

WISE AND STRANGE:
AN INTERPRETATION OF THE FEMALE IMAGERY
IN PROVERBS IN LIGHT OF TRICKSTER MYTHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This article compares various manifestations of the trickster figure from comparative myth and folklore with the presentations of personified Wisdom and the Strange Woman in the book of Proverbs. There are five interrelated characteristics of the trickster that provide categories for analyzing these two female figures and their relationship to each other: the trickster's basic duality; the trickster's embrace of both order and disorder; the importance of language and the interconnection of wise and deceitful language; the problem of theodicy and the attempt to understand human evil; and the liminal status of the trickster. This reading of the female images in Proverbs through the lens of the trickster has the effect of undercutting the book's most obvious message of absolute opposition between good and evil as represented in the female figures, and highlighting their paradoxical, but experientially validated, unity. The paper concludes with reflections on the potential value of the "woman as trickster" image in feminist thought.

0.1 Cross-cultural studies have, in recent years, generated much enthusiasm among biblical scholars. They have been responded to with equally strong and well-taken words of caution about respect for cultural differences and for variations in apparent patterns of social behavior or mythological imagery. Nowhere is such caution more well-placed than in an attempt to identify elements of the trickster motif in a cultural tradition such as the Bible, which does not have any one character clearly identified as such, unlike the cycles of trickster stories that appear, for example, among many native North American tribes and also among certain African peoples (Thompson, Pelton). The Bible's lack of such a figure is only the first of several methodological

difficulties that need at least an acknowledgement before one succumbs to the siren of comparison.

0.2 A second difficulty is that, even where comparative mythologists agree on the existence of a trickster, this figure is an extremely elusive and changeable one. What exactly makes a trickster a trickster? The trickster is often portrayed as an enormous buffoon who wanders the earth getting himself and others into trouble, largely because of his outlandish appetite for food and sex. Although he is called the trickster, as often as not he is more the fool, one who gets tricks played on him as well as tricking others. The trickster is a breaker of all social boundaries: not guided by any recognizable sense of good and evil, he flouts religious taboos and conventions of proper sexual behavior, even to the point of changing sex and becoming a man's "wife" for a period of time in one Winnebago episode (Radin: 22-24). In some folklore traditions, this radical "outside-the-normness" of the trickster results in his being cast as an animal rather than as a human, although always as an animal who interacts with other characters using the structures of human speech and society (even if only to abuse them).

0.21 Oddly, however (at least to the modern Western mind), trickster stories are not found threatening by their audiences but rather extremely humorous. Even more oddly, antics of this amoral buffoon are sometimes associated with the most serious tasks. Either an actual deity himself, or intimately associated with deity, the trickster regularly participates in the creation or transformation of the world, providing it with its basic cosmic and social structures, cultural knowledge, and deepest wisdom.

0.22 There does not seem to be any one "ideal" trickster type. Rather, any given trickster figure may comprise a shifting combination of several, but not necessarily all, characteristics of the general type. We may take some comfort, then, that one may analyze biblical texts under the aegis of the trickster mythologem without making absolute claims about whether a given character is or is not a trickster. The important task is to identify elements of the paradigm and examine how they function in relationship to each other and to other aspects of the culture (Pelton: 14-17). It is with such caution that I hope to treat the female imagery in Proverbs, where there are at least two major objections to finding a trickster. The most critical one is formal. These texts are not oral, folkloric narratives but literary, instructional poems. Second, and relatedly, they do not exhibit the non-judgmental hilarity that almost always characterizes trickster tales (though not always, as Pelton's presentation [164-222] of one West African trickster shows).

They are, rather, highly moralistic in tone and intent. Nonetheless, as I shall suggest, the presentation of the female figures in Prov 1-9 exhibits some striking similarities to the traditional trickster.

0.3 A third methodological problem lies not only in the diversity of the trickster, but also that of his interpreters. Anthropologists' treatments of the significance of the trickster have ranged from the psychic developmentalism of Radin and Jung to the mathematical structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. My own intellectual preference and, hence, the direction of this essay run toward the cultural hermeneutics approach of Robert Pelton. Unlike Radin and Jung, Pelton attempts to explain the often contradictory elements of the trickster myths holistically, rather than explaining them away in an evolutionary scheme that posits a development from animal to human, from amoral buffoon to a savior-transformer. Resisting Lévi-Strauss' tendency toward abstraction, Pelton insists on interpreting the trickster motifs with respect to their native cultural contexts. One may generalize about the trickster as a combination liar, buffoon, and culture-hero, but these traits are always narratively manifest in culturally specific ways that enable a given culture to interpret itself to itself. This concern for cultural specificity built into a comparative method is, at the very least, reassuring and, at best, should enable us to deepen our understanding of Israel's efforts to interpret its own situation.

0.4 Finally, we must take consideration of the fact that the biblical figures to whom I wish to apply the trickster paradigm are female, rather than male, which makes them unique in any comparative studies with which I am familiar.¹ The significance of this fact is open to question. We must recognize, first of all, that trickster mythology can be applied to male as well as to female characters in the Bible. Jacob, for instance, would be a prime candidate. Thus, the Bible does not simply reverse the typical expectations. Nonetheless, as other essays in this volume show, the Bible does have a tradition of "tricky" or deceitful women that should tell us something about Israel's understanding of itself and its women (cf. Camp: 124-40). Furthermore, the trickster is often portrayed as an animal, a being on the boundary between the human and the natural worlds. S. Ortner has demonstrated a certain proclivity to relate "female" to "nature" in contrast to the connection of "male" with "culture." Her analysis raises the possibility that female imagery, in characters exhibiting other elements of the trickster pattern, functions similarly to the theriomorphism of other tricksters.

¹ I would like to thank Carole Fontaine for stressing this distinction to me in personal communication.

0.5 While attempting to bear these cautionary notes in mind, it will be the thesis of this paper that a comparison of various manifestations of the trickster figure from comparative myth and folklore with the presentations of personified Wisdom and the Strange Woman in the book of Proverbs provides useful interpretive insights into the biblical material. Moreover, this comparison is informative not only at the several points where biblical female imagery fits the typical trickster model, but also where it does not. There are five interrelated characteristics of the trickster that provide categories for analyzing personified Wisdom, the Strange Woman, and their relationship to each other.

1. *Duality*

1.1 The first and most all-embracing of these characteristics, recognized by virtually all commentators, is the basic duality of the trickster. Reading through the collection of any given society's trickster tales, one always finds not only the fooler, but also the fool, both a creator and a disrupter of order. The female imagery in Proverbs also plays upon opposites, personified Wisdom representing creation, love, life, truth, social order and wisdom, while the Strange Woman represents death, falsehood, social disruption and folly. The concern for the proper boundaries of sexual behavior, flaunted so gleefully by the trickster, is also quite evident in Proverbs. Female Wisdom is associated with the wife whom one is to love faithfully (4:6; 5:15-19; 7:4; 8:17), while the Strange Woman allures with provocative descriptions of illicit sex (7:10-20).

1.2 The relationship of the positive and negative elements of the trickster has been a subject of debate among anthropologists. Paul Radin argues, for example, based on certain native American cycles, that the connection of the trickster with cosmogonic activity is a secondary accretion to the trickster mythology, a position which seems to have a fair amount of textual support in the traditions he studied (124-31; 155-69). Much more speculative, and also suspect because of its evolutionary presupposition, is his assertion that the trickster's "culture-hero" traits—the various ways he orders or initiates important social structures or useful cultural objects—are later "developments" from an "original" conception of a primordial person obsessed by hunger, wanderlust, and sexuality, purposeless and little differentiated from the animal world (165-68). Radin suggests that the elevation of the trickster to divine status with a role in creation was the work of an ancient "priest-thinker" trying to assimilate the even older myths into an aboriginal theological system (164).

1.21 Unfortunately, this postulated evolution of the trickster literature does not explain the persistent attractiveness of the figure in his dual

roles. Pelton's project takes on this issue with the assumption that members of pre-modern societies sought after a unity of experience in their lives and mythologies and, therefore, that the interpreter "can best approach the many aspects of pre-modern religious life by searching for the logic that knits diversity together" (11). I should make clear that Pelton does not imply any particular form of modern logic in this statement. The questions, rather, are those of how any given society structures the diverse and sometimes contradictory elements of the trickster pattern, how these elements work in relation to each other and to other social structures, and thus, how that society uses the trickster to uncover and interpret the meaning of its life and world (16).

1.22 Unlike the trickster who unites this duality into a single paradoxical entity, the female characterization in Proverbs divides it into two distinct figures. These opposites nonetheless "attract." J.-N. Aletti has noted with particular astuteness the many connecting links between the positive and negative female imagery in chs. 1-9. He argues that the editor of this material has created a very deliberate confusion between Wisdom and the Strange Woman through the ambiguous use of certain vocabulary (1977: 132-34). Prov 4:8 assures the young man that Wisdom will honor him if he *embraces* (חָבַק) her, while 5:20 questions why he would *embrace* (חָבַק) the bosom of the Strange Woman. Even more emphatically, one must *grasp* (חָזַק) Wisdom and Instruction (3:18; 4:13) and expect to be *grasped* (חָזַק) by the Strange Woman (7:13). All this grasping and grabbing will take place "in the street" and "in the marketplace" where *both* Wisdom and the Strange Woman are to be found (1:20-21; 7:12). After the encounter in the public place, both female figures invite the listener to their respective houses (the Strange Woman's or Folly's in 7:15-20 and 9:14-16; Wisdom's in 8:34 and 9:1-6). Both Wisdom and Folly offer *bread* (לֶחֶם) at their banquets (9:5, 17). The imagery of water is used to allure the young man to his own wife:

Drink water from your own cistern,
flowing water from your own well (5:15);

as well as to seduce him to Folly's house:

Stolen water is sweet,
and bread eaten in secret is pleasant (9:17).

With either the Strange Woman or his wife, he can *fill himself* (רָחַם) with *love* (דִּידִים, 7:18) or *breasts* (חֲדָיִים, 5:19, perhaps a scribal error, but carrying the same implications!). Finally, the word used to describe the truthful teaching of the sage (לִקְחָהּ) is the same as that employed for

the seductive speech of the Strange Woman who is said to be “wily of heart” (1:5; 4:2; 9:9; 7:21).

1.3 Comparison with the trickster invites the interpreter of Proverbs to take seriously the literary unity of the Strange Woman and personified Wisdom before separating them too quickly into “good” and “evil.” I have suggested elsewhere that other biblical imagery for women points in this same direction. Like the trickster and the Strange Woman—and indeed, by association, like Wisdom herself (Camp: 129-33)—Tamar (Gen 38), Ruth, and Judith all break their society’s boundaries on sexual behavior in order to accomplish good for themselves, for society, and, ultimately, for Yhwh (cf. Craven). Like the trickster also, Tamar and Ruth, in particular, undertake their risky strategies primarily out of their own self-interest. Only secondarily and unintentionally do their actions benefit the larger group (cf. Radin: 125). Yet the biblical authors, like the tricksters’ tradents, understand the women’s intentions and their effects as of one piece.

1.31 This subtle underlying unity of personified Wisdom and the Strange Woman provides a counterweight to the more polemical overtones of ancient instruction (“Understand, my son, that there are two distinct groups of women in the world . . .”) and modern critique (“Look, my daughter, how men have divided us into virgins and whores . . .”). Such a perspective allows an interpretation of female Wisdom and the Strange Woman not along traditional patriarchal lines of “virgin versus whore” or “the ideal woman on a pedestal versus the degraded woman of male experience,” but rather as a representation of the necessary complementarity of human experience. If Israel, in splitting the typical paradoxically single trickster, has to some degree denied rather than affirmed this complementarity, we now at least have a basis for a specific and constructive critique that goes beyond the limitations of a polemic against patriarchy in general (cf. Johanson’s admonition to take on this task). The remaining sections of this essay will address some of the different aspects of this fundamental feature of duality. In particular, an issue that emerges in the Proverbs material is that of how Israel has here structured its experience of the conjunction, as well as the opposition, of good and evil, and what role female imagery has played in that structuring.

2. *Order and Disorder*

2.1 As we have already noted, the trickster represents the forces of creation and destruction, order and disorder, on both the cosmic and social levels. Although the temptation here, once again, is to see two “originally” distinct characters at work, the structure of many trickster episodes reveals the inherent unity of these two movements. Raven, the

North American Haida trickster, for example, begins his creative work by skinning a newborn child and appropriating its skin for himself, and then stealing and eating people's eyeballs (Radin: 156-58)! Similarly, the trickster's introduction of valuable tools or social customs to a society often takes place without any intentionality on his part and, indeed, often as the result of some otherwise unpleasant trick he has played on someone (Radin: 125). Occasionally, this intermixture of ordering and disordering activities results in an ironic double paradox, as in one of Pelton's parade examples, the conflict between Ananse, the trickster of the West African Ashante tribe and the misanthropic character, Hate-to-be-contradicted (25-27). Hate-to-be-contradicted lives on the outskirts of society and fools visitors into contradicting him by telling outlandish stories, and then kills them. Hate-to-be-contradicted is outdone by his own contradiction of the even wilder lies told by Ananse, who then takes license to kill him. Having performed this apparent favor for society, however, Ananse cuts his antagonist into bits and "sows" contradiction among humans!

2.11 Contrary, perhaps, to our expectations, the Ashante do not condemn Ananse for his introduction of contradiction into human discourse, but rather delight in this expression of what they know to be their reality. In this, as in other stories, the trickster embraces and embodies the paradox of order and disorder (Pelton: 29).

Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is the Trickster. His function . . . is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted (Kerenyi: 185).

The important point is that the forces of disorder are brought inside human territory. Ananse and Hate-to-be-contradicted behave in virtually the same manner, except for the fact that the latter refuses human intercourse while the former insists on it, even in its negativity. "The true limen," suggests Pelton, "lies not on or outside the margins of society, but in its midst" (37).

2.2 That personified Wisdom and the Strange Woman represent forces of order and disorder is abundantly clear. Wisdom participates in the ordering process of Yhwh's creation (8:22-31) and is responsible for the governance of society (8:15-16) and the well-being of her followers (8:18, 35-36). The doubled epithet repeatedly applied to the negative female figure—strange woman, foreign woman—captures in its very ambiguity the multi-leveled nature of the threat she presents to the orders of life and society (Camp: 115-20). She guards the gateway to

death (2:18-39; 9:18), countering Wisdom's offer of life. This death, though imaged in virtually mythological terms, has a concrete social form: being "cut off from the land" (2:22) and descending to "the point of utter ruin in the assembled congregation" (5:14). Clearly, the community feels a threat to itself in the actions of the individual.

2.3 For all these obvious oppositions between the ordering of Woman Wisdom and the disordering of the Strange Woman, the trickster paradigm invites us to consider the intersections of these forces as well. The Strange Woman, in spite of her "foreignness," exists very much within the boundaries of society. She appears in the public places of the community and invites people to her house, just as Woman Wisdom does. In portraying the Strange Woman in this manner, the Israelite sages have not excluded foreignness, but, in fact, let it "in." In so doing, they have acknowledged the reality that a system of order cannot afford to exclude anomaly without ultimately being overwhelmed by it (Pelton: 251). Here the apparently negative Strange Woman enacts one of the paradoxically positive roles of the trickster, symbolizing the manner in which people try to integrate disorder, the anomalous, into their daily lives.

2.31 The house and paths of the Strange Woman, moreover, bring within the boundaries of Israel's communal apprehension the ultimate disorder, namely, death. Trickster figures are often credited with bringing death into human existence and, thereby, capturing death's "centripetality" for the center of life and guaranteeing life's "eternal reirruption" (Pelton: 263; cf. Radin: 147). If this evaluation of death seems a bit *too* positive with respect to Proverbs, we ought nonetheless to remember that the "first woman," Eve, accepted death as the price of a fully human life. The entry of death into human life through the mediation of the woman and the serpent (certainly another trickster figure!) goes hand in hand with the acquisition of knowledge of good and evil which, for the sage, means life. At the heart of wisdom thought, then, lies the trickster's paradox: death does yield life. (See below for further consideration of the Eden story.)

2.32 Death as a metaphor in Prov 1-9 may be less focussed on biological death than on the related connotations of separation from deity and community, perhaps more terrifying ideas to Israel (cf. Bailey: 41). If we assume that the book of Proverbs became prominent religious literature after the Exile, Israel's experience of communal "death" in Babylon (Ezek 37:1-14) and their subsequent struggle to maintain an identifiable community in post-exilic Judah may also be reflected in this material. In that case the acknowledgment of the Strange Woman, with all her danger, inside the community's boundaries becomes all the

more striking. And, in spite of the danger, this acknowledgment is quite complete, as witnessed by the poem in Prov 7, which paints a shameless picture of her attractions (vv. 13-20) before warning of her consequences. Knowledge of evil must accompany knowledge of good in the search for wisdom and life. Without an appreciation for the strange, a society does not know its own boundaries.

2.4 To complete the paradox of order and disorder encompassed by the female imagery in Proverbs, we must recognize not only the Strange Woman's *inclusion* within Israel's social boundaries, but also personified Wisdom's *transgression* of them. She is, first of all, one of the most universal, non-xenophobic images in the Hebrew Bible, comparable in this respect to Second Isaiah's Servant. She crosses, moreover, the most fundamental line of all, that between creator and created, and in both directions, as is typical of tricksters. She is at one and the same time human wisdom elevated to the word of God (witness the canonical status of Proverbs) and divine wisdom come to reside among humans. But, contrary to expectations, her elevation does not result in death (contrast the king of Tyre, Ezek 28), nor is her "descent" from heaven the result of anything other than her own initiative (Prov 8:30-31). The boundary-crossing which ought to destroy instead becomes a source of life, but we can see the true value of this life only if we also recognize the dangerously disordering process through which it becomes available.

3. *Language of Wisdom and Deceit*

3.1 Pelton argues that the bringing of reality to language and the definition of human being as being engaged in discourse, usually accomplished through foolishness or deceit, is one of the hallmarks of the trickster. "The trickster brings to light all non-sense so that all might become language and therefore human" (242).

3.11 The Ashante's Ananse provides a variety of amusing examples. In addition to introducing contradiction into human discourse, Ananse also saves speech for human beings by tricking a monster bird into returning the jaws he stole from human faces (40). He is also associated with the spread of wisdom, which he initially tries to hide by putting it in a gourd at the top of a tree. Aggravated because his son can climb the tree better than he, however, he breaks the gourd and hurls its contents to the earth. In a wonderfully complex episode, Ananse helps the Sun assume his rightful position as High God in the pantheon and settler of human disputes, but again by trickery. He steals a certain word from the Creator God that Sun must know in order to prove his worthiness for the position, and then aids Sun's memory of it by fashioning a drum whose resonance imitates the sound of the word. Pelton comments that

the "light" needed to fashion order out of the tangle of human wills can only be focussed through a duplicity that restarts the processes of speech. . . . Ananse rejects truth in favor of lying, but only for the sake of speech . . . (50-51).

Furthermore, as a reward for his success in this episode, Ananse's name is given to all the stories—*anansesem*—through which the Ashante remember and shape their culture (27-31, 224).

3.12 These Ashante tales represent only a few of the episodes associating various West African tricksters with language. Compare also Pelton's discussions of the Fon's Legba, the "divine linguist" (72); the Yoruba's Eshu, the introducer of divination (133-48); or the Dogon's Ogo-Yurugu who, with his twin, possesses the forty-eight categories into which the Dogon divide all speech (188-89).

3.2 The connections of personified Wisdom and the Strange Woman to language are numerous and, again, more subtle and complex than might appear at first glance. Woman Wisdom announces herself as a speaker of truth and a hater of perverted speech (8:6-9, 13). Her instruction brings happiness and life (8:32-35). The invitations of the Strange Woman (or Woman Folly in 9:13) are, of course, understood as seductions that lead to death. We must, however, consider the underlying currents that partially blur this surface opposition.

3.3 Like Ananse, Woman Wisdom presides over and authorizes a tradition (Gilbert: 218; Lang: 170-71) that is terribly concerned with language and its proper use. The basic values as represented in the proverb collections are to speak as little as possible (10:19; 13:3; 17:25; 29:20; *passim*), as effectively as possible (15:23; 25:11,15; *passim*), and to recognize that no matter what one says, Yhwh may have something else in mind (21:1,2; 20:21; *passim*). Righteous speech is also of great importance (10:11,20,21,31,32; *passim*), but it shares center stage with words fitly or efficaciously spoken. The moral value of proverbial language is occasionally ambiguous, moreover. The observation that "a bribe is a magic stone in the eye of him who gives it" (17:8) creates almost as much temptation as the description of the Strange Woman in Prov 7. Finally, proverbs that counsel opposite courses of action (presumably depending on the situation; cf. 26:4,5) indicate an awareness that this form of commonsense truth is to some degree relative and immethodical (cf. Geertz: 23-24). The tradition personified by Woman Wisdom recognizes, then, a complexity in human existence and in the speech which articulates it.

3.4 A similar ambiguity exists in the proverb collection with respect to the relationship of folly and wickedness. Although both are evalu-

ated negatively, folly does not entail the dire consequences associated with Woman Folly in 9:13, who opens the same doorway to death as does the Strange Woman in other poems. R. B. Y. Scott has noted that the contrasted pairs of righteousness and wickedness, on the one hand, and wisdom and folly, on the other, are not interchangeable in the collection (153-54). The fool can expect poverty and disrepute, but this does not carry an explicitly religious value judgment with it (*ibid*: 158). Frequently, the actions of fools are simply described (12:15,23; 13:16; 15:21; 18:2) as if no further comment were necessary, and folly is considered its own reward (16:22). The warnings against the consequences of folly, both to the fool and to others, are sometimes couched in images that border on the amusing and, indeed, remind us of the trickster.

Like one who binds the stone in the sling
is the one who gives honor to a fool (26:8).

Like a dog that returns to his vomit
is a fool that repeats his folly (26:11).

The sluggard, in particular, is depicted in laughable images (22:13; 26:13,14,15), and there is one character who is even worse than the fool:

Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes?
There is more hope for a fool than for him (26:12).

3.5 Although this nuance and complexity found in the tradition is seemingly reduced by the either-or opposition of Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman in the poems of chs. 1-9, even here the matter is not quite so simple. As Aletti's analysis pointed out (see above), the one who wishes to distinguish between these two female figures must first contend with their similarities. Aletti argues further that this potential confusion of values was quite intentional on the part of the sage, who used it as one means of emphasizing the crucial importance of language to society as a whole and in the endeavors of the wisdom tradition in particular and, for these very reasons, the dangers of its abuse (139-40).

3.51 The crowning irony in this nexus of language, wisdom, and deceit comes in Prov 18:21, which introduces yet another female image, "Lady Tongue" (Williams: 91).

Death and Life are in the hand of the tongue,
and her lovers will eat of her fruit.

Those who are lovers of language, and the sages are most certainly among them, can expect to taste the fruits of both the Strange Woman's deceit, namely death, and Woman Wisdom's truth, the life that comes

from Yhwh (8:35). The fundamental duality that exists in human intercourse is inescapable. Language may, in the abstract, separate truth and deceit, but in experience the two often become one.

3.6 This duality is often treated elsewhere in the Bible with greater appreciation and, sometimes, humor than it is in Prov 1-9. This is nowhere more true than in stories of some of the female characters who are related in theme and imagery to personified Wisdom and the Strange Woman (Camp: 124-40). I have already alluded to the social boundary-defying sexual activity of Tamar, Ruth, and Judith. In this context, we need also note that the ploys of Tamar and Judith are accompanied by deceitful speech, as is also true in Rebekah's scheme to win the first-born's blessing for Jacob (Gen 27). Esther provides another example of cagey locution and circumlocution which, while not quite deceitful, was, at the appropriate moments, less than completely straightforward (cf. Talmon: 437). Finally, in yet another twist on truth, deceit, and their anticipated consequences, the wise (but calculating) Abigail kills her husband Nabal (whose name means "the fool") with the absolute, unvarnished truth (1 Sam 25:37-38)!

4. *Theodicy*

4.1 Although I have yet to see the word "theodicy" used by anthropologists in their studies of tricksters, it should be clear from the themes of order and disorder, truth and falsehood which we have already discussed that the question of good and evil, and their relationship to the deity, cannot lurk far in the background. We have seen enough of the trickster to know that, in him, various cultural understandings of good and evil merge in complex ways. What is less obvious, and, indeed, varies from culture to culture, is the role of the deity in all of this. Sometimes the trickster *is* a deity who represents a primordial blend of power, creativity, and destructiveness, for example, the Haida's Raven (see above; Radin: 156-58). Other times, he is a being created by the High God for a special purpose. In an episode of the Winnebago trickster mythology, Earthmaker tells the trickster, Wakdjunkaga

Firstborn, you are the oldest of all those I have created. I created you good-natured: I made you a sacred person. I sent you to the earth to remain there so that human beings would listen to you, honor you and obey you and that you might teach them by what means they could secure a happy life . . . (Radin: 150).

Earthmaker goes on to chastise Wakdjunkaga gently for bringing trouble on himself by making light of the deity's creation. Radin notes, however, that even within one tradition, interpretations of the trickster can vary. By the early twentieth century, some Winnebagos influenced by

syncretized Christian beliefs had moralized the trickster stories as examples of inappropriate behavior, or even equated him with Satan (148-50).

4.11 The pattern varies again in the case of Ogo-Yurugu, the trickster of the West African Dogon tribe. In Dogon mythology, Ogo-Yurugu is one of a set of primordial twins who rebels against the High God, Amma, his creator, because of his fear that Amma would deny him a mate. Although Ogo-Yurugu is finally defeated by Amma and banished from the divine and human domains (he becomes a fox), his attempts to wrest control from Amma result in the shape of the world as the Dogon know it.

[T]he Dogon too must cope with solitude, sexual anxiety and death. They do not, however, look at these experiences or the rebellion that caused them as unequivocally evil. Without Ogo's search for his female twin nothing would be what it is, and even as Yurugu [the fox], he continues to reveal and enlarge the boundaries of life. The "beneficent ferment" of Ogo's opposition complements the orderly graciousness of Amma (Pelton: 207).

4.2 The Judeo-Christian reader of the Wakdjunkaga and Ogo-Yurugu stories is inevitably tempted to make comparisons with the biblical story of creation and "fall." This placement of the trickster in the role of the archetypal human would not be altogether inaccurate. Over and over his interpreters comment that the trickster's role is that of making the human world human. The questions raised by this mythology for the biblical tradition are: how evil is evil, and what does God have to do with this dimension of human experience?

4.21 According to one interpretive stance, the negative aspects of the human condition are punishment for the sin of disobedience to God, enacted out of human free will and thus absolving God of responsibility in the matter. Although on one level, such an interpretation seems comparable to the trickster stories of rebellion against, or at least carelessness of, the High God's purposes, it does not cope well with their lightness, humor, and irony, and their acceptance of human "evil." Nor does such a position deal well with certain intra-biblical dilemmas, for example, the terrible logical problem of the existence of evil under the reign of a good and all-powerful God, or the occasional biblical revelation of God's maleficence (especially in Job and Qoheleth).

4.22 The trickster stories represent a different approach to the problem of evil. This approach is more descriptive (being often etiological) than prescriptive, and it is less concerned with explaining evil than it is with interpreting the human condition of which evil is a part. The

paradoxical unity of good and evil in the trickster is basically a manifestation of the way human life is. This approach also, then, begs the metaphysical question of the relationship of a good God to evil, but it does recognize the reality of a human experience of evil which is not explicable in the terms of a simplistic theory of retribution. In many respects, I would suggest, the commonsense, human-oriented attitude to this issue found in the trickster stories is most closely akin to that expressed in biblical material associated with wisdom.²

4.3 We have already noted some of the moral ambiguities in the proverb collection. This ambiguity is coupled with variant evaluations of vocabulary associated with wisdom, both within Proverbs itself (McKane: 10-22) and elsewhere as, for example, in the Succession Narrative (Whybray: 57-9). Nowhere is this more clear than in the Eden story, where the crafty (ערום)³ serpent leads the way to both human mortality and wisdom. In addition to the traditional interpretation of this story as one of sin and punishment, G. Mendenhall has also found here a scathing critique of wisdom. I am not convinced that either of these perspectives is completely correct.

4.31 The simplistic notion of sin and punishment does not deal with the complexities of the text, both in what it does and does not say. First, it does not deal with God's ultimate responsibility for the situation. Who, after all, created the serpent and his intellectual abilities, and provided the temptation of a forbidden tree? The Eden story is really quite like a trickster tale in this respect, concerned not with explaining or rationalizing every logical possibility of a situation but rather with enfolded in an imaginative, narrative embrace the "way things are" for human beings, in other words, with describing and interpreting the human condition. The text is curiously silent about Yhwh's emotions in reaction to the human deed, especially with regard to any "wrath" one might expect the deity to feel. Yhwh simply asks what has occurred (3:11,13), describes what every Israelite knows to be the nature of existence (3:14-19), and then makes clothes for the man and woman (3:21). The work of P. Tribble on the literary features of this material and C. Meyers on its sociological context makes abundantly clear both the descriptive, rather than prescriptive, nature of the text, and its concern to bring meaning (not merely condemnation) to the brokenness of human life.

² I recognize the difficulties in defining "wisdom literature" or the "wisdom tradition" in the Bible. For our present purposes, we need no more precision than that of broad similarities of vocabulary and theme.

³ Compare the positive evaluations of this word in Prov 12:3, 13:16, 14:14, *passim*.

The elementary questions about life and its hardships, about the endless and excessive efforts to survive—these are the human enigmas of existence to which this passage speaks. The gnawing WHY—why is life so hard for both men and women, why is there so much to be done for survival alone—is dealt with here (Meyers: 348).

The answer? Simply that “the human condition is ordained by God and must be accepted as such” (ibid.: 348-49).

4.32 Is, then, Gen 2-3 a condemnation of human wisdom? It is true that wisdom that is “wise in its own eyes” and that does not allow for the disposing of Yhwh as well as the proposing of human beings is condemned by the sages, not only in the critical books of Job and Qoheleth but also in that bastion of human optimism, Proverbs itself. The universality of this critique in the wisdom tradition suggests to me that Mendenhall’s interpretation is off-target and that, once again, Genesis’ intent is to understand, not condemn, human reality as the author knows it. Yes, the Eden story does associate the acquisition of human wisdom with death, but the rest of the Hebrew Bible makes clear that the mere fact of human mortality is not overly troubling to the ancient Israelites (Bailey: 47-57). Death, too, is part of the “way life is.” More importantly, I think, Gen 3 reveals that wisdom, like death—and also like the hard work of farming, the bearing of children, the wearing of clothes, and so on—is part of *human* life.

4.4 The wisdom tradition was willing both to exalt and to criticize itself, but both evaluations were made from the perspective of human beings. Even the God of the whirlwind who appears in Job, I would argue, is a God poetically articulated from a consciously human experience, with no pretense of recording direct divine revelation. The wisdom tradition articulates various facets of the interface between an ambiguous human wisdom and a God who should be good and just, but who is not always so experienced. Wisdom *is* theodicy, not conceived as a metaphysical problem, but experienced in the way we live.

4.41 Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman in Proverbs also speak to this condition, as always, paradoxically. On the one hand, they represent the idealized conceptualization of good and evil: ever separate, with ever inevitable consequences. Under the surface, however, as Aletti’s analysis makes clear, lurks the dangerous knowledge that life does not always work so neatly. The Strange Woman is such a horror because her words are so close to the truth, not the truth of tidy theological packages, but the truth as humans really experience it. Husbands do go away on business, and strange beds do offer delight.

The depth of the paradox only becomes visible when we acknowledge the unity of the female imagery that embraces the duality. In their embodiment, Woman Wisdom and the Strange Woman are one, a fact that the sages' evaluations of them (e.g., 7:4-5) only partially mitigate. As woman, her dual path runs from heaven to Sheol and back, never failing to pass through human territory. The unity of the imagery is important for the same reason the trickster is important. It is a way of representing, and thus encompassing, the anomaly that exists in human life.

4.42 The female imagery does not, then, simply mediate between the human and the divine, as I have previously suggested (Camp: 272-81), or only between human life and death (see above), but also unites divinity with death. In the connection of this imagery *both* to Yhwh *and* Sheol, the full range of human experience of anomaly is incorporated, not only that of the material and social world, but that of the spirit as well. The ambiguity of the female imagery reflects the moral ambiguity of the deity which stands in the shadows of Eden and bursts forth in the Joban whirlwind. It thereby acknowledges what all humans experientially know: we cannot receive good from the hand of Yhwh and not receive evil also (cf. Job 2:10).

4.43 The unity of this imagery brings a new meaning to death as well. If the woman whose dwelling place is in Sheol is, on one level, the same as she who plays before Yhwh, and if this woman is the human reflection of the nature of God, then God's presence in Sheol is also affirmed. This theological perception is rare in the Bible (cf. Ps 139:8); it is typically either denied (Job 7:21; Ps 88:3-5, 10-12 [H:4-6, 11-13]; Isa 38:18-19) or, in the case of Job, tantalizingly tasted (15:13; 28:22). In Proverbs, by means of the female imagery, the chaotic anomaly of death is brought fully within the compass not only of human but also of divine experience. The female imagery in Proverbs anticipates the Gospel of John in more ways than one! The words of Pelton regarding the trickster may be accurately applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Strange Woman and Woman Wisdom.

[The trickster] affirms the doubleness of the real and denies every one dimensional image of it. If he struggles with the High God and causes pain and death to enter the world, spoiling primordial bliss, his quarrel is not with the divine order as such, but with a false human image of the sacred, one that cannot encompass suffering, disorder, and the ultimate mess of death (262-63).

No less than Job, although through very different literary means, do the women of Proverbs participate in this struggle.

5. *Liminality*

5.1 The notion of liminality is derived by its greatest conceptualist, Victor Turner, from the middle phase of the rite of passage described by A. van Gennep. The first phase involves separation "from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions . . . , or from both." Then,

during the intervening liminal period, the characteristics of the ritual subject . . . are ambiguous: he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.

Finally, the person is reincorporated into a stable, but new, social or cultural state (94-95). It is the middle phase that is of concern here.

Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon (95).

5.11 Turner does not limit his concept of liminality to ritual passage, however, but rather applies it to any "anti-structural" person, group, condition, or cultural form that marks a transition from old to new (108-13). One common denominator is the social recognition that liminality involves *danger* to the social order, but that this danger must be accepted if the order is to sustain continued life. It is this broad use of the term that is employed by Pelton to understand many dimensions of the trickster tales. One of these, the inclusion of disorder within the boundaries of order, has already received attention in our discussion. Two others deserve consideration: the imaging of the trickster in animal forms (and the attendant question of the significance of the female imagery in Proverbs) and the mediation of the trickster between the realms of the sacred and daily life.

5.2 The connection of liminality with nature is articulated by Turner.

Since liminality represents what Erving Goffman would call a "leveling and stripping" of structural status, an important component of the liminal situation is . . . an enhanced stress on "nature" at the expense of culture. Not only does it represent a situation of instruction . . . but it is also replete with symbols quite explicitly relating to biological processes, human and non-

human, and to other aspects of the natural order. In a sense, when man ceases to be the master and becomes the equal or fellow of man, he also ceases to be the master and becomes the equal or fellow of non-human beings ("Passages, Margins, and Poverty: Religious Symbols of Communitas," *Worship* 46 (1972): 410; quoted by Pelton: 34).

Based on this analysis, Pelton argues quite effectively that, where animal imagery is used of tricksters, it is essential to their structure and is, indeed, a source of their transforming power, for the liminal state is the source of personal and social regeneration (34-35).

5.21 The fascinating but difficult question we must address here is whether the female imagery in Proverbs serves the same function as the theriomorphism in the typical trickster pattern. Ortner's provocative theoretical analysis of female subordination based on women's association with nature would certainly point in that direction. How such a theoretical generalization might work itself out in Israel and, specifically, in the book of Proverbs, remains to be seen.

5.22 Although one may well debate Ortner's conclusion that woman's perceived "closeness" to nature is *the* fundamental cause of female subordination, it is certainly the case that in ancient Israel, as in virtually all known societies, women were subordinate. The question, then, becomes, whether this "less-than-male" status has a hermeneutical function in Proverbs similar to the trickster's liminal animality. I would suggest that it does and that this function finds its focus in the poems' representation of woman as the source of both power and love. Such a representation is "anti-structure" at its most apparent. Typically, in Israel, the source of power and love would have been Yhwh, usually imaged as male, mediated through the male power structures of society. The depiction of a woman in these roles is, then, the antithesis not only of the normal social order but of the normal theological order as well. Woman's role itself is transformed in Proverbs: she is the source of the community's life not in the usual biological sense of childbearer ("nature"), but in the socio-cultural and religious domains.

5.23 Although a liminal entity or state represents "anti-structure" in Turner's conceptualization, this anti-structure is understood by society to reveal its deeper identity and serve as a regenerating force. Turner cites studies by anthropologist M. Fortes suggesting that

where patrilineality is the basis of social structure, an individual's link to other members of society through the mother, and hence by extension and abstraction "women" and "femininity," tends

to symbolize that wider community and its ethical system that encompasses and pervades the politico-legal system (117).

I have argued elsewhere that personified Wisdom and the Strange Woman in the post-exilic period seem to embody just such a dynamic (Camp: 261-81). At a time when the center of male power, the monarchy, had been eradicated, the kind of power born of the love and nurture of the woman-centered family household recalls Israel to its fundamental values and serves as the life-and identity-source for the community.

5.3 A second dimension of liminality evident in the trickster is that of his movement and mediation between the world of the sacred and that of daily life. Liminality is not a static position, but a passageway between one condition and another, a process that transforms one state into a new one. The trickster is, at one and the same time, non-human, human, and beyond-the-human.

[A]s the master of all language, he is . . . the meeting-place of all worlds. If, then, he is the image of the ironically imaginative mind of man, he is equally the image of the adaptability of transcendence, for which no material thing is too trivial to become a hierophany, not even that little gust of tongue-shaped breath known as the human word (Pelton: 269).

In all of Israel's religious literature, it is the wisdom tradition that most clearly discloses such a meeting place of the divine and the human. Here, the sacred is not set apart in the holy of holies, or reserved for the chosen few prophets. Woman Wisdom, who embodies both human wisdom and divine authority in an unexpected female form, stands in the public places, calling to and delighting in all בני אדם. J. Williams has argued that woman and the feminine in Israelite tradition often symbolize the boundary-dwelling of Israel and its God (127-30; *passim*). Female imagery for Wisdom, then, reinforces this paradoxically liminal dimension of the tradition that yet exists in the midst of things. There is indeed a sense in which the wisdom tradition is, as its scholarly denigrators have long argued, set apart from "mainstream Yahwism." What the trickster paradigm makes clear is that Yahwism could not long exist without it.

6. Conclusion and Feminist Reflections

6.1 In the foregoing discussion, I have employed the trickster pattern well-known in world mythology as a hermeneutical resource for analyzing the female imagery in Proverbs. Although I doubt that a folklorist or a biblical scholar would conclusively agree that this double female

figure is in fact a true trickster, I have argued that the abundant points of connection afford the trickster paradigm some interpretive value with respect to personified Wisdom and the Strange Woman. To generalize, we might say that reading Prov 1-9 through the lens of the trickster produces a form of deconstructive reading of the text, undercutting its most obvious message of absolute opposition between good and evil as represented in these two figures, and highlighting their paradoxical, but experientially validated, unity.

6.2 From the perspective of feminist critique and theology, this paradox persists. In Proverbs, we are met first by a strong, exalted, almost deified female figure in personified Wisdom, surely the apex of biblical female imagery. On the other hand, we confront her opposite, the Strange Woman, and begin to fear that, once again, images of women are being used by men to support their own place of power in the social structure and the view of reality that supports it. The trickster paradigm opens yet a third possibility: a positive valuation of women's power as anti-structural, regenerative because of its liminality. But again we face paradox: what structures are being regenerated by this liminality? Is it all too convenient for the patriarchal power structure to give liminality its due in order to draw on its power for themselves?

6.21 The reality is that all of these various forces are at work in the mix of human life, which is one reason why feminists may choose different, but equally valid, courses of resistance to the patriarchal system. Some choose to separate themselves, to live on the margins of patriarchy. This is fine, as long as it is recognized that, by removing liminality from the center of the world, one abdicates the power to transform the world. But perhaps a new world is possible. Others choose to work within the system. This again is a valid choice, but only paradoxically so: the power that might transform the world also helps to support its present form. But perhaps the gain will outweigh the loss.

6.22 In either case, I think that the energy for change will come in women's seizing the paradox of our existence, drawing on the power of our liminality for ourselves, reading the Bible as tricksters ourselves. In the spirit of reading like a trickster, let me offer a reflection on one of the Bible's most misogynist comments:

From woman is the beginning of sin
and because of her all die (Sir 25:24).

What would happen if ironic women were daring enough to embrace rather than reject this statement? If we said, yes, human reality includes evil and death, and woman encompasses them, just as she encompasses

goodness and life? Woman does indeed represent *all* of human reality. Could we then say, truly, that "womankind" is the most generic designation possible for the human race?

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