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**MARK SNEED, “WHITE TRASH” WISDOM: PROVERBS
9 DECONSTRUCTED**

“WHITE TRASH” WISDOM: PROVERBS 9 DECONSTRUCTED

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1. INTRODUCTION

James L. Crenshaw supplies a reason for the personification of wisdom and folly¹ in Proverbs 1-9: boredom.² The sages had to spice things up to keep their student’s attention. He points out that teachers used suggestive language to open the students’ eyes:

Because students almost without exception were males, wisdom was described as a beautiful bride, and folly was depicted as a harlot enticing young men to destruction. In this way language became highly explosive, and the quest for wisdom suddenly took on erotic dimensions, but teachers often stood in the way of learning, unintentionally encouraging sleep.³

This eroticization of wisdom seems benign enough. Some scholars have even seen something positive in it. Preferring to view Woman Wisdom as a metaphor, Claudia Camp believes her to be a symbolic replacement of the then defunct monarchy; with her, the home becomes prominent, and she helps promote egalitarian values.⁴ Similarly, Silvia Schroer believes Woman Wisdom is a postexilic figure who “is the one and only acceptable feminine image of God in ancient Israel.” She shares elements of the goddess figure.⁵ Similarly, David Penchansky considers her to be a goddess, which he claims opens up a possibility for seeing the divine in a new image.⁶ And Joseph Blenkinsopp goes so far as to

¹ “Woman Wisdom” חכמות (1:20-33; 3:13-18; 4:5-13; 8:1-31; 9:1-6) and “Woman Folly” אשת כסילות (9:13-18), closely related to the “strange woman” אשה זרה, who is a literal adulterer (2:16-19; 5:1-23; 6:24-35; 7:5-27).

² James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 2, 118.

³ Crenshaw, *Education*, 118; cf. Athalya Brenner, “Some Observations on the Figurations of Woman in Wisdom Literature,” in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (FCB 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 51-52.

⁴ Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Bible and Literature 11; Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 116, 120, 286, 290-91.

⁵ Silvia Schroer, “Wise and Counseling Women in Ancient Israel: Literary and Historical Ideals of the Personified HOKMA,” in *Feminist Companion*, 68, 71.

⁶ David Penchansky, “Is Hokmah an Israelite Goddess, and What Should We Do about it?” in A. K. M. Adam (ed.), *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible—A Reader* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice, 2001), 89-92.

view the feminine personification in Proverbs as representing the return of the repressed in predominately chauvinistic literature.⁷

In this article, however, I will show how the eroticization of wisdom has a darker and more sinister side. Instead of serving to liberate woman, it reinscribes traditional ideology along the lines of gender, social class, and race. I will illuminate this ideology and then show how the wisdom/folly dichotomy, the dominant one in these chapters, deconstructs, with a little prodding, exposing its ultimately tenuous character.

2. GENDER

Carol Newsom's famous article “Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9” treats the topic of ideology and gender in Proverbs 1-9.⁸ She argues that the main issue is the transfer of patriarchal power from one generation to the next. She demonstrates how, in these chapters, two discourses compete for the hearts of the youth. The discourse of the father, that governs these chapters, relates hierarchically to the son. Woman Wisdom, couched in the voice of the father, represents an attempt to ground patriarchal authority in the transcendent realm.

The rival discourse displays a certain “egalitarian subtext.” Newsom explains that this discourse has “a horizontal rather than a vertical structure of authority, and one that offers young men immediate access to wealth rather than the deferred wealth of inheritance.” She says regarding Woman Folly, “She is not simply the speech of actual women, but she is the symbolic figure of a variety of marginal discourses. She is the contradiction, the dissonance that forces a dominant discourse to articulate itself and at the same time threatens to subvert it.” Similarly, Camp describes her “strangeness” in the sense of deciding to stand outside the family structure as defined by its sexual roles and restrictions.”⁹

Celebrations of woman, instead of lauding her, actually assume her inferior and supplementary character. Jonathan Culler states,

... discussions of woman that appear to promote the feminine over the masculine—there are, of course, traditions of elaborate praise—celebrate the woman as goddess (the *Ever-Weibliche*, Venus, Muse,

⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 41-51.

⁸ Carol Newsom, “Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1-9,” in Peggy L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 142-60.

⁹ Claudia Camp, “What So Strange About the Strange Woman?” in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991), 26. Similarly, Gail Corrington Streete writes, “These two figures embody the positive qualities of the woman possessed by a man (Wisdom as wife) and the negative qualities of the woman incapable of being mastered by any man” (*The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997], 105); cf. Mieke Heijerman, who sides with the “strange woman” because she questions patriarchal authority (“Who Would Blame Her? The ‘Strange’ Woman of Proverbs 7,” in *Feminist Companion*, 105-106).

Earth Mother) and invoke a metaphorical woman in comparison with which actual women will be found wanting. Celebrations of woman or the identification of woman with some powerful force or idea—truth as a woman, liberty as a woman, the muses as women—identify actual women as marginal. Woman can be a symbol of truth only if she is denied an effective relation to truth, only if one presumes that those seeking truth are men. The identification of woman with poetry through the figure of the muse also assumes that the poet will be a man. While appearing to celebrate the feminine, this model denies women an active role in the system of literary production and bars them from the literary traditions.¹⁰

Culler's comment applies directly to Woman Wisdom (ch. 9), whose gender reflected the exclusion of Israelite women from the search for truth and wisdom. There is nothing positive in that!

3. SOCIAL CLASS

Social class is another ideological feature that surfaces with close reading. Woman Wisdom is clearly an aristocrat.¹¹ She has a grand seven-pillared mansion. She owns livestock, from which she makes a great banquet. She mixes her wine with spices, and she has female slaves, who go out to invite people to her great banquet.

To the contrary, Woman Folly has a house, but no features are used to describe it. She has no servants, so she must invite guests herself. She is also loud, a stereotype of the poor. On the literal level, she offers only bread and water; no wine or meat is mentioned. She, then, is not inviting a group of young men to a banquet, as is the case with Woman Wisdom. Rather, she singles out an individual male to come enjoy her "food." She is obviously poor.

The connecting of wisdom with wealth is also clearly articulated. The father's voice says regarding Woman Wisdom, "Long life is in her right hand, in her left hand are riches and honor" (3:16); she says, "I endow with wealth those who love me, and filling their treasuries" (8:21).¹² This implies that folly is connected with poverty. Regarding relations with the "strange woman," in 5:10, the father's voice warns, "Strangers will take their fill of your wealth, and your labors will go to the house of an alien." And, of course, Woman Folly leads her victims to Sheol (9:18).

¹⁰Jonathon Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 166-67; contrast this with Jacques Derrida's discussion of Nietzsche's view of woman as truth and a style (*Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* [trans. Barbara Harlow; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979]); cf. Carol R. Fontaine, who argues that the figures of Woman Wisdom and Woman of Worth (Prov 31:10-31), "may be inversely proportional to the truth of real women's lives. That is, such fine figures may just as easily be an index of women's lack of power and status as a reflection of a gentler, kinder social reality for women" ("The Social Roles of Women in the World of Wisdom," in *Feminist Companion*, 25).

¹¹Cf. Gale Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 150.

¹²All Scripture citations are from NRSV (1989), unless otherwise indicated.

4. RACE

Several scholars have proposed that the closely related “strange” woman represents the threat of exogamous marriages during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah instead of just being a “loose woman” as translated in *NRSV*.¹³ But as Camp argues, “Such an understanding is hard to square with the context, however, which assumes a male listener who is being persuaded against a future liaison with a female who has forgotten (in parallel) her youthful companion and the covenant of her God.”¹⁴ There is, however, a way that this ideology can be detected. That these chapters are in Hebrew, of course, indicates the racial makeup of the intended audience. Also, all the women of these chapters are perceived as Jewish, even the adulterous “strange woman.” The question of non-Jewish marriages never surfaces.

5. DECONSTRUCTION

Structuralists and deconstructionists have informed us about how the human mind uses dichotomies to construct the world.¹⁵ The first term of a dichotomy assumes a superior position to the second term. The first term is primary and dominant, while the second is secondary and submissive. The man/woman or white/black dichotomy is an example of this. What deconstruction tries to do is show how these dichotomies are ideological and that their rhetoric breaks down under analysis. Deconstructionists demonstrate how the two terms are not wholly antonyms, how they are complicit in each other, and how each term needs the other in order to exist. Deconstructionists also like to show how the first term lacks presence, that it has no content or presence in itself, that it exists only as it is the opposite of the second term. Presence is the illusion of supposed self-present truth that needs no justification. Thus, the first term’s identity is based on absence instead of presence. Also, deconstructionists like to reverse the dichotomy and show how the second term can be shown to be central and the first term marginal.

Jacques Derrida has developed the notion of the supplement to describe this lack.¹⁶ A supplement usually adds something to another thing that is not necessary. However, supplement can also mean to complete an item. This means that the supplement reveals the lack in the term it is supporting. Only the second term can provide that completion. Thus, the identity of the first term is dependent on the second. And the first term’s identity is formed from absence, not presence. The boundary between the two terms begins to become blurred.

¹³ Harold Washington, “The Strange Woman (אשה זרה/נכריה) of Proverbs 1-9 and Post-Exilic Judean Society,” in *Feminist Companion*, pp. 157-84; Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Social Context of the ‘Outsider Woman’ in Proverbs 1-9,” *Bib* (1991): 457-73; Schorer, “Wise and Counseling Women,” 80-81.

¹⁴ Camp, “Strange Woman,” 26.

¹⁵ For an introduction to deconstruction, see Jim Powell; illust. Joe Lee, *Deconstruction: For Beginners* (Writers and Readers Documentary Comic Book; Danbury, Conn.: Writers and Readers Publishing, 2005); Nicholas Royle, ed., *Deconstructions: A User’s Guide* (pap. ed.; Hampshire, UK: Palgrave, 2000).

¹⁶ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (corrected ed.; trans. Gayatri Spivak; Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 141-64.

6. WISDOM/FOLLY

So the appropriate question, then, is how does Woman Wisdom need Folly in order to exist? How might she disclose a lack in Woman Wisdom, and, thus, the absence of pure presence? How does Folly supply a lack in Wisdom? First of all, that the wisdom tradition needs to be eroticized to make itself more interesting to young men shows that fundamentally, wisdom has a lack and is never fully present. If it were truly superior to folly, it would not need to use sexuality to bolster its claims.

Secondly, Woman Wisdom needs Woman Folly in order to exist. She constructs her identity only in relation to her Other.¹⁷ Wherever she is, Woman Folly is close behind; she haunts her. This is even true at the beginning of the creation of the world. In ch. 8, Woman Wisdom brags about being the first of God's creations (v. 22) and about aiding him in the rest of the creative acts. But can she brag only from the standpoint of pure presence, only in terms of positive essence, without reference to any lack, to any absence? The birth of Woman Wisdom means the birth of Woman Folly, for you cannot have one without the other. In ch. 8, there are four verses where the Strange Woman (related to Woman Folly) raises her ugly head, not as personified, but nonetheless there (vv. 7, 8, 13, and 36). Also, Woman Wisdom says in v. 13, "The fear of the Lord is hatred of *evil*. *Pride* and *arrogance* and the way of *evil* and *perverted* speech I hate" (italics mine).

Thirdly, from a source critical perspective, Woman Wisdom also needs Woman Folly to complete what she lacks. R. B. Y. Scott theorizes that the poem about Woman Wisdom originally concluded after 9:12, minus vv. 7-9, which were a later expansion of the language of v. 12.¹⁸ The poem of vv. 13-18 is also secondary. He states,

"When . . . we observe that the collection has already been formally concluded with vs. 10-12, it seems at least very probable that vv. 13-18 form a later *supplement* (italics mine). Its material is derived from earlier passages, especially ch. vii, and v. 16 is similarly repeated from v. 4, where it is clearly more suitable than here."¹⁹

So why did the editor add the poem on Woman Folly? Did he sense a lack, an absence he wanted to fill by balancing out the portrayal of Women Wisdom with a contrast? Did he feel the need to present, in detail, what the opposite of Woman Wisdom might look like so that young men might recognize her duplicity and, thus, not stray from the wise path?

¹⁷ Claudia Camp explores the complementary character of both women by using the notion of the trickster ("Wise and Strange: An Interpretation of the Female Imagery in Proverbs in Light of Trickster Mythology," in *Feminist Companion*, 34-45); cf. Roland Boer, who argues that the identities of each Woman coalesce (*Knockin' on Heaven's Door: The Bible and Popular Culture: Biblical Limits* [London: Routledge, 1999], 84-85).

¹⁸ R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs. Ecclesiastes* (AB 18; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1965), 75-76.

¹⁹ Scott, *Proverbs*, 76.

Fourthly, Women Wisdom appears to echo or mimic Woman Folly, and the related strange woman.²⁰ Both Woman Wisdom and Folly woo or seduce their disciples. Here the wisdom tradition becomes eroticized. The “strange woman” uses “smooth” words (2:16; 7:5), has a “smooth tongue” (6:24) and “smooth lips” (7:21). “For the lips of a strange woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil” (5:3). “With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him” (7:21). She tells the gullible youth that her husband is away on a trip and that she has food (7:14, 19), implying that there will be no negative consequences in this tantalizing affair. She is beautiful and captures her victim “with her eyelashes” (6:25). Basically, she is both seductive and deceptive.

Woman Wisdom also uses erotic overtones, though none as overt as that of Woman Folly. In ch. 4, the father says,

Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. . . . Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown. (vv. 5-6, 8-9).

In 3:18, the father states, “She is a tree of life to those who lay hold to her; those who hold fast to her are called happy.” In 8:17, she says, “I love those who love me.” The father says, “Say to wisdom, ‘You are my sister,’ and call insight your intimate friend, that they may keep you from the loose woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words.” “Sister” is the term used by the male lover to describe his beloved (Song 4:10; 5:2).

Woman Wisdom also mimics Woman Folly’s use of “food” to lure her victim. The eating of food often symbolizes sexual indulgence (cf. Prov 5:15, 20; 30:20; Song 4:13-15). Though Woman Wisdom intends a literal referent, a double-entendre appears, and so her “feast” can metaphorically symbolize sexual indulgence, something she would be aghast to admit.

Thus, both women “seduce” their adherents, but what is absent in the words of or about Woman Wisdom is any acknowledgment that this sexual enticement will be ever satisfied. This is where the imagery breaks down and deconstructs. Her seduction has no *telos*. Her eroticism is gratuitous. At least Woman Folly’s seduction is up front about the consummation; she only lies about the consequences. Thus, she has a kind of integrity as a character that Woman Wisdom lacks. Though seductive language is used to portray Woman Wisdom’s “allurement” of potential disciples, there is a strange, non-sexual, virginal quality to her. She does not “put out.” Basically, wisdom and sex do not mix. And in Proverbs 1-9, while the sage attempts to use sex to make the path of wisdom more appealing, he attempts to downplay or repress it as well. Prov 9:1-6 contains no allusions to sexual fulfillment. Woman Wisdom

²⁰ Cf. J. N. Aletti, who points out that both Women share the same vocabulary and that this effect of ambiguity is intentionally designed by the author to portray the seductive character of Woman Folly (“Seduction et parole in Proverbs I-IX,” *VT* 27 [1977]: 129-44).

sends out her slaves to invite potential adherents to a great banquet, literally. Interestingly, David Jobling has noted how sexuality is repressed in 1 Kgs 3-10, before Solomon's "fall" in ch. 11.²¹ These chapters depict a monarchical Golden Age, in which the king's sexuality is strangely absent.

Thus, Woman Folly has been shown to serve as a supplement to Woman Wisdom. Though Woman Wisdom might try to keep her at bay, Woman Folly continually haunts her very presence; she, in fact, enables her very existence. For Woman Wisdom to appeal to young males, she has to take on the beguiling qualities of Woman Folly. But Woman Wisdom promises what she will not deliver. She is the truly deceptive one of the two. Thus, she remains a ghostly, ethereal, non-sexual being, who entices but never satisfies.

7. FOLLY/WISDOM

Now we need to turn the tables. We will let Woman Folly take center stage and ask how she might have a certain lack, how she might need Woman Wisdom as a supplement. The question then is how is folly like wisdom?

Woman Folly is described as ignorant and knowing nothing (9:13). She also addresses those who are simple and without sense, using the same wording as does her opponent (9:4). The Hebrew for "ignorant" in both places is from the same Hebrew root: פתה. So, in the case of Woman Folly, we have the ignorant seducing the ignorant. Earlier descriptions of the "strange woman" emphasized her deceit rather than her ignorance (2:16-19; 5:3-6; 6:24; 7:21). But to be the opposite of Woman Wisdom, she must be ignorant. The former passages that emphasize Woman Folly's deceit, however, imply a person who is not so ignorant, but instead cunning and crafty--should we say, "wise"? We might call her "white trash" wisdom.

What is amazing is how Woman Folly's seductive ploy seems in a way more sapiential than that of Woman Wisdom. After an invitation to come to her, Woman Wisdom tries to win over potential followers with the enticement of fine food (9:5). In contrast, Woman Folly does something remarkable: she quotes a proverb (v. 17), "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." And it is not just any proverb, but one that focuses on a paradox. It expresses the truism that things forbidden ironically seem to entice us. C. H. Toy points out that "stolen waters" refers to anything illicit, "The inducement she offers is the delight of secret enjoyments, things prohibited by law or condemned by society, more tempting because they are forbidden."²² Compare the following paradox observed in 17:9, "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense." The sages were apparently fascinated with the paradoxes of life, and with putting that wonderment in proverbial form.

Also, in v. 17, Woman Folly wisely uses a "neutral" proverb that does not contain or imply an ethical directive. In Proverbs 20:17, we

²¹ David Jobling, "Forced Labor?: Solomon's Golden Age and the Question of Literary Representation," *Semeia* 54 (1991): 63-66.

²² C. H. Toy, *Proverbs* (ICC 16; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899), 190.

find a proverb about this same paradox, “Bread gained by deceit is sweet, but afterward the mouth will be full of gravel.” But unlike 9:17, it contains a moral lesson in the second colon.

This sophisticated quoting of a proverb clashes with Woman Folly’s earlier characterization as ignorant. Prov 1:6 is part of an editorial preface that suggests one purpose in studying the proverbs of chs. 10-31 is to learn how to interpret them. It reads, “To understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles.” According to Richard Clifford, “‘To understand’ here means not only to comprehend the sayings but to apply them appropriately to particular situations.”²³ So how is it that the ignorant Woman Folly knows how to astutely use a proverb to allure her victims? Of course, the sages, being quite territorial, might quip, “The legs of a disabled person hang limp; so does a proverb in the mouth of a fool” (26:7). Or “Like a thornbush brandished by the hand of a drunkard, is a proverb in the mouth of a fool” (26:9).

There is another way that Woman Folly indicates that she is no fool when it comes to the understanding and use of proverbs. The proverb of v. 17 refers to the enticement of forbidden things. However, in the context, she is not referring generally to any sort of thing tabooed. We have double-entendre here. The secret bread and stolen water refer specifically to adultery. Compare 5:15-17, “Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be for yourself alone, and not for sharing with strangers.”

Finally, the type of proverb in v. 17 is identical to the kind of proverbs that we find in the book of Proverbs (10:1-22:16). This proverb has two cola that parallel each other synonymously. Thus, Woman Folly not only quotes a sophisticated proverb that contemplates a paradox, her author puts it in good literary form, as those composed by the wise. At his hands, she turns out to be quite the female sage, showing more sapiential finesse than Woman Wisdom. The fact is that, here in ch. 9, she is simply a more interesting character than Woman Wisdom. She seems more life-like, more corporeal, compared to the ethereal and ghostly Woman Wisdom. And Robert Alter demonstrates the exquisite craft involved in depicting the “strange woman” in ch. 7.²⁴ The sage has taken great care in fleshing out colorfully the images of both the “strange woman” and Woman Folly. He seems enticed by his own creation.

Here at this particular point, the text about the two women begins to deconstruct as the tight boundaries between both women begin to become porous and blurred. Who is now wise, and who is fool?

8. CONCLUSION

While some scholars view Woman Wisdom as positive and redeemable, I find nothing to substantiate this. Rather, the eroticization of

²³ Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 35.

²⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 56-64.

wisdom reinscribes the typical ideology of the time, along gender, social class, and racial lines. The binary opposition, wisdom/folly, is what enables the discourse of Proverbs 1-9. My reading, however, has exposed the fragility of the boundary between both women. In their presentations, each is shown tainted by the Other. For success, Woman Wisdom must be deceptive like Woman Folly. And Woman Folly is revealed to be quite wise and crafty. Both women are accomplices to each other's path. Each supplements the other.