Verbum et Ecclesia
ISSN: (Online) 2074-7705, (Print) 1609-9982

In the garden: Spatial reflections on Susanna and the *Barbie* movie

Author:
Annette Potgieter[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Annette Potgieter,
annette.potgieter@up.ac.za

Dates:
Received: 26 Sept. 2024
Accepted: 10 Dec. 2024
Published: 05 Mar. 2025

How to cite this article:
Potgieter, A., 2025, 'In the garden: Spatial reflections on Susanna and the *Barbie* movie', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 46(1), a3326. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v46i1.3326

The narratives of Susanna and the *Barbie* film have nothing in common at first glance. However, in both narratives, the garden plays a central role in the plotline. In Susanna, the garden locates the scene where the elders inappropriately approach Susanna who refuses them, setting the court events into motion and the need for Daniel to investigate. In *Barbie*, the garden scene is the opening scene of the film. Girls break dolls setting the tone for Barbie as a positive role model, exemplifying more possibilities for women than just being mere mothers. This signifies a creation narrative that is set into motion. Both these garden scenes are reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. It is within the intersection of how these narratives are positioned that provides the opportunity to compare them.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article aims to investigate the intersection between these narratives as 'subversive narratives', but particularly seen in the light of the 'garden or paradise' motif. Feminism is used in conjunction with spatial theory as it offers a lens to reflect on the power relations found within the production of space found in the narratives. Accordingly, the article aims to explore the feminism that underpins the notions of space in the narratives.

Keywords: Susanna; the *Barbie* movie; garden or paradise; space; women.

Introduction

Stories play an important role in capturing our imagination and introducing us to new ideas. One story, which has played an important role in Christian constructions,[1] is the story of Susanna.[2] Susanna is often depicted as an ideal to strive for as the moral and upright woman who resists 'seduction'.[3] No other story has been so extensively interpreted and reproduced in art and other forms even if it was never included in Jewish and Protestant canons (Kanonge 2018:1). Another story that has been immensely popular in the past year is the *Barbie* movie. Whether or not you have seen the movie, we are all aware of this film. *Barbie* is the highest-grossing movie of 2023 (Pequeño 2023:n.a.). But what does the narrative of Susanna have to do with the *Barbie* movie? At first glance, nothing ostensibly. It is within the intersection of how these narratives are positioned that provides the opportunity to compare them. In both these narratives, the garden scene plays a vital role in the plotline. It is in the garden that the elders try to rape Susanna. The *Barbie* movie opens with a desolate garden scene where girls destroy dolls. The garden scenes in both narratives are reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. Accordingly, the intersection of space and feminism is the focus of this article.

Space is not a mere location which functions as a backdrop. The seminal work of Henri Lefebvre (1974) *The Production of Space* has shed light on the fact that humans produce space and shape its meaning. Lefebvre's work was initially not intended to be used in literature, but his Marxist sociological approach was meant for urban theory. Accordingly, spatiality aids in discerning the positionality of voices that would not necessarily be heard. Space is interactive. De Certeau (2002:130) uses the example of walking to describe how this movement creates a framework of being close and being further away, the notion of here and there and rendering certain spaces inactive, and others active, thus altering space. We know that space is not an unresponsive container of ideas, but it plays a critical factor in the formulation of ideas (Maier 2015:145) and how

1. A substantial part of the Hebrew Bible was written during the Second Temple period. It is predominantly preserved by Christians (often only the translation), but the moral meanings found in these sources reflect early Christianity.

2. Susanna was originally composed in Greek, although it seems to have had a Hebrew *Vorlage* (Moore 2008:80).

3. Glancy (1993:104–105) rightly argues that the depiction of Susanna being seduced derives from a 'standard code for representing gender'. This classification of this narrative as seduction must be critically viewed as it is rather an attempted rape. I will refer to this point again in this article.

we orientate ourselves. But space is also intertwined with power relations reflected in society (Stewart 2011:114). In some cases, certain actions and manners of groups are 'hidden' by the space that they produce (Stewart 2011:116). Spaces are controlled and can act as representatives of control (Stewart 2011:116). However, space can also be reassigned and is variable. Feminism is concerned with transforming power relations that are specifically gendered (Robinson 2000:285). Accordingly, the theories of spatiality and feminism complement one another. It is particularly the aim of this article to explore the underlying feminist imaginaries found in the spatiality of both Susanna and *Barbie*.

It is often discussed whether Susanna is a subversive narrative for women or whether it is simply a product of its patriarchal background.[4] Narratives with female heroes were immensely popular among Jewish authors of the Second Temple period. These heroes were particularly featured as beautiful and pious (Hogan 2019:292).[5] For its part, *Barbie* promotes itself as a subversive narrative engaging in feminist discourse or aims to promote females. This notion is also contentious and needs to be scrutinised as to what type of feminism are we dealing with. This is a movie where the advertisement budget was larger than the production budget, which makes one wonder whether the cause is truly women or capitalist ideals. The *Barbie* movie mentions that it is representative of all types of beauty, but the movie centres around the beauty of the lead actress Margot Robbie. It is the occurrence of cellulite and wondering about death that trigger her awareness of being in Barbieland, a type of idyllic paradise. Accordingly, cellulite cannot be accepted, and a beauty standard is conveyed. Although diversity is portrayed in the film, all these actresses uphold an impossible beauty standard; for example, 'Weird Barbie' played by Kate McKinnon is still strikingly attractive. America Ferreira who is typically seen as representing curvier women is gorgeous and not at all a representative of 'heavier' women. Beauty remains an important part of the movie – and plays a role in Susanna.

Accordingly, the point of contention with both Susanna and *Barbie* is whether these narratives undermine or enforce patriarchy. This article aims to investigate the intersection between these stories as 'subversive narratives', but particularly seen in the light of the 'garden or paradise' motif. The garden plays a pivotal role in Susanna as it is the main location where the 'so-called temptation' of Susanna takes place. On the other hand, *Barbie*'s opening scene may be interpreted as a type of 'paradise' motif that is employed.

The main characters of the narratives

Susanna

Susanna remains enigmatic, as we are only presented with her surroundings and no insight into her thoughts or emotions. Her name is mentioned 49 times in the narrative and by far more than any other character (Kanonge 2018:4). Although Susanna is the main character of the narrative, we see Susanna through the lens of the narrator with his account of her story, and it is his designs of women that are mirrored in the text (Cornelius 2008:98). Susanna is introduced as the daughter of Chelkias, very beautiful and God-fearing [καλή σφόδρα καὶ φοβουμένη τὸν κύριον]. Her parents taught her according to the law of Moses [κατὰ τὸν νόμον Μωυσῆ], which indicates she is pious. She is married to Joakim who is introduced in verse 4 as a very rich man with a garden adjacent to his house [παράδεισος γειτνιῶν τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ]. Susanna is defined in terms of her husband and her parents.

The narrator chooses to focus on Joakim's wealth as it forms the bedrock of the story to make the garden scene possible. Only wealthy people would have been able to have a παράδεισος 'paradise'. Παράδεισος is a Persian loanword that was initially employed to describe the Persian king's parks (Balz & Schneider 1990:17).[6] Παράδεισος can also be translated as 'garden' or 'orchard'.[7] But what is also important about Joakim's wealth is that Susanna would have a certain status. Their house would be where Jewish people would come together and as seen in verse 6, would be where court cases were tried. Joakim is held in high esteem, and all the Jews go to him [καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν προσήγοντο οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι διὰ τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐνδοξότερον πάντων], including the elders, who intend to cause Susanna harm, would have known her husband and have been guests at their home. She would have also been well-known to her community. She has many slaves that must do as she requires, which indicates a manner of power and influence; but as Cornelius (2008:99) points out, she remains the property of Joakim and without her husband, she is without status and wealth.

Barbie

Barbie is presented as the heroine of women. She wants to invite girls to think of themselves as more than just mere mothers. She rescues girls from the confines of stereotypical maternal roles and introduces them to diverse occupations (Yakali 2024:198). Barbie shows women they can be presidents and doctors, although the main character, played by Margot Robbie, is just the 'normal' Barbie. She is beautiful and parties every night with her girlfriends. The Mattel company features in the film with Will Farrell as the CEO of the company. In a hilarious and cringy line, he mentions: 'I love girls, this is the only job where I can love girls without it being strange'. Is this a true statement reflective of society? What about involved fathers and encouraging teachers? Are men not capable of interacting with women in a manner that does not objectify them? In an interesting play on advertising, all problems with Barbie are not the Mattel company's fault and it is hurtful to Barbie who only wants what is good for all girls. The movie also ends with Barbie wanting to have ovaries. This raises the question of whether women as

4.Cornelius (2008:99) argues that the text of Susanna has been employed in many settings, but none of these settings included 'to persuade people that God changed Susanna's power in society in particular, or the power of women in general'.

5.For example, the depictions of Judith 8:7–8; Tobit 6:12, 3:14–15 and LXX Esther 2:7 and 20 (Moore 2008:95).

6.For example, with wild animals (Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.2.7) and trees (2.4.14). Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.2.7. The word παράδεισος is translated as 'orchard' in NETS.

7.For example, Philo; Jos., Ant. 1, 37; SibOr 1, 24; 26; 30; Iren. 5, 5, 1; Orig., C. Cels. 7, 50, 31; Hippol., Did., Theoph. Ant. 2, Dg 12:3 (Bauer et al. 2000:761).

mothers are subverted. There is much to unpack with this movie, particularly this movie's lens on women.

Space in *Barbie*

Barbie resides in a paradisiacal realm called Barbieland where 'every day is a great day'. In this world, Barbies rule in matriarchal fashion, and Kens are essentially second-class citizens (La Porte 2023:1). This world mirrors how both boys and girls immerse themselves in their imaginative play (Yakali 2024:198). As individuals mature into adulthood, a shift occurs, and this causes active agents to become objectified subjects (Yakali 2024:198). Barbie undergoes a transition as she moves from Barbieland to the real world. This is a journey that compels her to leave paradise and navigate the complexities of real-world womenhood, where the concept of perfection is inherently absent (Yakali 2024:198).

The 'garden scene' in *Barbie* is to my mind the opening scene of the film. But this garden is a wasteland. The scene references Stanley Kubrick's film *2001:A Space Odyssey* which shows a group of hominins discovering a futuristic monolith. The narrator begins by saying that since the beginning of time, since the first little girls ever existed, there have been dolls, but the dolls were forever baby dolls. The girls always had to play the mother, 'which could be fun, for a little while', as the narrator states. This continued until a group of girls were shocked by seeing a massive Barbie in a black and white swimsuit (a reference to the 1959 Barbie doll). The little girls then start to break the baby dolls. This is the creation scene as girls are invited to be more than mere mothers. But what are girls invited to? The scenery is desolate and barren. Is the implication that female leaders break structures or that destruction itself should be equated with female leadership? Is a female who wants to have children less of a strong female as she does not fit the mould? In Barbieland, women are leaders, but the patriarchy is sought out by Ken as the only way to have a place within the dominated space. In Barbieland, Ken is taking a second-class role. Perhaps this is illustrative of what women experience. However, as a construction of a third space that offers the possibility to reimagine the roles of both genders and to promote the feminist ideal that all have a place, it seems rather restrictive. The imagined space of Barbieland shapes a sense of political possibilities that is indicative of how we question social spaces in general (Robinson 2000:286).

Space in Susanna

The story is set in Babylon. This is also indicated as the location where 'lawlessness came forth from Babylon' ([ἐξῆλθεν ἀνομία ἐκ Βαβυλῶνος] {OG 5}). Already, not participating in the Jewish values is juxtaposed with Babylon which is typically depicted as a location with bad influence. There is a bit of a play with space in the narrative. In both the OG and Theodotion verse 9, the elders turned away their eyes to not look to heaven. In contrast, Susanna looks up to heaven in verse 35 'because her heart trusted in the Lord' Susanna's aid comes from heaven (Kanonge 2014:76). The elders who are supposed to be good and uphold the values of the Jews are bad, and Susanna, a mere woman, is the one who is obedient to God. Babylon and heaven function as symbolic spaces that influence the actions of the characters (Kanonge 2018:7). Susanna looks up which makes that she can change her situation and that of her community (Kanonge 2018:7).

Joakim's house is also a space that, by extension, is bad as it is in Babylon and is the location where the elders try to rape Susanna (Nolte & Jordaan 2010:537). These two elders lust after Susanna. They know she is married, and they know her husband. They would have been to her house many times and would probably have held positions of trust in the household being allowed into the house. Nolte and Jordaan (2010:538) succinctly mention the 'enemy comes from the community which should have provided her with support'. Susanna follows the convention as she waits for people to leave her home and goes into the garden when there is not supposed to be anyone (Jordaan & Chang 2018:3). It is emphasised in verse 7 that after people left at noon, Susanna would walk around in the garden. She even locks the gates, thus ensuring from her side that there is no impropriety. The Greek indicates that the garden is next to the house. Thus, for verses 13–14 to make sense, it must be possible to leave Joakim's house through the gardens. The garden doors that are locked in verse 18 are presumably the doors that give the public access to the grounds of the house with the side doors in verse 18 doors that provide access to the house (Slager 2006:235–236).

In the garden

In both versions of Susanna (OG and Theodotion), the garden is mentioned, but this is not peculiar as both the OG and Theodotion preserve the common outline of the story (Collins & Collins 1993:426). The garden plays a pivotal role in the narrative as this is the location where the plot unfolds. There is a possible echo between the Susanna text and LXX Jeremiah 36 as Jeremiah sends a letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon saying: 'Build houses and dwell there and plant gardens and eat their fruits and take wives and produce sons and daughters' (Jr 36:5–6; Jr 29:5–6). The similarity with Jeremiah 36:21–23 G is also striking as Jeremiah 36:23 points out two false prophets who committed lawlessness (Corley 2014:134).

In the LXX, παράδεισος is also used for the garden of Eden (Gn 2–3).[8] In LXX Genesis 2–3, the term παράδεισος occurs 13 times referring to the primeval garden of Eden. The term used to describe garden is παράδεισος 'paradise' which, of course, garnered a negative connotation when associated with women as it invokes Eden. Eden functions as a synonym for sin which comes from Eve. In Ben Sira, for example, Eden is evoked indirectly in relation to women as a source of sin.[9]

Tkacz (2008:189) mentions that, unlike Eve who chose to sin and brought death to humankind, Susanna offers the

8.It became synonymous with the place of the righteous dead in 1 Enoch 20:7; PsSol 14:2/3; 4 Esdras 3:6; II Bar 4:2–7 and in NT literature Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:3; Revelation 2:7 (Moore 2008:95).

9.Jordaan (2009) posits that Susanna is a counter narrative for the negativity seen in Ben Sira.

counter-narrative as she is a woman tempted in a garden, and her choice to refuse sin cleansed the entire community. In verse 56, Daniel says to the second elder 'beauty deceived you'. This is like Eve who declared that 'the serpent deceived me' (Gn 3:13). Corley (2014:135) remarks that Susanna is the reverse of Eve, as unlike Eve who succumbs to pressures to sin, Susanna does not give in to the two elders.

This sheds light on the importance of how we speak about women, for example, speaking about the encounter of Susanna as choosing not to sin raises questions. Is it normal for a married woman to just be encountered by men and want to have sex with them? Particularly two men at the same time? Most commentaries refer to the 'seduction' of the elders. This is not seduction, and the elders are intent on evil. This is not a perchance meeting in the garden. The elders have been stalking Susanna. They are often found at Joakim's house as seen in verse 6, and in verse 12, it is mentioned that 'every day they would watch eagerly' in Theodotion. In OG, they come as soon as the dawn would break to speak to Susanna in verse 12. Susanna is at home and in real danger.

Here, we must discuss the difference in Theodotion that describes the bath scene. The OG and Theodotion are in general agreement. The Theodotion presupposes the OG and there are several instances of verbatim agreement. Theodotion elaborates with an episode of Susanna taking a bath that heightens the dramatic and erotic interest (Collins & Collins 1993:426).

The bath

The author takes great pains to illustrate that Susanna is wealthy. We read already in verse 4 that Joakim had a garden and that he was very rich. This is important as a big garden probably has a pond. We think of modern gardens when we read it, but the text is referring to a park-like area, with trees, bushes, flowers and seemingly a pool large enough for bathing (Slager 2006:235–236). The text informs us that Susanna takes a bath in the garden [λούσασθαι ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ] as it is hot.

This is not the first time we hear the trope of a woman taking a bath and being desired.[10] In the Hellenistic period, erotic motifs became commonplace (Collins & Collins 1993:431). However, we need a corrective in our thinking about nakedness. In Genesis 38:14, when Tamar dresses as a prostitute to seduce Judah, she is completely covered; in Genesis 39:12, Potiphar's wife finds Joseph attractive while he is fully clothed; in 2 Samuel 13, Amnon raped Tamar who was dressed in a tunic (Satlow 1997:451). It is only in 2 Samuel 11:2 with Bathsheba's nakedness that is portrayed as sexually tempting to a male. This is seen in Judith's bath scene as well; but unlike Susanna and Bathsheba, Judith wants to seduce and uses her body as a means to an end. Female nakedness is not a marker of character or marital status but is used to indicate vulnerability (Satlow 1997:451). The Jewish literary environment was one in which sexuality was not a taboo subject, but often provided an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the human person in relation to the divine (Hogan 2019:292).

In *Barbie*, there is a scene where construction workers are catcalling Barbie. Ken is with Barbie and in a hilarious moment, they yell at the construction workers: 'We have no genitalia'. This is crass, but the sexuality is immediately de-weaponised.

We never read the story of how Susanna experiences it. This was not Susanna's usual routine. She only speaks three times. The first time is in the bathing scene in verse 17. When she tells her servants to bring her olive oil and soap and shut the orchard doors so that she can bathe. It is in this moment when the servant girls have left to fetch the things Susanna required and not seeing the hidden elders, that they reveal themselves and their lust. Susanna then speaks a second time. She expresses the predicament that she is in, and chooses not to sin before the Lord. Susanna would rather die than be raped as she denies the elders. They are essentially trying to blackmail her and are abusing their position and power. Pearce (1996:19–20) makes an important remark on the OG version of Susanna, that is, the author indicates immense sympathy towards Susanna, but also in verse 35 refers to 'the Lord her God' indicating the notion of a woman's personal God.

Discussion

Both Susanna and *Barbie* function on a level of counter-narratives of Eve's in the garden scene. Susanna is seen to act the way Eve was supposed to, as Susanna remains virtuous. Unlike Eve, Susanna is the one who says no to temptation. Of course, the temptation depiction is problematic. But one must remember that Susanna also functions on a level of being a symbol for the Jews in the diaspora. Stories can also function as a didactic tool in educating us on how to behave (Potgieter & Johannisen 2023:1.). Susanna's name[11] should be interpreted in its original context as a symbol for Israel or Judah (Corley 2014:130–131).[12] She becomes the action that is required of persons in the diaspora to remain faithful to God. In a way, she is an example of what one should do. The hearers of the text are confronted with Susanna's story and essentially, it is also a confrontation of one's relationship with God. Susanna's voice is only heard when she requires oils for her bath, then when she refuses the elders and finally when she prays. What is more, the narrative also illustrates that Susanna being obedient and doing the right thing is not

10.The theme of a beautiful woman taking a bath being observed by others is not unknown to the Hebrew Bible. We know the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sm 11). Reuben's desire for Bilhah, which is unexplained in Genesis 35:22, is occasioned by the sight of Bilhah bathing *Jub* 33:1–9a, *T. Reuben* 3:11 and in *Vis* 1.1.1–9. Hermas sins in his heart when he sees Rhoda bathing (even though he does not act on his desire) (eds. Collins & Collins 1993:431).

11.In the Christian tradition, Susanna is understood a symbol of purity or chastity. The name Susanna is the Greek form of the Hebrew noun *Shoshanna* which is generally regarded as meaning waterlily or lotus (Corley 2014:129). Shoshanna is an Egyptian loanword (Collins & Collins 1993:429). In Egypt, the lotus flower was a symbol of love. The name Susanna could also be interpreted to convey 'beauty and love', drawing on the Song of Songs especially as Susanna is introduced as 'very beautiful' (Corley 2014:132).

12.Charles (ed. 1913:n.a.) mentions Susanna was intended as a parable after the Pharisaic controversy with the Sadducees during the time of Alexander Jannaeus (c. 95–80) with the intent to illustrate the importance of cross-examining witnesses.

easy. She is not guilty. She cannot save herself; it is Daniel who provides aid after the spirit moves him. God does come to her aid in the action of Daniel saving her from the condemnation of death.

Perhaps our modern ideas of sexuality also dilute our understanding of Susanna in the bath, as this is rather an illustration of her being vulnerable. The elders have been interested in her with her clothes on. It is the moment of her being at her utmost vulnerable that is explored. In a way, the author challenges one to rethink what you would do when no one is watching, and you could carry out your desires. It is Susanna's beauty that is likened to the serpent in Eve's garden as it is depicted as deceptive. This a problem for the elders. This is not something she can change, and to be possibly raped is not something she is asking for. She has played her part in being a good woman. The fact that she is being objectified is not within her control. The narrative of Susanna was intended to illustrate why it was important to question witnesses in a court case. The patriarchal thinking is embedded in the spatial underpinning of the garden scene.

Susanna did everything she was supposed to do to be a good woman. On a hot day, she makes certain her garden is empty, unaware of the two elders waiting and watching in the bushes as she takes her bath and sends her servants away. The garden is an ambiguous space (Kanonge 2018:7). Kanonge (2018:7) mentions that the garden is a place where women and men can meet by chance as it is both a private and public space, allowed and forbidden to women. It is a liminal space that makes the crossing of boundaries possible. But the elders wait for her and have been watching her. They even discuss with one another their lust for her. This is an intentional meeting with the purpose of harming her.

Kanonge (2018:7) also adds that the author uses the garden metaphorically as a battlefield where ingrained prejudice against women is deemed to be reversed. When it comes to this garden moment, Hylen (2020:534–553) rightly asserts that there is a need in scholarship to reject the uses of public or private dichotomy as a heuristic tool, because it is anachronistic in the light of ancient texts. Space plays an important role in Susanna. Space as Susanna's body is a point of orientation to look up to heaven and the elders who look down and are entrenched in the bad space of Babylon. She becomes more than a woman, but a symbol of what happens when the Torah is followed. Of course, good people suffer too, but God heeds them.

Susanna was always intended to be sacrificed. This story has been shown to have parallels with Jesus's story. And one must be careful to want to redeem Susanna as a female. Our modern questions concerning gender are important, but these are not the author's concerns. The author is sacrificing someone who has done everything correctly, and she is humiliated and shamed because, at the end of the story, there is not the garden but the judgement of adultery. This includes the possibility of her breasts being exposed again. Susanna is a text that stems from a patriarchal culture and the text cannot be bent into something else, which would be anachronistic.

Barbie is also a counter-narrative for Eve's garden. Greta Gerwig creates Barbie and Ken, not Adam and Eve. It is a world where Barbie is put first and Ken is always second. A wasteland is depicted with the humongous figure of Barbie being launched as the remedy for generations of women who were socialised to only desire motherhood. This creation scene is the opposite of the garden of Adam and Eve where everything is green and abundant. Rather, it emphasises that being a woman begins from a place of wasteland. However, the mould can be broken. The creator of Barbie postulates that Barbie represented the idea that women had choices (La Porte 2023:3). Bardo (2023) writes:

> [*I*]n the beginning Ruth Handler created Barbieland and said: Let there be pink! There was Barbie and then there was Ken. Then Barbie had a blowout party with all the other Barbies and planned choreography and a bespoke song. (n.p.)

Greta Gerwig subverts the creation story and takes us to another type of garden of Eden. Ken has a good day when Barbie acknowledges him. In the real world, Barbie experiences shame. Much like Susanna's relationship with Babylon and heaven, Barbie moves between Barbieland and the real world. Barbie was created as a representation of dreams for little girls. The film seeks to discuss being a woman and is aware that this is a complex question.

Greta Gerwig makes Barbie aspire to create meaning and be a 'subject' rather than an imagined object or an objectified subjectivity (Yakali 2024:198). By openly critiquing patriarchy and the prevailing world order marked by inequality, *Barbie* emerges as a feminist narrative. But the movie, of course, cannot solve gender problems, and the narrator makes a jab at this at the end of the movie. A missed moment is at the end of the movie when Ken asks if he can be part of the cabinet and the reply is, 'no, not yet'. Feminism is not merely interested in a power shift, but ideally in equality for all. But the fact remains that the movie should leave one feeling uncomfortable as it wants to be a counter-narrative. The *Barbie* movie does not take the opportunity to address difficult matters such as gender-based violence (GBV) and may be interpreted as continuing a notion that women can have it all – which is not attainable. But this is not the main point of the movie. Rather, it wants to elicit debate, and in this regard, it has been highly successful.

Conclusion

Perhaps we need to stop window-dressing the details, as the elders are not seducing Susanna. In the reception and the way we speak of the tale, upholding Susanna as the virtuous heroine who musters to say no to two men suddenly and unexpectedly appearing when she is naked and vulnerable is not a true reflection of what she might have felt in that moment, nor does it aid in any way that we think about

women. We do not talk about her fears or vulnerability. We immediately want her to be a hero, and we make her a symbol of righteous conduct. Perhaps this is reflective of our way of sweeping gender discussions under the rug. We promote the ideals, but we do not practise them. Like Barbie, we know what topics are important, but we talk just enough about it to not elicit any real change. Or rather, the way we approach it often is exclusive which makes the idea of equality unappealing. Susanna's beauty is what deceived the men; this is not her problem. And let us be honest: would we be interested in the story had she not been beautiful? We are drawn to beauty. However, our reflection on the story does not contribute to feminism. And this is what *Barbie* also does. Again, having a beautiful woman play Barbie is what is part of the commercial success. But the movie does not unmask patriarchy. Just like Susanna, it is a product of its environment. The gendered power structures are embedded within the storied space. Rather, *Barbie* asks us to rethink what it means to be a woman. It is a beginning, as creation stories intend to be.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

A.P. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

All data that supports this study and its findings are available in this research article and references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

Balz, H.R. & Schneider, G., 1978, *Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Bardo, O., 2023, 'Barbie' is Greta Gerwig's genesis story', *Sojourners*, 26 July, viewed 12 September 2024, from https://sojo.net/articles/culture-opinion/barbie-greta-gerwig-s-genesis-story.

Bauer, W., Danker, F.W., Arndt, W. & Gingrich, F.W., 2000, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, 3rd edn., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Charles, R.H. (ed), 1913, *Apocrypha of the Old Testament*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Collins, J.J. & Collins, A.Y. (eds.), 1993, 'Daniel: A commentary on the Book of Daniel', *Hermeneia – A critical and historical commentary on the Bible*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Corley, J., 2014, 'Arboreal metaphors and botanical symbolism in the Theodotion Susanna narrative', in W. Markus & B. Sven (eds.), *The metaphorical use of language in deuterocanonical and cognate literature*, pp. 125–152, De Gruyter, Berlin.

Cornelius, E., 2008, 'The woman in "Susanna". An understanding of the rhetoric of "Susanna"', *Acta et Patristica et Byzantina* 19(1), 97–109. https://doi.org/10.1080/10226486.2008.11745789

De Certeau, M., 2002, *The practice of everyday life*, transl. S.F. Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Glancy, J.A., 1993, 'The accused: Susanna and her readers', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 18(58), 103–116. https://doi.org/10.1177/030908929301805808

Hogan, K.M., 2019, 'Jewish literature of the Second Temple Period', in B.H. Dunning (ed.), *Oxford handbook of New Testament, gender and sexuality*, pp. 295–314, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Hylen, S., 2020, 'Public and private space and action in the early Roman Period', *New Testament Studies* 66(4), 534–553. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688520000120

Jordaan, P., 2009, 'The pendulum is never static: Jesus Sira to Jesus Christ on women in the light of Judith, Susanna and LXX Esther', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 65(1), a167. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v65i1.167

Jordaan, P.J. & Chang, C., 2018, 'Penetration of private places in Theodotian Susanna', *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 74(3), a5004. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.5004

Kanonge, D.M., 2014, 'Gender and Jewishness: A Greimassian analysis of Susanna', *Acta Theologica* 34(1), 68–90. https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v34i1.5

Kanonge, D.M., 2018, '*Être* and *paraître*: The games of truth in the book of Susanna', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(3), 4940. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.4940

La Porte, A., 2023, 'Faux feminism in a capitalistic fever dream: A review of Greta Gerwig's Barbie', *Markets, Globalization & Development Review* 8(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.23860/MGDR-2023-08-02-06

Lefebvre, H., 1974, *The production of space*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Maier, H.O., 2015, 'From material place to imagined space – Emergent Christian community as thirdspace in the Shephard of Hermas', in M. Grundeken & J. Verheyden (eds.) *Early Christian communities between ideal and reality WUNT 342*, pp. 143–160, Mohr Siebeck, Tubingen.

Moore, C.A., 2008, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The additions: A new translation with introduction and commentary*, vol. 44, Anchor Yale Bible, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Nolte, S.P. & Jordaan, P.J., 2010, 'Susanna: A story of dangerous spaces', *Journal for Semitics* 19(2), 527–547.

Pearce, S.J.K., 1996, 'Echoes of Eden in the Old Greek of Susanna', *Feminist Theology* 4(11), 11–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/096673509600001102

Pequeño, A., 2023, 'Barbie officially becomes this year's highest-grossing movie in the world–as it edges past the Super Mario Bros. Movie', *Forbes magazine*, viewed 11 September 2024, from https://www.forbes.com/sites/antoniopequenoiv/2023/09/02/barbie-officially-becomes-this-years-highest-grossing-movie-in-the-world-as-it-edges-past-the-super-mario-bros-movie/.

Potgieter, A. & Johannisen, J., 2023, 'Resilience and gender-based violence: An interdisciplinary reflection on shaping stories of resilience from an institutional perspective', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 9(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2023.v9n1.a18

Robinson, J., 2000, 'Feminism and the spaces of transformation', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 25(3), 285–301. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0020-2754.2000.00285.x

Satlow, M.L., 1997, 'Jewish constructions of nakedness in late antiquity', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116(3), 429–454. https://doi.org/10.2307/3266667

Slager, D., 2006, 'Preface', in *A handbook on the shorter books of the Deuterocanon*, P. Clarke et al. (eds.), *United Bible societies' handbooks*, pp. 235–236, United Bible Societies, New York, NY.

Stewart, E.C., 2011, 'New Testament space/spatiality', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42(3), 114–123. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107912452245

Tkacz, C.B., 2008, 'Susanna and the pre-Christian book of Daniel: Structure and meaning', *The Heythrop Journal* 49(2), 181–196. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2007.00367.x

Yakali, D., 2024, 'Is she a feminist icon now? Barbie 2023 movie and a critique of post-feminism', *Studies in Media and Communication* 12(1), 198–205. https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i1.6478

Ziegler, J., Munnich, O. & Fraenkel, D. (eds.), 1999, 'Susanna, Daniel, Bel et Draco', in *Vetus Testamentum Graecum. Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis Editum*, vol. XVI, p. 2, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Sus 2, Göttingen.