



Tricksters and Temptresses

Women as Tricksters in the Jewish Scriptures

Women as Tricksters and Deceivers

- The motif of deception often features in the presentation of women as key players in the history of Israel.
- A distinction is made between:
 - a form of deception that benefits the nation
 - the sinister and manipulative form of deception that characterizes certain women.

What is a Trickster?

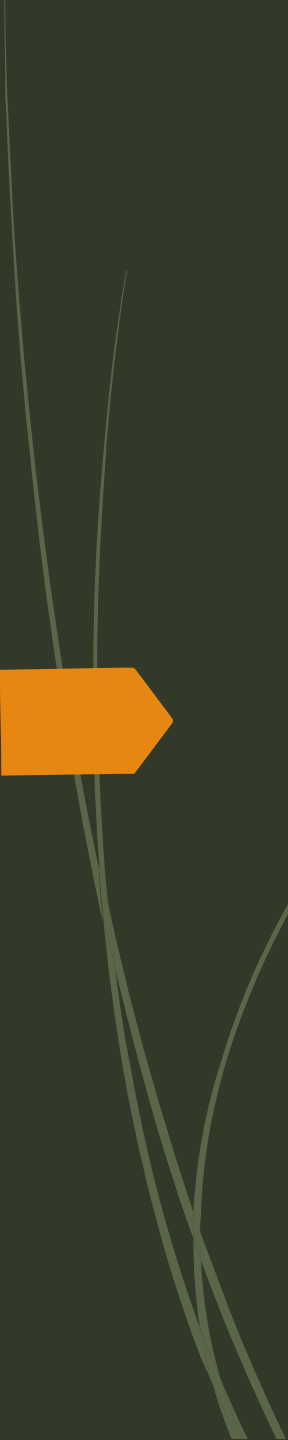
- *Trickster n.* – in folklore and mythology, a character that plays clever tricks on other characters. Often taking the form of an animal such as a fox or coyote, the trickster can represent downtrodden elements of a community or the triumph of good over evil (A. Barnard & J. Spencer, *Encyclopedia of Cultural and Social Anthropology*, 1996).





Trickster Figures

- ▶ They inhabit liminal realms
- ▶ Often viewed as messengers of the divine
- ▶ They wield power over enemies
- ▶ They subvert social boundaries



Anthropological Perspectives on the Trickster

- Global myths, narratives and folktales
- Selfish buffoon? Cultural hero(ine)?
- The mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox' (Lewis Hyde, *Tricksters Makes This World*, 1998).
- A figure that crosses and constructs boundaries.

Trickster Characteristics

- ▶ Boundary crosser: Disrupts norms/crosses boundaries/does not conform to the establishment.
- ▶ Disorderly: Loss of status / seen as cultural buffoon or cultural hero.
- ▶ Deceptive: deceives larger and more powerful beings
- ▶ Mysterious stories: tells stories that need decoding / brings divine messages

P. Hansen, *The Trickster and the Paranormal* (2001)



Women as Tricksters

- ▶ Due to their marginal position, women (as individuals and as a group) seek to accomplish aims through alternative or subversive ways – through deception and trickery.
- ▶ Underdogs in contexts of power and authority.
- ▶ Marginalized women re-construct their social circumstances.
- ▶ A politics of resistance to transcend borders and boundaries.



Deception in a Man's World

- ▶ Several women in Genesis deceive their husbands or fathers: the daughters of Lot, Rebekah, Rachel, Tamar.
- ▶ The women of Exodus 1-2 deceive/trick Pharaoh.
- ▶ Such acts are designed to
 - promote the careers of their husbands (e.g., Sarah in Genesis 12:10-20)
 - secure the family name (Tamar deceives her father-in-law Judah in Genesis 38).

The Daughters of Lot (Genesis 19:30-38)

'The Daughters of Lot', Hendrick Goltzius, 1616.

Now Lot went up out of Zoar and settled in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; so he lived in a cave with his two daughters. And the firstborn said to the younger, 'Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come into us after the manner of all the world. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father'..... Thus both daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore him a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites to this day.



‘Lot and his Daughters’
Lucas Cranach, 1528



Rebekah (Genesis 27)

Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, 'I heard your father say to your brother Esau, "Bring me game, and prepare for me savoury food to eat, that I may bless you before I die". Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savoury food for your father, such as he likes; and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.' But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah,

'Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.' His mother said to him, 'Let your curse be on me, my son' only obey my word. And go, get them for me.' So he went and got them and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared savoury food, such as his father loved. Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob; and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck.

Isaac Blesses Jacob

So he [Jacob] went in to his father, and said, 'My father'; and he said, 'Here I am; who are you, my son?' (Gen. 27:18).

Govert Flinck, 1638





Isaac Blesses Jacob
Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1618-82)

‘The elder shall serve the younger’

And the Lord said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.’ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterwards his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob’ (Gen. 25:23, 28).

‘The birth of Esau and Jacob’
(www.ratnermuseum.com)



Birth of Jacob and Esau

Female Deceptiveness

- ▶ They act in ways that benefit the family (Tamar and Ruth).
- ▶ They play a part in Israel's salvation history (Rebekah, the women at the Nile)
- ▶ Points to the social inferiority of women in a patriarchal society.
- ▶ As marginalized figures they must resort to trickery to achieve their goals.
- ▶ Acts of trickery take place behind the scenes.



A Feminist Perspective on Power and Authority

- Biblical women possess no authority
Authority = power recognized in social terms.
- Biblical woman can possess power
Power = they succeed in fulfilling their wishes.
- Their power is confined to the private domain, 'behind the scenes'.

Dangerous Seductresses and Temptresses

- ▶ Deceptiveness is a malign condition with negative effects.
- ▶ It is particularly associated in the Hebrew Bible with foreign women, including:
Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39)
Delilah (Judges 16)

Potiphar's Wife

Tintoretto (1555)

- ▶ She is an unfaithful wife of one of Pharaoh's officers; she is also depicted as the 'older woman'.
- ▶ 'Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me"' (Genesis 39:6-7).
- ▶ Her deception lies in her sexual desire for Joseph.
- ▶ 'And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her' (Genesis 39:10).
- ▶ When her seduction fails, the scorned woman resorts to deceit and lies.
- ▶ Joseph's garment is left in her hand, prompting her to accuse him falsely of seduction and rape.



A Pawn in Israel's Salvation History?

- ▶ The seduction leads to Joseph's good fortune:
 - ▶ > he is thrown into prison
 - ▶ > he interprets the dreams of his fellow prisoners
 - ▶ > he interprets Pharaoh's dream
 - ▶ > he becomes a key figure in the Egyptian court.

'Joseph and Potiphar's Wife', Properzia de Rossi (female Renaissance artist, ca. 1520)



Samson and his Women



The Women in the Life of Samson

Samson's wife, a Philistine woman from Timnah, does not actively deceive, but uses emotional blackmail in order to cajole Samson into explaining his riddle.

So Samson's wife wept before him, saying, 'You hate me; you do not really love me. You have asked a riddle of my people, but you have not explained it to me'.... She wept before him for the seven days that their feast lasted; and because she nagged him on the seventh day he told her. Then she explained the riddle to her people (Judges 14:16-17).

Delilah (Judges 16)

‘He fell in love with a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah. The lords of the Philistines came to her and said to her, ‘Coax him, and find out what makes his strength so great, and how we may overpower him, so that we may blind him in order to subdue him; and we will give you eleven hundred pieces of silver’ (16:4-5)

‘How can you say, “I love you”, when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me three times now and have not told me what makes your strength so great’. Finally, after she had nagged him with her words day after day, and pestered him, he was tired to death. So he told her his whole secret (16:15-17).

Hedy Lamarr and Victor Mature, 1949 film ‘Samson and Delilah’



The 'Deception' of Samson

- ▶ Samson falls asleep on her lap, she calls upon a man to cut his locks and weakens him.
- ▶ Delilah uses rhetorical skills and her sexuality to entrap Samson.
- ▶ She is guided by lust, self-interest, promises of wealth, and then disappears from the narrative.
- ▶ 'I found more bitter than death the woman who is a trap, whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are fetters' (Eccles. 7:26)

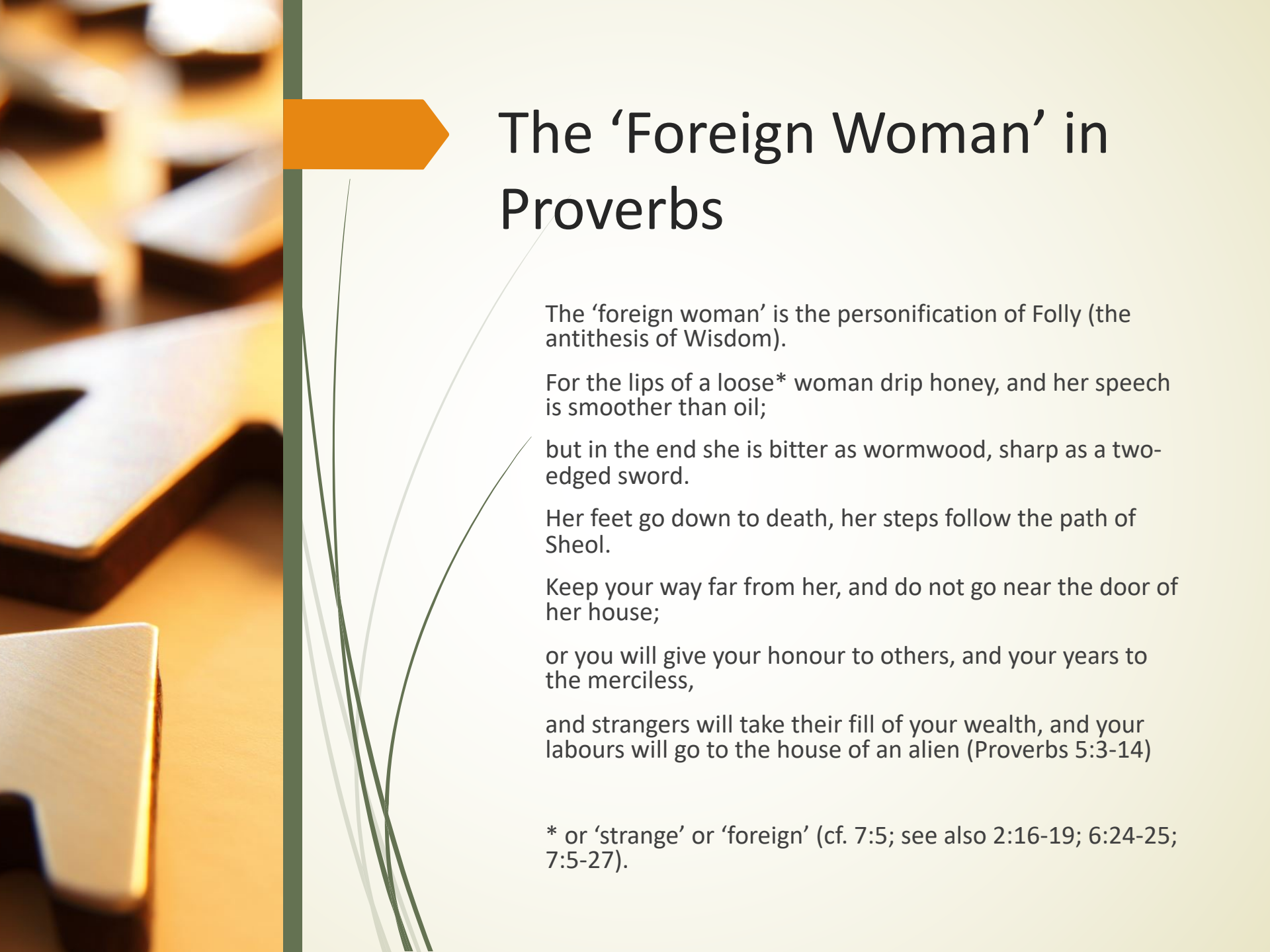
Paul Rubens, 'Samson and Delilah', 1610.



Foreign Women as Temptresses

- ▶ Potiphar's wife, Samson's female companions, Jezebel.
- ▶ Jezebel is of Phoenician descent (I Kings 16:13) and uses deceptive means to capture the vineyard of Naboth (I Kings 21:8-11).

'So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. She wrote in the letters, 'Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly'.



The 'Foreign Woman' in Proverbs

The 'foreign woman' is the personification of Folly (the antithesis of Wisdom).

For the lips of a loose* woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil;

but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.

Her feet go down to death, her steps follow the path of Sheol.

Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house;

or you will give your honour to others, and your years to the merciless,

and strangers will take their fill of your wealth, and your labours will go to the house of an alien (Proverbs 5:3-14)

* or 'strange' or 'foreign' (cf. 7:5; see also 2:16-19; 6:24-25; 7:5-27).

- ▶ Male biblical authors clearly hold foreign women in suspicion.
- ▶ Proverbs (post-exilic) reflects the concern to protect the ethnic purity of Israel.
- ▶ Ahab takes a foreign wife and builds a house and altar for Baal (cf. I Kings 16:31-32).

When Joram saw Jehu, he said, 'Is it peace, Jehu?' He answered, 'What peace can there be, so long as the many whoredoms and sorceries of your mother Jezebel continue?' (II Kings 9:22).

The Threat of the Foreign Wife

King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the Israelites, 'You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods;' Solomon clung to these in love. Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David (I Kings 11:2-4).

'And I [Nehemiah] made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for you sons or for yourselves. Did not King Solomon of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was not king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God make him king over all Israel; nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women? (Nehemiah 13:12-27).

Foreign Women as a Threat to Yahwism



‘Foreign women were accepted into the Judahite/Israelite community if and when they were prepared to forsake their previous ethnic, cultural, and religious ties and to adopt the systems of value and beliefs prevalent in their new environment’ (Athalya Brenner).