



## Stepping In / Stepping Out

### A Conversation between Ideological and Social Scientific Feminist Approaches to the Bible

Alice A. Keefe

University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point

#### Introduction

[1] Two important hermeneutical orientations shaping the field of feminist biblical criticism today are social scientific criticism and ideological criticism. This paper considers the tension between these two critical approaches, a tension which might be helpfully visualized through recourse to a spacial metaphor: "stepping out" versus "stepping in." While ideological criticism asks the reader to step outside of the ideology of text in order to critique it, social scientific criticism insists that unless we first step into the socio-symbolic world refracted through the text, our readings will be controlled by the unacknowledged projections of modernity's assumptions and worldview.

[2] Given that these two methodologies move in different directions, it is not surprising to find a certain lack of coordination or communication between them. As Claudia Camp has observed, "like much work done in biblical studies today, the study of women vis-à-vis the Bible often takes place in terms of one or the other of two seemingly separate enterprises: the study of women's lives in the ancient historical context or the study of female imagery in the literature of the Bible with little attention to historical context" (5). In this paper, I hope to contribute to the ongoing effort to bring these two enterprises into closer conversation. But I will not do so under the pretense of being a disinterested third party, for my own work (Keefe 1993, 1995) has been much more concerned with the challenge of "stepping into" an ancient socio-symbolic world in order to glimpse its radical difference than with "stepping out" from the ideology of the text in order to neutralize its continuing authority. While I appreciate and relish the ways that feminist ideological critics have disturbed and overturned entrenched androcentric reading practices, I am concerned that more attention to the particularity of ancient worlds is needed, especially with respect to the distinct significations of women's bodies and female sexuality in those worlds. This paper seeks to highlight and explore this concern by considering the tension between feminist ideological readings of certain troubling texts - specifically those prophetic metaphors of female sexuality which have been referred to of late as "pornoprophetics" <1> - and the thrust of feminist social scientific work which has been to caution us against the wholesale importation of the cultural baggage that inevitably travels with our own modern notions of "patriarchy." <2>

[3] My approach to the question of anachronism in feminist readings of biblical "pornoprophetics" differs from that taken by Robert Carroll who has argued that "without knowing the psychological make-up of the biblical writers it is not possible to evaluate the degree to which their writings may be characterized as misogynistic or otherwise" (cited in Exum 1996: 103 n.3; see also Carroll 1995). Carroll seems to suggest that what is relevant but unattainable here is insight into the psychological make-up of the individuals who produced these texts. But an individual is so much a product of his cultural contexts that what is relevant for the purposes of interpretation is not the psychological makeup of individual writers, but rather the ideological frameworks and socio-symbolic contexts out of which these individuals thought and wrote. But how do we get at these frameworks and contexts? How can we form credible hypotheses about the presuppositions and values of an ancient culture - that is, its ideology?

[4] Ideological criticism itself stresses that its work begins with an "extrinsic" analysis of the socio-economic circumstances under which the text was produced. Only once we understand the social world which produced the text can we move on to an "intrinsic" analysis of the ways in which the text reproduces and promotes particular ideological investments (Yee: 150-1). So ideally, ideological criticism includes and builds upon social scientific criticism. But I would argue that too often, feminist ideological critics falter in this task of extrinsic analysis and too much is assumed at the outset about women's social location and cultural attitudes towards women's bodies in ancient Israel.

### Stepping Out: Ideological Criticism

[5] One of the more influential writers in the current school of "resistant readers" is Cheryl Exum, who helpfully clarifies for us the premises out of which her ideological critical readings proceed. Exum begins with the assertion that in ancient Israel, symbolic production was controlled by men, and that therefore, female characters or feminine metaphors in biblical literature need to be recognized and treated as "male constructs" which reflect androcentric ideas about women and serve androcentric interests (1993: 11). Even where the authors of a text might have been female or where one finds an ostensibly positive female character or feminine symbol, the world view expressed is that of "the dominant male world view" (1993: 10). Thus the feminist critic "must, of necessity, read against the grain," stepping outside of the ideology of the text in order to subvert that ideology (1993: 11). Those readers who fail to recognize this point risk complicity with the androcentric ideology of the text.

[6] Exum's premise about the thoroughly androcentric worldview controlling the production of the biblical texts leads to the thesis, articulated by many feminist critics, that in the Hebrew Bible, woman is always inscribed as the "other," as that which simultaneously defines and threatens the boundaries of a patriarchal order (see e.g. Exum 1993; Milne 1989; Newsom 1989). This "otherness" of woman is inherent in an androcentric order where woman figures not as "one of us" but as that which, being possessed or not possessed, creates relationships and marks boundaries among "us" (i.e. among men). Further, as an object of male control and competition, woman is always a potential locus of conflict and violence. Thus woman as the "other" is also a symbol of chaos, bearing the meaning of that which is foreign or threatening to the order of things (e.g. Bal 1986: 1; Exum 1993: 84-93, 181 and *passim*; Schwartz 1991a, 1991b; Thistlethwaite 1993: 68).

[7] This argument about woman as a symbol of the threatening "other" within patriarchal thought has found much support in recent feminist ideological readings of the often graphic and disturbing female sexual metaphors found in several prophetic texts. In the prophetic "marriage" metaphor and other related metaphors of the body politic as a sexually promiscuous woman, the woman's illicit sexual activity represents the nation's sin and sexual violence against her body (public exposure and rape) figure as the deity's "fitting" punishment against "her" for this sin (Hos 1-3; Jer 2:23-3:20; Ezek 16, 23; see also Jer 4:30; 22:20-33; Isa 1:21; 3:16-26; 57:3-13; Lam 1:8-10). These texts direct the reader's eye to images of sexually insatiable women, who fornicate with multiple lovers and are then stripped naked and sexually violated in public. Grappling with the disturbing character of these texts, several feminist ideological critics including T. Drorah Setel, Athalya Brenner (1995, 1996, 1997: 153-74), the late Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, and Cheryl Exum (1996) have read these images as functionally similar to the modern genre of pornography. These readers argue that prophetic sexual metaphors have the same function as pornography: the maintenance of male domination through the representation of women as degraded objects of male possession and control (e.g. Brenner 1995: 266; Setel: 87; van Dijk-Hemmes: 248). Like pornography, prophetic metaphors of female fornication and sexual violence are products of an androcentric imagination which denigrates female sexuality and degrades women "in order to stress that their sexuality is and ought to be an object of male possession and control" (van Dijk-Hemmes: 253).

[8] According to these feminist ideological critics, the motive behind this concern with the control of female sexuality goes beyond the patrilineal imperative to guarantee the legitimacy of sons. Rather, both prophetic and pornographic representations of women's bodies are motivated by "patriarchy's fear of women's reproductive power" (Exum 1996: 127) and its corresponding need to control that power, along with its abhorrence of female blood and bodily processes. Thus, undergirding "pornoprophetic" literature is not simply a cultural abhorrence of female sexual transgression, but a cultural abhorrence and denigration of the female sexual body itself. While the term "misogyny" is used sparingly and cautiously by ideological critics (e.g. Brenner 1997: 167; Exum 1995: 250; 1996: 103 n. 3), they definitely lean toward the conclusion that the biblical texts encode predominantly negative views towards women's bodies and bodily processes, as is seen most obviously they assert, in the biblical purity codes and in the sacralization of the male penis. Exum, for example, follows Eilberg-Schwartz in positing an opposition between the signification of the male penis, which in circumcision becomes the symbolic locus for meanings of "covenant, righteousness and wholeness," and that of female menstrual blood, which in the pollution codes becomes a symbolic locus for meanings of "sin, indecency and death" (Eilberg-Schwartz

1991: 181; Exum 1993: 124-128). Brenner likewise sees an opposition between the "textual spiritualization of the penis" (1997: 38) in which the male genitalia are euphemistically hidden and protected by biblical law and language, and the graphic exposure of the female sexual organs in both language,<3> and in texts, most especially in the prophets (1997: 31-43). Mieke Bal's remark on biblical misogyny is quite blunt: For anyone who doubts "that ancient Hebrew society . . . was thoroughly misogynist . . . , the books of Laws provide useful reading in their evident contempt for the female body . . ." (1987: 110). This consensus among feminist ideological critics on biblical attitudes towards the female body has exerted considerable influence upon feminist biblical critics in general. For example, although Renita Weems considers these prophetic metaphors without making a direct comparison with pornography, she reiterates the view that these metaphors reflect a misogynistic cultural orientation that sees women's bodies as "disgusting" and "perceives women's sexuality as deviant and threatening to the status and well-being of men" (30, 41).<4>

## Stepping In: Social Scientific Criticism

[9] The work of ideological critics on prophetic sexual metaphors of sin as female "whoring" and divine retribution as spousal abuse is invaluable at the level of reception as it exposes the damaging effect of these metaphors in their divine validation of patriarchal control of women and sexual abuse, and enables us to resist and reject those effects. These images, as they have been interpreted and used in Jewish and Christian history, are appropriately condemned for their complicity in fostering and reinforcing misogyny through the centuries. But did these texts emerge from a misogynistic world, or did they help to create subsequent misogynistic worlds? I do not think we can draw any clean and clear lines to demarcate the birth of misogyny in western religions. But nevertheless, someone who comes to this ideological critique of biblical "pornoprophetics" after reading feminist social scientific work on gender in ancient Israel might be surprised by the ideological critic's description of ancient Israel itself as a misogynistic society.

[10] In their efforts to reconstruct the social world of pre-monarchic Israel, Carol Meyers and Phyllis Bird have come to the conclusion that ancient Israelite women were not merely the denigrated "sexual property" of all powerful males, but were empowered social actors in their own right. Their argument begins with a sociological reconstruction of early Israel as an agrarian subsistence economy within which economic production and decision making processes revolved around the domestic family unit and more broadly, the kinship network; this socio-economic system is an example of what Marshall Sahlins called the "familial mode of production" (Jobling: 242; Yee: 150). Comparative anthropological studies show that in such contexts, women may "wield significant amounts of power" and "control at least the major portion of important resources and decisions" (Rogers: 728-29; see also Rosaldo; Meyers 1988). The centrality of women within the domestic-based, kinship-based social structure is suggested by the archaic term *bet 'em* or "mother's house" which appears in three biblical passages as an alternative designation for ancient Israel's basic social unit, *bet 'ab* or "father's house."<5> For Meyers, the somewhat startling appearance of the female-oriented term "mother's house" in these predominantly androcentric texts suggests the lingering presence of cultural ways and attitudes from early Israel which located woman at the center of the kinship-based social power network.

[11] In light of such arguments about women's social location and power in early Israel, Meyers and Bird have questioned the applicability of the term "patriarchy" to ancient Israel, given that the term evokes assumptions and associations generated by our own experience with modern, capitalistic Western societies which are not transferable to this ancient, agrarian, kinship-based world (Bird: 288-91; Meyers 1988: 24-46). Ancient Israelite women did not possess the kind of social and sexual autonomy which we in the modern world take to be the *sine qua non* of personal dignity and worth. In the modern world, human value and meaning are predicated upon individual autonomy and bodily self-possession; thus where a modern observer sees persons without the power of self-determination, he or she tends to assume that those persons were coded as inferior beings in that social context. But in the world of ancient Israel, personhood and personal dignity were not predicated upon the possession of bodily autonomy and individual freedom, but rather were defined in terms of one's place within larger corporate structures of family and lineage and by one's contributions to those structures.<6> In this world, the basic social unit was not the individual but the kinship group, and individual existence was intimately tied to corporate welfare and survival; even in death, one's existence depended upon continuing ties to the family and its land through burial in ancestral tombs.<7> In relation to the material conditions of the familial mode of production, communal orientations to lineage and land defined a world of sacred meaning and order. In such a social world, where the corporate unit rather than the individual is the primary locus of identity, value and meaning, one cannot assume any simple correlations between personal autonomy and social value. Ancient Israelite women certainly did not enjoy sexual autonomy or self-possession over their own bodies, but this does not mean that women were assumed to be inferior beings or that female sexuality itself was negatively valued. As Meyers concludes concerning gender relations and gender codes in early

Israel, "male authority existed in certain spheres but there was no connotation of misogyny, the oppression of females, or the notion of female inferiority" (1988: 187).

[12] How does this extrinsic analysis of gender relations and modes of production and gender relations in ancient Israel impact upon the process of analyzing the gender codes encoded in biblical texts? In her reading of Genesis 2-3, Meyers offers an example of how literary analysis can be informed by the sociological picture of relatively egalitarian gender relations which she posits for early Israel (1988: 72-121). She reads Genesis 3:16, typically translated as "and he [Adam] shall rule over you [Eve]," in light of the historical context of early Israel where corporate survival depended upon women producing as many children as possible. Meyers claims that contrary to the conventional patriarchal reading, Genesis 3:16 was not originally intended as a mandate for male supremacy in general, but rather as a specific reference to male prerogative within the realm of sexuality; "the solution to the need for an increased birthrate in early Israel took the form of a divine ruling that gave men the power to overcome female reluctance" (Meyers 1988: 116). The presence of misogyny behind the production of this text is denied.

## The Conversation

[13] In her explanation of feminist criticism as being, at its best, a form of ideological criticism, Danna Nolan Fewell (1993) characterizes Meyers' interpretation of Genesis 2-3 as naive, <8> but she does not address the credibility of the extrinsic analysis from which Meyers reads, nor does Fewell work carefully to construct an alternative extrinsic analysis which would provide a foundation for a more suspicious ideological analysis of Genesis 2-3 as a profoundly androcentric text. Such lacunae in respect to the work of "extrinsic analysis" is fairly typical of those ideological readings which contend that in the biblical texts women and women's bodies are coded negatively as symbols of the threatening "other" or of chaos. Ideological critics are correct in showing us how, in many ways and in many texts, women and female sexuality figure as volatile boundary markers for the patriarchal order, but they overlook or underplay other significations of female sexuality which are at work in the biblical texts as well.

[14] Clearly, anxiety about female sexual transgression was not the only locus for the construction of cultural meanings of woman's bodies in ancient Israel. Recent archeological finds and renewed attention to related textual evidence have begun to reshape our understanding of the place of the female reproductive body in ancient Israel's religious imagination. The presence of female figurines on the domestic altars <9> (representing either goddesses or more abstractly, the power of fertility itself), <10> and the presence of the feminine symbol of the asherim "trees" at local shrines, <11> in addition to possible worship of Asherah alongside of the national deity <12> (at least in some times and places), suggest a surprising ubiquity of female religious symbolism in ancient Israel. While there is considerable controversy over the interpretation of these feminine religious symbols, their presence suggests at least that in monarchic Israel's religious imagination, the female body served as an icon of sacred power (Frymer-Kensky: 153-61).

[15] This picture of ancient Israel as a world where woman's body could be seen as a *sacra* is difficult to reconcile with ideological readings which argue that "pornoprophetic" texts presuppose a cultural abhorrence of female sexuality. So too, sociological reconstructions of relative gender equity in early Israel could potentially disturb the ideological critic's presupposition that symbolic production in ancient Israel was thoroughly controlled by androcentric interests (assuming that is, some relationship between social power and the power of symbolic production).

[16] One might argue that there is no necessary tension here between sociological and ideological work on gender in ancient Israel because sociological arguments for relative gender equity apply primarily to pre-monarchic Israel and therefore have little relevance for the study of prophetic texts dating from the monarchic and exilic periods. As Meyers herself says, social changes precipitated by the emergence of the monarchical state precipitated a marked deterioration in social and symbolic location of women in Israel and Judah over a period of just two or three centuries (1988: 189-96). The centripetal force of growing monarchic power weakened the power of the lineages and effected a shift from the familial to the tributary mode of production. As power was siphoned away from the kinship networks, the power of the nuclear family unit and the authority of the *paterfamilias* was strengthened. These transformations had a detrimental effect on women's status because the extended kinship network and the domestic-based agrarian economy had been the arenas in which early Israelite women had claimed and exercised their social power (Steinberg; Jobling). As well, feminine religious symbols, which were important within domestic and local forms of religious practice, were stigmatized as non-Yahwistic as the centralizing state tightened its control. A historical picture of a more virulent and intensifying patriarchal order is implicit in the ideological critics' analyses of the misogynistic character of many biblical texts. If the politics of state centralization brought about a deterioration of women's social power, and if that historical transformation brought about a concomitant rise in negative and even misogynistic attitudes towards women's bodies and

female sexuality, then there is not necessarily any dissonance between the social scientists' view of women's power in early Israel and the ideological critics' reading of latent or overt misogyny in "pornoprophetic" literature.

[17] But to account for such a profound shift in cultural values about meanings as fundamental as gender and sexuality, it is necessary to posit that symbolic forms are very closely derivative of the social, political and economic forces in which they are produced, such that ways of thinking are fundamentally created anew with every major shift in the material mode of production. But it is clear that family religion and ritual practices involving symbols of female fertility did not vanish overnight with the emergence of the monarchy, nor did the value system and the thought patterns rooted in the familial mode of production and lineage-based systems of polity. Traditional patterns of thought persist even in the midst of intense acculturative pressures like statehood, latifundialization, and even imperial conquest and domination (Ohnaki-Tierney). Like mighty trees, cultures have deep roots; these roots are the patterns of language, thought and practice that have been elaborated over time to become part of the cultural core of that people's world. These patterns, which emerge out of a people's imaginative encounter with the material world, with the landscape and climate, with the available means of sustenance and survival given in the environment, and above all, with their own bodies and sexuality, are perpetuated by the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Over the centuries, they become so central to that culture's modes of thought and metaphor construction that they cannot be easily eradicated.<13> Indeed, it is easier to cut down the tree than to dig up those roots.

[18] The argument for radical social change being accompanied by an intensification of patriarchal social structures and a concomitant rise of misogyny can perhaps be easily applied to Ezekiel, whose obscene language and obsessive fantasies of nymphomania "seem to be fueled by unconscious fear and rage" (Frymer-Kensky: 151). But Ezekiel's writing emerges in the wake of the cataclysms of total conquest and mass deportation, at a time when the pressing problem of defining ethnic boundaries was addressed by means of an intensified concern with bodily boundaries and bodily pollution. In this situation, women, whose bodily processes rendered them frequently "unclean," were more and more excluded from the public realm and were coded negatively as symbols of evil (Archer). But the same argument is more difficult to apply to prophets from the monarchical period. This period was characterized by ongoing tension and conflict between the traditional kinship-based systems of power and the familial mode of production on one hand, and the trajectories of centralizing state power and its tributary mode of production on the other. While some texts produced within the monarchical period sought to resolve ideologically the conflicts between the familial and tributary modes of production in favor of the latter (e.g. texts edited by the Deuteronomist; Yee: 152-56), the classical prophets, and especially the eighth century prophets, stood in opposition to the growing power of the monarchy and its efforts to undermine the traditional social and economic systems of power and production (see e.g. Chaney; Coote 1981, 1992).

[19] Hosea, for example, like Amos and Micah, was an advocate for the embattled system of kinship-based power and familial modes of production. His attack on the cultic practices of his day was not an attack upon the fertility religion which had long been an essential component of the world of the *bet 'ab* (or the *bet 'em*), but rather was an attack upon the national shrines and the monarchical power structures they sanctified. In his oracles against the monarchy, its royal cult, and its cosmopolitan orientations, Hosea deployed a metaphor of female "whoring" that exploited his culture's fears about autonomous female sexuality. The social body of the nation, he said, was like the sexual body of an adulterous wife (*'eshet zenunim*) - transgressive and threatening to the order of this society (Keefe 1995). Given Hosea's position on the ideological battleground of his day, it seems reasonable to consider his rhetoric within the context of the systems of meaning which were indigenous to the social and ideological world he was defending rather than reading his metaphors in the context of subsequent developments.

[20] The prophets' language about Israel as an adulterous woman was spun of many intertwining threads of signification concerning woman, sexuality and gender. One of these threads concerns patriarchy's fear of autonomous female sexuality. But there is another thread at work here that is less often noticed: a symbolic association of the social body with woman's body. And it is this connection between woman and community which is easily hidden or obscured behind ideological criticism's assumption that women in biblical literature always stand as symbols of that which is "other" and threatening to the patriarchal order.

[21] The symbolic association of woman's body with the social body was indigenous to a social world where life revolved around the domestic sphere. Not only the father's body (i.e. Jacob's/Israel's), but the mother's body as well figures in the biblical texts as a symbol for the whole Israelite community. For example in the thrice-repeated "wife-sister" tales (Gen 12:10-20; 20; 26:6-11), the sexually endangered matriarch figures the vulnerability of the early Israelite community amidst more powerful nations

(Williams). The trope of woman's body as social body is discernable as well in the Hebrew Bible's three rape narratives (Gen 34; Jud 19; 2 Sam 13) where, in each case, the rape of a woman serves as a metonym for war or internecine conflict (Keefe 1993). It is likely that this symbolic pattern had deep roots in the religious and cultural imagination of a people whose survival across the generations depended precariously upon the fertility of women's bodies. By the time a remnant of this people suffers through the cataclysmic uprooting of total conquest, deportation and exile, we can see a deformation of this symbolic pattern in the obsessive and misogynistic sexual rhetoric of Ezekiel. Yet even as Judahite culture was overrun by the body-denying philosophical perspectives of hellenistic culture, a positive valence in this metaphoric complex of Israel as a woman can still be glimpsed in the appearance of heroic female characters - Esther, Judith and Susanna - as "metonymies of community" (Levine: 177). Finding itself part of an alien empire, Judean culture grappled with the threat to its cohesion and continuity in part with stories about heroic women who defend their own bodily integrity and/or the nation against invasion or destruction. From Sarah to Susanna, we can see the persistence of a metaphor where woman and woman's body (when both fecund and available only to her husband) are symbols of corporate solidarity, integrity and continuity. From this perspective, the adultery metaphor can be seen as a rhetorical reversal of a deeply rooted and persistent symbol of Israelite cultural identity.

[22] Feminist ideological criticism teaches us to situate ostensibly positive narratives such as those about Esther, Judith or Susanna within a larger frame of patriarchal discourse and its investment in maintaining female subordination. But in turn, social scientific criticism cautions us to attend to the radical differences between ancient and modern worlds, and to investigate the complexities of any language world, tracing its roots down deep into a culture's historical encounter with the material determinants of its existence. In those nether regions of language we find meanings of power which are not only about the power of one social group to dominate another, but also about the powers of life, fecundity, and survival, which find their most obvious material and symbolic locus in the procreative power of women's bodies.

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