Workshop Title:
Reframing Female Voices: Biblical Women and Their Afterlives in Early Modern Theater and Painting

Workshop Participants:
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Workshop Summary:
This workshop will consider how the stories of female figures in the Bible were retold and reimagined in the Early Modern period, particularly in Spanish drama, where the women are often given far greater power of self-representation than they had in the original Bible story, speaking on their own behalf and thus changing the familiar biblical image. In Renaissance and Baroque paintings, these same women are also depicted, but in a form that inherently removes their voices entirely, often creating a distorted version of events that is at odds both with the Bible story and with the plays we discuss. Our discussion will be in keeping with the conference theme of commemoration, particularly the ideas of portraits and reception across time, and will consider both theater and visual arts, and the ancient as well as the Early Modern periods, touching briefly on how the images of these women have remained present in later periods.

Workshop Organization:
Each of the workshop organizers will focus on two works of seventeenth-century Spanish theater, which tell the story of women from the Hebrew Bible: Tamar (from 2 Samuel), Susanna, and Dinah. A main goal of our workshop, however, will be to facilitate discussion of reframed biblical women across disciplinary boundaries. To this end, we welcome participation from scholars concerned with other national traditions and biblical source-texts, including figures from the New Testament or later Christian saints. Workshop participants are encouraged to share examples from their own areas of expertise and to bring discussion questions particularly pertinent to their own work.

Our workshop will begin with brief framing remarks from the organizers where we will discuss how our example texts relate to broader issues of intertextuality and adaptation, differing representational media, and women’s voices. After discussing our primary source material in the form of images and brief text selections, participants will be divided into small groups and invited to discuss a selection of questions, including those that participants have contributed. These questions will attend both to the specificities of individual texts and to the possibilities for productive comparisons across national and generic boundaries.

Finally, participants will reconvene with the whole group to share findings and broaden the discussion. The last ten minutes of the session will be devoted to a conversation about the further relevance of this topic and the possibilities for future collaborative and comparative work.

Questions and themes to consider:
I. Female Subjectivity

1. How is masculine authority destabilized or confirmed by reconfigured theatrical or visual representations of biblical women?
2. Are there places in which the biblical women truly gain a new voice or a protagonistic role, or are their outbursts always contained within a larger male narrative?
3. In what ways do the Bible, paintings and plays each hint at the woman's responsibility for the story's central conflict?

II. Genre and Medium

1. How do pictorial and theatrical representations differ in their presentations and reframing of these biblical figures?
2. How does focusing on biblical women help us redefine the categories of the comic and the tragic?
3. To what degree does the representation of biblical women both in painting and in drama present a new art of reading these genres?

III. Authority and Canon Formation

1. What does a renewed focus on the female perspective grant these texts?
2. Does the biblical example authorize and or encourage a particular kind of attention to the female subject or perspective? Or is female subjectivity distorted/displayed in this way purely for contemporary aesthetic aims?
3. How do the women's voices in the plays redefine the message of both the Bible and the images?

IV. Imitation and Translation

1. How do the authors studied in this seminar refigure the biblical story for dramatic ends?
2. What is the relationship between history and memory in these plays?
3. How do these texts help us theorize “re-writing” as an aesthetic category? At the same time, does this category provide us a new lens for reading these works?
Tirso de Molina: *La Venganza de Tamar* (Jornada segunda 955-968; 1083-1108)  
*Tamar’s Revenge* (Act II)

Tam. Ya sea, Amón, tu hermana, ya tu dama,  
aquélla verdadera, ésta fingida,  
quimeras deja, tu pasión olvida,  
que enferma porque tú sanes mi fama.  
Si una difunta en mí busca tu llama,  
diré que estoy para tu amor sin vida.  
Si siendo hermana soy de tí oprímida,  
razón es que aborrezca a quien me infama.  
No me hables más palabras disfrazadas,  
ni con engaños tu afición reboces  
cuando Joab honesto amor pretenda.  
Que andamos yo y tu dama muy pegadas,  
y no sé yo cómo tu intento goces  
sin que la una de las does se ofenda. (*Vase*)

Am. ¿Ansí te vas, homicida,  
con palabras tan resueltas?  
¿La venda a la herida sueltas  
para que pierda la vida?  
Pues yo te daré venganza,  
cruel, mudable Tamar,  
que en fin acabas en mar  
por ser mar en la mudanza.  
Que me abraso, ingratos cielos,  
que me da muerte un rigor.

...  

Tam. Lo que haces considera.  
Am. No hay ya que considerar.  
Tú sola has de ser manjar  
del alma a quien avarienta  
tanto ha que tienes hambrienta,  
pudiéndola sustentar.  
Tam. Caro hermano, que harto caro  
me saldrás si eres cruel,  
príncipe eres de Isräel;  
todos están en tu amparo.  
Mi honra es espejo claro  
donde me remiro y precio;  
no sufrirá su desprecio  
si le procuras quebrar,  
ni tú otro nombre ganar

Am. She leaves me, just like that, for dead?  
And with such unyielding words.  
She unbinds the wound she has dressed  
and cruelly lets me bleed to death?  
Well, cruel, inconstant-as-the-sea  
Tamar, I will give you vengeance!  
Cruel Heavens, my heart is on fire  
and yet I feel the chill of death.

...  

Tam. Consider what you are doing.  
Am. There is no more to consider.  
You have denied my soul too long.  
You are the food and you alone  
Can serve it.

Tam. Dearest brother, stop!  
If you don’t, that name will surely  
cost me dear. You are Israel’s prince.  
All are under your protection.  
My honour is the un tarnished  
mirror of my self-respect.  
It will not bear this infamy  
if you try to break it and all
que de amante torpe y necio.  
Tu sangre soy.  
Am. Ansí te amo.  
Tam. Sosiega.  
Am. No hay sosegar.  
Tam. Qué quieres?  
Am. Tamar, amor.  
Tam. Détente.  
Am. Soy Amón, amo.  
Tam. A tu hermana?  
Am. Amores gusto.  
Tam. Traidor.  
Am. No hay amor injusto.  
Tam. ¿Tu ley?  
Am. Para amor no hay ley.  
Tam. ¿Tu Rey?  
Am. Amor es mi Rey.  
Tam. ¿Tu honor?  
Am. Mi honor es mi gusto.  

Fin de la segunda jornada.

Jornada Tercera:  
Sale Amón echando a empellones a Tamar, y Eliazer y Jonadab.  

...  
Tam. Mayor ofensa y injuria  
Es la que haces contra mí  
Que fue la amorosa furia  
De tu torpe frenesí.  
Tirano de aqueste talle,  
Doblar mi agravio procura,  
Hasta que pueda vengalle.  
Mujer gozada es basura.  
Haz que me echen en la calle,  
Ya que ansí me has deshonrado;  
Lama el plato en que has comido  
Un perro al suelo arrojado;  
Dí que se ponga el vestido  
Que has roto ya algún crido;  
Honra con tales despojos,  
A quién se empleó en servirte  

you will gain is degradation.  
I am your blood.  
Am. I want you so.  
Tam. My lord, be calm.  
Am. There is no calm.  
Tam. What do you want?  
Am. To love Tamar.  
Tam. Amnon, please stop!  
Am. Love cannot stop.  
Tam. I’ll call the king!  
Am. And I on Love!  
Tam. For your sister’s sake!  
Am. For Love’s sake!  
Tam. Traitor!  
Am. Love knows no treachery!  
Tam. To Israel’s law!  
Am. Love has no law!  
Tam. To your king!  
Am. Love is my king!  
Tam. Your honour!  
Am. My honour is a whore!  

End of Act. II

Act III  
Enter Amnon violently ejecting Tamar from his room. Eliazer and Jonadab follow.  

...  
Tam. With this you do me greater wrong  
Than brutish lust could ever do.  
You are the tyrant of this body,  
So go on, pile on the insults.  
Till my time comes and I avenge them!  
A woman who’s been used is dross,  
So have them throw me in the street.  
You’ve dishonoured me, so why not?  
Fling me to the ground and let dogs  
lick the plate from which you have fed!  
This dress that you have torn, give it  
To some servant and honour him  
With the spoils of your victory,  
In payment for his services!  
But just give me more anger!
Y a mí dame más enojos.
Am. ¡Quién por no verte ni oírte
Sordo naciera y sin ojos!
¿No te quieres ir, mujer?

Am. Oh, that I’d been born blind and deaf
So as not to see or hear you!
Will you not go!

*****

Calderón de la Barca, Los Cabellos de Absalón (Jornada tercera, 2406-2424; 2470-2487)
Absalom’s Hair

Tam. Mucho gusto me has dado
en decir que quedó reconciliado
mi hermano con el Rey, porque no dudo
que esta fingida paz disponer pudo
sus intentos mejor que mis intentos;
que han de ser escarmientos,
según nuestra esperanza,
de su hermosa ambición y mi venganza.
Sus órdenes espero
en el Hebrón, ceñido el blanco acero,
la gente de Gesur capitaneando,
con las tribus que ya se van juntando;
aunque la fama diga
que mi pasada ofensa a esto me obliga.
Y pues ya ese criado
a saber mis designios ha llegado,
porque no pueda dar ninguna señal,
de lo alto le arojad de aquellas peñas:
atale atrás las manos.

Tam. What pleasure you’ve given me
by telling me my brother has been reconciled
with the king, for I don’t doubt this feigned peace
will help his plans more than my own,
and in accordance with our hopes,
these will prove to be the punishments
wreaked by his great ambition and my vengeance.

I await his orders in Hebron,
ready with pale blade,
captaining the people of Gesur and the tribes that
are already gathering;
although reputation says that the offense against me
obliges me to this much.
And since this servant has already learnt my plans,
in order that he may not give warning signs,
throw him off those peaks there:
tie his hands behind him.

Jon. I thought you’d forgotten about me.
[aside]
Jon. You always were a nice one.
[aside]
Teu. I beg you, since he came here with me.

Tam. Let that servant.
Jon. Let him be the first to die.
Teu. let him live.
Tam. All right. Let him be a prisoner, so he cannot
warn of coming events.
Let the people divide
and march in small groups.
If I arrive with them to the city walls,
Jerusalén verá que a sangre y fuego
sus almenas derribo,
sus torres postro, su palacio altivo
ruina sin polvo yace.
Pongase el sol caduco, pues que nae
joven otro que da rayos más bellos
con el crespo esplendor de sus cabellos.

Jornada primera, Ioachin habla a Susana:
Ya sabes, pues, que soy tu amante Esposo,
tan alegre, y gustoso,
que si otros, que consortes se compassan,
la mano suelen dar, quando se casan,
yo te busqué por mia, tan temprano,
que ya en tu Concepcion te di la mano.
Casa te puse en esplendor no escasa,
que por ser tuya, es ya del Sol la casa,
por criadas fieles contra la malicia
tei Ley, Essencion, Verdad, Iusticia...
Dispuse aqui, para tu aplauso pios
quatro partes del Orbe, en quatro rios,
fuentes en que te mires, y suaves
baños, en que te laves;
que te laves señalo,
no por necesidad, si, por regalo
pues deve ponderarse,
que la que limpia està, no ha de lavarse,
y tu con modo extrañio,
buelves, mas limpio, y saludable el baño,
que contigo, picina se examina,
pues tu el angel seràs de la picina.

Jornada tercera, en el jardín:
[Los dos viejos, Tiempo y Engaño, ya se esconden allí]
Salen Susana, Iusticia, y Verdad.

Verd. La siesta, señora, obliga
a bañarse…

La Iusticia, y la Verdad. Comedia de Susana de don Francisco de la Torre.
[An allegorical play in which Susana represents the Virgin Mary and Ioachin is God, the Elders are represented by Time and Deception, and Susana’s two maids are Justice and Truth]
Sus. Molesto es el calor, desnúdame, que después entraré dentro; mirad si solo, y cerrado esta el jardín.

Verd. Ni aun el viento passar puede.

Iust. Ni aun murmura el agua.

Sus. Su raudal tierno, apenas en breve rastro dexa sobre el verde suelo, no seña de la humedad, sino sudor del incendio.

Tiem. Que discreta!

Eng. Di que hermosa!

Tiem. Que candor descubre bello!

Sus. Desnudare lo que falta, dentro a solas, el unguento aromatico, y el agua templada, que añadir suelo, para mas alivio al baño, dadme.

Verd. Yo el agua no tengo.

Iust. Yo el unguento olvidè.

Sus. Pues id por todo. Mas teneos. El unguento, tu, y tu el agua, como olvidaste?

Ver. Vn compuesto essa agua es, que la hazen turbia, otros ingredientes frescos. Que el arte ha inventado, yo soy la Verdad, claro espejo, y por esso el agua turbia olvidè, porque al aprecio de la Verdad, no conviene lo turbio, sino lo terso.

Iust. Justicia soy, el precioso unguento dexè, temiendo no digan que a la Justicia, la manos le vnta el unguento.

Verd. Ya por ambas cosas vamos.

Vanse. …

Salen de donde se han escondido el Engaño y el Tiempo

…
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Los viejos, Engaño y el Tiempo, le dicen a Susana que están enamorados de ella.

Tie. Ea, concede al instante.
Eng. Que sino, de ti diremos,
Sus. Que podeys dezir de mi?
Tie. Que entregada al adulterio con un joven, te hemos visto, y que cerraste por eso las puertas.
Sus. Riesgo fiero; mas que mucho esté en él, si Justicia y Verdad se fueron? Que el alma sin las virtudes siempre tropieza en los riesgos.

Time. Listen, give in at once.
Dec. If not, we’ll say that you...
Sus. What can you say about me?
Time. That we have seen you submitting to adultery with a young man and that you closed the gates for that reason.
Sus. Harsh risk; but how much am I in danger, since Justice and Truth left? For the soul without virtues always falls into danger.

Santa Susana. Comedia famosa de Luís Vélez de Guevara.

Segunda jornada. Acab y Sedequias están en el jardín hablando de Susana. Ella pasa por el escenario y vuelve a entrar, mientras los viejos siguen hablando de ella.

Entra Susana dando el tocado a una criada llamada Sesa, como que se desnuda, y entrase cantando...

Vanse, y salen los viejos.

Acab. Acia la fuente caminan, que dà sombra aquel laurel, desnudandose Susana.
Sed. Loco estoy, que emos de hazer?...
Acab. Ahora va descubriendo de aquel hermoso y cruel pecho la nieve y le fuego que sabe elar y encender...
Sed. Ya de la fuente el cristal se comiença a encender salpicando con aljofar donde toca con los pies. Y la estaua de alabastro, de aquel divino pinzél, del plasmador de los cielos se va comenzando a ver...

Act II. Acab and Sedequias are in the garden talking about Susana. She passes across the stage then exits, as the elders continue to talk about her.

Susana enters, giving her toque to a maid named Sesa, as if she were undressing, and goes in singing...

Exeunt, and the elders enter.

Acab. They walk toward the fountain which that laurel shades, as Susana undresses.
Sed. I am mad, what should we do?...
Acab. Now she is uncovering the snow and the fire of that beautiful and cruel breast which can freeze and ignite...
Sed. The crystal of the fountain already begins to burn, sprinkling with pearls wherever her foot touches And the alabaster statue, of that divine paintbrush, of the molder of the heavens, begins to be seen...
[Las criadas entran en la casa, dejando a Susana sola. Los viejos entran y vuelven a salir con Susana]

*Salen Acab, y Sedequias asidos de Susana, suelto el cabello y medio desnuda.*

Susa. Que es esto Acab? Sedequias que es esto?

Acab. Susana, amor.

Susa. Locas y vanas porfias!
No respeta este furor a las nobles prendas mias,
ni a las que tiene Ioachin…

Sed. A que fin
nos estás dando razones
si venimos sin razon;
escucha de dilaciones,
si adviertes en la ocasion,
que con tu beldad nos pones,
culpa tiene tu hermosura
desta tirana locura.

[The maids return to the house, leaving Susana alone. The elders exit, and enter again with Susana]

*Enter Acab, and Sedequias grasping Susana, half-naked and her hair loose.*

Susa. What is this Acab? Sedequias what is this?

Acab. Susana, my love.

Susa. Insane and fruitless endeavor!
This frenzy has no respect for my noble qualities,
nor those of Ioachin…

Sed. To what end
Are you reasoning with us,
if we come without reason;
listen to your delays, but if you
note the predicament that you
with your loveliness have put us in,
your beauty is to blame
for this despotic madness.

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*El Robo de Dina.* Lope de Vega (1615-1622)
[de la segunda jornada donde Dina explica a su padre Jacob las circunstancias de su robo]

*The Theft of Dinah* by Lope de Vega (1615-1622)
[selection taken from the second act where Dinah is explaining to Jacob how she was captured]

Padre, si llamarte padre
Puede ya quien mejor fuera
que no tuviera este ser
de tu virtud y nobleza;
aunque si lo miro bien,
agora es razón que pueda
llamarte padre quien viene
para que un padre seas.
No fuiste padre hasta agora:
agora, padre me engendrás,
agora, soy hija tuya,
aunque causa de tu ofensa.
Mi culpa es grave, no es toda:
Mil veces te llamo padre,
porque el nombre te enternezca,

Father, if to call you father
Can one be better
Who is not one
of your virtue and nobility;
although if I look at it well,
now it is reasonable that I can
call you father, a man who comes
so that you can be a father.
You were not a father until now:
now, father who created me,
now I am your daughter.
Although the cause of our offense.
My crime is grave, but that is not all:
A thousand times I have called you father
because the name does soften you
pues es palabra que obliga
a las entrañas más fieras.
Padre, en fin, yo soy tu hija
Dina, aunque indigna que tenga
tal nombre, por quien hoy pierdes
la dignidad que profesas.
Mi culpa, la parte della,
Es haber curiosamente
Solicitado tu afrenta.
Las mujeres de Siquen
tienen fama en esta tierra
De hermosura y bizarría;
Quise verlas, salí a verlas.
Honestamente ocupé,
padre, los ojos, que apenas
por las márgenes de un velo
dejó asomar la vergüenza.
Sabe Dios que un pensamiento
(que esto quiero que me creas)
no excedió, con ser tan fácil,
de mi castidad la esfera.
Hablando, pues, con las damas,
las fénix de aquestas fiestas,
cuya hermosura y donaire
andaban en competencia,
llegó el Príncipe: no es justo
que este nombre le conceda:
llegó el fin de nuestro honor,
y el principio de tu pena.
Llegó Siquen, y tratando
tu valor con la insolencia
que los mozos poderosos,
donde la razón es fuerza,
donde la ley es la espada,
la cortesía la tema,
su Dios el vicio, y al fin,
la justicia el no temerla:
y disculpando su infamia
con amor, que es la cubierta
de los vicios de los hombres,
como si amor ser pudiera
aquella planta que al alba
con verdes hojas comienza,
florece al medio del día,
da fertile fruto a la siesta,
y desmayando las hojas

for it is a word which commits
to the most beastly of consciences.
Father, in the end, I am your daughter
Dinah, although indignantly that I have
that name, for whom today you lose
the dignity that you profess.
My crime, the part of it
Is to have been curiously
Soliciting your shame.
The wives of Shechem
Are famous in this land
For their beauty and their valor;
I desired to see them, I left to see them
Honesty I took up my eyes,
father the eyes, which barely,
by the margins of a veil,
left one to be embarrassed.
God knows that a thought
(one which I hope you will believe)
did not extend, being so easy
From my chastity, the sphere
Speaking then, with the ladies,
The phoenixes of those festivals,
whose beauty and grace
walked in competition
the Prince arrived: it is not fair
that this name is awarded to him:
the end of our honor arrived,
And the beginning of your shame.
Shechem appeared and trying
your bravery with insolence,
taming powerful children.
where reason is force
where the law is the sword
his God, vice, and finally
he not being afraid by justice
and excusing his slander
with love, which is the covering
of the vices of men,
as if love can be
that plant which at dawn
with green leaves begin
to bloom in the middle of the day
give fertile fruit to the siesta,
and the leaves losing vigor
yace marchita en la tierra
luego que se parte el sol
y suceden las estrellas.
Yo respondí que mirase
la calidad de tus prendas,
y el ser huésped, privilegio
que los bárbaros respetan.
Mas remitiendo a los brazos
La razón y la respuesta,
Y los demás a las armas,
a sus palacios me llevan.
Contarte, amoroso padre,
qué llanto qué resistencia
acompañaron mi honor
hasta el fin de su tragedia,
era decirte lo mismo
que imaginaran las piedras
si Dios les diera aquella alma
donde el honor se aposenta.
No fue de provecho el llanto,
Porque mis lágrimas eran,
en la fragua de su amor,
el agua para encenderla.
La resistencia era mía;
que la mujeril flaqueza,
¿qué valor puede tener
que el hombre la defienda?
Leones sujeta al hombre,
Tigres amansa; mas piensa
que no fue en mí con industria,
sino con fuerza y soberbia.
Mil veces quise matarme
con las manos, si quisieran
que a la garganta llegaran
a ser diez dagas sangrientas.
Solamente a los cabellos
me dio, aunque tarde, licencia,
porque la ocasión gozada,
¿qué se le da que los pierda?
Dellos la tierra sembré:
¡ojalá que fueran hierbas,
porque nacieran testigos
de mi verdad y su ofensa!
Luego, con dulces palabras,
Aplacar mi enojo intenta,
¡como si a tan malas obras pudieran bastar cautelas!
Amenacéle contigo;
Pero ¿quién duda que crea que no hay vara que el poder y no la rompa o la tuerza?
También de mis once hermanos, que como ve que profesan más que la espada el cayado, más que la corte la aldea,
de mí, de ti y dellos, padre se burló, como si fuera la venganza desigual a la corona y las letras.
Siete años viste a Raquel en los prados y las selvas, y jamás tu amor llegó más que a una palabra tierna.
¿Cómo este bárbaro quiere, que dentro de una hora quepan las palabras y las obras, los brazos y las ternezas?
Nieto de Abraham naciste; Tu honor y mi afrenta venga, si no en Siquen, en mi sangre, para que la tengas buena.
No hare yo falta a tu amor, pues tantos hijos te quedan, antes te daré veneno cuando sin honra me veas.

as if such horrible deeds can be capable of such prudence!
I threatened him with you;
But who doubts that one believes that there is no rod which power Does not bend or twist?
Additionally, of my eleven brothers, who as you can see profess not the sword but rather the staff not the court, but rather the countryside they ridiculed me, you, all of it, as if it were an unequal revenge For the throne and the knowledge.
Seven years you saw Rachel in meadows and jungles, and never did your love come to be more than a tender word.
How can this barbarian wish that his words and works, his arms and his sweet nothings fit within an hour?
You were born grandson of Abraham; Your honor and my insult comes, if not by Shechem, then by my blood, So that you would have it well.
I will not be lacking your love since so many sons are left to you before I will give you poison When without honor you see me.
CHAPTER 1

Signs of the flesh

To arrest the meanings of words once and for all, that is what Terror wants.
Jean-François Lyotard, Rudiments Pains

The use of the biblical icon is widespread in our culture. We are named Sarah, Leah, Jacob, Joseph. We live in towns called Canaan, Bethlehem, Jericho. We refer to a deceiving cheating woman as a Jezebel; a man is strong as Samson. On a recent best-selling CD-ROM Charlton Heston gives a sonorous reading of the book of Exodus from a craggy vista somewhere on Mt. Sinai. We are so accustomed to being addressed by these images that we scarcely notice their total impact. Indeed the tropes and figures of the Bible reside in the collective unconscious of Western culture as well as in the conscious streams of moralizing that drench our popular media.

Mostly we interpret biblical narratives in terms of binary oppositions: divine and human, male and female, Israelite and gentile. It is the intention of this study to use a variety of reading strategies to shake loose the habit of binary interpretations that have been bound by a central interpretive unity or logic. This logic springs from two mouths: either condemning or protecting women from the seemingly “clear” interpretations of biblical narratives. A central cause of women bearing the weight of patriarchy is to be found in the biblical portraits of women. If women want to extricate themselves from the androcentric logic of the roots of Western culture, they need to analyze the strategies, conscious and latent, that have been used to make all areas of life conform to the
old androcentric biblical logic – or what we take it to be – that woman thwarted the divine plan. A majority of feminist intellectuals have freed themselves from the religious biases first planted in the Garden that continue to teach androcentrism as God’s law. But this is not enough to change a culture.

As historians, anthropologists, and literary critics have all recently argued, the social construction of reality does not produce a clear and coherent world view. As any reader of a novel knows, to find one’s way through a book is not the same as to make one’s way through life. Yet the parallel can be instructive. A persuasive version of the process of reading has been developed by French philosopher Michel de Certeau, who understands reading as the appropriation of texts, or as he termed it, “poaching” texts. He argued that ordinary people are not helpless passive victims of texts, but rather they take what they want from mass media, regardless of the intention of the author. De Certeau was primarily concerned with the readerly connection between the characters of soap operas and life depicted within tabloids, the texts of those at the bottom of the social order, but he could have included the Bible as a text that everyone freely poaches.

Most important for de Certeau’s argument is that readers use the same tactics in their everyday lives as they do in their reading process, snatching whatever advantage they can to survive within a hostile environment (de Certeau 1984: 168–70). De Certeau and others acknowledge that ordinary readers award life to the characters who dwell in their minds. Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (1984) analyzes the way working-class women in contemporary America read Harlequin Romances, identifying with some female characters, judging others. Too often scholarly analyses of literary figures deprive the characters of the juiciness of life. While I agree with scholarly conclusions that the gap between the lives of real and imagined women can be large, the process through which ordinary readers identify with literary characters has largely been ignored. Similarly the route that a reader takes through texts is largely unknown.

The question of what are the significant categories in the study of a literary character is twofold. First, the study of character in the Bible has too often attempted to produce a theory that is unitary,
homogenized. I suggest that readings need to incorporate the arena of contradictions: to acknowledge the endless conflict and negotiation that goes on within the mind of the reader, a matter of drawing lines, contesting boundaries, reinterpreting symbols, and rearranging experience into constantly shifting categories — an effort which corresponds to the efforts of readers to make sense of narratives and the characters who live within them. Second, it is important to realize and to take into account that characters exist in our consciousness independently of the stories in which the characters were originally encountered. This is how it is relevant to speak of a biblical culture today. But such a culture, then or now, can not be conceived of as pure and homogeneous. Assuming the ongoing “life” of characters, one can identify counter voices and forge links with other noncanonical literary figures. Again, emphasizing contradictions allows the reader to perceive the differences between culturally valued elements, such as rationality, language, masculinity, whiteness, over against that which is outside the white, male order. In biblical narratives, a major otherness is created between the chosen of YHWH and followers of other gods. In reading the dominant elements against the other, the effect of the literary text can be both to release and repress the other. Since repression never succeeds completely, the reader functions like a psychiatrist who asks questions of the resisting text, which nevertheless gives its unconscious away in slips of the tongue.

When female literary figures within biblical narratives are analyzed solely against each other, too much cultural otherness is dropped out and a self-referential loop is created. In order to break free of that loop, I present readings of biblical literary figures, in particular the so-called wicked women, against various extrabiblical narratives. In focusing upon the life of characters within biblical narratives I remain an oppositional critic: that is, I do not attempt to harmonize, to set a fixed horizon line for a particular group of readers. Instead, I have tried to design an approach that is kaleidoscopic — its function is to find new arrangements, ones that emphasize cultural connections that move between scholarly disciplines. One advantage to this method is that it decreases the reader’s fascination with a hypostasized notion of literary theory. Too often such toyig with metatheory leads one to believe she has
carved out the road to some grand universal truth. Thus, the reader can explore how conflicts within the biblical text become transferred in varied narrative expansions into critical conflicts about the biblical text and doxic traditions. By doxa I mean one’s idea of a narrative plot point or character or place from some remembered version of it, such as thinking that Delilah cut off Samson’s hair, or that Herod’s luscious step-daughter Salomé is named in the Bible. Often the doxic version becomes cultural baggage for the reader, setting up assumptions that blind one to what appears in the actual text.

Reading Second Temple narratives and rabbinic midrashim lets the reader in on the ancient doxa as well as the process of canonization. The biblical expansions provide the interpreter with prime examples of the efficacy of using extracanonical narratives to highlight and resolve textual irritants in the canonical version. One thus rattles the keystone of the edifice of canon in which the texts are viewed as blocks of a unified object. This is a first interdisciplinary move: from biblical to literary studies. By ignoring the artificial barriers of canon, I can enable previously unthinkable readings.

While scholars of biblical studies have traditionally been resistant to subjecting biblical texts to the same critical border-crossings as those who study secular texts, the paradigm of privileging the Bible, isolating it from ideological scrutiny, is shifting. Concomitant with this move is the acknowledgment that the weight of the doxa must be figured into the readerly equation. Following the move toward cultural readings of literary texts, I have applied cultural perspectives to a group of biblical narrative units centered upon female figures: Judith, Esther, and Jael, each celebrated as a heroine of Israel for seducing men with wine and food and then cutting off their heads (or in the book of Esther, causing Haman to be impaled) and two other biblical vixens, Delilah and Salomé, who used the same weapons – wine and food and sexuality – to bring down their enemies.

Reading through the binary code of good and evil results in the first group of female literary figures being judged as good and the second group as evil. Such dichotomous reading reproduces essentialism by assuming that texts have a fixed identity and that literary value can inhere only in the unchanging properties of the
text, such as imaginative and linguistic. An analysis of the plot structure in each narrative indicates that each of these women has performed similarly in plotting the demise of an enemy and caused the same dis-ease among the members of the male audience. The basic move, however, is to attach more labels to plot structures.

Part of the ideological effect of the text is to splinter the power of women, and the most efficient way of accomplishing this effect literally is to isolate women from each other within textual units and commentaries. Moving outside the boundaries of individual texts allows me to break through the isolation of character portraits of individual female characters. One way to negotiate this comparison is through intrabiblical interpretations: to bring biblical characters together who have been isolated by the storyteller. A second strategy is to compare the portrait of a biblical character with the expansion of her role in postbiblical literature and other uses of a figurative motif in a variety of modern literatures. By extending my palette, I present a chiaroscuro of character. Vibrant portraits can be painted when the reader views a character from more than one angle. The wider the reader's gaze, the more vivid the portrait. A deeper point here is that criticism of the Bible is oddly capable of keeping everybody engaged. Moralists and Marxists, Freudians and Feminists, semioticians and deconstructionists—all find a literary banquet in biblical narratives. And for every generation of critics, and readers, the Bible is effortlessly renewed.

As has proved evident even in feminist readings conscious of gender biases, remaining within the biblical canon as a closed universe presents problems. To seek a coherent pattern in biblical portraits of women is bound to marginalize women unless one lays bare the social and cultural codes as well as the gender codes that are reflected in the texts of the society that produced them. The first character to be analyzed in this study is the wife of Potiphar (Genesis 39), whom I call Mut-em-enet, following Thomas Mann in his novel Joseph and his Brothers (1934). In chapter 3, I read the biblical narrator's story. In order to see how his bias has been incorporated into the text, I perform a rhetorical analysis of both his interpretive frame and the narrative unit it encloses. This strategic move allows me to peel a particular ideology away from the story. I then juxtapose the traditional portrait of Mut-em-enet
with that of Susanna, often considered to be the female counterpart of Joseph, a pious Jew falsely accused of sexual activity. An alternative reading that brings Susanna together with Mut-em-enet allows both female characters a measure of subjectivity in contrast to the doxic versions in which they are objects of male stories. A reading of the gender code links Mut-em-enet and Susanna, as female objects dependent on male characters to resolve each story.

Once I have established a subjective position for Mut-em-enet through a suspicious analysis of the male story, I can turn a deaf ear to the narrator’s voice. Then I can substitute my own voice as I read her story against the first-century Greek expansion, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (T12P), in which a dying Joseph tells his sons his version of his life’s struggles, especially his sexual encounters with that predatory Egyptian virago. The Testament of Joseph (TJos), usually read as a moral and ethical portrait of Joseph, has considerable literary interest for this study, since it is a detailed first-person account of “what happened” between him and his master’s wife. The Joseph of the biblical account is curiously silent after her accusations; this later story is focalized through the hero Joseph. Thus, I shall set up within the reader’s mind two stories: the narrator’s version in the biblical account and Joseph’s version (a second narration) in TJos. In neither version does Joseph’s character move beyond the opaque consciousness of a man wronged, pursued. In order to subjectivize the story, I have read these male versions against a third, imagined narration, recounted in the voice of Mut-em-enet. Thus, reading a biblical text against its later Jewish expansions awards the female character a measure of subjectivity.

One can identify throughout T12P the beginnings of the conflict that became apparent in literary as well as religious works of late antiquity, when people embraced asceticism and penitence as protection against the seductions of physical pleasure. An important interpretive shift has occurred from the confidence of the biblical writers, who assumed divine protection against erotic evil to the fears of the writers in the Second Temple period of the serious threat of Eros. In Proverbs the believer is certain of his own immunity, while in T12P the evil spirit Beliar threatens the
believer, both as protagonist and as reader, who “feels his soul torn asunder.” In the Testament of Levi, the patriarch warns his sons, “Choose for yourselves light or darkness, the Law of the Lord, or the works of Beliar” (19:1). In the expansion of the biblical tale, the transformation of the character of Joseph as well as the fuller portrait of his female seducer can be seen in terms of this shift. Joseph takes refuge in penitent behavior, as protection against the sensuality of his master’s wife.

In chapter 4 I explore the wickedness traditionally allocated to Mut-em-enet with the virtue of another Egyptian female figure, the wife of Joseph. Because Aseneth is mentioned only once in the Bible (Gen. 41:45), I have imported the fuller portrait of Aseneth from the novella Joseph and Aseneth (JosAsen) a first century CE Greek romance composed during the same period as the Testaments. In sharp contrast with the sinful Mut-em-enet is the portrait of the ascetic Aseneth, who controls her desire for Joseph and transforms wantonness into wifeliness. In neither version do the sensual woman and virginal wife interact. That meeting takes place in the mind of the reader.

Like Aseneth, Bathsheba might also be considered as a biblical character committed to protecting Jewish tradition by plotting to have her son Solomon anointed king. Instead Bathsheba is traditionally considered a temptress who has seduced David, by intentionally bathing in the chill evening air in Jerusalem to catch the monarch’s eye. In chapter 5 I examine the objectified Bathsheba in the same order as the biblical narrator presents her, originally as an object of male sexual fantasy, seen and not heard, and in 1 Kings 1–2, finally, as a good mother, heard and not seen. My reading results in a portrait of a female biblical figure who is not as wicked as traditional interpretations have drawn her.

Jezebel is another biblical figure who has become a stock character representing seduction and betrayal. Unlike the case of Bathsheba there is no mention of sexual attraction in the narratives of Jezebel. She is a political queen, attempting to gain the extra land that her husband Ahab desires. Her narrative is the reverse of Bathsheba’s. Jezebel moves from being heard to being seen; painted, her body adorned as though for a celebration, she is thrown from a window, the usual site for a woman to observe male
Signs of the flesh

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activity. Thrown to the ground, in death, Jezebel becomes the object of a contemptuous male gaze.

Objectified female characters, especially when used to promote masculine sexual fantasies, are not confined to the domain of the canonical texts. By interpreting popular fictive portraits of Bathsheba, I begin a second disciplinary move from literary to cultural studies. Leaving the limited literary canon for a wider cultural one permits the reader/spectator to explore first-hand the construction of female sexuality not only in the ancient culture that produced the foundational biblical text, but also today, in the widely diffused media, including advertising, music-videos, journalism, and television, that continue to produce a heavily gendered rhetoric of sexuality and provide the ineluctable cultural context in which the biblical story is and will be read.

One example of cultural poaching or appropriation can be found amid the fragments of popularized Freudian analysis that decorate and direct contemporary literary readings. Most literary critics accept that the study of biblical literature, or any canon for that matter, is not a matter of imposing order on a corpus of texts, but rather is a function of readers making sense of symbols. Such a process can not operate independently of the influence of the reader's unconscious. In a post-Freudian culture such as ours, it is impossible to escape saturation with Freudianism, which operates in our culture in unconscious as much as conscious modalities, so that even so-called "neutral" or "apolitical" or "mainstream" readings work from unspoken assumptions colored by post-Freudian cultures, which speak through us, whether we acknowledge such activity or not. Thus, it is necessary to foreground such cultural mediation, rather than to pretend that there is a possible pre-Freudian access to the Bible. Ironically, since the days of the Viennese master, the specifics of sexuality may have changed, but the essential use to which the images of the evil woman are put has not changed. Women are depicted in a significantly different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the "ideal" spectator has always been assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.

The woman consciously displaying herself for male pleasure is a
motif that has only recently begun to be explored. The trope of the woman on display returns us in chapter 6 to the biblical figures whose sensuous beauty trapped the men who could not turn away from them. Traditionally the difference has been one of ethnic or theological triumph. Jael, Judith, and Esther killed the right men, while Delilah and Salomé are represented as viraginous vixens for destroying men whom the ideal community had identified as heroes. Underneath the songs of praise are warnings about women connected to the sublime delights of wine, food, and sex. Expecting platters of pleasure and celebration, the male reader sees his own death as the main course. Through analyzing the cultural connections between food and sexuality, and comparing the function of banquets and sexuality in other peri-Mediterranean texts, I argue that all women are potentially deadly seducers to the extent that they reflect male fears of castration. Reading through a psychoanalytic lens, then, allows one to enumerate the nuanced differences between a seemingly unified group of female biblical literary figures: those who occupy a traditional position of valorized heroine, like Esther and Judith, and those who have been devalorized. My mode of reading demonstrates that these narratives signify the success or failure of the cultural effort to repress the knowledge of sexual danger in the first instance and to close it down in the second.

Thus, interweaving cultural and literary questions suggests additional possibilities in understanding the motivation of character. Cultural studies offers the reader a blueprint for negotiating the challenge of evoking the past while being rooted in a world that is totally different. By imagining oneself as an ethnographer of the biblical corpus, one is able to read across the barriers of time and space without being trapped in universalistic thought. When I refer to a peri-Mediterranean world, I am not required to halt before ethnic or nationalistic borders. I can simultaneously slip the bonds of area or discipline (religious studies) and moralistic interpretation (theology).

While the great proportion of scholarly investigation of the term banquet in biblical texts has been philological, the same concentration on philology has kept cultural analysis of the occasion to a minimum. If the Bible can be considered a compressed record of some two thousand years of struggles, then the ethnographer’s
interpretive project is one of decompression. Such a cultural study is actually a representation not of the ancient culture itself, but of the dynamics among a culture, an interpreter, and the institutions of study and discourse. It is within the space of a decoding process that expands meaning that the subjectivities and the discursive practices of the interpretive community assert themselves. Through looking at the cultural context of food, sexuality, and death, one can connect figures who have been separated by theological readings, Old and New Testament locations, and even wider disciplinary distances of the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world.

The reader becomes the site at which the texts and the cultures that produced them come together. Thus, comparative analysis of the symbolic connections that various Mediterranean cultures made among ritual and social celebrations, sexuality, and death decompresses or fills the gap of understanding between the function of banquets in one narrative and the function of banquet in the other. Considering the signs connected to the narrative detailing of aromatic fragrances and food adds depth to the reader’s appreciation of the story. While banquets have not everywhere signified the same thing, there are relationships between eating and nurturing identified with women as locus of food, sexuality, and death that form a basis of comparison. The food becomes a crucial trope in this complex: it poisons, intoxicates, or causes delusions of grandeur or pleasure. The food either represents sexual pleasure or accompanies it. The Persian banquets of Ahasuerus and Herod’s birthday banquet were products of the same cultural understandings as the Greek symposia attended by Socrates and his students. Each was understood as a major event of homosocial solidarity among men, attended or served by women. One reading examines how that affinity is reversed when the woman severs the man’s head from his body rather than serving his bodily desire. Another reading connects the temporal nature of perfume and tastes with the moment of action in which a female literary figure uses her fragrant sensuality to entrap a man.

The seventh chapter deals with the figure of Salomé, one of the characters who shares a variety of tropes with the female literary figures examined in the preceding chapters. To make the case for a
cultural reading that integrates visual poetics, I have used both films and paintings as lenses through which to examine the relations between narrative versions of Salomé and iconographic interpretations. Like the verbal analysis it has stimulated, visual theory assumes that both readers and viewers bring to texts and images their own cultural assumptions. When viewed together, images provide testimony to the lack of coherence in this sweep of cultural images of Salomé. The so-called “sword and sandal” films of Hollywood give a Technicolor testament to the absence of a universal story of Salomé. More than stamping out similar interpretations, film shows how each cultural production makes of the biblical icon a reflection of its own values, not of the ancient culture in which the story was rooted. Each of the Hollywood Bible films proclaims itself as a recitation of shared cultural history, but also accedes to the strong current of belief in its intended Christian audience.

Both academic and ordinary readers have been accustomed to coherent readings, readings that progress in a linear fashion to a payoff, a bottom line, a result. Traditional commentaries on biblical texts emphasize a unity of reading, a single viewpoint, a pronouncement of moral or theological truth. In analyzing the roles and assumptions of biblical criticism, I have tried to separate each text from its interpretive frames in an attempt to shatter the stereotypes that have held most interpreters within the confines of traditional interpretations. A first frame is binary thought. Whether theological or literary, the majority of interpretive strategies have reflected the dichotomy of good and evil. But dichotomy as a mode of thinking entails decisions of method. My interest in analyzing dichotomies has developed from Bal’s concerns leveled in Murder and Difference.

dichotomies have two inevitable consequences: They subsume all relevant phenomena under only two categories, thus restricting the possibilities and paralyzing the imagination, their centripetal quality. And they turn hierarchical, shedding off one pole as negative in favor of the other which needs to establish its value, their centrifugal quality. (1988:9)

A method suspicious of binary opposition, therefore, one that tries to increase the interpretive possibilities, offers the reader weary of wandering in the perfection of the biblical garden of good
and evil a different landscape, where no category can claim hegemony. There is no fence to protect the garden of narratives into which I would transplant the biblical narratives. Rather they will be intertwined with other narratives that grew in the cultural soil of the ancient Mediterranean world and thrived in the cultural unconscious of Western literature.

A second frame is the unification of the readership. Resistant readers are acutely aware of the politics of language, of the need to examine that troublesome “we,” which often has not included us. The biblical interpretive tradition has a variety of subjectivities, or “we” identities that includes belief positions as well as those that revolve around ethnic or cultural views. For the reader of biblical texts it is essential to include the gender code among the strategic choices – in order to cut through the patriarchal hegemony of the text. But, since gender is not the only difference among people, probably not even the essential difference, I will propose readings that incorporate gender but are not relegated to this single interpretive slot. Only then will I be able to create readings that play across codes, rather than identify the world of readers exclusively on the basis of anatomy.

One way to avoid such a trap consists of shedding a third confining frame, the unification of methods within disciplines. A transdisciplinary method, I suggest, enables the reader to free her/ or him/self from such ideology. By examining the interaction of codes, including the gender code, the reader of biblical narratives becomes aware, as Bal has shown us, of the partial nature of each code. The primary goal of this study, then, is to devise a way of telling “her” story in a literature that has been interested foremost in “his” story.

When I began pursuing that end, I first worked within traditional methods of literary analysis, as well as newer methods developed by rabbinic midrashists, literary critics, and feminists concerned with alternative readings of biblical texts. Throughout my efforts, however, new questions continued to plague me: why have these methods not led to readings that reveal her story, or in narratological terms, the embedded story of the woman? An answer suggested itself: I had not yet contended with the biblical narrator.
Bibliography


Suggested Readings:


*El arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* by Lope de Vega. [the two best editions in Spanish are those by Enrique García Santo Tomás (Cátedra) and that of Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros (Clásicos Castalia). An English translation is available on Google Books]


Genesis, chapters 31-34; 2 Samuel, chapter 13; Daniel, chapter 13 (The story of Susanna may be placed earlier in Daniel or included in the Apocrypha, depending on which Bible you have).