

CARNAL KNOWLEDGE: HOW PERFORMANCE CRITICISM CAN PROVIDE INSIGHTS INTO BIBLICAL WOMEN

Tracy Radosevic

Wesley Theological Seminary, USA

tracyrad@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Biblical Performance Criticism, among other things, relies on how a biblical story is embodied and, as a result, viscerally experienced by the performer as a means for gaining a better understanding of how to more fully comprehend and appreciate, and then potentially interpret with more accurate integrity, the biblical narratives. This process goes way beyond the left-brain intellect, permeating the very physiology of the teller in a way that provides a more multidimensional grasp of scripture, giving insights that perhaps could not be gleaned in any other way. This article, written by a woman, specifically focuses on how the stories of certain biblical women took on more profound meaning when embodied, experienced, and understood through the unique reality of females throughout the past few millennia.

Keywords: performance; embodiment of scripture; visceral experience; biblical women; storytelling

DISCUSSION

Biblical Performance Criticism is about nothing if not how *embodying* the biblical narratives (and, in so doing, connecting with the various emotions/attitudes/experiences of the story) sheds a unique light on how to interpret and understand those texts. As a woman, I find this somewhat amusing, and vindicating, because much of the church's history has been influenced—either directly or indirectly—by the ancient philosophy that human beings consisted of mind and matter. Males were associated with the mind and thus considered superior; females were associated with the body and emotions and thus considered inferior. Actually, some philosophers/theologians went so far as to believe that females were an aberration of creation; a mistake. Therefore, to be a member



of an organisation like the Network of Biblical Storytellers (NBS) that has contributed so strongly to the kind of shift in biblical interpretation that not only embraces the body and emotions, but deems them critical in trying to understand the original intent of our sacred texts, is liberating, to say the least!

It does not take much delving into the pages of the Bible to see that females get short shrift. First of all, their stories are significantly outnumbered by the stories devoted to males. Secondly, a high percentage of their stories that did make the final cut portray them (or, more disturbingly, have been *interpreted*) in less-than-ideal ways. Sure, we get to see plenty of the guys' dark sides but for many of them it is also made clear that, despite their faults, they are still chosen/favoured/loved by God. Moses is a murderer, and he is chosen to head up the main event of the Hebrews' story, one that continues to be retold every year at Passover. David is an adulterer and murderer, among other things, and yet he is described as "a man after God's own heart" (I Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22) and is commemorated to this very day in Jerusalem via David's Citadel, David's Tower, David's Tomb, King David Street and David's Village—to name but a few. Simon (Peter), one of Jesus' BFFs, denies he even knows Jesus (when only a couple of hours earlier he declared vehemently: "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" [Mk 14:31]), and yet he is the bloke Jesus renames Peter ("Rock") and then announces: "... on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18). Moreover, Jesus also gives him the keys of the kingdom of heaven. There are many more examples, but for our sake these will suffice.

I am not opposed to the Bible making clear, over and over again, that imperfect humans can still be called and used by God in amazing ways. In fact, it is one of the things I appreciate most about the Bible. It is what has made the Bible relevant and truly good news to flawed people of faith for millennia. The bone I am picking is that the same treatment, at least to the same extent, has not been applied to the biblical women.

The best example we have to the contrary is probably Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus cast seven demons (i.e. "imperfections"). While she was certainly devoted to Jesus to the very end (and is the only woman, let alone person, named in all four gospels as present at the crucifixion and empty tomb) this devotion does not even come close to being on par with the "accomplishments" or favoured status enjoyed by the men mentioned above. In fact, thanks to Pope Gregory the Great, Hollywood, and various artists and authors through the ages, this Mary's primary identification for many people has been, and continues to be, as a prostitute—something the Bible never states.

In like manner, a possible case could be made for the Samaritan woman at the well. She has a somewhat dubious past (although, the specifics of which are woefully vague) and yet Jesus still deems her worthy of a significant conversation. She is transformed, and as a result of her experience, instigates the transformation of many others in her town of Sychar. Not bad, except that her evangelical role has traditionally been eclipsed in sermons and curricula by the part of the story where Jesus calls himself living water. And speaking of tradition, Jesus' mother Mary has obviously been given

elevated status and enjoys the honour of having made one of the best contributions (i.e. “accomplishments”) to humanity: she birthed the Saviour! But her lack of any known faults or imperfections disqualifies her from this list. In fact, there is a delightful joke that drives this point home: Jesus is confronting those who plan to stone the woman caught in adultery. “Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone,” he challenges them. A stone comes hurtling through the air, striking the woman in the head. Exasperated, Jesus turns around and cries, “MOTHER!!”

Too many biblical women, however, if they are even known at all (many are not even named), are known for negative traits only. Even non-churched folk “know” that Jezebel was evil, Delilah was a sneaky temptress and Eve (while also Adam’s wife and the first woman) is guilty for the *sinful fall of all humanity* (ahem!), even though the Bible clearly says that her husband was with her when she initially ate the fruit (but how often has *that* little fact been preached on over the years?). Lot’s (unnamed) wife is famous for being turned into a pillar of salt. What an accomplishment! It is stated right up front what the (unnamed) woman caught in adultery is known for; incidentally, was she committing this act by herself? And those with experience in stricter Christian traditions are well aware what those talkative/disorderly (and completely unnamed) women from the church in Corinth are responsible for.

There are exceptions, of course, to women known only for their negative traits. The (unnamed) woman who anoints Jesus with nard from the alabaster jar is publicly defended by Jesus and honoured into perpetuity when he declares that her actions will be told in memory of her throughout the whole world wherever the gospel is preached. Two thousand years later we are still, indeed, telling her story. Not too shabby. Pharaoh’s (unnamed) daughter, along with Miriam (although not named in this story), and the mighty-mighty midwives Shiphrah and Puah, pull off the amazing accomplishment of saving the future liberator of the enslaved Hebrew people. Lydia, a successful businesswoman (no small feat), was an early Christian convert and a gracious hostess to Paul, Silas and Timothy. Speaking of “hostess with the mostess” there is Martha (and her sister Mary), reportedly loved by Jesus. Abigail saves her family and servants through peaceful hospitality. What a concept! Deborah was judge over Israel and had to “hold the hand” of Barak to ensure the Israelites’ defeat over Sisera’s army of 900 iron chariots, an important (albeit, bloody) accomplishment. Speaking of which, Esther is also responsible for saving her people ... but there is more to her story, which I shall get to in a minute.

Despite these, and other notable exceptions, there also seems to be a prevalent theme running through many of the biblical women’s stories: their identity, motivation and/or main accomplishment being connected in some way to sexuality. There are only five women listed in Matthew’s long genealogy of Jesus—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, “the wife of Uriah” (in other places named as Bathsheba), and Mary—all of whom have some sort of sexual impropriety associated with them. The matriarchs (the ones you’d think would be listed in Jesus’ genealogy)—Sarah (not to mention the whole ordeal

involving Hagar), Rebekah, Leah and Rachel (as well as Bilhah and Zilpah)—are either desperate because they are barren or seemingly only around to produce children. What do we know about Hannah? That she was barren and made even more miserable about it because of Peninnah who, you guessed it, had plenty of kids. Even Elizabeth's (and Zechariah's) blameless lives and steadfast devotion into old age couldn't garner them any offspring, until it finally did.

There are days when I think about this and all I can do is roll my eyes and sigh: "Really? *This* is all they thought there was to women?" My intention is not to downplay or denigrate pregnancy, childbirth or the monumental task and responsibility of nurturing children. It is the most difficult job in the world; but to condense the complexity and significance of each female life into not much more than a uterus is incomplete, degrading and potentially dangerous.

On my more charitable days, however, I can possibly be persuaded into acknowledging that, due to lack of sophistication and scientific research, it made sense *back then* (ahem!) to think that this was all women were for. They are the ones, after all, with the uteruses and the milk-producing mammary glands. If women are not here to birth and feed babies, then what are *those* all about? So *maybe* for the people who finally started writing these stories down—most likely men—it would not have occurred to them that there was anything else to focus on since women's identities were pretty much solely wrapped up in whom they had (and had not) managed to birth. On a charitable day I sort of get this.

Then again, I think that maybe, just maybe, many of these women knew fully well that this "second-class citizen" status was the reality of their culture so they chose to use what they had—their sexuality and feminine wiles—to full advantage, kind of like desperate times calling for desperate measures, or doing as the Romans while in Rome, or fighting fire with fire.

That certainly seems to be the case with most of the matriarchs and the women in Matthew's genealogy, not to mention Lot's daughters. I would argue, however, that there is also a potential sexual connotation for some of the biblical women where children (or the lack thereof) are not a part of their recorded story. For instance, David found Abigail fetching enough so that, as soon as her husband died, he wasted no time marrying her (even though he already had multiple wives). Was it her generous hospitality alone that saved the day or the fact that she was beautiful and possibly used that to flirt with David to get her way? In other words, if she had been ugly or old or infirm, would her gifts of food alone have been enough to convince a man who was, in essence, "breathing threats and murder" to change his mind?

We know for a fact that Esther was beautiful; that is how she beat out all the other beauty contestants to become queen! But even the favoured wife could be put to death for approaching the king in the inner court unsummoned. What did the lovely Esther do to ensure that the golden sceptre was not only extended to her but that her wish was granted? Might she have dressed provocatively? Coily batted her eyelashes? Spoken

in a husky, seductive voice? Surely she used her feminine beauty to her advantage; her own life ultimately depended on it!

With the well-established biblical type scene of initial meetings at a well leading to betrothals, was there some sexual energy exhibited by the Samaritan woman at the well? Knowing that a well-pleased (and probably drunk) king would likely be easy to manipulate, how intentionally beguiling were the dance moves of Heriodias' daughter? Did the Syro-Phoenician woman employ any feminine wiles to ensure her daughter's healing? Might even the daughters of Zelophehad have flirted with Moses and the leaders to get their way? I do not know. But Biblical Performance Criticism gives me the tools to play around with these possibilities, particularly as a woman.

I do not mean to perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes here. Women are obviously more than sexual connivers! We are strong and determined, resourceful and compassionate, intelligent and creative ... you get the idea. But you know what? So are men. Pretty much the only thing that is uniquely ours is our femininity, and all that goes with it. So, if I am trying to uncover fresh insights into the *women* of the Bible, then it behooves me to particularly explore and play around with *those* dimensions of these characters. And if one thing we know about these characters' contexts is how "sexualised" they were, and that often the only "weapon" they had to right a wrong or to garner themselves some dignity or to ensure survival was to exploit some aspect of their sexuality, then that is not an inappropriate path of potential discovery.

Which brings me back to where I started—with those "most feminine of associations" (according to some); the body and emotions. I happen to be a naturally dramatic person, which means when I perform biblical stories I easily embody the characters of a story, including their possible emotions/attitudes/experiences. I also happen to be a woman, so while I have made frequent connections with various male characters, of course there is a special potential synergy with the biblical women. My context as an American living in 2017 may be different from theirs, but as a 52-year-old female who has never married nor borne children, I am definitely still outside the norm. I am fiercely independent ... until I am not! At those times, I have had no problem playing a damsel in distress and batting an eyelash or two to cajole some kind-hearted male to do what I cannot (or do not want to) do. Oh yeah, I "get" my scriptural sisters!

But if I had to choose the woman for whom Biblical Performance Criticism has most impacted me, I would have to go with the (unnamed!) woman with the flow of blood. While not a tale of feminine wiles or conniving, it is, nonetheless, the most feminine of stories because it is about menstruation or, more accurately, the never-ending period. I can remember times when I felt like I was having that experience after only eight days (and a few times close to two weeks). "Are you *kidding* me? Come ON!!" Boy did I suffer ... or so I thought. In reality, it was little more than an inconvenience. Multiply that by 12 years, during which I would have been considered untouchable. It is hard to imagine. But I have enough actual experience to understand just why it would be

so difficult to imagine. All of this insight, however, could be gleaned from a reflective *reading* of the text. What does Performance Criticism add to the equation?

Well, thankfully (seriously, thank you God!) I was not one who suffered from debilitating monthly cramps. I would get a *little* “crampy” and bloated but rarely was I knocked out of commission. So the few times when that was my experience, it made an impression because it was so distinctly different from my norm. I was miserable, unable to fully function, and not even able to stand up straight. Aha! There it is.

A few years ago I started embodying the woman’s physical approach to Jesus with a bent-over posture. I did this thinking that, as an unclean person, she would have had to sneak in to touch him unrecognised, not only because she was violating several laws by making contact with Jesus but also because she defiled everyone else she certainly brushed against in a crowd described as “pressing in on him.” One day, however, while telling the story in that bent-over position, I suddenly re-remembered (literally recalling an experience thanks to various physical members of my body working in conjunction with each other) those rare times in my menstruating life when I had been doubled over in agony. Is that how the woman had felt physically? I had never thought about her having cramps. And maybe she didn’t. But what if she did—and they were debilitating—for *12 years*! Oh sister, no wonder you broke all the rules. A 12-year “inconvenience” is bad enough. Add to that an existence devoid of touch or a real sense of community and you’ve got cruel and unusual punishment. Top it off with cramps so bad you feel like crap and cannot even comfortably stand up straight, not just for a couple of days, or a week or two, or a month, or even one year, but for 12? Shoot me now!

It was this realisation that caused me to rediscover the word “suffered” in the narrative. Over the years I had glossed over that word, often saying simply: “In the crowd was a woman who had had a flow of blood for 12 years.” Not only is that weak sentence structure and downright incorrect (according to the biblical text [Mk 5:25]), it is woefully inadequate. You bet she suffered from that 12-year flow of blood! She suffered mightily, on all levels. And maybe *that* is the “whole truth” (Mk 5:33) that she shared with Jesus after she was healed, liberating herself, at long last, from that 12-year burden of pain, misery and suffering.

ENDNOTE

I am currently writing a book on Performance Criticism and Biblical Storytelling that pulls together almost 30 years of formal education, research and experience. It is a book I plan to use as required reading in most of the seminary classes I teach and hope other professors and leaders of faith formation will find it useful as well. The problem I am having, however, is putting into (silent) words on “paper”/screen—that will most likely be read in silence—the lively, three-dimensional, communal, vocal and visual experience that is the performed Bible. In fact, at times, I am finding this excruciatingly difficult! It is like when my students come up with a plan for implementing Biblical

Storytelling into their churches that initially only consists of talking *about* the power of the embodied Word of God. They list all sorts of resources and information they plan to use to convince the powers that be that this is a good idea. The idea is not just good, they argue, but is historically accurate in terms of how the early faith communities actually shared and communicated the stories that eventually became canonised into the Bible. When I learn of these plans, I cannot help but shake my head. All of that information is important, to be sure, but it is not the same as actually *experiencing* it, not by a long shot!

Obviously, a journal like this one presents similar challenges. In many ways, it seems anachronistic for a resource that is dedicated to *performance* only to be available in print! In lieu of a supplemental DVD where readers could also *see*, *hear* and (most importantly) *experience* the various aspects of performance criticism discussed in these pages, however, I offer this article as a practical companion essay to the other pieces in this journal. While the performative choices therein are all steeped in years of research, I wanted to leave the largely left-brain references to others so as to focus on the rest of the body: those non-verbal tools normally associated with the right brain such as pause, tone of voice, tempo, volume, posture, facial expressions, and gestures; but also the heart (emotions) and gut (actively lived life experiences) as well as the other body parts that are so essential in performance (arms, legs, muscles, lungs, and so forth). It is my hope that my reflections might bring you one step closer to applying in real life the important scholarly foundations provided by others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Tracy Radosevic [<http://tracyrad.com>] is an internationally-acclaimed storyteller, educator and retreat facilitator. Since 1991 she has travelled all over the United States, as well as to several foreign countries, bringing her special brand of humour, insight and faith to audiences of all ages through the power of performed narrative. Working across denominational lines, Tracy puts to good use the extensive training she has received while working as a Director of Christian Education; Artist-in-Resident at a United Methodist church in Baltimore; leader of spiritual pilgrimages to Israel/Palestine, Greece/Turkey and Italy; adjunct professor at Wesley Theological Seminary and St Mary's Ecumenical Institute; and through her official educational degrees (Bachelor of Arts from Grove City College, Grove City, PA double major in Elementary Education and Christian Ministries; Master of Religious Education from Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC; Master of Arts in Storytelling from East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN; Doctor of Ministry—focusing on Spirituality for Life Together with a special emphasis on Digital Storytelling—from Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC).

She has been a member of the Network of Biblical Storytellers [<http://www.nbsint.org>] since 1990, has served on their board, and is currently the dean of their Academy for Biblical Storytelling [<http://www.nbsint.org/absinformationpage>], and has a one-year certification programme in Biblical Storytelling.