

Liminal Nakedness and Transformation in the story of Susanna

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This article analyses the story of Susanna and the Elders from the Book of Daniel, as a transformational and liminal process. My focus is the role of nakedness in Susanna's transition through distinct social and moral stages, within both the biblical narrative as well as in visual art through history. Using Victor Turner's concept of liminality, I analyze nakedness as a liminal threshold and discuss how her initial state of innocence is transformed into one of shame and ultimately to glorified exoneration. The main question is what Susanna's nakedness means in art and text, I explore how nakedness functions on different narrative levels, contributing to her journey from innocence to shame and eventually, vindication. By applying Turner's theory to the narrative structure and its shifts, and by approaching Susanna's nakedness as liminal, more complex layers of meanings and symbols emerge.

Keywords: Liminality, Nakedness, Susanna and the Elders, the Bible, art history, Victor Turner

Depicting Susanna

In the book of Daniel in the Bible, we find the story of Susanna,¹ the pious daughter of an affluent Jew in Babylon. While she is at the garden of her home, she is secretly observed by two elderly high-status men –judges –while she bathes alone and naked.

¹ The story of Susanna is not contained in all bible versions e.g. the King James version. It is considered canonical in the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic church, and consequently in the Bible versions these branches of Christianity use. For the purposes of this writing the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition of the Bible is used.

The pair of voyeurs approach Susanna with the intention of coercing her into sexual activity. Upon her refusal they construct a false accusation of adultery against her, a crime punishable by death. In the end, Susanna is acquitted with the help of Daniel and the conspiring elders are themselves put to death. In this article I examine Susanna's nakedness as a liminal element, and analyze the meanings ascribed to it.

This short biblical story has been depicted numerous times in artworks by various artists over a long period. The reoccurring motif displays Susanna taking a bath, viewed secretly, or sometimes openly, by two elderly men. Some of the earliest depictions of Susanna are found at frescoes in the catacombs of Priscilla in Italy, dating from the middle of the 3rd century CE. In those portrayals Susanna is fully clothed, and also covered in other early Christian art renditions. As we move forward in time this element shifts radically (Smith 1993, 6–9).

During the renaissance and early modern period in Europe, a large number of acclaimed painters are inspired by the biblical Susanna, among them Gentile da Fabriano, Jacopo Tintoretto, Rubens, Artemisia Gentileschi, Rembrandt and Guido Reni.² Notably, Susanna's body is now uncovered.

Interpretations of Susanna's depictions

A cluster of underlying ideas among Christians had been projected onto the female body centuries before these paintings were created. Anne Stensvold, for instance, points out how Christian writers like Augustine placed women on a lower value plane. Referring to the creation myth in Genesis, Augustine distinguishes between man (Adam), who was created by God, and woman (Eve), who was created from Adam's flesh. In this way, the primordial female body is inferior to the male body and burdened with negative values. Furthermore, the female body is perceived as the cause of 'sinful' sexual desire in men (Stensvold 2011, 53–55). It is evident that the assessment of Susanna's naked body in the Christian world does not always start from a neutral point of view.

Depictions of Susanna after the 16th century have been, in current times, interpreted as sexually objectifying. Margaret Miles sees Tintoretto's painting (image 1) as assigning guilt, rather than innocence upon Susanna. This argument is based on ob-

² Gentile da Fabriano, *Susanna and the Elders*, ca 1400, Museum of John Paul II Collection, Warsaw; Jacopo Tintoretto, *Susanna and the Elders*, ca 1560, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; Peter Paul Rubens, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1607, Borghese Gallery, Rome; Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, Schloss Weißenstein, Pommersfelden; Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1647, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; Guido Reni, *Susanna and the Elders*, ca 1620, The National Gallery, London.



Image 1: Jacopo Robusti (Tintoretto) – Susanna and the elders, (1555-1556), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Jacopo_Robusti%2C_called_Tintoretto_-_Susanna_and_the_Elders_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

servations of the painting. Susanna is centrally placed, painted in illuminating bright colors, while the Elders are in the background painted in darker tones. Such a representation leads to a visual eroticization of Susanna, an implication of wrongdoing on her part, in essence hinting that lustfulness does not originate from the two oglers, but from the naked body of the woman. A similar tonal highlighting is employed in Rembrandt's rendition (image 2) of the same theme from 1647.

One might question whether the artists intended to validate voyeuristic behavior or at least cater to the male gaze. Mary D. Garrard argues that the combination of the naked young woman and the older men creates a sensual allure that is “pornographically effective” (Broude and Garrard 1982, 149–150). The sexual allusions portrayed in the canvases at times become more explicit. In Alessandro Allori's ‘Susanna and the Elders’ (1561) the Elders are depicted not merely as voyeurs, but as initiators of non consensual physical contact as well (image 3). One of the Elders



Image 2: Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Susanna and the Elders, 1647, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, Germany. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rembrandt_-_Susanna_and_the_Elders.jpg

stands behind Susanna and forcefully grabs her right hand, while the other with his face at the height of her torso places his hand on her back and between her legs. Susanna has her hands on the Elders faces, clawing them with her nails. The beauty of Susanna and of the painting, comes in contrast with the brutal actions it displays. Such a depiction raises the general question of how these artistic displays of nakedness were perceived in their time. Were all versions of naked Susanna perceived by default as erotic and exclusively as objects of sexual desire?

Another element to take into consideration is that the aforementioned paintings present a biblical story, thus their aim is also to articulate a moral statement. If we assume that the viewers of these paintings were familiar with the ultimate fate of the Elders, and the moral context of the story, then these artworks imply the existence of two different possible reactions. The viewer could be captivated by the beauty of Susanna's naked form, possibly igniting sexual arousal, or he could perceive it as a part of a didactic tale about temptation and virtue.



Image 3: Alessandro Allori, Susanna and the Elders, 1561, Musée Magnin, Dijon.

Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alessandro_Allori_-_Susanna_and_The_Elders_-_WGA00186.jpg

Nevertheless, the theme of the scene could also be interpreted as a lesson about temptation. In that sense, Susanna's nakedness plays a dual role. Her body is an objectified fetish, an originator of carnal desire. It is also an opportunity – and an advice – to overcome temptation. In both interpretations, either that of acquiescing to the portrayed sexual assault, or that of denial of the imagined sexual enticement, we find common conceptual ground. Susanna's naked body is instrumentalized as a reward gateway for men either directly as sexual pleasure, or indirectly, by denying it and receiving religious moral satisfaction and contentment.

The naked body of Susanna seems to be unavoidably a temptation for the male observer. Her body is the most prominent visual object in the paintings. It is after initially taking in her form that the viewer observes the presence of the Elders. In the renaissance paintings mentioned above, Susanna shows moral resilience, yet the shadow of implied sin falls upon her, by way of artistic sexualization.

Interpreting nakedness – Nakedness as a liminal element

The anthropologist Victor Turner, inspired by Arnold van Gennep, used concrete terms to describe the process and structure of rituals, focusing on rites of passage

(Turner 1977, 94). Turner's concept of liminality is central to uncovering layers of meaning in the story of Susanna, as the portrayal of her experience reflects a state of social and moral ambiguity, where established norms are temporarily suspended. To examine the biblical story of Susanna, I employ his ideas about separation, liminality, and reincorporation, as well as *communitas* and status reversal.

The Susanna story reveals a recursive three-part structure, both in the overarching plot and within smaller segments: separation, liminality, and reintegration. At various points in the story, there is also a temporary dissolution of ordinary social hierarchies and norms, which in Turner's terms could be defined as *communitas* and status reversal. According to Turner, *communitas* refers to a sense of equality and shared experience that emerges in liminal phases, where people's normal distinctive status is suspended (Turner 1977, 94–95). A status reversal occurs when roles and positions are inverted, and hidden power dynamics are often revealed, as seen in the elders' fall from respected judges to condemned wrongdoers. I will explain my argument by breaking down Susanna's action of taking a bath, starting from parts of the story, going forward to the whole.

Susanna is described as “a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord” (Daniel 13:2).³ One hot day she decides to take a bath at her husband's private gardens. She commands her servants to bring her oil and ointments and to afterwards leave the place (Daniel 13:15–19). This part of the story can be interpreted as the pre-liminal phase of separation. Susanna is alone and naked. Her clothes, a symbol of ordinary social life and social status are removed. She is also surrounded by gardens which, although man made, can be seen as relating more to nature than constructions like a house or a temple would. Her servants are also sent away. Susanna is separated from other people, from the ordinary social structure.

Beyond the stage of separation, liminality awaits. Turner notes that,

Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system (Turner 1997, 95).

³ On the surface such an observation presents Susanna as a person of both outer beauty and inner virtue. A different reading would be considering the mention of her God fearing character as a counterweight to her beauty. In essence the writer of the passage could be implying ‘a very beautiful woman nevertheless one who feared the Lord’. Such an innuendo would point to a mindset seeing women's body seen as dangerous and inclined to sin.

Susanna by ‘possessing nothing’ and stripped of emblems of her status fits Turner’s description. She has become a liminal entity by leaving behind her previous, ordinary, state. When the two elders approach her in this subsection of the story, the phase of liminality begins. Susanna finds herself in a situation outside of cultural norms, a married woman naked in front of two men. Her nakedness puts her presently in a position of vulnerability. At the same time, her *future* social role becomes ambiguous and undefined. Before Susanna lies amorphous, murky potentiality. At that exact moment all elements are beyond cultural normality, and the way forward is unpredictable. The supposedly wise and ethical elders have become deviant and threatening peepers. She herself has nothing, no evident power, social structure or immediately accessible material shelter to use for diminishing her vulnerability. As Turner (1997, 94) notes, “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial”. Indeed, naked Susanna finds herself in a position which is not part of any norm. She is ‘betwixt and between’.

Susanna is now facing either rape or false accusations that can lead to the death penalty. She lets out a scream, alerting the servants (Daniel 13:20–27), and at that point she becomes reincorporated, she becomes something – an accused person. In these three stages of this story section – separation, liminal stage, and reintegration – nakedness has a transformative function as a liminal portal for Susanna. She enters nakedness as a pious, socially respected married woman and exits it defamed, facing execution.

It could be argued that the elders also experience these three ritual stages, but we should analyze the elders’ role in the story, as the antithesis to Susanna. At the beginning, Susanna is described as a woman that is beautiful, God fearing and knowledgeable of the law of Moses, in contrast to the Elders –old and impious men transgressing the law. The introduction of their characters is also antithetical in its tone. Susanna is presented in a positive light, detailing her virtues, in the first four verses of the text, but the introduction of the elders is rather short and dry: “In that year two elders from the people were appointed as judges” (Daniel 13:5). This short sentence is directly followed by an ominous foreshadowing: “Concerning them the Lord had said: Iniquity came forth from Babylon, from elders who were judges, who were supposed to govern the people.”

As if the implied characterization of the two elders as incompetent was not enough, the verses that follow establish their compromised moral status. We read:

When the people departed at noon, Susanna would go into her husband's garden to walk. The two elders used to see her every day, going in and walking about, and they began to desire her. And they perverted their minds and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering righteous judgments. Both were overwhelmed with passion for her, but they did not tell each other of their distress, for they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire to possess her. And they watched eagerly, day after day, to see her. (Daniel 13:7–12)

This description confirms the corrupt nature of the elders. Their lack of names throughout the story accentuates their degraded state. This could be seen as an emphasis on their roles, which they betray, and additionally as an opposition to the character of Susanna. While her name is eternalized via her story, the Elders seem not to be 'worthy' of names, their immoral actions symbolically stripping them even from this basic human condition.

The text continues to refer to their amorality, and the subsequent verses have almost comical undertones:

They said to each other, "Let us go home, for it is mealtime. And when they went out, they parted from each other. But turning back, they met again; and when each pressed the other for the reason, they confessed their lust. And then together they arranged for a time when they could find her alone. (Daniel 13:13–14)

Through Turner's view point we can suspect a separation stage in regards to the two men. A difficulty presented here is that the text does not provide ample information about their ordinary, "pre-Susanna" moral status. Nevertheless, their lustful state is presented as a result of a gradual procedure, and it is noted that "both were overwhelmed with passion for her" (Daniel 13:10). In that sense we could assume that a process of ethical transformation has taken place. It should also be noted that the two elders were acquainted with Joakim, Susanna's father, and frequented his house. Their ordinary status thus could be perceived as their role as judges who make social visits and behave accordingly. In light of this, the separation stage here is one of abandoning the assigned social role and expected behavior and entering an almost trance-like state of lustfulness.

When the elders confront Susanna, they cast aside all expected social norms. The judges, with the implied responsibility to promote justice and fairness, undergo a status reversal and are transformed into perpetrators of injustice and malice. They present to Susanna two options which are often tightly connected with liminality,

sex and death. At this point, not only Susanna, but also the elders have a new undetermined status. They may either become ‘successful’ sexual predators, or they might face some resistance, and consequences as well. This uncertain status is their own liminal phase. Susanna’s scream sets forth the next stage of the story, the reintegration of the elders, as her accusers.

The whole story

After examining the different parts of the Susanna story, I will now analyse it as a whole. The story consists of three main parts. The first part introduces the characters and tells the incident of Susanna bathing and confronting the elders (verses 13:1–27). The second is the trial of Susanna, with the elders’ false accusations condemning her to death (verses 13:28–41). In the third part we read of Daniel’s divine intervention and the condemnation of the elders to death (verses 13:29–63). This categorization is based on the different thematic and dramaturgical elements in each part.

The first scene can be analysed as the separation phase. As already stated, by taking a naked bath in the gardens Susanna physically and socially separates herself from her regular social environment. The removal of her garments symbolizes the separation from social status. Her naked body in the natural surroundings could initially be seen as a symbol of paradise, an innocent place of integrity and true serenity. This is taken away when the elders appear on the scene. Now the gardens become a place exposed to vulnerability and danger. This shift of the spatial meaning adds one more layer of separation.

Another motif from the story of Eden also becomes apparent. Both stories take place in enclosed gardens, where the innocent naked protagonist(s) of the stories has dangerous, malevolent encounters. The symbolic serpent in Susanna’s story has the face of the elders. One could wonder if one underlying aim of the story is to allegorically reenact the Eden narrative, with a different ending, as a psychological tool for dealing with the paradisaic loss.

As noted earlier, the elders also experience a separation from their roles as judges and helpers of the people. On a moral level, they also separate themselves from their expected social conduct of devotion. Some verses clearly demonstrate this transition. In Daniel 13:6 the elder judges are presented in a context of openness: “These men were frequently at Jo’akim’s house, and all who had suits at law came to them”.

Later in the text, in Daniel 13:13 they become secretive and conspiratorial: “And then together they arranged for a time when they could find her alone.”

In this three-fold segmentation of the story which I propose, the second part serves as the liminal phase. Here Susanna is judged by the people that have gathered at her house and is falsely accused by the elders of having a secret lover. She enters a phase of great ambiguity, with transformative potential, where her identity and fate are suspended. As Turner relevantly notes: “During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner 1977, 94). This is certainly the case for Susanna. Her own residence, in the past a safe home, has become the arena for her social and psychological demolition. The ambiguity of her existence could not be of greater disparity. She is either completely innocent or held under a death conviction.

Turner also notes of liminal entities, like Susanna, that “their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint”, and also that “neophytes in many rites de passage have to submit to an authority that is nothing less than that of the total community” (Turner 1977, 103). Elements of such a behavior are evident in Daniel 13:31–41, when Susanna endures the sycophantic accusations in front of a crowd of people which leads to her condemnation to death without her articulating a counterargument. Only when the sentence and her faith are decided she speaks, but not to defend her case, but to plead for God’s help.

The third part of the story is the process of Susanna’s reintegration into society, through Daniel’s intervention. Susanna is acquitted of the false accusations, and no longer in a state of ambiguity. The fate of Susanna and of the elders is decided, but in addition, a final moral judgment is cast upon her nakedness.

Susanna’s exoneration would not be possible without the help of Daniel. He decisively applies a significantly more scientific method of trial by examining the witnesses, in this case the elders, independently. Daniel is described in verse 45, “And as she was being led away to be put to death, God aroused the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel”. In their accusations against Susanna the elders also mention a young, fictitious man. These two men—one real and divine, the other imagined—could be seen as two perspectives on nakedness. The elders’ fabricated man conveys that nakedness is promiscuous, lewd and sexualized. Daniel, on the other hand, is the bearer of divine truth and justice, and by establishing Susanna’s innocence Daniel

connects these ideals with her naked body. This time her uncovered body is not a canvas for the projection of shame, but a symbol of innocence and pure intentions. Her exoneration and reintegration allows her to reclaim ownership of her naked body. Through divine intervention and judgement, integrity and order are restored. In other words, God confirms that the naked woman is innocent.

The story of Susanna thus provides a complex answer to the underlying question: Was her nakedness a symbol of promiscuity or innocence, or both? Different characters, stages and levels of the story convey different views, but the divine conclusion seems decisive: Being naked is not sinful in itself. Nakedness is thus understood as contextual, not absolute. A Turnerian analysis of the stages of the Susanna's story shows that nakedness is polysemantic, also within the same religious tradition. Even within the same artistic expression, several and sometimes conflicting perspectives emerge.

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Sammendrag

Artikkelen analyserer nakenhet som liminal og transformativ prosess i bibelfortellingen om Susanna og de eldste fra Daniels bok og i kunstneriske fremstillinger av den. Med teoretisk utgangspunkt i Turners teori om liminalitet, drøfter jeg hvordan Susannas nakenhet, slik den er skildret i kunst og tekst, fungerer som en liminal terskel. Fremstillingene kan dermed forstås som en narrativ reise i tre faser, der hennes uskyld forvandles til skam og til slutt til opphøyet rettfærdiggjøring. Ved å undersøke narrative skift og stadier på forskjellige nivåer av fortellingen, kan man få frem flere lag av mening, og forskjellige, iblant motstridende syn på nakenhet.

Nøkkelord: liminalitet, nakenhet, Susanna og de eldste, Bibelen, kunsthistorie, Victor Turner.