

"FOR I HAVE THE WAY OF WOMEN":
DECEPTION, GENDER, AND IDEOLOGY
IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests that gender is a primary factor which determines the literary presentation of deception in the biblical narrative. Focusing on Genesis 31, I offer a comparative study of the presentation of Rachel vis-à-vis Jacob and Laban. The results point to three major strategies which appear to distinguish Rachel's presentation: the suppression of motivation, insufficient indices of authorial judgment, the absence of a confrontational paradigm and consequently the lack of closure. That such permanent narrative gaps rarely appear in the literary presentation of male protagonists suggests that a gender-blind literary approach to the biblical text is liable to perpetuate the sexual-political status quo implied by the biblical text. By insisting on the patriarchal functions of the biblical representation of female deception, this article offers a rationale and methods for reevaluating the claim to objectivity of literary biblical scholarship.

Women's honor, something altogether
else: virginity, chastity, fidelity to a husband.
Honesty in women has not been considered
important. We have been depicted as gener-
ically whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillat-
ing. And we have been rewarded for lying.

Adrienne Rich

01 Lying is the intentional prevarication of facts through the manipulation of language. Deception is the intentional production of (a) misleading message(s)—through linguistic or other means—or the intentional concealment of required information. The concept of deception is predicated upon the expected correspondence of semiosis and reality, language and fact. To deceive is to signify something to

which no real state of things corresponds. Semioticians like Umberto Eco are right in emphasizing the interdependence of deception and the process of signification (58-59). But the focus on the mechanics of deception often ignores its political aspect, or the power relations between addresser and addressee. This aspect will be at the center of the following analysis of the literary presentation of deceptive women in the biblical narrative.

0.2 At the risk of oversimplifying the complex relationship of language and patriarchal authority, I will offer the following generalizations as my preliminary hypotheses. Patriarchal ideology does not differ from other hegemonic ideologies in its dependence on the control of the production and consumption of signs, or what we might call the semi-otic economy. To understand what Mary Daly calls the "deadly deception" of patriarchal thinking and "metapatriarchal" thinking which often poses as scholarly analysis (43-50), it is essential to examine the relationship of women and language. For as the symbolic interpretation/representation of reality, language also has the power to determine or constitute reality and/or truth. It should therefore not surprise us that denying women access to language and depicting them as deceitful have been among the most successful strategies of traditional patriarchies.

0.3 This may explain the frequent association of women and deception in the Hebrew Bible (Fuchs, 1985b). Few scholars have noted the peculiar relationship of women and language in the Hebrew Bible, and even fewer have considered the role of heterosexual politics in this relationship. James G. Williams suggests that: "The mediating function of the feminine in many symbolic texts and contexts [in the Hebrew Bible] is closely related to the function of language, that of mediating self and world to each other" (119). But if the function of language and the feminine is to mediate between self and world, we might conclude that the feminine (and, for that matter, language) is neither (in) the self nor (in) the world but rather somewhere in between. Williams does not ask what might be the political/ideological function of such localization. The failure to bring out the political aspect of the troublesome relationship of language and women in the Hebrew Bible risks mystifying and validating this relationship.

0.4 In what follows, I would like to develop what I began to ask in a largely exploratory way about the political and ideological aspects of female characterization in the biblical narrative in general (Fuchs, 1982; 1985a) and about female deceptiveness in the Hebrew Bible in particular (Fuchs, 1985b). In "Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive

Women and Biblical Androcentrism," I argued for an awareness of the relationship between the patriarchal factor and the frequent presentation of women as deceptive. Addressing a variety of deceptive images, I suggested that there is a difference between the representation of male and female deceptiveness, a difference directly related to biblical patriarchal politics. Here, I would like to develop and refine this argument by focusing on a single case study, Rachel's deception of Laban and Jacob in Genesis 31:19-36, and the political implications of its structural and ideological relationship to Jacob's and Laban's deceptiveness.

1.1 The story of Rachel's deception dramatizes what I think distinguishes biblical tales of female deception: *the suppression of explicit indices of motivation, the suspension of authorial judgment, and the absence of closure*. As we shall see, these literary strategies create the impression that deceptiveness is somehow generic to women. By suppressing motivation, the narrator makes it difficult for the reader to exonerate the female deceiver. By suspending judgment, the narrator creates a kind of ambiguity which may lead to a paleosymbolic association of femininity and deceptiveness. The absence of closure contributes to this vagueness, suggesting that in the case of women, deception is not a problem requiring punishment or reformation. In our particular case study, the association of deception and menstruation permits a more intricate and refined analysis of the possible connections between the narrative gaps typical of the biblical representation of female deception, and the tendency of phallogocentric language to either deny or demean female experience. In a way, the dismissal of female experience as deception is necessary for the perpetuation of the hegemony of patriarchal semiosis.

1.2 In several important ways, ch. 31 presents a closure to the deceptive treatment of Jacob by Laban (Gen 29:19-30; 30:25-34), which presents in its turn a closure to the deceptive treatment of Esau by Jacob (Gen 25:29-34; 27:1-42). Genesis 31 marks the conclusion as well of Laban's deceptive exploitation of his daughters and his son-in-law. Just as Jacob is punished through deception, so Laban is punished through deception. Laban's תרפים, or idols, are stolen by Rachel (Gen 31:19), who proceeds to feign ignorance about their whereabouts in response to her father's attempt to find them (vv. 34-35). Chapter 31 also puts in the mouths of Jacob and Laban, the male antagonists, harsh mutual reprimands that function as implicit judgments of their actions (vv. 26-30, 36-42). Each antagonist has a chance to explain his deceptive actions (vv. 31-32, 43-44) and finally the tense relationship between the two comes to some resolution through a mutual covenant (ברית), and a public ceremony signifying a new compromise and friend-

ship between them (vv. 45-54). This celebratory closure highlights by contrast the open-ended nature of Rachel's characterization. She is neither punished nor reprimanded for her deceptiveness. Her actions are reported with few if any motivational or evaluative indices. Consequently, Rachel's deceptiveness fails to be shown as problematic or to be resolved in the way Jacob's or Laban's deceptiveness is.

1.3 Rachel's deception of her father (Gen 31:35) is presented as the necessary outcome of her unmotivated stealing of her father's idols. The verse reporting the theft is not preceded by any explanation. Positioned as it is between two verses referring to Jacob's departure, the verse appears to disrupt the narrative flow: "Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's idols" (Gen 31:19). The temporal clause whose subject is Laban explains *how* it was possible for Rachel to steal rather than *why* she decided to steal the idols. Laban's temporary absence from his tent explains how Rachel managed to steal his idols. Explicitly, the function of the temporal clause of v. 19 is descriptive rather than causal, circumstantial rather than psychological. It does not provide us with an insight into Rachel's mind, or what we might call her inner world. What the syntactic combination of Laban and Rachel may suggest, however, is that being the daughter of a deceiver, Rachel has inherited his fundamental characteristic. The syntactic combination of Laban's shearing (למ) his sheep and Rachel's stealing (והגנב) the idols may also suggest that the actions are in some way related. For enjoying the stolen product of Jacob's labor, Laban is punished by having something of value stolen from him by none other than his own daughter. For all these possible implications, our original question regarding Rachel's motivations remains unanswered. For we do not know whether Rachel values the idols themselves, or whether she uses them to take vengeance on Laban.

1.4 One may argue that the opaqueness of Rachel's characterization only illustrates the general tendency of the biblical narrator to maintain varying degrees of reticence or ambiguity in his characterizations (e.g. Alter: 114-30). Yet, in morally problematic contexts, such reticence is very rare (Bar Efrat: 89-112; 199-235; Sternberg, 1985: 186-221). Or rather, as I shall show here, the suspension of authorial judgment is especially rare where important male characters are concerned. The biblical narrator may be indirect or subtle in his characterization and evaluation of male protagonists caught in compromising situations, but he is rarely as reticent as he tends to be with their female counterparts. While it is true that narrative gapping and ambiguity are among the major literary hallmarks of the biblical text, I find important differences in the degree and extent of narrative reticence between accounts of male versus female deception.

2.1 The permanent gaps surrounding Rachel's deception stand out all the more prominently by contrast with the detailed presentations of Jacob's and Laban's motivations. The lengthy monologue Jacob addresses to his wives prior to Rachel's theft functions as only one of a series of implicit justifications for Jacob's stealthy abdication (Gen 31:5-13). In terms of pure information, there is little in this monologue that was not already described with great detail in Gen 30:25-43. We already know that Jacob was successful thanks to Yhwh's intervention on his behalf. We already know about the striped, mottled, and spotted sheep and goats. We even know from Gen 31:3 that God enjoined Jacob to return to Canaan. Why repeat all this information in Jacob's monologue to his wives? It seems to me that the answer lies in Jacob's numerous references to אלהים, אל (Gen 31:7,9,11,13) as the author of his success, and the reason for his wish to return to Canaan. In his monologue Jacob presents God as the one who conceived of the successful sheep breeding enterprise (vv. 8-12). From the monologue we also learn that Jacob does not merely wish to depart for Canaan because he has become wealthy and economically independent, but because God enjoins him to do so.

2.2 What Jacob's monologue significantly precludes is any hint at vindictiveness. The text indicates that Jacob is apprehensive about Laban, for the latter changed his attitude עמו כחמול שלשום (v. 2). Jacob mentions Laban's deceptive and exploitative treatment without bitterness. What he is stressing in his address to his wives is not his victimization by their father, but his victory through God's interference. "And your father has cheated (חלל) me, and changed my wages ten times, but God did not allow him to harm me" (31:7). Jacob's gratitude for God's protection seems to override what might or perhaps should have induced him to retaliate against Laban. By contrast, Rachel's and Leah's response is informed by vindictiveness, as they stress their economic deprivation by their father. Only the last verse of their response contains a reference to God: "And Rachel and Leah answered and said to him: Is there still for us any portion or inheritance in our father's house? For indeed we are considered by him as foreigners, for he has sold us and he has used up the money given for us. All the riches that Elohim took away from our father is ours and our sons', and now all that God told you, do" (31:14-16).

2.3 While Jacob implies that all his possessions belong in fact to God, Rachel and Leah—presented here as speaking with one voice and mind—feel that the property God took away from Laban belongs to them. Whereas Jacob emphasizes God in his monologue, his wives stress the financial aspect as their primary concern. Their references to portion (חלק), inheritance (נחלה), selling (מכרו), money (כסף), riches

(עשר) brings out the sisters' motives for renouncing their father. It is noteworthy that Rachel and Leah are quoted as complaining about their own rather than their husband's victimization by Laban. Whereas Jacob's statement about Laban's cheating him is substantiated by the omniscient narrator in previous passages (Gen 29:22-26, 27-30), the sisters' complaints are nowhere substantiated. Furthermore, since previous marital accounts (e.g. Rebekah's, Gen 24:50-67) suggest that a bride's father could indeed use the money he received in return for his daughter, we are left wondering about the validity of Rachel's and Leah's complaint. A case might be made that the narrator is in fact satirizing Rachel and Leah for complaining so strenuously about Laban's trickery and opportunism, when both colluded in a transaction that involved spending the night with Jacob. Coming from Rachel, who sold Leah the pleasure of spending the night with Jacob in return for Reuben's mandrakes (Gen 30:14-16), the daughters' self-righteous accusation of their father works as a kind of irony of self betrayal. But perhaps most significant is the fact that while Jacob's monologue refers to God's injunction as his primary motivation, the sisters' response stresses the financial aspect and Laban's exploitativeness as the primary justifications for departure. Jacob's wives urge him to "do" (עשה) as God told him, only after enumerating the practical reasons for doing so. In this fashion, the narrator transfers to Rachel and Leah the motivations which might have shed an ambiguous light on Jacob's flight.

3.1 The dialogue between Jacob and his wives fulfills several functions. It exonerates Jacob from Laban's subsequent accusation to the effect that the latter kidnapped his daughters and carried them away like "captives of the sword" (בשביית חרב v. 26). It exonerates Jacob from the (reader's) potential suspicion that his return to Canaan is induced by financial rather than religious motives. This is done by projecting the financial set of motives onto Leah and Rachel and denying their existence in Jacob's mind. By setting up a contrast between Jacob's piety on the one hand and the sisters' pragmatic reasoning (and Rachel's deceptiveness and vindictiveness) on the other, the narrator dramatizes Jacob's transformation from a deceptive opportunist into a God-fearing man. The response, and the actions attributed to Rachel, dramatize wherein lies the difference between the young Jacob and the older Jacob. The words and actions attributed to the sisters, but primarily to Rachel, signal a subtle transference of the will and ability to deceive from Jacob to his wife(wives).

3.2.1 The singular form of the verb ענה and the fact that Rachel precedes Leah as the subject of v. 14 suggests that Rachel was the primary respondent, and that Leah merely consented with or followed

her sister's initiative.¹ But if we can safely argue that Rachel is the primary respondent, and consequently that the bitterness and vindictiveness the verse reflects may be attributed primarily to Rachel, we are still left with the question why. That is, why does the narrator prefer to present Rachel rather than Leah as her father's primary adversary? Why is it Rachel rather than Leah who is shown to steal Laban's idols?

3.2.2 A possible answer to the last question is that having Rachel steal Laban's idols dramatizes more vividly the *lex talionis* principle which controls the Jacob cycle. For it was Rachel whom Laban stole from Jacob, when the latter came to ask for her in return for his seven years' labor (Gen 29:20-23). It is therefore all the more fitting to present Rachel, the object of Jacob's desire, as the one who steals from her father his own objects of desire.

3.3 But Laban's punishment through Rachel is only one paradigm at work in Jacob's cycle. As Michael Fishbane has pointed out, the larger purpose of the mirror structure of the cycle is to "give Jacob his comeuppance and circumspectly redress the injustice of his original act of deceit" (55). *Rachel is the answer for the somewhat conflicting needs of these two paradigms. By having Rachel steal Laban's idols, the narrator penalizes Laban without unduly involving Jacob in yet another compromising situation. In this fashion the narrator demonstrates that the swindler (Laban) received his just deserts, while at the same time showing that Jacob has become fully reformed in Aram and is ready to return to Canaan.*

3.4 The use of the verb גנב in reference to both Rachel's and Jacob's actions first suggests an analogy between them: "And Rachel stole (וַתִּגְנוֹב) her father's idols. And Jacob stole (וַיִּגְנוֹב) the heart of Laban the Aramean in that he did not tell him that he was about to flee (בָּרַח)" (31:19-20). This apparent analogy, however, only highlights the important differences between the actions designated by the homologous verb גנב. For one thing, the literal use of גנב in reference to Rachel and its figurative use in reference to Jacob indicates that while Rachel committed an actual theft, Jacob "stole" in a manner of speaking, that is, idiomatically. That Jacob did not steal anything from Laban is made clear in the detailed description of his work, and the detailed explanation for his economic success (Gen 29:20-21, 27-28; 30:26-43; 31:5-12). Verses 17 and 18, which describe Jacob's preparations for the journey, implicitly repeat that Jacob's belongings are lawfully his own by insist-

¹ Compare the use of the singular verb in reference to Deborah and Barak in Judges 5 1

ing on the use of the third person possessive "his": "And Jacob arose, and set *his* sons and *his* wives on camels, and he drove away all *his* cattle, all *his* livestock *which he has gained*, the cattle *in his possession which he gained in Paddan-Aram*, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac." Lest we miss the implications of the possessive, the repeated relative clause *אשר רכש* challenges any doubt we may have about Jacob's lawful claim to the property he took away with him from Paddan-Aram.

3.5 The juxtaposition of Jacob's figurative גנב and Rachel's literal גנב suggests both similarity and contrast. Both succeed in deceiving Laban, but whereas Jacob's deception is presented as an act of self-defense, Rachel's unexplained deception seems arbitrary. Laban, who is unaware of his daughter's deception, emerges from his confrontational scene with Jacob as the victim of dramatic irony. For as Laban is accusing Jacob of deception and of mistreating his daughters, the reader is aware that it is precisely the objects of his concern that betrayed Laban most severely. Laban accuses Jacob of "carrying away" (גנב) his daughters as "captives of the sword" (v. 26), and of depriving him of the opportunity to kiss his daughters and sons goodbye (v. 28), while we know that his daughters left willingly and had little interest in taking a ceremonious leave of their father (vv. 15-16). Laban uses the verb גנב three times, twice in the figurative sense of cheating (vv. 26-27), and once in the literal sense "and you stole my gods" (v. 30). The glaring mistake Laban makes in attributing to Jacob the stealing of the gods reflects his attributing exclusively to Jacob the interest in the stealthy flight. Ultimately, Laban is deceived by his misperception of Jacob and of his daughters. His (alleged) trust in his daughters and (overt) distrust of Jacob are just as misguided as his valuation of his idols.

3.6 By juxtaposing Jacob's figurative גנב with Rachel's literal גנב the text implies that Jacob's deception is not as grave. Not only does the text provide him with more substantive and detailed reasons for stealing away from his father-in-law, there is also the element of kinship. Rachel is more closely related to Laban than Jacob. This increases the objectionableness of her deceptiveness. Yet, it is Jacob rather than Rachel who is provided with both a preliminary and a retrospective justification for stealing Laban's heart. The preliminary justification (31:1-13) makes it clear that Jacob wishes to leave for Canaan because he is tired of being exploited and deceived (vv. 7-10), because Laban has begun to treat him even worse (vv. 1-2,5), and because God ordered him to return to Canaan (vv. 11-13). The retrospective justification is put in Jacob's mouth in response to Laban's furious questions about Jacob's stealthy departure: "Because I was afraid, for I thought (אמר) that you would take by force (גזל) your daughters away from me" (v. 31).

4.1 Jacob's fear is understandable in light of Laban's deceptive manipulation of his fatherly authority in the past (Gen 29:23-27). Jacob's perceived need to deceive his foe for fear of losing his wives reminds us of Abram-Abraham's deception of the Egyptian Pharaoh (Gen 12:10-20) and of Abimelech the king of Gerar (Gen 20) for fear of losing his life on account of his attractive wife. It also reminds us that Isaac deceived Abimelech for the same reason: "For I thought that I might die on her account" (Gen 26:9). Like his predecessors, Jacob resorts to deception because of a perceived fear associated with his wives. But perhaps more significantly, Jacob is challenged by Laban, just as Abraham and Isaac are confronted by their respective competitors. This confrontation allows all three heroes to explain their actions, which constitutes the prelude to an agreement of peace with their adversaries, and thereby to some kind of moral closure. But as already noted, Jacob is even more justified than Abraham and Isaac in opting for the deception at this point, in view of his bitter experience of Laban's dishonesty in the past.

4.2 Were Rachel said to steal or deceive for fear, her action may not have seemed as objectionable, not only because the specification of motivation is likely to mitigate the negative implications of an act of deception but also because one's fear of a politically superior party often emerges as the most acceptable prelude to deceptive strategies in the biblical text. When used as a means of self-defense, deception emerges often not only as an understandable ploy but also as a necessary, and even venerable ploy (e.g. Ehud's deception of Eglon, Yael's deception of Sisera). In the case of Sarah's deceptive denial concerning her incredulous laughter in response to God's promise of progeny, the text specifies that she "lied" (שָׁחָה), "because she was afraid" (Gen 18:15). Sarah's faithlessness and her false denial does not add much to her moral stature, yet, by explaining it, the text mitigates its negativity. Rebekah's deception of Esau and Isaac is more problematic and complex than Sarah's deception. As I have noted elsewhere, the text does not make us aware of the constraints of patriarchal order which in some ways offer deception as the only alternative for a mother interested in the welfare of a particular child (Fuchs, 1985b: 138). Nevertheless, the text points to at least two justifications for her questionable actions: the divine oracle preceding the birth of her twins (Gen 25:23), and her love for Jacob (Gen 25:28). Yet unlike Abraham and Isaac, their male counterparts, Sarah and Rebekah do not benefit from the moral closure we noted above. And unlike Sarah and Rebekah, Rachel can not be said to have been motivated by fear, love, or faith in God. Nor can her deception of her father be perceived as an expression of loyalty to her husband, as we might construe, for example, Michal's deception of Saul (2 Sam 18:13-17). The fact that Rachel is shown to act

on her own, and that Jacob is so incensed by the theft as to curse the thief, indicates that Rachel did not necessarily act in Jacob's interests (Gen 31:32).

4.3 The suppression of information about Rachel's motives leaves us with several problematic possibilities. Her theft could be construed as the result of greed, presuming that the idols are monetarily valuable. It could be construed as an act of spite, motivated by filial disobedience and vindictiveness, which is perhaps the most acceptable possibility. Her theft could, however, also be read as the result of an idolatrous inclination, as we may assume that Rachel is personally attached to her father's household idols and does not wish to part with them. The potential of these possibilities to cast Rachel's already weak moral stature in an even more negative light, reveals with great clarity the need for the confrontational paradigm and the structural closure that we observed in the stories of the patriarchs' deception. The absence of these paradigms brings out the significant differences between tales of male and female deception in the Hebrew Bible.

4.4 By letting Jacob explain his motives for stealing away with his wives and property, the narrator validates Jacob's actions. To insure his complete exoneration, the narrator does not allow us to speculate whether or not Jacob colluded with Rachel. For these purposes, the narrator makes use of his omniscient stance, offering us a direct glimpse into Jacob's mind: "And Jacob did not know (לא ידע) that Rachel stole them [the idols]" (Gen 31:32). By fully explaining Jacob's motives for stealing away from Laban, and by clarifying that—unlike Rachel's deception—this move was strategically necessary (v. 31), the narrator removes any doubt we might entertain about Jacob's moral reformation. The authorial intrusion clarifying that Jacob was unaware of his wife's crime not only makes clear that he curses her unintentionally, but also that he is outraged by the act, and that had he known, he would have tried either to prevent it or to make amends. Ambiguity is not something the narrator can afford at this important juncture in the narrative, whose goal is to dramatize Jacob's moral transition from a cunning Ya'akov to an upright Israel.

5.1 In view of the variety and complexity of the strategies the narrator employs in conjunction with the characterization and validation of Jacob, it is untenable to argue that the permanent gaps typifying Rachel's presentation are symptomatic of the biblical art of authorial reticence. Neither will it do to explain the narrative gaps by appealing to Rachel's secondary status. For one thing, this explanation begs the question: how do we explain the secondary status of the Israelite matri-

arch? Secondly, Laban's essentially secondary status does not preclude the attribution to him of a rather lengthy diatribe (31:26-30) as well as conciliatory speeches (vv. 43-44; 48-53), which help mitigate the negative implications of his deceptive machinations.

5.2 The differences between the literary representation of Rachel on the one hand and of her male counterparts on the other suggest that gender is a sorely overlooked factor in what has come to be known as biblical poetics. What determines the usual shuttle of the biblical narrator between what Meir Sternberg calls "the truth and the whole truth" (1979:129-133) is not only the Bible's monotheistic ideology, but also its patriarchal ideology. The irreducible differences between the temporary gaps typifying male deception and the permanent gaps, the relentless ambiguity and the lack of closure typical of female deception, are indicative of a patriarchal conception of femaleness. This conception fails to problematize moral attitudes that it tends to problematize in the case of major and secondary male characters. The textual failure to problematize, challenge, and resolve the moral ambiguity attributed to female characters reflects an epistemological economy which predicates moral judgment on a character's sexual identity. According to Judith Ochsorn, the interdependence of gender and morality distinguishes biblical monotheism from earlier polytheistic ideologies which predominated in the ancient Near East (133-236). But whether the moral devaluation of femaleness is inseparable from the Bible's monotheistic ideology or not, the fact remains that gender does constitute an irrepressible factor in biblical representations and interpretations of female deceptiveness.

6.1 As in the scene describing her stealing of the idols, so in the scene describing her encounter with Laban, we are left in the dark as to Rachel's motives. Her actions and speech do not explain or justify her deception, but rather constitute her deception:

And Rachel had taken the idols and put them in the camel's cushion, and sat upon them. And she said to her father: "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for I have the way of women." So he searched, but did not find the idols (Gen 31:34-35).

As an extension and complement of the *lex talionis* paradigm which I discussed earlier, this scene punishes Laban in two complementary ways: on the one hand, the deceiver is deceived, the exploitative father is being deceptively exploited by his own daughter. On the other hand, the idols, symbolic of Laban's idolatrous beliefs (beliefs that implicitly explain his greed, deceptiveness, and relentless exploitation) are being

desecrated. For not only does Rachel sit on the idols, she sits on them in a state of, what Nahum Sarna calls “menstrual impurity” (201). Those who tend to take Rachel’s excuse at face value, however, tend to forget that Rachel may be appealing to “the way of women” as a deceptive excuse for keeping the idols hidden. Once again, by opting for ambiguity, the narrator avoids giving us any clues for judging the character. The permanent narrative gaps left open by the narrator make it possible for us to interpret the textual evidence as an ironic jibe against Rachel as much as against Laban, as we shall see later.

6.2 One wonders in this context, why the narrator prefers to provide us with a somewhat detailed description of Rachel’s alleged actions and words in a way that he deemed unnecessary in the scene describing the theft of the idols. Just as he simply claimed that Rachel stole the idols, he could also briefly state that she hid them. But the narrator prefers to describe in some detail just *how* Rachel concealed the idols (v. 34), and how she concealed the fact that she concealed them (v. 35). The accidental concealment described in v. 34 parallels the verbal concealment quoted in v. 35. Both verses begin with a combined sentence whose subject is Rachel, followed by a consecutive sentence whose subject is Laban. The success of Rachel’s deceptive act is expressed through the compact string of the three verbs *לקחה ותשמם ותשב* and the rhetorical persuasiveness of her polite and conciliatory tone, as well as through the repeated reference to Laban’s failure to find his idols (vv. 34,35). Yet while vv. 34 and 35 represent two versions of concealment, they also create a vivid contrast between Rachel’s actions and words. Rachel’s actions are expressive of agility and initiative, whereas her description of herself insists on her passivity and vulnerability. Thus Rachel’s deception consists in her concealment of the “real” state of things, not only in regard to the idols’ whereabouts, but also in regard to her own “real” state.

6.3 Yet this relatively detailed dramatization of Rachel’s deception does not clarify to what extent Rachel’s appeal to her menstrual period correlates with her “real” state. The text does not clarify whether Rachel’s appeal to her menstrual period is a lie, or whether she uses the fact as a convenient excuse. By leaving it open to our conjecture, the narrator is enabling us to interpret “the way of women” as a reference to Rachel’s menstruation as well as to the fact that she is deceiving her father. The reader knows that Rachel does not rise before her father because his idols are hidden beneath her seat, because, in other words, she is deceiving him. The ambiguity of the described deception enables the narrator to use the powerful dramatic irony generated by this scene as a double-edged weapon against Rachel as well as Laban. For

Rachel's appeal to her "way of women" (דרך נשים) puts in her mouth a condemnation of her own sex, by combining in the same expression a reference to woman's alleged somatic impurity and moral inferiority.

6.4 The euphemistic expression which enables the linkage of female deception and menstruation is itself a linguistic device of concealment. "The way of women" is a euphemistic name for menstrual blood, which in a patriarchal economy is symptomatic of somatic impurity. The need for a "clean" expression testifies to the dis-ease which the referent arouses in the patriarchal mind, especially when the female subject in question is a respectable matriarch. The euphemism is expressive of the horror menstruation evokes in the male imagination, a horror encoded in the Levitical laws of *nidda* (Lev 15:19-33), as well as in the prophets' figurative use of *nidda* as a synonym for moral impurity (Ezek 36:17; Lam 1:17; 1 Chron 29:5). In some ways, it is inevitable that menstruation should be associated with deception, for the former does not exist in male reality, and it is only through moral devaluation and partial denial that patriarchal language can coopt it. If truth is the commensurability of language and reality, and if female reality is incommensurate with male reality, the former must be dismissed as nontruth, or deception.²

6.5 Because menstruation is unique to women, it should come as no surprise that patriarchal ideology should attempt to associate it with both deception and idolatry, the former signifying a negation of (male) word, and the latter signifying the negation of this word's divine authorization.³ This may explain why Rachel is not challenged for deceiving both her father and, in a less blatant way, her husband. If deceptiveness is inherent in female nature, there is no more point in challenging it than there is in challenging the menstrual cycle. But if patriarchal politics cannot deny the existence of menstruation and its undeniable link to fertility and procreation, it can degrade it by defining it as impure and by legislating a series of laws to contain it. Similarly, if patriarchal politics cannot deny woman's ability to think and speak, it can contain, or warp, the relationship of women and language by minimizing and constricting female dialogue and by implying that it is metaphorically impure, or deceptive.⁴

² Compare Luce Irigaray's analysis of the phallogocentric treatment of female eros in Western civilization from Plato to Freud

³ For a thematic association of menstruation with female deceptiveness, see Gen 18 11-15. For a thematic association of idols with female deception, see 1 Sam 19 11-17.

⁴ See Julia Kristeva on the relationship between biblical laws on somatic and dietary purity on the one hand and the biblical moral code on the other (90-108).

7.1.1 By failing to show Rachel's deceptiveness as problematic, the narrator forestalls the use of the confrontational paradigm which usually leads to resolution and closure. There is neither confrontation nor compromise between Rachel and Laban. Unlike Laban, who despite his questionable conduct is allowed to utter binding words of truth shortly before he leaves the narrative scene, Rachel's final words are deceptive. Unlike both Laban and Jacob, who are punished for their deceptiveness, Rachel is not shown to be punished, unless we interpret her death on the way from Bethel to Ephrath as a kind of divine punishment (Gen 35:16-24).

7.1.2 Such an interpretation would be problematic both for its unusual severity and because of its textual disjunction from the scene describing what is never quite presented as her crime. Rachel resurfaces in ch. 35, just as abruptly as she disappears from ch. 31. One could argue that Rachel's untimely death is a belated fulfillment of Jacob's curse: "Any one with whom you find your gods shall not live" (Gen 31:32). But close attention to the text would disclose that the object of Jacob's curse is the one who would be found out by Laban. Since the latter is not shown to find his gods with Rachel, it is a matter of speculation to attribute her death to Jacob's curse.

7.2 The ambiguity which typifies Rachel's deception typifies also what might or might not be her punishment. The emphasis in the scene on the fact that the dying Rachel is giving birth to a son (Gen 35:17) and the attention given to this baby's name (v. 18) suggest that the narrator is not so much interested in the moral relationship of Rachel's death to her deception as in the "product" of her death. Now that she has given birth to a second son, Rachel is no longer necessary for the progression of the story. Rachel "dies" at a convenient point, having fulfilled her procreative role, just as she has previously been whisked off the stage, having served as the means of Laban's punishment and as Jacob's foil. From this point of view, Rachel dies in "the way of women," just as she lived and deceived in "the way of women." It is not so much the fact that she dies in childbirth, but that she disappears just as abruptly as she was shown to "live."

7.3 The systematic differences in the biblical representation of deceptive men and women is crucial for our understanding of the interdependence of biblical poetics and the Bible's patriarchal ideology. An awareness of these differences should matter to both biblical feminist and literary critics. For if gender is a factor in what determines the shape of the biblical text, it is misleading to refer to a general "art of the biblical narrative," or to a neutral "biblical poetics" (Alter; Stern-

berg, 1985). An awareness of the interdependence of heterosexual politics and biblical narrative is the first step in a feminist critique of the patriarchal claim to absolute "objective" truth. The critical failure to reevaluate the implications of the permanent narrative gaps discussed here risks validating the androcentric epistemology which made gaps possible in the first place. A failure to deal with the political aspect of female deceptiveness in the biblical narrative is both an academic and a political failure. By denying the problem, we risk justifying the continued hegemony of androcentric discourse in the biblical academy.

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