BATHSHEBA nods and leaves.)

ABIGAIL

I think Tamar will be fine for now where she is, but we'll need to make sure she remains that way.

(ABIGAIL crosses to AHINOAM who is still dramatically sobbing on the floor and sits next to her, resting a gentle hand on her back.)

(BATHSHEBA reenters and gestures for ABIGAIL to join her at the table. ABIGAIL goes to her.)

BATHSHEBA

(Speaking low for ABIGAIL alone)

My father says David won't pursue. He's just lost Amnon and doesn't want to lose Absalom as well.

ABIGAIL

(Shaking her head, disappointed)

We both know what it is to lose a child. He's just lost his third. He cannot let Absalom go without reprisal, but... I cannot imagine how he's feeling.

BATHSHEBA

I'll go to him. He shouldn't be alone.

ABIGAIL

Thank you.

(BATHSHEBA squeezes ABIGAIL's shoulder in farewell and then exits.)

(ABIGAIL pours a cup of water for AHINOAM and moves to return to her. MICHAL intercepts ABIGAIL and stops her.)



MICHAL

How can you comfort her?

ABIGAIL

She's hurting. How can I not comfort a mother who has lost a child?

MICHAL

Her child was a grown man and a rapist!

ABIGAIL

Timing, Michal. Could you save your vitriol for after we bury him?

MICHAL

No! But I can try to be quieter. That doesn't change that he was a monster, and she is a viper.

ABIGAIL

I don't deny that. But it doesn't make her pain less real. It just makes it more complicated.

MICHAL

(Disdainful)

You're so nice, Abigail. Always taking such good care. What are you trying to achieve? She will never be kind. I saw you send Bathsheba to David. He'll never listen to you. Why do you bother?

ABIGAIL

Bathsheba made that choice on her own. He's in pain, grieving the death of one son and the loss of another.

(MICHAL opens her mouth to interject but ABIGAIL holds up a hand to stop her.)

ABIGAIL

(A prayer for patience)

Yahweh be merciful.

ABIGAIL (Continued)

Am I not allowed to show the bare minimum level of decency to a woman I have lived with for more than twenty-five years, for the death of a child I delivered?

MICHAL

I think neither that woman nor her child would have offered the same kindness to you, while Maacah at least is a half-decent human.

ABIGAIL

Maacah had you, Eglah, and Avital. Ahinoam has no one else.

MICHAL

Because of how she treats people.

(ABIGAIL fully feels the irony of MICHAL'S statement,  
but MICHAL plows ahead.)

MICHAL

And you have all this compassion for David grieving his sons, but what about his daughter? Why can't you see that this is his fault! He sent Tamar to Amnon, knowing full well what a monster Amnon is.

ABIGAIL

Can David read minds to know what Amnon intended? Does he control Amnon like a puppet master? You cannot lay every wrong at his feet!

MICHAL

Nor can you absolve him! I'm not wrong, Abigail. He knows Amnon's character just as well as we do, and he still sent a beautiful, nubile, vulnerable young woman to be alone with him. Then he didn't punish Amnon, so Absalom had to do so.

ABIGAIL

You would have a man who was devastated by the losses of two children forced to take the life of a third?

MICHAL

Yes! As both father and king it was his duty to do so. Shouldn't a father correct his children when they transgress? Shouldn't a king uphold and enact justice? Pain does not absolve him of responsibility, Abigail! At least he should have made Amnon marry her-

ABIGAIL

Are you mad?

MICHAL

I'm not saying it would have been a good thing! I don't want sweet Tamar married to that monster, but it would be preferable to the life of a woman alone without the protection of husband and family. She was raped and her father did nothing. Not a damn thing. If Absalom hadn't taken her in, if he cared for her any less... It doesn't even bear thinking about.

ABIGAIL

If Amnon hadn't attacked her, Tamar would have been used for a political marriage- another pawn. With your disdain for the game, shouldn't you be thrilled that she's out of it?

MICHAL

No! Curse it! This wasn't her choice! I want to live in a world that cares what happens to us, that values our voices and heeds our wisdom. I want a society that sees Tamar, a quiet, sweet young woman who loves baking and embroidery, and playing with Bathsheba's little ones- instead of seeing her as damaged goods and a valuable bargaining chip wasted.

ABIGAIL

(Deflating)

I want that too. But that's not the world we live in. I cannot fix our society. I cannot even fix what is broken in our household. You want to know why I comfort Ahinoam? Because I can't fix this and I can't give up and walk away either when people are hurting. This life is inhumanly cruel. I just pray it is enough for me to be a decent human.

MICHAL

How do you live with it?

ABIGAIL

Live with what?

MICHAL

Your disappointment. You can't pretend this is the life you hoped for, but you're not... well, me.

ABIGAIL

(Slowly)

This is my life. My role is to guide the king toward ruling justly and I have failed time and again. Because you're right. He should have acted. The king let his pain blind him to the right course, and I didn't push, not enough, and he didn't listen...

MICHAL

We're not done paying for it yet, are we?

ABIGAIL

No. Not nearly.

(Beat)

But I have to believe that there is still good I can do, and that deep down, David is still a good man, that he can be a good king. I pray that Bathsheba will be more successful than I have been.

(MICHAL pulls ABIGAIL into a hug, offering her comfort.)

(ABIGAIL steps back and wipes her eyes.)

(MICHAL pulls ABIGAIL further off to the side, away from the other women and looks around to ensure no one else is paying attention. No one is.)

MICHAL

What do you want, Abigail?

ABIGAIL

I want our king to rule justly--

MICHAL

Every conversation we have is about the king! I don't care about him. What about you?

ABIGAIL

I am Yahweh's prophet and he is Yahweh's chosen and anointed king. I'm the king's wife, and I run his household. My entire life, all our lives, are spent in reaction to his. What else is there?

MICHAL

You are not your role, Abigail!

(Beat)

There's you. There's me.

(Taking ABIGAIL's hand and a step closer)

There's us, whatever this is.

ABIGAIL

(Gestures between the two of them)

Us?

(MICHAL nods.)

ABIGAIL

Timing, Michal! A man was just killed and we just fought. Again.

MICHAL

You admitted I was right.

ABIGAIL

In one, very limited instance that will have far reaching and likely heart-breaking consequences.

(MICHAL opens her mouth to ask, but ABIGAIL shakes her head.)

MICHAL

Then all the more reason for us to seize the opportunity for joy when it presents itself.

ABIGAIL

Michal, you have the worst timing.

(ABIGAIL kisses MICHAL.)

MICHAL

But I'm not wrong.

(Blackout.)

## ACT IV

## SCENE 4

(Evening. Courtyard. **Work setting.**)

(MICHAL mixes ingredients and forms date cakes. BATHSHEBA is embroidering on a low couch.)

MICHAL

I don't trust him.

BATHSHEBA

Trust who?

(MICHAL looks around to be sure she won't be overheard, but they are alone in the courtyard.)

MICHAL

Absalom. David. This strange peace between them. Two years of exile, two years of David refusing to have Absalom in his presence- while bemoaning the situation the whole time- and then what? They kiss and make up. It's too easy.

BATHSHEBA

You said it yourself - David has missed his beautiful boy, Absalom only now asked to be readmitted to the king's presence.

MICHAL

'Asked' is one way of putting it.

BATHSHEBA

He reminds me of you with the theatrics.

MICHAL

I never lit a general's field on fire!

BATHSHEBA

(Teasing)

Only your tongue burned.

(Both laugh, and then MICHAL becomes serious.)

MICHAL

Abigail tells me his been sitting in the gate, and acting the king.

BATHSHEBA

He has.

MICHAL

How are you so calm?

BATHSHEBA

(Explosive)

I'm not! You think I don't see the danger all around us? That I don't know how unlikely it is for my boys to live long enough to have gray hairs? Yahweh may love Solomon, but does not mean his siblings feel the same.

MICHAL

I'm sorry for pushing.

BATHSHEBA

You wouldn't be Michal if you didn't push.

(BATHSHEBA sets aside her needlework and crosses to MICHAL where she forms small cakes on a tray.)

BATHSHEBA

Show me?

MICHAL

Here, you just form them like this. They're sticky - watch your dress.

(MICHAL shows BATHSHEBA how to form small date cakes.)

BATHSHEBA

Like this?

(MICHAL nods. They continue working as they talk.)

BATHSHEBA

Offerings to Asherah?

MICHAL

As Abigail said, we need all the help we can get.

BATHSHEBA

What do I do? How do I protect my sons. Lord knows, he wants my body, but if I say 'Absalom' it's all 'my sweet boy- this' and 'O Absalom- that'

MICHAL

I am the wrong person to ask. David has killed nearly everyone I've loved, and there was nothing I could do to stop him.

(ABIGAIL walks into the room and stops at the edge of the scene before MICHAL and BATHSHEBA notice her.)

BATHSHEBA

Abigail tells me to be silent, let it go, but I don't think that's the right answer anymore.

MICHAL

She's letting her heart get in the way of her sense.

(Beat)

You can't direct David to act against Absalom. He won't. You have to work sideways instead.

BATHSHEBA

How?

(ABIGAIL steps forward, joining the conversation.)

ABIGAIL

Find allies, rather than alienating people like some former princesses.

MICHAL

In my defense I was very angry.

(ABIGAIL caresses MICHAL's cheek briefly before turning back to BATHSHEBA.)

ABIGAIL

You do have to be patient, but you can start to work for Solomon's cause. Speak to David's allies and ask him to bring Solomon when he might meet them and earn their support. Nathan already supports Solomon, so work that angle.

BATHSHEBA

What about Absalom?

ABIGAIL

What about him?

MICHAL

He's up to something.

ABIGAIL

Of course.

MICHAL

Abigail!



ABIGAIL

What do you want me to say? Yes. He's up to something. David won't hear it from me. If I say as much again, I'll lose any pull I might still have.

BATHSHEBA

That's why you told me to be silent.

(Makes an angry noise)

He doesn't want a queen. That would be too much like an actual partner. How can I be queen if he doesn't want a queen?

(MICHAL wipes her hands on her apron and then begins pacing.)

MICHAL

So what do we do?

ABIGAIL

Bathsheba cannot speak against Absalom...but-

BATHSHEBA

But I can speak for the princes, for Solomon, right? Perhaps suggest they spend time away?

(ABIGAIL nods.)

BATHSHEBA

(To MICHAL)

How about a tour of the shrines at Shiloh, Bethel, and Dan?

MICHAL

I couldn't ask you to do that.

BATHSHEBA

I'm offering. It gets them far from here. Maybe they'll learn something.

(MICHAL nods, feeling strong emotion, and then pulls BATHSHEBA into a hug.)

ABIGAIL

That's only the first step. If Absalom wins the throne, nowhere in Israel will be far enough to protect Solomon.

BATHSHEBA

He's a boy!

MICHAL

That didn't stop the king from handing my nephews over to be strung up like criminals for crimes they didn't commit.

BATHSHEBA

(Looking sick)

Oh God. Alright. Getting him away isn't enough.

ABIGAIL

You need to act to ensure he'll be king.

MICHAL

(With a sharp smile)

Then you won't have to worry about not being queen. You'll be Queen Mother. Solomon could have five wives or five hundred. There will only be one of you. *That* is power.

(Blackout.)

## ACT V

## SCENE 1

(Daytime. **Work setting** with the shrine. There are two candles lit in the shrine. AVITAL, AHINOAM, EGLAH, and MAACAH are seated, pretending to work but mostly watching the door. MICHAL is weaving.)

(BATHSHEBA strides into the room from stage right and the others rush to her, AHINOAM trailing behind.)

MAACAH

What news?

BATHSHEBA

Absalom is amassing men in Hebron.

MAACAH

He truly left?

BATHSHEBA

I'm so sorry, Maacah. I sent word to Tamar to see if he said anything to her.

MAACAH

I would go with him if I could.

AVITAL

Has Tamar gone to him?

BATHSHEBA

I... I don't know. I pray not.

MAACAH

(Shaking her head)

A war camp is no place for a young woman, not even her brother's war camp.

(ABIGAIL enters from stage left.)

MICHAL

(To ABIGAIL)

What did Nathan have to say?

ABIGAIL

Nothing useful. More of the same. God will let this play out and will not interfere for or against the king.

EGLAH

Are the princes to stay in the city?

(ABIGAIL shrugs.)

BATHSHEBA

My sons are in the north. The other princes should go to them.

(Looks to ABIGAIL for reassurance that ABIGAIL cannot offer.)

He spared the princes once, but now that he's turned his sights from revenge to the crown, I don't think he'll be so generous a second time. They're the competition.

ABIGAIL

Pray that Absalom doesn't succeed. I wish I had a better answer, or some comfort to offer. We must wait for the king and have faith that he will make the right choice.

(The women drift apart, now avoiding MAACAH as much as AHINOAM.)

(SERVANT enters and hands a small scroll to MICHAL. MICHAL reads the note, and then pulls ABIGAIL aside.)

MICHAL

(Looking around make sure no one is watching.)

My nephew, Meriv-baal, Jonathan's son- Abigail, he's gone to Absalom. The king has killed everyone else, my sister's sons, Rizpah's. Everyone. He is the only family I have left.

ABIGAIL

Oh, Michal, no! When did you hear?

MICHAL

(Holding up the letter)

Just now.

ABIGAIL

Burn that. Immediately.

(ABIGAIL chews her stylus, thinking. MICHAL crosses to a candle and burns the scroll while pretending to pray. She then returns to ABIGAIL.)

ABIGAIL

Write to him now. Tell him not to oppose the king openly. He must grow out his beard as though in mourning. He learned deceit at the king's own table.

(ABIGAIL squeeze MICHAL's hand.)  
He'll survive.

(MICHAL nods and collects a scroll and a reed from ABIGAIL's workspace at the table in the middle of the room and begins to write.)

(ELIAM enters the room.)

ABIGAIL  
Eliam, what is the meaning of this? Soldiers aren't permitted here.

ELIAM  
(Nodding in apology and greeting)  
Abigail. Ladies.

(To BATHSHEBA)  
Daughter.  
(Continuing more formally)  
Orders from the king. We are staging a strategic retreat.

BATHSHEBA  
We are fleeing.

ELIAM  
We are retreating strategically. Pack your bags. Essentials only. We leave in one hour. Absalom and his armies are coming. There's no time to delay.  
(To ABIGAIL)  
The king commands that ten concubines remain to keep the house for our return.

ABIGAIL  
I'll see to it. Do we need to set aside provisions for the soldiers remaining as well?

ELIAM  
(Awkward)  
We have already taken care of it.

(ABIGAIL leaves stage right. AVITAL, AHINOAM, EGLAH, and HAGGIT scatter to their rooms to prepare. MICHAL rises, taking ABIGAIL's place.)

BATHSHEBA  
You're lying. You only do that thing with your eyebrow when you lie. The soldiers?

(ELIAM remains silent.)

MICHAL

(To ELIAM)

You're kidding.

ELIAM

(Uncomfortable)

King's orders. Ten concubines stay behind to keep the palace while the rest of the household retreats.

BATHSHEBA

Will any soldiers be staying with them?

ELIAM

No.

BATHSHEBA

So the king wants you to leave ten defenseless women behind in the palace, the most visible and attractive target, with no defense? That's madness.

ELIAM

(Softly)

Yes, Daughter.

BATHSHEBA

Oh, God. What do we tell Abigail?

MICHAL

Nothing. I'm not sure she could survive the truth.

BATHSHEBA

I have to speak with him.

(BATHSHEBA moves to leave, but ELIAM stops her.)

ELIAM

I can't let you do that.

BATHSHEBA

Father, I have to.

ELIAM

(Gently)

Orders are orders, Daughter. The king has already gone ahead with his generals.

(ELIAM departs.)

(BATHSHEBA falls to her knees and hangs her head.  
MICHAL moves to support her.)

(Blackout.)

## ACT V

## SCENE 2

(Daytime. Courtyard. **Formal setting.** The room is pristine. There is a tray on the table laden with food, and a basin for washing the feet, as well as a neat pile of towels near the entrance.)

(AVITAL, ABIGAIL, BATHSHEBA, EGLAH, HAGGIT, and MICHAL file in, tired, and dirty. ABIGAIL is noticeably dragging. HAGGIT is supported by EGLAH and AVITAL.)

MICHAL

(Looking around, shocked)

It's like we never left.

EGLAH

Did you expect anything less?

MICHAL

I didn't - after everything.

ABIGAIL

(Dropping her pack and looking around)

He left them to keep the house. Where are they?

BATHSHEBA

Probably in their chambers, waiting to hear their fates. The king has no use for them, not after Absalom used them so publicly.

EGLAH

I'm glad Maacah didn't live to see this day. It would have killed her.

MICHAL

(Venting a scream of frustration)

The king still sobbed, "Absalom! Absalom!" after what he did! If the king had even a crumb of the love for Selah, Rena, and the others that he left behind that he has for the monster who hurt them-

ABIGAIL

(To BATHSHEBA)

Have you heard if any of the soldiers who remained survived? I didn't see any at the gates.



(There's a long pause as BATHSHEBA and MICHAL make eye contact.)

BATHSHEBA

There were no casualties.

ABIGAIL

How is that possible?

(BATHSHEBA looks to MICHAL for help.)

MICHAL

There were no casualties because there were no soldiers. The king took all his fighting men when we fled.

ABIGAIL

But how...? I just assumed-

(ABIGAIL sinks down under the weight of realization.)

The king knew. My God. He knew. He was the monster who did this to them. They bought him the time to flee. He planned it.

(ABIGAIL covers her eyes)

Oh God. I helped. I told them to stay. So efficiently, I sealed their fates. Please, God, forgive me. I don't think I can forgive myself.

(MICHAL kneels in front of ABIGAIL)

MICHAL

No, Abi, no. This was not your doing. You didn't tell the king to leave them behind. You didn't know he wasn't leaving soldiers to protect them. That was him. Him.

BATHSHEBA

He didn't consult with me, you, nor Nathan.

ABIGAIL

I didn't think. He made the choice, and I-. He's the king. God's chosen. I didn't stop to think. I didn't want to think. They drew tapers to see who would stay. I cut the tapers-

MICHAL

No, Abi-

ABIGAIL

I reassured them it would be fine! They would be safe!

(ABIGAIL's begins to cough. MICHAL moves to help, but ABIGAIL waives her off.)

ABIGAIL (Continued)

I lied to them. You told me so many times, Michal. You begged me to see. You were right. You should be happy.

MICHAL

Not like this. I didn't want this.

BATHSHEBA

You told me once that I would be his counterbalance, I would make him better. Yet he did this. Do you hold me culpable too?

ABIGAIL

No, child. You did nothing wrong.

BATHSHEBA

I'm a grown woman, Abi.

(Not looking at MICHAL)

I realized he wasn't leaving soldiers. I could have done something. I could have fought for them. I failed them too.

(ABIGAIL mutely shakes her head, crying.)

BATHSHEBA (Continued)

We cannot fix the past. We can only hope to shape the future.

ABIGAIL

How can we shape the future when this is the monster our king has become?

MICHAL

(Looking at BATHSHEBA, softly)

He will not always be the king, and he has not yet named his heir.

(Louder)

Yahweh has commanded us to care for the widow and the orphan. The most vulnerable. What are Selah, Rena, and the others if not vulnerable?

BATHSHEBA

I believe we are also commanded to care for the stranger in our midst, and you know how well he cared for my Uriah.

(Beat)

But I will go to him. I will remind him what it is to be king, and what Yahweh requires of us. Perhaps it will work.

ABIGAIL

(Weaker)

We cannot let him hurt them further. Thank you, Bathsheba.

BATHSHEBA

Do not thank me for this, Abi.

(ABIGAIL sways and staggers against MICHAL.  
BATHSHEBA reaches out to steady the other woman.)

BATHSHEBA (Continued)

Are you alright?

ABIGAIL

Is there any water? I'm too warm.

(MICHAL goes to the table and pours a cup of water.)

(BATHSHEBA and EGLAH help ABIGAIL to sit down.)

EGLAH

Can you imagine what Ahinoam would say to all this?

MICHAL

That heartless bitch would ask us what else we expected. Power games are always played with women's bodies.

EGLAH

I feel like I should say something about not speaking ill of the dead, but given the times she threatened to poison me...

(EGLAH shrugs)

HAGGIT

She once threatened to leave an asp in my bed if I didn't let her wear my gold necklace to a feast.

EGLAH

Did you let her wear it?

HAGGIT

Of course not. But I did check my bed carefully that night and every night after for months. You never knew with Ahinoam.

ABIGAIL

(Drains her cup)

It's too warm in here. Too warm.

(Confused, BATHSHEBA touches ABIGAIL's cheeks to see if she has a fever.)

(HAGGIT begins coughing and AVITAL brings a cup to her.)

BATHSHEBA

If anything, it's a little chilly. I think we're in for more rain.

HAGGIT

(To AVITAL)

Thank you.

(ABIGAIL stands and takes off her blue robe and hands it to BATHSHEBA. All the women are focused on the weight of the moment as ABIGAIL is handing the symbol of her power and authority to BATHSHEBA.)

ABIGAIL

Here, take this. Please.

BATHSHEBA

But Abi- are you sure?

(To the others)

Leave us please. Settle in and clean up. Tell me if you find the others.

(HAGGIT, EGLAH, and AVITAL leave. ABIGAIL leans heavily on MICHAL)

ABIGAIL

I can't- I don't understand why God chose him. Was Samuel wrong? Was I? What use am I if my words carry no weight?

MICHAL

(Holding ABIGAIL)

Abi, you have run this place for decades-

ABIGAIL

A useful woman to a monstrous king.

(ABIGAIL covers her eyes and sobs, overcome at what she did not see. She collapses against MICHAL, who struggles to catch her. BATHSHEBA rushes to help.)

BATHSHEBA

No, Abigail. You were never useless. When I was a broken child, you helped me find my purpose. And you and Michal are far less subtle than you think. I know you have given her back her joy.

MICHAL

Bathsheba!

BATHSHEBA

Am I wrong?

(Neither deny the accusation.)

BATHSHEBA (Continued)

The king's actions do not dictate your value. You are precious to us. God did not send you only to the king. God sent you to us too.

(ABIGAIL doesn't respond, continuing to cry in MICHAL's embrace.)

MICHAL

I should get her into bed. The trip has exhausted her and this... is too much.

BATHSHEBA

I'll go to the king and see what can be done for them.

MICHAL

Wait. Bathsheba, don't forget about Tamar. With Maacah and Absalom dead, we're all she has left.

BATHSHEBA

I won't. I promise.

(Blackout.)

## ACT V

## SCENE 3

(Daytime. **Formal setting.** MICHAL kneels at the shrine of Asherah. The atmosphere is heavy with sadness. MICHAL is bent and has clearly been crying. All women have a tear at the neckline of theirs dresses. For AVITAL and EGLAH the tear is on the right, for MICHAL the tear is over the heart.)

(BATHSHEBA walks in. She wears the blue robe and her bearing is regal, but she too is grieving and her dress has a tear at the neckline; hers is also over the heart.)

MICHAL

(Seeing BATHSHEBA and standing)

You're here!

BATHSHEBA

Where else could I possibly be today?

(MICHAL gives BATHSHEBA a look that says the both know where else she would be.)

BATHSHEBA (Continued)

Don't be like that. You know why I've been with him. I'm here now.

MICHAL

She asked for you.

BATHSHEBA

(Allowing her pain to show at last)

It was so fast. I had hoped- I'm so sorry I wasn't here with her. With you.

(MICHAL opens her arms and BATHSHEBA goes her, seeking comfort. MICHAL strokes her hair as a mother would a child. After a time, she pulls away and tries to set herself to rights.)

BATHSHEBA

Where are Avital and Eglah?

MICHAL

They're preparing her body. I couldn't- I couldn't.

BATHSHEBA

Of course. First Haggit and now Abi. It's too much. I miss her already.

MICHAL

Me too. I'm glad you're here now. I'm surprised he's letting you walk with us to the burial.

(MICHAL takes BATHSHEBA's hand and squeezes it before letting go.)

I don't know what I'm going to do without her. She was everything... I can't-

(MICHAL stops and pulls herself together so that she doesn't cry more.)

Do you think he mourns Abigail at all?

BATHSHEBA

Yes and no. He misses her efficiency in managing his household. But her kindness, her heart, her loyalty?

(She shakes her head)

I don't think he saw them beyond how they served him.

MICHAL

How do you stand him?

BATHSHEBA

(Pausing to consider)

He is not good, but he's a loving father to my boys. I think maybe even more so after Absalom. He's a broken man, Michal. He plays the part of a king, perhaps better than he ever has, but he's not... what he was. He's taken it in his mind to do a census. Abi would have loved organizing a census, don't you think? But for him...it's play-acting.

(Beat)

Yesterday, just- just before we got word about Abi, I told him that the house for Tamar, Selah, and the others was ready.

MICHAL

I wish Abi could have heard that. Forgiveness, not permission indeed. Thank you.

BATHSHEBA

Please don't thank me.

MICHAL

(Quieter)

Have you gotten his word on the other matter?

BATHSHEBA

I'm working on it with Nathan.

MICHAL

(Suggestively)

The same Nathan your second son is named for?

BATHSHEBA

(Looks around sharply)

Hush! Don't even suggest such a thing.

(MICHAL smirks, then becomes serious.)

MICHAL

If there is anything there, I'm glad for it. Your path has not been easy, and I hope- I pray- that you will find a companion to share it with. Having someone, it makes this life almost bearable.

BATHSHEBA

I have you and Abi.

(Correcting herself)

I had Abi.

MICHAL

You know that's not what I meant.

BATHSHEBA

(Shaking her head)

I would not have survived this hyena pit without you.

MICHAL

You would have. You're stronger than you give yourself credit for.

(Both women take a moment as the loss hits them.)

BATHSHEBA

When do we go?

(MICHAL looks up, gauging the light.)

MICHAL

I think we have a few minutes yet.

BATHSHEBA

Would you like the latest gossip then?

MICHAL

Of course.



BATHSHEBA

I heard this morning that the king's courtiers are going to bring in a young woman to fill Abigail's role and manage his affairs.

MICHAL

We haven't even buried Abi yet! What's the rush?

BATHSHEBA

I think they are worried that I'll step in. God forbid I should amass more power.

MICHAL

That's my girl. Make them scared.

BATHSHEBA

They have their sights set on a young beauty named Avishag.

MICHAL

Are you worried?

BATHSHEBA

The king is too old to father another child, so even if she proves to be smart, cunning, and proactive, the most she might secure for herself is a measure of wealth, perhaps a gift of land to bring to her next marriage. I'm less concerned about what she might do than about how she'll be used by others.

MICHAL

Because we are all tools in their eyes.

BATHSHEBA

Yes, so let us hope she's a sharp one.

(EGLAH appears in the doorway.)

MICHAL

It's time.

(MICHAL and BATHSHEBA support each other as they walk out.)

(Blackout.)

## ACT V

## SCENE 4

(Evening. **Formal setting.** MICHAL is lying on one of the low couches. AVITAL and EGLAH sit with her. Her eyes are closed and her breathing is shallow.)

(BATHSHEBA strides triumphantly into the courtyard until her eyes fall on MICHAL and she stops.)

BATHSHEBA

What's happened?

EGLAH

A fever. It came on last night.

BATHSHEBA

(Hesitant)

Is she--?

MICHAL

(Weakly, coughing)

I'm here, Bathsheba.

BATHSHEBA

(To EGLAH and AVITAL)

Could you give us a moment?

EGLAH

Of course.

(To AVITAL)

Come on, sweet.

(BATHSHEBA crosses to kneel next to MICHAL and takes her hand.)

MICHAL

News?

BATHSHEBA

He made the proclamation. Nathan and Avishag witnessed. Solomon will be king.

MICHAL

(With difficulty)

A good choice. Abigail would be proud.

BATHSHEBA

I hope so. I miss her.

MICHAL

(Weak but determined)

She would be. Child, in my room, my mother's *teraphim*. You will be the Queen Mother. You should be the Priestess.

BATHSHEBA

I'm no child, Michal.

MICHAL

(Fading)

*My child. The teraphim are yours.*

(MICHAL's eyes close and she dies.)

BATHSHEBA

Michal? Michal!

(BATHSHEBA cries over MICHAL's body for a moment before gathering herself.)

BATHSHEBA

Eglah? Avital?

(EGLAH and AVITAL enter.)

BATHSHEBA (Continued)

MICHAL has died. Could you please ask a servant to bring hot water and a towel? I would bathe her and prepare her body.

(EGLAH and AVITAL exit. BATHSHEBA tenderly sets down MICHAL's hand. She crosses to the shrine and lights a candle for MICHAL.)

END.