

THE OUTRAGEOUS TALE OF MRS. POTIPHAR

An Analysis of the Gender Bias of Modern Interpretations of Genesis 39 and a Proposal for an Intersectional Reading

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Throughout modern research history, the story about Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39) has very often been labelled "seduction" or "temptation". With both terms, Mrs. Potiphar is depicted as a dangerous and yet fascinating *femme fatale*. In the present paper, I will analyse the underlying gender bias of these terms and propose "a new kind of outrage" that focusses on Joseph's victimhood.¹

1. *Genesis 39 and Mrs. Potiphar's Morality in Research History*

Chapter 39 of the book of Genesis belongs to the Joseph story. After he has been sold into slavery by his own brothers, Joseph is bought by a wealthy Egyptian official named Potiphar. Potiphar's wife casts her eyes on the handsome and successful slave, commands him ("Lie with me!") day after day, ignores his refusal and finally grabs his garment. Joseph flees and she stays behind, the *corpus delicti* in her hands. After a moment of thought, she cries for help and lies about the incident twice: She tells her servants that the slave has tried to "mock" her and has escaped because of her cry for help. After his return home, she repeats the story in similar words to her husband. Enraged, he brings his best slave to the king's prison.

Seen within its Ancient context, Genesis 39 is a tale about the wise man who does not commit adultery — a common motif in Ancient Near Eastern

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1 I would like to thank Michael Windisch for his stimulating critical remarks from a philosophical perspective. — A large part of my arguments stems from my diploma thesis (University of Graz 2014, unpublished). Although the hypothesis stayed the same, I have rearranged the course of argumentation, especially the use of Bourdieu's theory, for the present paper.

Wisdom Literature.² All throughout modern research history, though, Genesis 39 has very often been given either the title “seduction”³ or “temptation”⁴. Only late and occasionally, doubts about the adequacy of these terms have been raised. The thesis of the present paper is that these labels reflect a gender bias that is rooted in the modern patriarchal perspective on the text. In order to disclose it, Genesis 39 will be interpreted within an overtly patriarchal framework. After thereby making the androcentric approach visible and raising awareness, it will be deconstructed so that a new reading can be outlined.

2. *Bourdieu’s Relations of Symbolic Power – Understanding Genesis 39 from a Patriarchal Perspective*

2.1 “La Domination Masculine” (1998) — Gender Relations And Symbolic Power

By the end of his life, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) dealt with gender relations in his work “La domination masculine” (1998; English: 2001). For this purpose, he fell back on his key-term of “symbolic power” (cf. Rehbein 2011, 189–216). Bourdieu’s intention is to show how the patriarchal system is permanently reproduced so that it seems like there is no alternative: Patriarchy is perceived as *natural*. On the one hand, Bourdieu’s work is an analysis of these social structures. On the other hand, it is explicitly directed against their mystification: The system *could* be changed, although only with difficulty.

2.2 Usability and Limitations of Bourdieu’s Theory

2.2.1 The “Apparent Perennity” of the Androcentric Vision — A Questionable Approach to History

The same system of classificatory schemes is found, in its essential features, through the centuries and across economic and social differences, at the two extremes of the space of anthropological possibles [sic], among the high-

2 See Fox 2012, 256: “Wisdom teaches a man to shun sexual advances by another man’s wife (Prov 2:16–22; 5:1–23; 6:20–35; 7:1–27; 22:14; 23:27). And, it should be noted, Joseph’s scolding of Potiphar’s wife (Gen 39:8–9) does have the tone of a sage’s lecture in Proverbs.” According to Fox, however, a main “ingredient” of Wisdom Literature, the immediate connection between deed and consequence, is missing in Gen 39 (cf. *ibid.*).

3 Cf. among many others Holzinger 1898, 232; Jacob 1934; Ruppert 1965, 51; Vawter 1977, 403; Brueggemann 1982, 313; Scharbert 1986, 248; Alter 1996, 225; Reyburn/Fry 1997; Turner 2000, 168–173; Amos 2004, 242; Wilson 2004, 102; Matthews 2005, 733; Loza 2007, 169; Plaut 32008, 335.

4 Cf. for example König 1919, 42; von Rad 1964, 317; Speiser 1964, 301; Ruppert 1965, 51; Brenner 1985, 111.121; Jeansonne 1990, 10; Jansen 1993, 157; Boecker 1994.

land peasants of Kabylia and among the upper-class denizens of Bloomsbury (Bourdieu 2002, 81)

The patriarchal structures *seem* to be perennial (Bourdieu 2002, 81) — but in fact they are arbitrary and just extremely difficult to change. “Arbitrary”, however, does not mean that humanity has ever had anything else but an “androcentric vision of the world” (ibid., 82).

In my opinion, Bourdieu is too optimistic about both the timelessness of his theory and the completeness of our idea of “history”. The “androcentric vision” is, for example, not present in every text of the Hebrew Bible — although it is certainly possible to read it into all of them. Ancient Israel can doubtlessly be called a “patriarchal society” — but the practical consequences of this statement differ depending on the epoch and on the social stratum. Separated rooms for men and women, for example, and confinement of the latter to the house are not archeologically attested before the Hellenistic period (4th century BCE) and remain then limited to the upper class (cf. Staubli 2008). Therefore I maintain that Bourdieu’s theory casts more light on the motives of biblical scholars in the past 150 years than on the intentions of the Ancient author(s).

2.2.2 The Exclusive Focus on Gender — A Plea for Intersectionality

Bourdieu focusses exclusively on “gender”. The missing aspect of *intersectionality* — that is: the overlap and interplay of various discriminating categories — is one of the weakest points of Bourdieu’s work. In my view, his reductionist approach does not do justice to the complexity of social positions: For a rich, young and healthy lady with a PhD, being a woman means something else than it does for a poor, uneducated, old and sick woman.

2.2.3 A Theory is not a Method — The Treatment of Narrative Gaps and Ambiguities

Bourdieu’s work does not establish a method but a *theory*. Using a theory for the interpretation of the literary text Genesis 39 does not supply you with neutral tools — it gives you a backpack full of stimulating and coherent ideas. This leads to different scenarios that have to be critically evaluated:

Some parts of the theory might match the narrative nicely: No matter how you interpret Potiphar’s silence and actions at the end of Genesis 39 — he eliminates Joseph from the household because rumours will certainly spread and his honour is in danger. *Other elements might fit the narrative gaps and ambiguities:* The text does not say if Mrs. Potiphar is really confined to the house or inhabits a separate part of it. It only speaks of the “servants of her house” (Gen 39:14). However, you can choose to interpret it as a

confirmation of Bourdieu's statements about how patriarchal structures are expressed in the distribution of space. If the ambiguous title *s'eris* is translated as "eunuch", Gen 39:1 already sets the tone for a narrative about virility and its endangering. If you choose "officer" instead, the indication for an explicit discussion of masculinity is weak.

As I am trying to deconstruct the unconscious principles of modern research history, the three aforementioned points can serve as "attention guidelines" for the analysis of the text: They disclose how the modern patriarchal mindset affects the perception of the story.

2.3 Mrs. Potiphar — For a Short While the "Manliest" Person in the Household?

The female protagonist of Genesis 39 does not have a name. She is solely defined by her marriage to Joseph's master Potiphar, an important Egyptian official (Gen 37:36; 39:1). His wealth is remarked upon multiple times (VV.4–6.8). In Bourdieu's terminology: Potiphar's economic capital is high and therefore his symbolic capital is correspondingly big. He can create, organize, start a financial transaction, buy a human being, employ him as he likes, delegate work and transfer a person to the royal prison without further explanation. In short: He is an honourable man.⁵

Among other things, his symbolic capital consists of his wife. She is — according to the "market of symbolic goods" (cf. *ibid.*, 44) — an important, dangerous and endangered good (cf. *ibid.*, 51). The ambiguity of women, their attractiveness and concurrent slyness, makes them a risky trophy. To ensure security, the virtues of (premarital) virginity and (marital) chastity are indispensable (cf. *ibid.*, 51). So when the wife of Joseph's master reaches out for the slave, she is leaving this framework and overstepping her authority as a woman. She acts in a masculine manner, that is to say: in a way that only a man is entitled to. First, she uses a masculine form of rhetoric: "Lie with me!" (Gen 39:7.12), an expression of discretionary power and aggressive sexuality that aims at possession (cf. *ibid.*, 20). Second, her behaviour is risky, offensive and spectacular, which is not appropriate for a woman.⁶ Her brusque order shows no signs of the tenderness that women are supposed to expect from sexuality in a patriarchal society (cf. *ibid.*, 20). Third, feminine passivity — normally an integral part of sexual intercourse (cf. *ibid.*, 21) — is now converted into a shamelessly demanding activity.

5 Bourdieu considers the idea of "honour" to be synonymous with the abundance of symbolic capital someone has (cf. *ibid.*, 42).

6 "It falls to men, who belong on the side of all things external, official, public, straight, high and discontinuous, to perform all the brief, dangerous and spectacular acts" (*Ibid.*, 30).

The reason for Mrs. Potiphar's final failure is already discernible in aspect number 2: Men act spectacularly in public where they can be seen by others (cf. *ibid.*, 46). "Conquests" are bragged about because they only increase the symbolic capital if they are acknowledged by other men. A woman's sphere is the house — and this is not the place for heroic deeds. The woman who attempts to act heroically there has to conceal her actions. Mrs. Potiphar ventures out of her terrain without leaving it. But as soon as she is about to be discovered, there is only one way out: She has to spin a tale that appeals to patriarchal logic. At this point, she relapses into stereotypically feminine behaviour.⁷ Interpreted against the patriarchal backdrop, Genesis 39 is an illustration of the insuperability of gender norms:

These strategies, which are not strong enough really to subvert the relation of domination, at least have the effect of confirming the dominant representation of women as maleficent beings [...]. Thus, whatever they do, women are condemned to furnish the proof of their malign nature and to justify the taboos and prejudice that they incur by virtue of their essential maleficence [...]. (Bourdieu 2002, 32)

Mrs. Potiphar, who claims masculine authority, cannot succeed. Eventually, the patriarchal framework re-incorporates her or she re-incorporates herself through stereotypical feminine behaviour: She is doomed to reproduce the system.

3. *Deconstruction of the Gender Bias of Modern Interpretations*

3.1 The Gender Bias behind the Terms "Seduction" and "Temptation"

Only two scholars have explicitly discussed the applicability of the terms "seduction" and "temptation" in the past years. David W. Cotter votes against "seduction" because, in his view, it is imprecise: Seduction would include wooing to weaken the desired person's defence. Mrs. Potiphar, however, does not use this kind of rhetoric at all: Her utterance is resolute (Cotter 2003, 291). Diana Lipton (2010, 46) shares the impression that Mrs. Potiphar's language and behaviour are not seductive when she records: "this is no sultry *voulez vous coucher!*"

Most of the common interpretations show no sign of a "moral outrage" against Mrs. Potiphar⁸. She is not perceived as absolutely evil but as a *femme*

7 Bourdieu (*ibid.*, 32) counts "magic, cunning, lies" among others among "forms of soft violence [...] that women use against the physical or symbolic violence of men".

8 Contra Donaldson 1993, 92: "I wonder whether the moral outrage directed towards Potiphar's Wife stems from her literal self-centeredness and her blatant reclamation of what a patriarchal system has tried to wrest from her."

fatale, an extremely dangerous person with bad intentions, who is at the same time very lascivious and desirable. Only a few scholars highlight the bluntness of her behaviour. The majority acknowledge that her actions are morally wrong; at the same time, they seem to give her credit for being fascinating.

I suppose that the episode in Potiphar's house would not be called "seduction" or "temptation" if a master told his female slave to sleep with him and grabbed her by her garment. Modern scholarship would probably call such a story "sexual harassment", "coercion" and "attempted rape". It would probably not be maintained that the defenceless and morally sound girl resisted the *temptation* of being *seduced* by her powerful and uncompromising master.

Contrary to my interpretation of Genesis 39 against the backdrop of the "patriarchal mindset", where I showed the transition from stereotypically masculine behaviour (demanding, aggressive sexuality) to stereotypically feminine behaviour (lying and cunning), the interpreters who speak of "seduction" and "temptation" harmonize all of Mrs. Potiphar's actions according to the image of the *femme fatale*. In their perception, she is acting stereotypically feminine throughout the whole episode. This is problematic in view of the actual text. Moreover, the depiction of Mrs. Potiphar as a *femme fatale* trivializes her power. In the end, the captions "seduction" and "temptation" show a double gender bias:

- (1) *A man cannot be the victim of sexual violence by a woman.* He can only be seduced or tempted — in either case he retains his freedom of action. He is never helpless or defenceless — if he is damaged by a woman, it is because of a temporary weakness of his strong will and integrity. In any case, he certainly *could* have saved himself.
- (2) *A woman cannot be a sexual offender.* She can only seduce or tempt a man — but the success of her always non-violent, almost non-physical "witchcraft" depends only on the man's steadfastness. Her immoral and dangerous behaviour questions a man's integrity but cannot hurt him without his consent.

Both of these assumptions do not bear closer critical examination. Empirical data (cf. Doege 2013) shows that men are in fact victims of sexual violence by women. Correspondingly, women can be sexual offenders, for example when they force a man to have sexual intercourse: then their exertion of power has direct bodily consequences.⁹

9 Recent surveys show that violence of women is generally perceived as less severe. This gender bias, however, does not correlate with the actual severity of the injuries inflicted by women. Cf. Schwithal 2005, 233.

3.2 Feminist Interpretations of the Chapter — Perpetuation of (One Aspect of) the Gender Bias

On the whole, a surprisingly small number of gender critical analyses of Genesis 39 have been published in the past decades (cf. Bach 1993/1997; Brenner 1985; Donaldson 1993; MacKinley 1995; Jeansonne 1990; Schneider 2008; Lipton 2010), which gives the impression that the narrative about the nameless, immoral wife of Potiphar presented a difficulty to feminist or gender critical approaches. I assume that the reason for the low interest in this story and the striking similarity of the results of the aforementioned works lies in some hermeneutical issues in the analysis of a “bad” female literary character. For this reason, I suppose, the twofold gender bias discussed in the preceding section has so far not been remarked upon by any feminist or gender critical analysis.

In general, gender critical interpretations show a common starting point — the observation that the woman in Genesis 39 is depicted as “bad” or rather “immoral”. After that, two different branches can be distinguished. They are not mutually exclusive: Scholars switch from one to the other at various stages of their thought-processes.

Approach # 1: How does Patriarchy depict Mrs. Potiphar as “bad”?

The first approach concentrates on the question: *How* does patriarchy depict Mrs. Potiphar as “bad”? It centres on the narrative techniques, the context of moral norms etc. As a result, the patriarchal framework is disclosed and opposed by the feminist perspective.

The feminist reader, refusing to align herself with the narratorial ‘we’, joins the ranks of the disloyal and the unfaithful. Such a betrayal of authorial trust implies the denial of patriarchal rule and rejection of the shadow cast by the giant phallic ‘I’ over everything men write. (Bach 1993, 341)

So far, feminist scholarship has been preoccupied with the alleged patriarchal context of the author(s) of Genesis 39, as is evident in the previous quotation of Bach. She decides to be disloyal to the narratorial “we” that tries to force a patriarchal perspective on the readers. In my opinion, this focus on the Ancient author(s) has to be distinguished from another possible focus: The analysis of the patriarchal context of modern (scholarly) interpretations. This distinction is already hinted at, though not elaborated on, by Donaldson (1993, 92): “On a more repressed level, this outrage could also represent a deep sexual anxiety within the predominately male tradition of biblical criticism.”

The differentiation between the patriarchal system (of the Ancient author[s]) and the “male tradition of biblical criticism” questions the abso-

lute continuity of patriarchal concepts through time. By rejecting the “giant phallic ‘I’”, as Bach puts it, she might introduce modern patriarchal concepts into the story that may have been foreign to the Ancient author(s).

Apart from the warning about anachronistic categories, my objection to this first branch of research is as follows: as exegetes and therefore as theologians, we cannot dismiss the text because it is rich in patriarchal stereotypes and has generated a long tradition of biased interpretations. The text is still canonical. If we stop after the analysis of the patriarchal context, we contribute to the perpetuation of this interpretation. Calling it “wrong” is not enough: We have to propose a new approach if we truly want to overcome it.¹⁰

Approach # 2: Let us make Mrs. Potiphar “good”!

Approach number 2 is another way of reacting to the observation that the narrative depicts Mrs. Potiphar as bad: It aims at making her “good” — that is: more understandable, likeable, sympathetic or at least more “three-dimensional”. The results are mostly highly imaginative readings of the story that incorporate content from later traditions into the biblical narrative¹¹ or choose unconventional ways of interpretation (cf. MacKinley 1995). My objection to this approach is threefold:

First, these approaches are overtly *eisegetic*, which, in these cases, is not problematic *per se* as it is marked by the authors themselves. Nonetheless, it has to be pointed out that by filling up the narrative lacunae of Genesis 39 *ad libitum* — be it with “traditional” material or bits from your own imagination — you are leaving the hermeneutical framework of conventional exegesis.

Second, there is no “real Mrs. Potiphar” that can be rescued or uncovered. We are dealing with a fictive text about a fictive character that, for all we know, enters the stage only once in the history of literature: In Genesis 39.

The third objection has been discussed at length by Lipton (2010, 40); she recalls a conversation with another Old Testament scholar: “Being a card-carrying feminist should not entail condoning the behaviour of all women, no matter how egregious. Potiphar’s wife, she said, was a woman whose immoral actions could not be excused.” Mrs. Potiphar’s actions are, as I would like to add, immoral on many levels, even — or perhaps much more so — by today’s standards (cf. section 4).

10 This critique is mostly directed at my own diploma thesis where I deconstructed the patriarchal structures but failed to develop a new and fruitful interpretation.

11 Cf. the title of Bach 1993: “Breaking Free of the Biblical Frame-Up”.

In the end, none of the feminist approaches manages to overcome the twofold bias that men cannot be victims and women cannot be offenders.¹² To some extent, their assumption that it is only the patriarchal perspective that makes Mrs. Potiphar “bad” contributes to the bias that women are never sexually and thereby physically aggressive (cf. Bourdieu 2002, 51).

4. *A New Kind of Outrage — An Intersectional Reading of Genesis 39*

The focus of large parts of modern research has been on the erotic aspects of sexuality and therefore on the alleged dichotomy of “seductive woman” versus “chaste man”. However, if Genesis 39 is interpreted within the context of Ancient Wisdom Literature, the opposition of “adulterous woman” and “wise man” shifts into focus. Against the backdrop of the contemporary concept of intersectionality, it is necessary to add two more perspectives: Genesis 39 is also a story about “master’s wife” versus “master’s slave” (hierarchical aspect) and “native woman”¹³ versus “foreign man” (ethnic aspect). If sexuality is seen as *one* discriminating category among many, the episode in Potiphar’s house can be understood as a highly topical tale about the explosive interplay of sexual violence, racism and power relations.

Until today, it is extremely difficult for a man to prove that he did *not* sexually harass or attempt to rape a woman. Several cases have been in the media in the past years, and even in the case of an acquittal, the reputation of the accused men has mostly been ruined. Of course, it is also problematic for a woman to prove that she has been harassed. If her accusation is false, however, it is a very powerful means to bring a man into disrepute.

A glimpse at current newspaper articles and reports draws the attention to another problematic aspect: the combination of alleged sexual harassment or violence and ethnic stereotypes. At the moment, male migrants from the Near East who come to Europe are often and generally said to be a threat to local women. Events like the harassment of dozens of women during Silvester in Cologne have sparked discussions that are rarely objective analyses of the problem of sexual violence and its connection to migration (cf. Strobl 2016).

12 One of the most fruitful approaches is Tammi J. Schneider’s (2008). She includes Mrs. Potiphar in her monograph about the “Mothers of Promise”, which is a theologically interesting and subtle way of making her “good”: Mrs. Potiphar is still the woman who stalks and slanders Joseph — but she is also essentially part of God’s plan.

13 Genesis 39 does not discuss Mrs. Potiphar’s nationality. Anyway, she is obviously more “at home” in Egypt than Joseph.

Although slavery is nowadays abolished in most countries in the world, 45.8 million people are still living under slave-like conditions today according to the Global Slavery Index (cf. www.globalslaveryindex.org). In industrial countries, especially prostitutes from abroad run the risk of being held as “slaves” without rights. In their positions, it is very difficult if not altogether impossible to report abuse and violence.

Besides slavery, racism and the difficulty of disproving the accusation of attempted rape, Genesis 39 also touches on another taboo subject: Sexual violence by women against men. In a recent survey in Germany, 7,3% of the men considered themselves victims of sexualized violence as opposed to 6,1% of the women (cf. Döge 2013, 36f.). On the one hand, this difference is due to the fact that men are more often victims of sexual violence by women *and* other men. On the other hand, it shows that sexual violence is at least as much a reality for men as it is for women. The survey tried to cast light not only on the victims but also on the offenders: 5% of the asked women and 9,7% of the men admitted that they had forced someone to a sexual act in the past year (cf. *ibid.*, 31).

Against this backdrop, the power relations between the characters in Genesis 39 become clear: Joseph enters Potiphar’s household as a slave. Being harassed by his master’s wife poses a dilemma for him: if he succumbs to her demand, he does not only risk his position in the household but his life. The readers know that he tries to master the situation by appealing to her common sense without shaming her. But after an unspecified amount of time it becomes physical: She grabs his garment and tries to *make* him lie with her. Even now, Joseph maintains his own and everybody else’s integrity. However, with a *corpus delicti* in hand, the tide is turning for Mrs. Potiphar: the incident is about to become public. Therefore she calls for help and spins a tale full of stereotypes about a dangerous, foreign, male slave who has tried to “mock” her.

Joseph’s “no *means* no”, as the famous slogan of the anti-rape movement goes. But as a slave, a foreigner and a man, he is denied the right to say no — in the Ancient story as well as in today’s interpretations. In the tale, his master’s wife ignores her rejection. In research history, Joseph is either made a chaste, moral hero, or Mrs. Potiphar is depicted as the “real” victim of the story — Joseph’s victimhood, however, gets overlooked. Couldn’t this be a reason for “a new kind of outrage”?

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Abstract

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Throughout modern research history, the story about Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39) has very often been labelled "seduction" or "temptation". With both terms, Mrs. Potiphar is depicted as a dangerous and yet fascinating *femme fatale*. Both labels show a twofold gender bias: (1) Men cannot be victims of sexual violence and (2) Women cannot be sexual offenders. The aim of this paper is to analyse and overcome this double bias. For this purpose, the story will first be interpreted from an explicitly patriarchal perspective using Pierre Bourdieu's "La Domination Masculine" (1998) to disclose the otherwise unconscious assumptions of a large part of modern interpretations. Afterwards, the deconstruction of the aforementioned gender bias will follow, as well as a critical evaluation of feminist approaches to Genesis 39. In the concluding chapter, a new reading will be proposed that focusses on Joseph as a victim of hierarchical, sexual and ethnical power relations.

KEY WORDS: Potiphar's Wife — Joseph story — Pierre Bourdieu — Symbolic Power — Feminist Interpretation — Gender — Old Testament — Hermeneutics