

## Holy Tricksters:

### Que[e]rying the Foundational Story of Jesus in Matt. 1:1–18

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#### Abstract

In the introduction of Jesus' genealogy (Matt 1:1), the writer firmly establishes its core purpose: affirming Jesus' royal lineage as the son of David and son of Abraham, thereby situating him as the prophesied Messiah. However, the inclusion of four Old Testament women of troubling status—foreigners, a prostitute, an adulteress—challenges the ensuing Israelite patriarchal power narrative. Scholars typically attempt to explain these problematic women by categorising and grouping them but ultimately fail to link them meaningfully with Mary. Viewing the women as literary tricksters through a queer lens reveals deeper subversive meanings, which point toward the ultimate disruption of the genealogy's surface meanings by the silent characters of the Holy Spirit and Mary. Que(e)rying the narrative, including the troubling intimate encounter of the Holy Spirit and Mary, underscores Mary's significance and offers a final resolution that acknowledges the subversive voices of women and the author's intentions to transcend heterocentric patriarchal norms.

**Keywords:** Matt. 1:1-18, genealogy, patriarchy, women, tricksters, queer

#### Introduction

There has been much scholarly deliberation on the surprising appearance of five women—Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba (pointedly referred to as the wife of Uriah) and Mary—in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–18). Propositions fit into three main clusters: first, that the four Hebrew Bible women are “sinners”; second, that these four women are non-Israelites; and third (favoured by recent contemporary analysis that includes Mary), that all five women's relationships are “irregular” in some sense. In addition, there has been limited agreement on why these specific women have been chosen by the writer, as opposed to naming other worthy Hebrew Bible matriarchs such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah.

In light of this ongoing debate, I put forward an approach to understanding the appearance of the five women in Matthew's genealogy. Specifically, I suggest that these women are neither deficient nor problematic; their shared identity connects them as tricksters. The underdog trickster is a well-known trope in stories, myths, and folktales in many cultures across space and time (Radin [1956] 1972). Cleverly dodging the limitations of their world, these tricky characters drive unforeseen subversive plotlines through acts of deception, pranks, wit and intelligence to create unexpected outcomes. Tricksters are both destroyers and creators, and, foremost, they are boundary and border breakers whose actions and stories contradict convention; tricksters smirk at petty limitations and, in doing so, awaken audiences to creative possibilities.

Tricksters “other” the narrative plot from the expected to the unexpected. While their characters and actions may be “other,” their personalities and predicaments

resonate with our world. Bridging two worlds, they function as parabolic characters, tricking us into seeing our world in new, refreshing and liberated ways. A queer hermeneutical lens uncovers structures and processes that engender “otherness,” offering an alternative truth towards a new, more just, liberated world. When reimagined as trickster characters through a queer lens, the women in the genealogy can be understood as heralds of “otherness,” announcing the birth of Jesus Christ—a cross-cultural religious hero and the progenitor of an entirely new order.

Following a brief framing of the interpretative lens, I consider Matthew’s genealogy’s literary form and context. Folklore scholarship generally approaches the narratology of storytelling through form, context, function and meaning (Niditch 2000,1). The form of a first-century Palestinian genealogy provides a vehicle for managing authority, identity, history and various ancestral and socio-cultural values through a well-known structure that connects the names of ancestors to their descendants. This article posits that the author of Matthew’s genealogy has added five female trickster characters as literary figures of resistance against the value assumptions inherent in such a form. By drawing on Susan Niditch’s (2020) biblical trickster plot morphology along with the core trickster traits developed by William J. Hynes (1993)—deviancy, trick-playing, shapeshifting, situation inversion and imitation of the deities—the women’s trickster behaviours can be illustrated at defining moments of their stories. Woven into a short discussion of each trait is a queer critique which, working in accord, recontextualises the truth of these five women characters to a new generation of readers of Matthew’s genealogy of Christ. Given the space limitations of this article and that trickster characters exhibit some shared traits, I have chosen to highlight one significant trickster trait in each of the five women’s stories.

### **This Essay’s Hermeneutic**

In order to interrogate elements of the five trickster women’s stories, I employ a queer biblical hermeneutic. Critical theorist David M. Halperin describes queer as,

by definition, whatever is at odds with the normal, legitimate, and dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily references. Queer demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative (1995, 62).

According to Thomas Bohache (2006, 493), to “queer” something (in its old English meaning) is to “spoil” and “shake it up,” which, in an interpretative sense, suggests stirring up new possibilities of meaning. Trickster characters are also queer as they spoil expected plotlines by ignoring established systems and norms; in doing so, they shake audiences awake to new possibilities. Bohache argues that, through acts of disordering and upsetting the status quo, other truths lying beneath the text may be revealed (493). As mechanisms of resistance to the norm, trickster figures and queer reading approaches are natural allies in what Heidegger called a “truth event”—an act of *Unverborgenheit* (unconcealment, or uncovering), the purpose of which is to disclose *alétheia* (truth) lying beneath the surface of a narrative.<sup>1</sup> Using a queer hermeneutic can help readers recognise the five trickster women in Matthew’s

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger (1992). In his winter 1942–1943 semester lecture series, Heidegger explored the meanings of *alétheia* within the poem Parmenides. He argues against a “thoughtless” interpretation of the word as *truth* in terms of correctness, rather teasing out notions of un-concealment through the interplay of hiddiness (*lethe*) and unhiddness (*alétheia*).

genealogy as an ongoing act of creative *alétheia* accessible for those “blessed with eyes to see and ears to hear” (Matt. 13:16).

Queer hermeneutics harmonise well with the trickster, who seeks to elude constraints and limitations through wit, humour and creative thinking.<sup>2</sup> Reading texts queerly involves holding a suspicious gaze on dominant universalising powers and their absurd claims to “right” and “truth,” thereby liberating identities from heteropatriarchy’s suffocating and coercive forces. Queer interpretations, therefore, have a mythological ally in the trickster character in that both creatively battle the constraining forces in their world.

Using a queer hermeneutic to explore the women’s trickster traits in Matthew’s genealogy allows readers to identify and critique the heteropatriarchal ideologies that often lurk within biblical texts and their interpretations. As consummate border breakers, tricksters defy established rules and categories in their efforts to resist and outsmart established power systems (Grottanelli 1983, 138). Varied approaches highlight different models and tactics to interrogate meanings behind trickster characters by highlighting particular traits. For example, one tactic used by a selection of feminist writings on female tricksters uses Anne W. Engar’s (1990) model of Old Testament women as tricksters, focusing on intelligence, faith and sexuality and aligning their studies to traits of humour and wit.<sup>3</sup> Tannen (2007, 176) recognises the humour in this context as the playful, self-deprecating kind able to subvert dominant models of femininity through comical expressions of alternative identities.

Queer theology, as part of this turn, is slowly becoming a significant discipline within theological and biblical studies<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, according to Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, queer theology is at its most potent and productive in the arena of a man-god’s tricky genealogy and the unexplored nature of the incarnation (2004, 7). I suggest that que(e)rying the contours of the five women’s stories uncovers alternative narrative truths with allusions to Christ’s tricky transgressive identity. According to Catherine McHale, writing on women and world religions, tricksters “memorably defy and transgress the normative, whether it be sexual, social, gender boundaries or even biology, spirituality and time-zones, therein provoking profound theological understandings of how human beings locate themselves in the world” (1999, 286). Thus, I suggest that a queer reading of five female trickster characters in a “straight” (or heteronormative) genealogy offers fruitful truth-telling synchronicities.

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<sup>2</sup> Feminist and postcolonial hermeneutical approaches might also find allyship with the trickster trope, in that they interrogate and circumvent the oppressive ideological claims of heteropatriarchy and imperialism. Queer, feminist and postcolonial approaches work in the creative interface of the person-Polis, the latter within its original Aristotelian sense of the blended personal and social life of the “political animal” (*zôion politikon*; see Aristotle, *Politics*, I.ii). Such hermeneutics deconstruct specifically the cultural forces within the peron-Polis space that foment human identities; by doing so, they offer alternative worldviews.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of feminist scholarship that considers the theme of humour in stories of trickster women include Chan (2015) and Jackson (2002).

<sup>4</sup> According to Elaine Wainwright (2015, 115), scholarship that focuses on queering religious themes, stories, traditions and texts remains “remarkably rare.” This short essay, as part of the burgeoning field of queer studies since Wainwright’s comments, stands as a testament to how quickly things are changing.

Trickster characters play at exposing and eluding the oft-hidden forces and privileged truths, which, according to Michel Foucault, are used by dominant powers to stifle the truth of “other” (1982, 208–26). In *Fearless Speech* (2001), Foucault engages with the ancient Greek word, *parrhēsia* (lit. “to speak everything”), which he connects to five characteristics: frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty. These characteristics remain significant factors in queer truth-telling, which promotes each person’s lived reality and worldview as valid expressions of truth (Foucault 2001, 14). Foucault argues that the truth of all lived experience is valid, and truth-tellers have a moral duty to express such truths (19). Truth-telling, suggests Foucault, is dangerous because it often involves stepping outside the “shared values” promoted and enforced socially, culturally and religiously by dominant powers (15–16). In the literary sense, the trickster character as “other” performs such “truth-telling” despite the risks involved; within their plotlines, they duck and dive around dominant forces and powers, challenging and expanding the borders of possibility.

Similarly, a queer hermeneutic liberates texts from the silencing and invisibility of the “other” within traditional heterocentric<sup>5</sup> interpretations based on assumptions of readers’ “shared values.” This article thus treats the five trickster women as heralds and embodiments of new and radical truths hiding in clear view. It is an approach aligned with the uncompromising and dangerous truth-telling of Jesus, resulting in his death on the cross.

### Form and Context: Genealogy

Genealogies are formulaic literary structures that appear on thirty occasions throughout the Christian Bible—twenty-eight times in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and twice in the New Testament (Matt. 1:1–18; Luke 3:23–38), the latter of which both purport to offer the lineage of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> A side-by-side reading of Matthew’s and Luke’s genealogies identifies numerous differences, discrepancies and historical inaccuracies,<sup>7</sup> suggesting these are purposeful literary constructions rather than detailed historical records of ancestry. Nevertheless, these genealogies prepare the reader for the divine launch of a new order through Christ’s βασιλεία (kingdom). The Greek word Matthew uses to introduce the genealogy is γενέσεως, which carries notions of identity, belonging, history, culture and community within a common ancestry. Genealogies provide a context for affirming lineage and the transfer of various inherited factors, including skills and abilities, status, identity, blessings, authority, power and other cultural values. Traditional genealogies privilege specific values, for instance, masculinity, heteronormativity, tribal affiliation, marriage, fecundity, and health (i.e., being mentally and physically able to bear offspring).<sup>8</sup> Given such values, the naming of five women in Matthew’s

<sup>5</sup> Tyson (2017, 305–7) describes “heterocentrism” as a more subtle form of prejudice, in that it unconsciously assumes that heterosexuality is universal.

<sup>6</sup> The Greek γενέσεως may be translated as “genealogy,” “genesis,” “history,” “story,” “account of the birth,” and “whole new creation” (Allison 2005).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, six kings of Judah are missing in the Matthean genealogy, which takes Abraham as its starting point. The Lukan genealogy goes to the primordial mythological time of Adam. For a detailed survey and analysis of the differences between the Matthean and Lukan genealogies, see Brown (1993); Davies and Allison (1997).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, to appear in the genealogies of the tribe of Levi (priestly caste) requires that you be male and have no physical defect or infirmity (Lev. 21:16–21).

male-dominated genealogy is surprising. Their confronting presence may suggest they are precursors to the person of Jesus as a challenger to all such ideals.

Biblical genealogies are also unilineal (omitting other relatives) and follow a single line of patrilineal cognatic descent. “Patrilineal” refers to the system of primogeniture that recognises the firstborn son as the generational link. In a general sense, the core function of Jewish genealogies is to identify and trace common patronyms to establish a degree of personhood through kinship and a degree of separateness between Israel and her neighbours (Johnson 2002, 77). The presence in Matthew’s genealogy of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary defies the patronymic and patrilineal system, given their gender and their varied (sometimes non-Israelite) heritage. The writer purposefully “spoils” the expectations of this first-century Palestinian genealogy. Hence, while Matt. 1:1–18 may appear as a formulaic literary device for establishing Christ’s pedigree, it betrays artful, subtle authorship that announces the transgressive and morally scandalous veracity of Christ’s entrance into the world. In troubling Matthew’s genealogy of Christ, five women tricksters question, resist and challenge the genealogy as an act of queer liberation.

### **Character Type: The Trickster**

The term “trickster” first appeared six decades ago in Paul Radin’s 1956 study of Native American mythology. As storytelling characters, tricksters break and leap the boundaries by which we live, dislodging our notions of normative roles and troubling our comforting social order. Everything and anything is on the table: deceptions, disguises, sexuality, seduction, displacement, subversion of authority, and “to hell with” consequences (McHale 1999, 986). The trickster character plays both the protagonist and the antagonist, both hero and villain, always quick thinking and knowing when to speak up or remain silent when it is to their advantage. As a character, they appear in countless cross-cultural mythic stories, disturbing the existing order, entertaining, and liberating the assumed story plot to unimagined possibilities (Radin 1972).

Joseph Campbell argues that the unique property of the trickster character is to creep into the mind’s unconscious to liberate possibilities of life beyond normal expectations (Campbell and Toms 1990, 39). Proficient in the art of creeping, the trickster sneaks in to mess with our lives and to suggest a whole range of possibilities that “the mind has not decided it wants to deal with” (Campbell and Toms 1990, 30). The trickster seduces us with disorientating and scandalous possibilities, bringing a creative force to our life stories.

Wesley Allen argues that the opening words of Matthews gospel (1:1) Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, literally, “the book of genesis [beginning, *creation*, birth] of Jesus Christ,” may serve as the title of the whole Gospel as it references the entirety of God’s creation story told in Hebrew scripture (Wesley Allen 2013, 225). The five women in Matthew’s genealogy of Christ follow the well-attested leitmotif of trickster characters who often appear in creation stories to offer insights into the world, how it came to be and possibilities of how it might be (Weaver and Raúl 2016).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Maui, the mythological trickster character in the Oceania culture is associated with creation stories. As ambiguous trick player, shape-shifter, situation-inventor and imitator of the G-Ds (Hynes 1993),

Stories of biblical tricksters follow a well-attested plot, which Susan Niditch (2000, 44–45) has identified as having a five-step morphology: (1) there is *a problem or issue* that has implications for the trickster's status; (2) *the trickster develops a plan*—a risky scheme involving deception or a troubling of the normative to resolve the situation and improve status; (3) *the trickster executes their plan*, with results that may include improved condition and status; (4) there may be *a complication*, such as the discovery of the truth; and (5) *there is an outcome*—success or failure and an alteration of status, for better or for worse.

According to this plot structure, the trickster is driven by a change in status (step 1). Trickster stories are about people responding to a change in their status by thinking and acting in ways that subvert and trouble the social order (McHale 1999, 987). This theme appears in the stories of the five women named in Matthew's genealogy of Christ, a literary structure that expresses status (Brown 1993, 65). I suggest that these women are included in the genealogy because they followed the tricksters' pattern of responding in a "tricky" way to their change in status. They all maintain silence when required, artfully manage the systems they live within, and possess the timing and courage to know the moment to take decisive action. Moreover, by appearing in Christ's genealogy, all the women arguably achieve the ultimate status leap.

Other examples of the trickster motif in the stories of the other five women include Tamar tricking her father-in-law into impregnating her and the prostitute Rahab tricking her way out of her community's destruction to a new status with a new people. As low-status women struggling to establish their presence and voices, it is important to recognise the frame of narrative reference used in the five women's opening scenes. For example, Bathsheba maintains her silence throughout 2 Samuel and only shows her trickster colours in 1 Kgs. 1:11–53. These contain the scenes of her collusion with the prophet Nathan to have Adonijah tricked out of his right as the oldest male heir to David's throne in favour of her son Solomon. Likewise, Mary and the Holy Spirit are silent in Matt. 1:18, but their actions speak for themselves. Mary and the Holy Spirit may well be the ultimate tricksters, with Mary dodging her status as a village girl and potential pregnant adulteress to claim a tricky perpetual virginity status as the Mother of G-D, Queen of Heaven. The Holy Spirit maintains silence throughout, thus avoiding the tricky questions about Mary's impregnation, potential claims of adultery, and Joseph's paternity.<sup>10</sup>

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he tricks death at his birth to spend his childhood in the sky with powerful deities, learning supernatural skills. Maui is a polyvalent character, both artful deceiver and gracious hero whose stories include shape-shifting into a pigeon and other animals, deceiving the sun into extending the day, crossing sexual taboos to seduce divine entities (Hine-Te-Po, goddess of the underworld) and bringing fire into the world by tricking the goddess Mahui-ike to give him her burning fingernails and toenails. He takes on the role of creator, smearing his blood on his grandparent's jawbone and fishing up islands from the sea (Christen 1998, 139–42). Trickster stories find their place in Oceanic cultures' earliest oral mythological creation stories.

<sup>10</sup> Reflecting on talmudic and rabbinic law within Matthew's birth story (Zaas 2009, 127), Herb Basser writes: "The act of betrothal (kidushin or erusin) and indeed 'promised' (bound to him in promise) is a fitting term if it is understood that there exists a legal state of matrimony and she is not free to marry anyone else without a divorce from her husband," (Basser, publication forthcoming). Israelite betrothals in this period may be considered as binding as marriage and thus only be terminated by an official divorce decree; for women to get pregnant from someone other than the betrothed risked judgement by the elders and the risk of being stoned to death.

## Heuristic Trickster Traits

For the remainder of this article, I demonstrate how the five women—Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary—can be identified as tricksters through their execution of a plan. As mentioned in the introduction, I apply one of Hynes’s (1993) five trickster traits (deviancy, trick-playing, inverting situations, shapeshifting, and imitating the gods) to each woman. While this short study only focuses on one trait per woman, it accepts that each woman may perform a varied combination of traits aligned to their tricksterish identity (Makarius 1969).

Below is a brief reference and associated summary of critical sections of the five women's stories. Within Susan Niditch’s (2000) five-step trickster story morphology, I identify this section of the story as step 3: the execution of a (trickster) plan.

These sections of the five women’s stories represent a pivotal place of plot change, where the “norm” is disordered by subversive acts that stir up new possibilities and unique situations outside the expected storylines. According to Károly Kerényi, this is the primary purpose of the trickster motif; it “functions in the storylines of archaic societies ... to add disorder to order and to render possible an experience of what is not permitted” (1972, 185).

RAHAB	Josh. 2:1–13	In a shifting allegiance, Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute, assists and protects the Israelite spies in exchange for her family’s safety.
TAMAR	Gen. 38:15–26	By playing the role of a prostitute, Tamar arranges for her father-in-law Judah to impregnate her. He judges her to be put to death by fire. She proves it is his child.
RUTH	Ruth. 3:6–15	In collusion with her mother-in-law, Ruth seduces Boaz on the threshing floor following a day's harvesting.
BATHSHEBA	2 Sam. 11:2–3 1 Kings. 11-40	Bathsheba expresses her status in a unique and tricky way to King David. Later in the story, she tricks another out of his kingship to achieve the highest status as the mother of King Solomon
MARY	Matt. 1:18	Mary is betrothed to Joseph, and the Holy Spirit impregnates her. She avoids the tricky status of an adulteress.

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## Authenticating the Five Women's Trickster Character Traits

### 1. Rahab the Deviant: Flirting on the Boundaries of Other

Rahab is considered a trickster-like figure by several biblical scholars. Erin Runions, for example, suggests that "trickster" is "maybe the best designation for Rahab" (2011, 70), while Tikva Frymer-Kensky describes Rahab as "smart, proactive, *tricky*, and unafraid" (2002, 35; emphasis added). In this section, I want to discuss Rahab in light of one of Hynes's identified traits of the trickster: their deviancy. According to Hynes, tricksters are anomalous, ambiguous, and polyvalent, deviating their behaviour from what is considered normal or expected (1993, 34). Anomalous, or *a-nomos*, suggests, without normativity, "a positionality on the edge, or just beyond existing borders and categories" (34). Rahab's tricksterish deviancy lies in her triply anomalous status as a woman, a foreigner (in the eyes of the Israelites) and a prostitute—she is neither male nor Israelite nor chaste wife and Mother, and thus is an object of abjection (Runions 2011; Frymer-Kensky 2002, 35). Nevertheless, Rahab takes her place in Judaism's formative genealogy as King David's third great-grandmother. Her rise in status by being included in the genealogy is an example of a trickster's social function: they que[e]ry the absolute and unchangeable nature of the social order (Douglas 1966, 365).

The book of Joshua is about the promised land and its possession, distribution and retention, which include the dispossession of "the wicked" from the land. The story of Rahab occurs within stories of the possession of the land (chapters 1–12); specifically, the conquest of Jericho (Josh. 2:1–21 and 6: 17, 22–25) is loaded with attention-gripping elements, including sex, lies, spies, and treachery, all within the dramatic backdrop of war and uncertainty.<sup>11</sup> Rahab is literally living in the walls of Jericho. As a Canaanite prostitute, she is an enemy inhabitant of the land the Israelites seek to conquer. By changing camps to join the victors and destroyers of her people, she escapes death but not her "otherness" as a (former) foreign sex worker with no male patron. Although she is, to an extent, "mainstreamed" as the Mother of the reliable Boaz and the ancestress of the prophet Jeremiah, Rahab's polyvalent otherness continues its disturbing influence through her naming in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5).

Joshua holds a sophisticated trickster storyline involving Rahab, which is identifiable within Niditch's (2000) trickster morphology:

1. **The problem:** Rahab, the deviant prostitute, lives physically, morally, and socially on the edge of her Canaanite community in the walls of Jericho. Two Israelite spies go into her house for the night. Jericho's king's representatives suspect her of harbouring them. Recognising the success of the Israelites in conquering lands, she and her family are at risk.
2. **The plan:** First, Rahab intends to deceive the king's men about the spies' whereabouts. She plans to have the Israelite spies save her and her family by saving *them* and thus indebting them to her.
3. **The execution of the plan:** Concealing the men, she misleads the king's scouts with lies. First, she expresses faith in the miracles and power of the

<sup>11</sup> Carden (2006b, 156) identifies sexuality and gender as crucial literary themes throughout Joshua.



Israelite G-D with her change in allegiance noted by the spies. Second, she secures their pledge that, in saving their lives, they spare the life of her and her family. Inhabiting the walls of Jericho, she then supports their escape, directing them to the hills to hide and wait for three days until they are safe.<sup>12</sup>

4. **The complications:** How to ensure Rahab and her family do not die in the battle. The Bible forbids lying.<sup>13</sup> What to “do” with Rahab after she is saved; there is no biblical suggestion that Rahab gives up her harlotry.
5. **The outcome:** Rahab, her father and Mother and brothers, “and all who belong to her” are saved. (Josh. 6:22–23). Traditions “clean up” her tricky deviancy within the efficacy of repentance and faith and suggest she married into the tribe of Judah. Rahab achieves high status, taking her place within the patriarchs and Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus as the Mother of Boaz (Matt. 1:5).

As a deviant whose body has been in the hands and control of many men, Rahab crosses boundaries to act as the controller of men’s warring bodies to hand her people over to their annihilation during the fall of Jericho. Hynes determines that tricksters’ deviancy does not hold as sacrosanct any religious, cultural, epistemological or metaphysical borders, and this allows tricksters to move “swiftly and impulsively back and forth across all borders with virtual impunity” (1993, 34).<sup>14</sup> Having scaled the walls and boundaries of culture, religion, gender and ethics, Rahab takes on the ramparts of bloodline as a foreign prostitute, straddling the ethnic and ethical borders to claim a place of honour and prestige in the lineage of the Israelite patriarchs. She exemplifies Claude Levi-Strauss’s (1963, 221) observation that tricksters are conduits of new meanings and power because they can bridge two worlds. While she plays a critical part in the brutal destruction of her people, she retains her ambiguous, enigmatic and polyvalent identity to empower others to a certain level of ruthlessness in surmounting and challenging elite realms of meanings and values. As with other tricksters, her ambivalence liberates her from the morals and standards of the two worlds she inhabits, seducing audiences to cross ethical boundaries that their respective communities might find intolerable (Levi-Strauss 1963, 226).<sup>15</sup>

A classic trickster plan is evident in closer analysis of Josh. 2:2–13; in Josh. 2.2–7, Rahab deceives the king of Jericho’s representatives and hides the Israelite spies on her roof. Rahab befriends the spies, gains their trust, and gathers information and support to survive the community’s impending destruction. In Josh. 2:7–11, Rahab gives a whole-hearted confession to the sovereignty of the Israelite G-D, aligning herself with the spies and their people. Having secured the spies’ trust and offering

<sup>12</sup> Even to this day, to the west of Jericho (Tell es-Sultan) there are hills with caves to hide in.

<sup>13</sup> Ex. 20:16; 23:1; Eph. 4:25.

<sup>14</sup> This echoes Claude Levi-Strauss (1963, 224), who views the trickster as the enigmatic epitome of binary oppositions, a necessary anomaly incorporating sets of extremes such as carnivore and herbivore, sacred and profane, life and death, and order and chaos.

<sup>15</sup> Lévi-Strauss is referring to the trickster motif more generally here, but his comments align well with Rahab’s performance in Joshua 2. The idea that Rahab’s story serves to change and challenge audience perspectives is also raised by Runions (2011), who reads Rahab’s story as a subversive comedy and a crossover text that uses humour to change audience attitudes towards non-heteronormativity from disgust to appreciation.

further assistance, she has them swear an oath (by their God) to save her and her clan ( Josh. 2:11–14).<sup>16</sup>

Although the text does not reference Rahab’s physicality, midrashic and aggadic traditions list her, along with Sarah, Esther and Abigail, as one of the four most beautiful women in the world.<sup>17</sup> One could argue that assigning Rahab extreme beauty is a heterocentric and patriarchal ploy to manage her dangerous ambiguity and polyvalency. In defining her danger through the heterosexual gaze, her “other” dangerous traits, such as ethnicity, ethics, and lack of male patrons, may be overlooked. However, I would argue that Rahab’s beauty has no significance in the biblical story; her ruthless, quick thinking and clever planning in securing a safe passage for her and her family is the centre of the narrative, rather than her feminine beauty.

Later, Jewish and Christian traditions often cloak her deviancy by presenting her as the beautiful, “just,” and idealised proselyte.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, this playing down of her exotic, erotic, and messy morality and her “complete otherness to Israel” cannot alter the crux of her story. As a Canaanite prostitute who offers crucial assistance to the Israelite army, she is simultaneously an insider and an outsider. Located literally in/on the boundary—the city’s walls—she does not hesitate to desert her people to evade her current crisis. As a trickster, she uses her wits to change her status from imperiled Canaanite prostitute to heroic Israelite ally and, ultimately, to one of the foremothers of the messiah commemorated in Matthew’s genealogy.

In an important final point, while she acknowledges the supremacy of the Israelite deity, she does not plead for mercy or pray for salvation to this G-D; instead, her deliverance is actively self-managed through the use of the Israelite spies. Rehab achieves her goal of survival through her active creativity, determination, and the resources available to her. Moral judgements get made on sexual orientation and prostitution as “choices,” with little acknowledgement of the human truth of the matter. As a Canaanite prostitute in a besieged city, Rahab tricks death and the warring powers to claim a place in the annals of Jewish history and rabbinic traditions. It may be that apathy toward her people is a critique of the powers, judgements and systems that frame her profession. As the enterprising Mother of Boaz, she continues to bring her queer reality-critiquing “otherness” to the idealised genealogy of Christ.

## 2. Tamar the Trick Player: Que[e]rying Family Boundaries

<sup>16</sup> Scholars generally consider Rahab’s speech as redacted into the story, as this Deuteronomist discourse sits awkwardly on the lips of a foreign prostitute. For an interesting appraisal, including the proposal that this speech has been added to “tame” Rahab’s troubling character, see Fewell and Gunn (1993, 118–19).

<sup>17</sup> Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 15a) lists her as one of four of the most beautiful women the world has even known, adding that those who said “‘Rahab, Rahab’ immediately lusted after her” (BT Megillah 15a). According to the Aggadah, she is also named as one of the world’s most beautiful women (Meg. 15a).

<sup>18</sup> For instance some Rabbis interpreted Rahab’s story not morally but as one of the priority of repentance over prayer aligned to the blessings of seven kings and eight prophets “that issued forth from her,” (*Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, para. 22). Early Christian interpreters, such as Justin Martyr (d. 165) in *Dialogue with Trypho*, asserted Rahab’s scarlet thread was symbolic of the blood of Christ and the salvation of the gentiles (111); Origen (185–253/4) held the same assertion (*Homilies on Joshua* 3.5) with Clement of Alexandria (180–203) suggesting the Rahab story was about justification through faith and the hospitality she offered to the spies (*Epistle to the Corinthians on Martyrdom* 17).

Genesis 38 contains one of the most consummate trickster stories in the Hebrew Bible. With sparse backgrounding, Genesis 38 abruptly has Tamar marrying Judah's firstborn son, Er. Three sequential steps set up the problem to be resolved. Immediately she is a widow with no reason given for her husband's death apart from "the Lord put him to death." (Gen. 38:7). Judah directs his second son, Onan, to "perform the duty of a brother-in-law; raise offspring for your brother" (38:8). Spilling his seed on the ground instead than doing his "duty," Onan is also killed by the Lord (38:19).<sup>19</sup> Tamar remains silent and dissociated from the intimate action and death swirling about her. In his queer reading of the text, Michael Carden recognises Onan's behaviour as an abuse of Tamar by denying her consent to take such action within a system that required her acquiescence (2006a, 55). Judah is afraid of losing a third younger son, Shelah; he directs Tamar to "Go home as a widow of your father," for he fears that his third son will die like his brothers. (38:11). Within the culture of the time, childless, widowed, statusless Tamar would have returned in shame to her father's house (Niditch 1979, 144). While the story is unambiguous that it is the deity who is behind the death of his two sons, Tamar takes the blame. It is the shame-blame game well known to those of queer sex and sexualities, who, through dubious logic, find themselves blamed for their discrimination and oppression.

Tamar's status and future are at stake, which she appears to accept without grief or entreating either Judah or the deity. The continuation of Judah's line is also in question. The story takes a turn when Judah, himself a widower, heads off with a friend to a sheep festival (38:12). In the spirit of self-reliance, Tamar seizes the opportunity to play a trick on Judah. She plans to pose as a prostitute and deceive Judah into having sex with her (38:14). In the risky process of soliciting her services, Tamar has the foresight to manoeuvre herself to obtain his signet, cord, and staff as a pledge. The strange pledge is a critical part of her trickster plan. Tamar's status is as a widow within Judah's family, and she is subject to the laws and rules of levirate marriage; consequently, when Judah discovers she is pregnant, he judges her as an adulteress, and she is to be burnt alive. In a dramatic scene on her way to her execution, Tamar plays her consummate trick, sending a message that the owner of the pledged items is the man who made her pregnant (38:25). Judah accepts "she is right and I was wrong" (38:26) in the context of his withholding his son Shelah and the risks and outcome of what she did. This powerful ethical acquiescence is the first time in the Hebrew Bible, and therefore recorded Judaic history, of such an admission.

The trickster motif often includes a successful outcome for the trickster; in this case, traditional interpretations have held it to be the birth of Tamar's twin boys at the story's conclusion (Gen. 38:27–30). The story seals her status as the Mother to a patriarch's sons, yet the achievement scandalizes the norms of family values with its elements of incest, adultery and prostitution.

Hynes identifies deception and trick-playing as another core trickster character trait (1993, 35). By lying, cheating, tricking, and deceiving, the trickster disrupts, disorders, and mixes truth and falsity. Intense, complex trick-playing also carries a

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<sup>19</sup> "If brothers reside together, and one of them dies childless, the dead man's wife shall not marry an outsider. Her husband's brother must come to her, taking her as his wife in a levirate marriage. The firstborn son whom she bears will then perpetuate the name of the dead brother, so that his name will not be obliterated from Israel" (Deut. 25:5–6).

risk; the trick develops its own internal momentum. At that stage, the trickster risks losing control of the trick, becoming the “trickster-tricked” (35). Rahab’s disguise as a prostitute tricks her father-in-law into impregnating her. However, she risks her downfall through the Levitical judgement of being burnt to death (Gen. 38:24). Tamar’s tricky *pièce de résistance* is the well-executed presentation of Judah’s pledge, which prevents her execution and proves her as the clever controller of the trick and the outcome (Gen. 38:26).

Genesis 38 holds a sophisticated trickster storyline identifiable within Niditch’s (2000) trickster morphology:

1. **The problem:** Tamar faces a collapsed status as a childless widow, consigned to living in her father’s house (Gen. 38:11). She faces denial of the usual avenues of levirate marriage.
2. **The plan:** Tamar wanted to get impregnated by a member of Judah’s family. Unable to manage this through the levirate marriage process and her dead husband’s brothers, she plans to get pregnant by her father-in-law.
3. **The execution of the plan:** First, Tamar dresses as a prostitute, veils herself and tricks her father-in-law into impregnating her (vv. 12–19). Second, she reveals the paternity of her unborn sons to Judah and, through subtle manipulation, secures her and her unborn children’s status and safety (vv. 24–26).
4. **The complications:** Tamar is guilty of incest, prostitution and adultery. Moreover, marriage and further sexual relations with her father-in-law Judah are impossible.
5. **The outcome:** Tamar achieves a successful outcome in that she gives birth to twin boys (vv. 27–30) and secures an elevated status within the clan, a place in Israelite history, and a mention in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:3).

Nevertheless, tricky ethical and status issues such as Judah and Tamar’s unmarried state and the incestuous nature of their relationship remain unresolved in Tamar’s narrative.

The execution of Tamar’s plan holds two dramatic highlights. First, by playing a prostitute, she tricks her father-in-law into impregnating her; second, she secures evidence (Judah’s seal and cord) to prove to him later that he is the father of her unborn children. This last step allows her to escape the fires of judgement that Judah initially judged for her when he heard about her illicit pregnancy (Bar, 2012; Westermann, 1986).<sup>20</sup> Tamar’s two-fold plan thus provides a brilliant foil to the patriarchal righteousness of Judah, exposing his hypocrisy.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> When Judah is informed that Tamar is pregnant, he responds with “Bring her out ... and let her be burned” (Gen. 38:24). This event occurred in the patriarchal period, where the patriarch holds all authority over his household, including the undisputed power to judge in legal affairs with ramifications over their life and death. Tamar remains bound to Judah by the tradition of levirate marriage and is thus part of his family. She is liable to the charge of adultery specifically as Er’s widow or Shelah’s betrothed. There is no legal process for Tamar to challenge Judah’s patriarchal powers of judgement and her sentence of burning. Westermann suggests burning refers to a more ancient severe punishment for adultery with stoning being adopted by Israel as later punishment (Deut. 22:23).

<sup>21</sup> After preparing to have her burned alive, Judah exclaims, “She is more righteous than I” (Gen. 38:26).

By taking ownership of his seal, cord and staff, Tamar tricks Judah of his authority, power, and arguably his prophetic possibility. Judah's seal was doubtless a small cylindrical device that expressed his legal and personal identity when rolled over clay. Due to its value and unique representation of personal power, men often wore it secured around the neck by a cord. Nevertheless, the staff of Judah holds his explicit powerful prophetic identity (Gen. 49: 8–12). Thus intertextually, Judah's staff is associated with שִׁילֹה (lit. "to him the obedience," NJB),<sup>22</sup> a much-debated epithet of the Messiah (Westermann 1996, 329), as a symbol of prophetic governance (Brooke 1996, 205–6).<sup>23</sup> Therefore, such items held the identity and legal and symbolic power of Judah that included potential links to the patriarchal power of the patriarchs. That Tamar, a childless foreign woman acting as a prostitute and guilty of adultery and incest, takes legitimate ownership of such items raises her to the standing and status of the patriarchs.

Following the success of Tamar's tricky plan and the birth of her twin sons, the narrative concludes with her marital, ethical and legal status left in limbo.<sup>24</sup> According to Levitical laws, Tamar has produced male children; yet Judah and Tamar cannot marry because their relationship is illicit, adulterous and forbidden.<sup>25</sup> While some later interpretive traditions assume that Judah and Tamar married, this is not explicit in the biblical text. Nevertheless, Tamar, the trick player, achieves her aims and secures a powerful status within the patriarchs despite her biblical milieu's cultural and religious conventions. It is a queer victory because it critiques the levirate marriage system, the privilege of male prophetic control and the use of religious texts to promote one ethical model of marriage and family.

Tamar goes from an inert, silent, acted-on character to the driver of the story of the patriarchs. It is a metamorphosis that makes her one of the top movers and shakers of the Hebrew Bible. Chaya Greenberger recognises the risks Tamar takes in ensuring the continuation of Judah's bloodline. Allied with this is her withholding judgement on Onan's misconduct. Her risks, generosity, and clever thinking encapsulate everything that Judah is not. In setting up Judah to admit his failure, Greenberger argues she enabled Judah to "trade shame for respect and self-respect" (2020, 29) in his development into a respected patriarch. Tamar secures Judah's family line with twin boys and supports his character development before fading into obscurity and objectification.

A queer and feminist lens might recognise this second instance in Genesis where the patriarchal lineage is dependent on the tricky agency and action of women (Carden, 2006a, 55).<sup>26</sup> A queer or feminist reading offers insight into the tricky

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<sup>22</sup> The word "Shiloh" is subject to enormous debate. The context in Gen. 49:10 indicates the toponym "Shiloh" makes no sense, Westermann insists the word can only refer to the future ruler.

<sup>23</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Q252 column 5 offer an ancient commentary on Judah's staff: "For 'the staff' is the covenant of the kingship, the [thousa]nds of Israel are 'the standards' until the messiah of righteous comes, the shoot of David. For to him and his seed has been given the covenant of the kingship of his people for everlasting generations."

<sup>24</sup> Verse 26 makes clear that "they never had intercourse again."

<sup>25</sup> Biblical Hebrew has no term for incest, but the Hebrew Bible has laws forbidding sexual relationships between close kin (Lev. 18:6–18; 20:11, 12, 14, 17, 19, 20, 21; Deut. 27:20–23).

<sup>26</sup> The first is Lots daughters raping their father (Gen. 19:30–38).

morality playing out and this story's true winners and losers (Greenberger 2020).<sup>27</sup> As Tamar's story ends, Chan's feminist reading identifies Judah as the "ultimate trickster" in the story (2015, 100).<sup>28</sup> Is this a case of the trickster being tricked into ensuring the progeny of the male Judah line? Is she a winner when the story ends with the empowerment of a patriarch perpetuating a male lineage supporting a system of oppression and injustice based on "the selfish interests of men" (Chan 100)? Judah retains his status, including his prophetic agency, and Tamar moves back into the shadows as an unwed mother guilty of illicit sex, whose role is only permitted because it is crucial to supporting the unjust system of her original condition.

Tamar, the trick-player character, exposes the tricky underbelly of patriarchal power and values. She is a queer character because she stirs up the meaning of righteousness and traditional, familiar structures. Unmarried Tamar is the antithesis of a chaste wife and Mother expected in Christ's genealogy, challenging all who weaponise biblical texts to rail and moralise against same-sex marriage and alternative family structures. Judah and Tamar's tricky incestuous relationship remains in limbo; and despite, or maybe because of, her deceptive performance as a prostitute and her trickery with Judah's seal and cord, she is rendered a very queer presence who actively que(e)rs the patriarchal boundaries of family and genealogy.

### 3. Ruth, the Family Shape Shifter: "We Are [All] Family"

Several scholars identify Ruth and Naomi in this story as tricksters. For example, when considering the trickster subplot in the Hebrew Bible, Raymond-Jean Frontain names widowed Ruth and previously covered Tamar as "stand-out" examples of such a character (1990, 178). In his philological formalist-folklorist analysis of the book of Ruth, Jack Sasson (1989, 230–31) also identifies Ruth's seduction of Boaz as an event on par with Niditch's third step in the trickster plotline: the execution of a plan. In her analysis of the story of Tamar (Genesis 38), Niditch (1979, 148) recognises similarities between the sociological situations of Tamar and Ruth. As women adrift from the status beacons of unmarried virgins in their father's households or child-producing wives in their husband's households (West 2006, 190), both Tamar and Ruth risk the stigmatising and precarious situation of being sent back to their fathers' households to the invisibility of non-status as "non-virgins."

Tamar and Ruth (and Naomi) are all "birds of a feather"<sup>29</sup> in that, despite being vulnerable childless widows, they create an alternative queer family as tricky shape-shifters—another trickster trait identified by Hynes (1993, 34). By achieving this change in status, they affect success: marriage, children, communal acceptance and, in the case of Ruth, land. The women thus bring their tricky relationship and alternative family status to Matthew's genealogy of Christ.

<sup>27</sup> For instance Greenberger picks up on a complexity of word choice in the opening pericope of Gen. 38:1: יהרד (literally go down, descend). It reappears in Judah's "off the path" reaction to Tamar as a prostitute (Gen. 38.16) and holds insightful physical-ethical interconnectivity.

<sup>28</sup> Chan argues she is a "pitiable" woman forced into using her only "assets" to navigate systems of shame, patriarchal power and impossible existing family and marital obligations.

<sup>29</sup> A lyric from the queer anthem "We Are Family," performed by Sister Sledge. The song was composed by Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, produced by the Power Station Studio (New York City), and released by the Cotillion label in 1979.

Ruth and Naomi are in a predicament—Naomi’s husband and two sons have died; she and her daughter-in-law Ruth are childless widows with insufficient economic resources. Ruth is also a foreigner, and rather than returning to her homeland, she expresses a strong attachment and desire to stay with Naomi (West 2006, 191).<sup>30</sup> Once back in Naomi’s Israelite homeland, as two widows without children and in a state of destitution, Ruth scours the fields for harvest cast-off (Ruth 2:3). Because Ruth and Naomi have no sons or male patrons, they have no legal access to the family land (4:5–6). With Naomi’s direction, both women devise a tricky plan, wherein Ruth will seduce and marry their patriarchal relative (3:1-4), Boaz. As their male patron, Boaz is the key to spring-boarding the women’s economic stability and status by having a male patron and children and redeeming their family land (4:8).<sup>31</sup>

The book of Ruth holds a trickster storyline identifiable within Niditch’s (2000) trickster morphology:

1. **The problem:** Ruth, a foreigner (Moabite), and Naomi are widows<sup>32</sup> with an intense bond. Without male patrons and children and in a state of destitution, they are adrift without legal status to access land and establish themselves within Naomi’s original Israelite community.
2. **The plan:** To establish a relationship with Boaz (Ruth 2) as a “kinsman-redeemer” male patron and as husband and potential father to “their” children.
3. **The execution of the plan:** To seduce Boaz (Ruth 3), marry him, and have his child (Ruth 4).
4. **The complications:** Ruth’s seduction of Boaz on the threshing floor subverts social conventions of female propriety. Ruth is a Moabite, and the law of Moses (Deut. 23:3–6) explicitly forbids intermarriage with Moabites.<sup>33</sup>
5. **The outcome:** With Boaz as their male patron, they have access to land, social-cultural status, and acceptance. The women of Bethlehem declared Ruth’s value to Naomi to be “better ... than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15). Their son Obed takes his place as a forefather of King David. Ruth is named in the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth’s character “cleaves” to Naomi (Ruth 1:14). Many commentaries miss the significance of the unusual Hebrew word דבק (to cling, cleave, keep close) used by the writer in this early scene. It is the word used in Genesis 2:24 in the first biblical referencing of marriage and the leaving of a family the “cleaving” of the two to become the one flesh. In her cleaving, Ruth professed her loving loyalty to another woman, Naomi, “to death and the grave” in one of the Hebrew Bible’s most beautiful and passionate poems (Ruth 1:16). No wonder this text is claimed as a favourite for weddings and relationship rituals of many LGBT+ peoples.

<sup>31</sup> I use “their children” in relation to Ruth 4:17 when the village women exclaim “a son has been born to Naomi.” The land is Naomi’s family land but can only be redeemed through Ruth so becomes “their land.”

<sup>32</sup> The women are never explicitly referred to as “widows.” In Ruth 4:5, Ruth is described as אשה המתה, literally, “the wife of the dead.” It reflects a focus of her legal status problem, rather than their poverty. Through levirate marriage, Ruth attains her status. It is the focus that relates to the need to “redeem” her to access the land entitlement of her deceased husband.

<sup>33</sup> The law mandates that the offspring of forbidden marriage be barred from the assembly of the Lord down to ten generations. If the letter of the law is followed, the implication is that King David is legally an outcast.

Hynes notes that a trickster’s relatively minor shapeshifting through the use of disguise “may involve nothing more than changing clothes with another” (1993, 36). While Tamar shapeshifts herself into a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law, it is Naomi who manages Ruth’s shapeshifting so that she is ready to execute their planned seduction; she directs her daughter-in-law to “wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes” before going to meet with Boaz (Ruth 3:4).<sup>34</sup>

Boaz’s seduction by Ruth—the “execution of the trickster plan” scene—occurs in Ruth 3:6–15. After Boaz has finished eating and drinking, he goes to sleep “on the edge of the grain pile” (v. 7). At this point, shapeshifting Ruth “quietly” goes to him and “uncovers his feet” (vv. 6–7). The night-time location of this scene and the use of the word “quietly” hint at the secretive nature of Ruth and Naomi’s plan. In vv. 8–9, Boaz awakes in shock and asks, “Who are you?” Ruth shapeshifts back to identify herself as his vulnerable “servant”; referring to him as her redeemer kinsman, she asks him to spread the skirt of his cloak over her (v. 10). The uncovering of Boaz’s feet and the spreading of his cloak are likely metaphors for their sexual encounter (Sasson 1989, 76–79; Tooman and Kelsey 2022, 4).<sup>35</sup> The scene then jumps to the following morning (vv. 11–13), and in a scene loaded with metaphors, Boaz sends Ruth back to Naomi with a barley-filled cloak (vv. 14–15; Newsom, 1992, 89).<sup>36</sup> However, the dangers and risks of Ruth and Naomi’s tricky plan are never far from view. By spending the night with Boaz and accepting his gift, Ruth risks the accusation of harlotry and illicit sex (Wenham 1994, 449).

Ruth’s use of shapeshifting tricksterism is referenced explicitly by some scholars, including Sasson (1989), Newsom and Ringe (1992) and Melissa Jackson (2012). Jackson (183) identifies Ruth as an “emerging” *trickster* (original emphasis) within Nidich’s five-step trickster morphology. She identifies the pivot of the trickster story, the scene on the threshing floor with Boaz’s unknown reaction deciding the outcome. A feminist reader, suspicious of who controls the narrative, might view Ruth and Naomi’s shapeshifting trickster as a standard strategy of the “other” to negotiate patriarchal power imbalances. The “successful trick leads to improved status to both women,” with the outcome positively “cementing Ruth in perpetuity amongst Israel’s *trickster matriarchs*” (183, original emphasis). Sasson recognises the “compounding boldness” of Ruth and Naomi to seduce (and thus gain the support of) Boaz (1989, 230). The evolving nature of their positioning to gain Boaz as their male patron also alludes to their shapeshifting trait.

In summary, Ruth’s primary problem is that, despite her loving, emotionally fulfilling relationship with Naomi, both women’s current status renders them economically disempowered, disenfranchised, and vulnerable. A male patron is critical to their legal, social, and economic security.. Ruth shapeshifts from a childless widow to a seductress to secure a male patron, a stable family, a child, and

<sup>34</sup> This has echoes of Tibetan shape-shifter trickster Agu Tompa (Uncle Tompa) who dresses as a nun so he may invited into a cloister and have sex with the nuns.

<sup>35</sup> Four times in two verses words are employed which are used in the Hebrew Bible as common euphemisms for sex, e.g., “lay down,” (Gen. 19:33, 35; 30:15, 16; Lev. 13:33, 2 Sam. 13:14) “come into,” (Gen. 6:4; 16:2; Judg. 1:14; 2 Sam. 12:24 etc., “know,” ( Gen. 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16, Judg. 19:22 etc) and “foot” (Deut. 28:57; Judg. 3:24).

<sup>36</sup> Ruth adapts Boaz’s words of her not returning “empty handed’ to include Naomi. Some commentaries have noted that, in the gift of the grain, Ruth symbolically carries what Naomi most wants: Boaz’s seed. In handing Naomi the grain, some have identified Ruth as anticipating her handing of the child Obed to Naomi.



the recovery of their family land. The plan is a success, and the foreign, widowed, childless Ruth shapeshifts once again to become a wife, Mother, and ancestor of Christ identified in Matthew's genealogy (Matt. 1:5).

Jennifer Koosed identifies that the narrator of Ruth never explicitly states a sexual attraction exists between Ruth and Boaz, instead suggesting the scene on the threshing floor portrays "a realistic depiction of what women must do to survive in a patriarchal world" (Koosed 2011, 89). What appears to be a close, emotionally fulfilling relationship indicates that the women do not necessarily want a male patron but need one for practical social and economic reasons. It is a position that "outs" the essence of heteronormative patriarchy as the web of embedded forces within the socio-cultural fabric that require everyone to play the game according to its rules. In this case, it is laws that require a male patron to establish the status of the women and provide economic stability through access to family land. Those who do not fit a standard relationship often have to shapeshift to accommodate notions of what relationships must be. In queer relationships, partners are often denied the economic and material benefits of their relationship, for instance, access to their partners' health plans. On the death of their same-sex partner, those who have been shapeshifting as "roommates" may be denied legal access to their partner's estate and the provisions of their will.

Naomi, a party to the tricky plan, also benefits from Ruth's shapeshifting, allowing her to leave her childless widowhood behind and become a mother again. Irregularities of relationships, including references to levirate marriage and cultural intermarriage, have already been identified within Rahab and Tamar's tricky stories and traditions. Ruth's tricky shapeshifting and risk-taking on the threshold floor also relates to the troubling "otherness" of ethnicity and rights of redemption issues. Another relative may, in effect, "acquire Ruth the Moabitess" (4: 1–4); however, he turns it down as her ethnicity jeopardises his and his children's status because of the laws on intermarriage between an Israelite and a Moabite. Ruth's tricky shapeshifting and activities on the threshing floor that successfully capture Boaz shapeshift her from a troubling "other" into a leading Matriarch. It is a high status that has her critiquing the unjust rules and laws that enforce otherness. In Ruth, "the foreigner is no longer foreign, the widow is no longer the widow, the sterile woman (or so considered) gives birth" (LeCocque 2004, 27).

In Naomi and Ruth's story, same-sex relationships and alternative supportive family structures appear emotionally self-sufficient and fulfilling, even if a compromise is required to survive the pressures of heteronormative patriarchy. Queer people are well known to play the tricky game of being "flatmates," "housemates," "lodgers" and "friends" while shapeshifting behind closed doors to share intimate emotional bonds with or without sex. A queer reading most often references a social location; however, the *reading subject* is just as critical. I recall the first openly queer man I met in a relationship four decades ago telling my naïve self that it was not just a physical relationship he sought with a man but equally a spiritual and emotional engagement. Many women-identity and lesbian-identity reader subjects find the undefined relationship between Naomi and Ruth "deeply dissatisfying" despite its unsettling elements (Powell, 2018, 2). As Stephanie Powell notes in *Narrative Desire and the Book of Ruth*, troubling aspects of the story include Naomi not reciprocating Ruth's evident devotion and, given the narrator's preoccupation with Ruth's foreignness, the silence around her full

acceptance into her new community by the end of the story (2018, 2). As a cis-male queer reader, I read Naomi and Ruth's relationship as queer by the full and comprehensive nature of their spiritual and emotional bond, considering they do not need a male to complete or fulfil their relationship. It is an approach that troubles normative assumptions of family units and the expectation that intimate relationships must also be physical and sexual to be of value. I read Boaz as a somewhat cardboard character, devoid of detail and emotion. He is a crucial passive player in the narrative as a pragmatic addition to the woman's relationship to access economic security and their land entitlement and to fit within communal status requirements. The women's relationship appears intense and emotionally self-sufficient; the (non-)physicality of the relationship is not the point. A contemporary queer lens might recontextualise the woman's relationship within the ongoing obsession of establishing who plays "the man" in queer relationships. That the women's relationship is fulfilling, satisfying and stable for both women explains why Naomi is unfazed about directing Ruth in the seduction of Boaz. Boaz is a practical addition to their loving relationship, not a threat, substitute or replacement.<sup>37</sup>

After the women in Naomi's community acknowledge the emotional bond between the women (4:15), Naomi takes Ruth's child and lays it on her breast. This intimate, tricky act suggests that she is suckling and nursing *her* child, a suggestion provocatively echoed by village women when they proclaim, "A son has been born to Naomi!" (Ruth 4:17). At the moment of this cry, an inclusive crack appears for queer inclusion in Christ's genealogy, opening space for shapeshifting queer family roles and structures. Finally, Ruth, the Moabite Matriarch, tricks Deut. 23:3 of its curse through traditions that such curses relate to the father, not the Mother.<sup>38</sup> Ruth and Naomi are shapeshifting tricksters who critique heteropatriarchal traditions and relationship norms, making space for fulfilling queer relationships and their families within the genesis of Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4. Queen Bee Bathsheba: Situation-Inverter

Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood suggest that a queer hermeneutic, like queer theology, "takes its place not at the centre of the theological discourses conversing with power, but at the margins (2007, 304). Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* (1976) argued that the powers that enforce normative notions are within socially aligned force relationships, the processes by which such forces engage and are enmeshed with each other to impose strategies of upholding normative social hegemonies. These are the nets, traps and snares that tricksters must negotiate to dodge boundaries, limits and restrictions that define their status and lives.

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<sup>37</sup> This pragmatic queer threesome family arrangement provides an echo of another; that of Mary, Joseph and the Holy Spirit as conjoint parents of Jesus. Joseph offers a physicality for the social and communal acceptance of Mary and the Jesus, but it is the Holy Spirit and Mary who are intimately bound. Joseph fulfils a pragmatic requirement of Mary, but it is telling that, like Boaz, there is so little detail and he disappears from the story without explanation.

<sup>38</sup> Mishnah Yevamot 8:3. It is argued that the Deuteronomic curse on the decedents is explicit to relations with Moabite men, not Moabite women, as in Ruth's case.

<sup>39</sup> Hynes (1993, 36) advances that the trickster's shape-shifting trait means that tricksters can move between wildly different roles, asserting that sex, sexualities and gender expression are included in the tricksters' shape-shifting disguises and transmorphisms.

Tricksters game such forces, and if the measure of success is a change of status, then Bathsheba is the queen bee of tricksterism because she moves from an ambiguous, anonymous and polyvalent character to the trickster mother of a king.<sup>40</sup> By tricking Prince Adonijah out of his kingship, Bathsheba usurps the forces that manage royal power, becoming queen through the kingship of her son Solomon (1 Kgs 1:11–2:25). This is the trickster trait of situation-inverter, where the world order is overturned, “be it person, place or belief, no matter how prestigious” (Hynes, 1993, 37). It is a characteristic that brings into sharp focus the systems and forces managing such powers and values (37).

According to Raymond-Jean Frontain (1990, 178), David is the “tricksters-trickster,” akin to a resourceful feline with a trick for every season.<sup>41</sup> The Bathsheba and David trickster motifs are thus complex, composite and interwoven. To beat a trickster and the net of forces that manage King David’s power, Bathsheba comes out as a trickster in some of her final scenes. What may be certain in the early narrative of her character is that she is vulnerable and subject to a power imbalance against the tricky controlling character (King David). In her introduction, the narrator uses a unique early descriptor highlighting her vulnerable status. It is a risky status that has added to it the (widowed) childless wife of a foreigner, also guilty of adultery. These are status echoes within Tamar’s trickster story.

Almost all of Bathsheba’s story is from the viewpoint of David. At night, he rises, walks around his palace roof, and becomes a voyeur watching a woman bathing. Following this infamous opening scene of 2 Sam. 11:2, King David sends a servant to enquire after her. Her given identity is that she is the “daughter of Eliam, wife [literally “woman”] of Uriah the Hittite” (2 Sam. 11:3). The identification of a woman by referencing her relationship to two male patrons and within the same sentence is unprecedented in the Hebrew Bible corpus. It falls outside Jewish patriarchal traditions (Dorn 1999). It is a social status descriptor that has had “commentators scratching their heads ever since” (Stone 2006, 212). I posit that Bathsheba’s unique a-nomous (Gk: outside the [social] rules) status identity marker presents her as highly vulnerable as highly vulnerable to David. Nevertheless, the fact that her status markers put her outside of patriarchal traditions suggests she has already triumphed against such forces. As a situation-inverting trickster, Bathsheba’s character in 2 Samuel moves from a silent object of King David’s desires to 1 Kings, where she appears as a mature, politically savvy manager of the royal line. Sara Koenig (2011) and others promote the significance of this “later Bathsheba” as a progression of her character.<sup>42</sup> Approaching Bathsheba as a situation-inverting trickster and, second, considering her through a queer lens moves her from being a “simplistic, unchanging, monolithic stereotype” (Park, 2014, 459)

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<sup>40</sup> James A. Wharton considers that “the figure of Bathsheba haunts the whole narrative with extraordinary ambiguity (1981, 384).

<sup>41</sup> Portraying Israel’s leading character King David as a trickster is an ideal image for a small nation surrounded by powerful forces, which requires creative thinking and clever political and military manoeuvring to manage power imbalances. David’s introductory scene with Goliath attests to his trickster status, as he uses wit and strategy to invert power outcomes (see Frontain 1990, 178).

<sup>42</sup> According to Koenig’s reading, Bathsheba is not a static figure, but a complex character who changes and matures. See also the analysis of the “later Bathsheba” in Zucker and Reiss (2016, 76). Equally, however, Song-Mi (Suzie) Park (2014, 459) argues the text may be read as an expression of different parts of her personality, rather than a progression. Park suggests the two blocks of stories may not have been meant to be read together.

typical of female biblical characters, into a dynamic character opening up new meaning possibilities. One of those meanings is the critique of patriarchal power and the mechanisms that silence the “other,” whether it be the queer, the poor, women, children, the elderly, the disabled, new migrants or refugees. As such, Bathsheba represents a positive story of the underdog eventually controlling the power narrative.

The text of Bathsheba’s story occurs in three blocks: 2 Sam. 11:1–27, 2 Sam. 12:1–25 and 1 Kings 1–2. From being a character subjected to the powerful forces King David represents, she triumphs in the latter narratives as a king-maker and Mother of a king. In the first block of the narrative, she is married to the Hittite Uriah, a soldier in King David’s army. Bathsheba becomes pregnant with King David’s child. What follows is David at his trickster best, manoeuvring Uriah’s return from the battlefield so that he may think it is his child, and when that does not work, putting in a tricky plan to have Uriah die on the battle-front. The first block of the story is from King David’s perspective, with Bathsheba silent and objectified amidst an awful set of predicaments that include being a sexual pawn of a powerful man and the death of her husband and child.<sup>43</sup>

In the second block, 2 Sam. 12:1–25, David moves Bathsheba to his harem. While Bathsheba has a male patron of sorts, her tricky ambiguous status remains, and she is at high risk of losing favour and being discarded as a childless widow at the whim of her powerful lover. Enter Nathan the prophet, who, by telling David a parable, has the king condemn himself. Nathan’s parable is of a poor man with a single lamb that a wealthy farmer takes for his own needs. In his queer story analysis of this narrative, Ken Stone advances that the parable is about property and theft (2006, 214). Under this interpretation, Bathsheba in this parable is the “stolen property” of Uriah, taken by the more powerful rich man, King David. The story has the deity claiming the life of the newly born child of Bathsheba and David as a judgement. To be clear, it is David’s sin that Nathan and the deity call out and judge, not Bathsheba and the child. However, the unnamed child dies for the fathers sin, a child King David had planned to let Uriah claim gladly.<sup>44</sup> Bathsheba, Uriah and the unnamed child critique this story’s patriarchal power strategies, including assuming ownership and control of women and children and the murderous treachery of sacrificing and using the innocent to maintain their worldly needs. With the assertion that a child must die for the sin of King David, we have the sacrifice of the powerless to the culpability of male power. It is a situation that critiques a G-D made in the image of the normative patriarchal social and power hegemonies of the times.

Bathsheba’s initial voice is silent, as, with the gaze of David at her bathing, the narration is from the vantage point of men. In 1 Kgs. 1:11–2:25, the power of David diminishes, and Bathsheba’s character is unleashed within Niditch’s (2000) trickster plot morphology:

1. **The problem:** Adonijah is older than Bathsheba’s son Solomon. Of royal blood and first in line for succession to kingship, Adonijah has a claim to the

<sup>43</sup> King David has no issue with Uriah having sex with Bathsheba, remaining her husband and claiming his child. It can be read as implying he has limited emotional investment in his relationship with Bathsheba.

<sup>44</sup> The active verb used (2 Sam. 12:15) makes plain that the child was killed. Some commentators wrongly interpret this as G-D “letting” the child die (e.g., Weren 2014, 120).

royal throne above her son Solomon. It is a situation that will rob Bathsheba of her status as the Mother of a king.

2. **The plan:** To play David to have son Solomon named as his successor (1 Kgs 1:11–31); she then plays her son Solomon to ensure the death of Adonijah (1 Kgs. 2:13–25).
3. **The execution of the plan:** To take advantage of an aged King David’s frailty and vulnerability, and by colluding with Nathan and referencing an oath (of questionable authenticity), have David agree to crown Solomon king, rather than the rightful prince, Adonijah. To permanently deal with the “Adonijah problem,” to play on Solomon’s insecurities and have Adonijah put to death.
4. **The complications:** Bathsheba’s status as an adulteress; the risk of Bathsheba and Nathan being judged as the revolutionaries rather than Adonijah.
5. **The outcome:** Solomon is king, Adonijah is no longer a threat, and Bathsheba becomes the mother of a king.

1 Kings 1:11–2:25 holds an interpretive key to Bathsheba’s trickster character as a situation inverter. This last block of her story concerns the days leading up to the death of King David and is not from his perspective. Moving to a third-person perspective, we hear Bathsheba’s story and perception. The site of power, kingship, is inverted by Bathsheba in two situations of trickery.<sup>45</sup> First, Bathsheba colludes with the prophet Nathan to tell David that Adonijah is already king, even though he still lives (1 Kgs. 1:11–12). Adonijah is aligned to be the next legitimate king, and David controls that process while alive. Nevertheless, Bathsheba plays a tricky game controlling the narrative as the king-maker (1 Kgs. 1:11–30). In a second tricky move (1 Kgs. 2:13–25), Bathsheba plays on Solomon’s insecurity to have Adonijah put to death. When Adonijah naively requests that she support his request to marry Abishag the Shunammite (King David’s last “bed partner” from his royal harem), she agrees and then takes the request to her son Solomon. She would likely be aware that Adonijah’s request to marry a woman from the king’s harem could signal his sense of entitlement to contest the royal crown (Zucker and Reiss 2016, 76; cf. 1 Kgs. 2:22). Certainly, it outrages Solomon to the extent that he immediately orders Adonijah’s execution (1 Kgs. 2:23–35).

The perspective of 1 Kings moves Bathsheba from an inert character in scenes laden with patriarchal, cultural and social status and power markers to her controlling the lines of the power that have previously managed her character and story. Specific situation-inversion scenes linked to Bathsheba are evident in the following passages:

- Prostrating herself twice before King David (1 Kgs. 1:16, 31) is an act of submission to his power. However, she immediately inverts the scene to become the manager of that power in two ways. First, she tells King David that he swore an oath to Yahweh that her son Solomon would be king and sit on David’s throne (1 Kgs. 1:12). No oath has previously been referenced. The calling in of this oath inverts the situation of a rightful prince attaining his kingship. Hynes suggests that as a situation-inverter, the trickster characteristically can overturn any person and associated orders safe from inversion (1993, 37). “What is bottom, comes top” (37); Solomon as king

<sup>45</sup> Hynes points out that no order is so rooted that it cannot be broached or inverted by such a trickster character (1993, 37).

inverts the kingship order in this case. Second, by warning King David he is out of touch, Bathsheba raises the spectre of Adonijah preparing for kingship and that she and Solomon will suffer if he is crowned (1: 22-27). It is a reference laden with discourses on chains of power yet seeking to invert them.

- Bathsheba expresses her wish that King David would live “forever” (1: 31); however, she is colluding with Nathan to manage the transfer of his kingship.
- Adonijah offers Bathsheba “peace” in accepting Solomon’s crowning (2:13–15). Sitting on the right side of King Solomon in a position of power, Bathsheba makes a specific marriage request for Adonijah. Within royal court politics, such a request “might as well request the kingdom for him” (2:22). In this final situation-inversion, Bathsheba’s request for Adonijah’s marriage results in his being put to death “that very day” (2:24).

Melissa Jackson considers Bathsheba a “trickster extraordinaire” (2012, 163), with her story holding “one of the more astounding tricks known to the Hebrew Bible” (162). It is a conclusion within three moves. First, the legitimacy of the oath Nathan and Bathsheba presented to the aged, declining King David guaranteeing Solomon his kingship is questionable (Klein 2000, 59).<sup>46</sup> If the oath is a fraud, King David is not in control of the order of succession as he believes, but his kingly power has been “taken from him” by the two co-conspirators, Nathan and Bathsheba.

Power inversion occurs at the highest levels. In the early stages of her story, David “takes” Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:4, ויקחה) using his power to manage both her and her silence within his desires. However, through her situation-inverting trait, by the end of her story, Bathsheba “takes” control of David’s kingdom to ensure her son is king. Bathsheba “brings in full circle a theme of seizure” (Jackson 2012, 163), turning controlling powers upside-down.

In Matthew’s genealogy Bathsheba, the tricky situation-inverter,<sup>47</sup> is referred to not by name but as “the one of Uriah” (Matt. 1:16). David killed Uriah, thus in referencing Uriah, it is arguable that this is a direct reference to the sin of David. This sin references inhuman patriarchal notions of property and ownership with outcomes of the unjust killing of Uriah and an innocent child. By finding her voice and inverting the power forces that silence and manage the powerless, Bathsheba gives voice to people silenced by their sex (women), sexual orientation, gender expression, poverty, marital status, age (both children and the elderly), disability, migrant or refugee status, and those without family support. As “the one of Uriah,” her situation-inverting presence continues to trouble systems of power and control, creating space and representation of the silent “other” within the genesis of Christ.

## 5. Psychopomp Mary: Message Bearer, Mediator and Imitator of the Deities

Hynes identifies this characteristic of the trickster—as arbitrators and mediators of the divine—through their ability to admix both divine and human traits (1993, 39–42). Polynesia’s trickster Maui, stealing fire from the gods for humanity, captures this deific boundary-crossing trait that gifts essential elements to human culture (Hynes 1993, 40). Jesus (unlike the Holy Spirit identified by symbols such as fire, dove and water) “remains truly man while remaining truly God” (Catechism of the

<sup>46</sup> Klein (2000, 59) concludes “it sounds like a conspiracy.”

<sup>47</sup> Hynes suggests that these two forms of trickery are frequently associated together (1993, 36).

Catholic Church 1994, 129) and holds an extreme neither/nor tricky status within the mystery of his incarnation.

Mary is considered fully human at her introduction in Matthew's genealogy (Matt. 1:16) yet imitates deities within such doctrines and dogmas as her perpetual virginity, immaculate conception and traditions of her assumption, body and soul, into heaven (1994, 139, 138, 279).<sup>48</sup> Such beliefs have developed in response to her character and tricky status as Theotokos, the Mother of God. In being impregnated by a deity and the conduit for the incarnation of the divine Logos, Mary embodies the trickster sacred-divine boundary-crossing trait. Through such a trait, offering mediating paths between the divine and the mundane, Mary offers a new understanding of the mysteries of life and functions as a cultural transformer (Hynes 1993, 40). Hynes recognises such a trait carries inherent instability (41) in Mary's case, reflected in the controversies and the development of defining doctrines and dogmas to manage her tricky status.<sup>49</sup>

Many cultures believe in specific angels and deities operating in the tricky zone of life and death. Such characters are associated with transition zones to the afterlife and hold immense cultural and religious importance. It is the place of the psychopomp, or ψυχοπομπός, "guide of souls,"<sup>50</sup> as agents able to "reset the lines between life and death" (1993, 40).<sup>51</sup> Such characters are mediators at the tricky border between the sacred and profane, associated with crossing such borders between life, death and potential life beyond death. In the popular prayer "Hail Mary," there is a request to pray "for us ... at the hour of our death." Traditions of the immaculate conception support Mary's psychopomp status because, without sin, she tricks death and, by doing so, offers creative pathways for others. Such positioning supports her ability to "assume" direct access to heaven in both body and soul. It is a unique human status that does not require the forgiveness for sins that Jesus' salvation offers to access eternal life. The "Hail Mary" prayer accentuates Mary's psychopomp character as a mediator and imitator of the deities in the afterlife.<sup>52</sup>

Matthew's genealogy of Christ, in reality, is Joseph's genealogy. Holding a throne-list orientation aimed to justify Joseph with the title "King of the Jews,"<sup>53</sup> Matt. 1:16 is, however, unambiguous that Jesus is not the physical son of Joseph. Mary tricks the genealogy out of its assumed power in that her lack of power, status,

<sup>48</sup> On perpetual virginity, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Christ's birth did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity, but sanctified it," "and so ... the church celebrates Mary as *Aeipathenos*, the "Ever-virgin" (#499). Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of immaculate conception in 1854: "from the first moment of the conception... [Mary was] preserved immune from all stain of original sin" (#491). Following her death, Mary "was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven, where she already shares in the glory of her Son's Resurrection" (# 974). The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is celebrated by Catholics on August 15.

<sup>49</sup> The Council of Ephesus (431) and the second Council of Constantinople (553) explicitly worked on clearing up heresies and developing dogmatic standards on the status of Mary.

<sup>50</sup> From *psykhē* ("soul, mind, spirit) and *pompos* ("guide, conductor, escort, messenger").

<sup>51</sup> Such mythic characters are found in many cultures, as exemplified by Hermes, Artemis, Abubis and Horis (Egyptian), and in the Christian context, St. Peter at the gates of Heaven and the Archangel Michael.

<sup>52</sup> The fact that the Venerable Pius XII did not define that Mary died when he defined her bodily Assumption has been taken by many to mean that she did not die. As immaculate conception suggests she was sinless, there is a doctrinal argument that she did not need to die.

<sup>53</sup> See comparison with Luke's (3:23–38) genealogy offering a more "physical" family-tree line.

unknown bloodline and undefined family associations claims the power for the powerless, the oppressed and the “other.” As such, the queer silence of Mary and the Holy Spirit in Matthew’s account may speak for the power excluded and the completely alternative powers at play. Mary is not grafted onto the genealogy, but in partnership with a Holy Spirit, commandeers it (1:16) in a power coup d’état. Mary’s background, birth and family remain undefined and unknown, fitting Hynes’s observation that, as messengers and imitators of the gods, such trickster characters are “often of uncertain or impure birth” (1993, 39).

While controversy continues about Mary’s tricky status and titles as an epigone of Christ, at the time of her conception of Christ, she held a similarly tricky betwixt-and-between domestic status as Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:3). Mary’s “otherness” is as a village girl, the virgin daughter in her father’s house and the woman betrothed to Joseph; that is to say, her status is between households. Even though her relationship with Joseph is (supposedly) unconsummated, her betrothed status technically makes her his wife (cf. Deut. 20:7; 28:30; Jdg. 14:15; 15:1; 2 Sam. 3:14). Pregnancy outside of the betrothal renders her guilty of adultery and subject to the death penalty (Deut. 22:23–24). Both the initial stories of Bathsheba and Mary are from the perspective of men, King David and Joseph, who also hold power to uphold her technical adultery and the death penalty. Bathsheba and Mary, as situation-invertors, emerge from their enforced narrative cloaks to subvert the submissive, docile and passive roles their culture assigns them to become the true kingmakers. If status change is a sign of a trickster character’s success, as Brown (1993) suggests, then Mary’s status elevation from technical adulteress betwixt and between households to the Mother of a G-D/man certainly beats Bathsheba’s elevation to that of wife and Mother of a king.

Trickster characters are plot players riding a wild kind of universal recreative energy that eludes the forces that might constrain it. As visionaries of uncontrollable possibility outside of the normative, they stump established systems of understanding, forcing them to expand or be rendered obsolete. Christian orthodoxy struggles with the tricky, unnatural and unholy crossing of boundaries that has a deity impregnating Mary. Instead, resisting the messy human realities of sexuality and conception, Mary is elevated to a pseudo-divine status, de-sexed and stripped of her human qualities and personality through two millennia of institutionally managed dogma and doctrine. Nevertheless, the reality of conception is that it is an actual, physical and intimate fleshy event. Denial of Mary’s humanity and the intimacy of her womb is a denial of the reality of life and the humanity of Christ.

Bathsheba is silent in her taking (“they took her”) and impregnation at David’s hands (2 Sam. 11:4). Likewise, Mary and the Holy Spirit are silent tricky characters in Matthew’s account (Matt. 1:18). A queer and feminist hermeneutic notes Mary’s silence and the power dynamics and imbalances in place. It is tempting to counter Mary’s and the Holy Spirit’s silence in the Matthean account with Luke’s poetic detailing through the conflation of materials from the two gospel accounts. However, scholars argue that the versions developed independently (Bellinzoni 2016, 325; Foxwell and Mann 1971, 6).<sup>54</sup> Joseph’s perspective is the basis of the scene involving Mary and the Holy Spirit. In noting the viewpoint (and cultural

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<sup>54</sup> Bellinzoni undertakes a detailed comparison of the birth stories in Matthew and Luke, arguing it “reveals their independent character and, hence, the fact that they used different sources” (2016, 325). My article approaches the Matthean text as a stand-alone account.



forces) narrating the scene, there can be a reimagining of critical voices, actions and issues in ways that reconceptualise this scene for a whole new generation and cultural position (Bohache 2006, 495).

Approaching the scene within Susan Nidetch's morphology might layer Mary's tricky plotline as follows:

1. **The problem** is to conceive a G-D/man while maintaining the divine order and the laws of nature.
2. **The plan** involves a sexless, genderless impregnation, a queer parental threesome, and the de-sexing and dehumanising of Mary that allows her to maintain a tricky place with the deities and her silence.
3. **The execution of the plan** involves Mary conceiving a child through/by the Holy Spirit and, to avoid issues of a pregnancy outside of marriage, requires Joseph to marry her.
4. **The complications.** The physical trickiness of sex and sexuality in human-divine conception, e.g., including the role of the Holy Spirit as the male equivalent of the union. The irrelevance of the genealogy in terms of justifying Joseph.
5. **The outcome** is successful in having a G-D/child (Jesus) conceived, both incarnated G-D and inheritor of the messianic title. Mary's status elevates to the Mother of a G-D.
6. **Failures** include the "in-conceivable" nature of the human-divine conception, that is, how it works on a human level—the tricky, ongoing controversial status of a Θεοτόκος, Mother of a god/man. The loss of Mary's humanity through statuses that include her sinless birth and perpetual virginity.

As a religious, cultural and social transformer, Mary navigates a tricky role as a message bearer and living mediator between the profane and divine while holding a position as the wife of Joseph. The "execution of the plan" plot point in this narrative is where Mary's tricky character crosses divine-human boundaries. This part of the plot occurs within the sparse textual details of Matt. 1:18–25, which contains Mary's betrothal, the conception and Joseph's deliberation on divorce (vv. 18–19); the appearance of an angel in a dream directing him to marry Mary (v. 20); the naming of the child (vv. 21–23); and Joseph taking Mary as his wife before he has sex with her (vv. 24–25).

In the context of the thirty-nine instances of the use of the word ἐγέννησεν in Matt. 1:1–16, it relentlessly implies men begetting children. In addition, this is a begetting of a privileged male child as an expression of particular meanings and power settings. The surprising inclusion of four previous women of uncertain and awkward status brings a jolting "otherness" to the genealogy. This article posits that their tricky characters and "otherness" prepare for the flipping of a genealogy whose purpose is to manage kingship's political power to the powerlessness and "otherness" of Mary, who is of unknown family connections, and The Holy Spirit, who is representative of an alternative, ultimate power positioning.

In Matt. 1:16, concerning Mary, the writer uses a relative pronoun ἧς ("out of whom was born Jesus"); ἧς holds other senses, including *that, what, which, whoever* and "*other.*" If the point of Matt. 1:1–16 is to justify Joseph's kingship pedigree, ἧς

marks the point when Mary queers the genealogy. The word queers the genealogy for “other,” “others” and “otherness.” Its smallness belies its openness to all sexes and sexualities, the *whoever* of the judged, the objectified and the powerless, including those *who* are of differing sex and sexual orientation, and none. In this respect, the traditions that de-sex Mary stay true to this theme. These sex and sexual statuses are relevant to the undefinable nature of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit and Mary find their queer place as “other,” with the latter shapeshifting through traditions of perpetual virginity to have her womb refashioned to manage away the awkwardness of divine-human sexual intermingling.

Deldon McNeely, in *Mercury Rising: Women, Evil, and the Trickster Gods*, considers Jesus a trickster through his ability to span and mediate the lower and high worlds (2011, 162). Breaking borders through his tricky incarnation, Jesus is the great boundary crosser of the bestial and the mystical, opening pathways from the “contemptible *prima materia*, to the pearl of great price” (162). Mary’s conception of Jesus through the Holy Spirit is a pivotal queer moment in disrupting the Matthaean genealogy’s normative power chain to the anomalous power of “other.” Not only does it usurp the essence and power meanings of the entire genealogy but, in the opening of Mary’s womb to the queer intimacy of divine impregnation, it releases creative possibility for entrance into Jesus’ mysterious βασιλεία.

In his American Academy of Religion 1995 presentation of Jesus and Mary as archetypal tricksters, Donald Blais identifies motifs of shared human and divine dimensions, the flouting of cultural mores, and shapeshifting abilities.<sup>55</sup> Mary must negotiate the tricky human and divine dimensions of her pregnancy, stepping through cultural norms relating to pregnancy and avoiding the “contemptible *prima materia*” through the shapeshifting abilities of her perpetual virginity. These archetypal trickster skills associated with crossing thresholds between the divine and mundane have echoes of Guibert of Nogent’s (d, 1124) descriptions of a “*super omnes creatura*: a unique and perfect status, above all creatures.”<sup>56</sup> It references Mary’s unique status as mediator and imitator of the gods, a queer place betwixt and between gods and humans.

Mary’s “otherness” trips up Matthew’s genealogy in its final step. In doing so, Mary, as a young village girl, tricks the flow of kingship power from its expected course. In the same preposition ἐξ (Gk: “out of, from”) that introduces the other women, taboos of divine/human intermingling are troubled, and the human-divine order is queered. Mary’s “out of whom” hijacks the notion of the assumed “right” of one privileged power associated with the genealogy in a way that has transformed cultures ever since.<sup>57</sup> Through the mysterious intermingling of the divine and the mundane in the darkness of Mary’s womb, traditions develop that her “continued intercession brings the gifts of eternal salvation” (Catechism, 277). Various tricky titles get attributed to her that include “Mother of humanity, Co-redemptrix,

<sup>55</sup> Jesus changes his form during the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-9) and after his resurrection when he was thought to be a groundskeeper (John 20:15), a stranger on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:15-16) and a ghost (Luke 24:37).

<sup>56</sup> From expressions of Guibert of Nogent (d, 1124) in *Liber de laude sanctae Mariae*, PL 156: 537–78 (537b).

<sup>57</sup> With salience to the Christian doctrine of salvation, Hynes argues that, because it is the trickster who breaks the divine-human admixing taboo while conveying the benefits of this to humans, punishments are deflected from humanity and cosmic boundaries are preserved (1993, 40).

Mediatix, and Advocate for the human race” (Assemani 1746, 525, 528–29, 532; Maunder 2019, 315).<sup>58</sup> The last title confirms her tricky trait as an imitator to the deities; παράκλητον (John 14:16), commonly translated as “Advocate” (e.g., NET, NIV), is also used as a title of the Holy Spirit.

Mary’s appearance in the genealogy signals the step into the unnatural, abnormal and queer based on the tricky impregnation by a G-D through unknown and unexplained sex and means. Blais considers Mary a trickster figure within a “juxtaposition of incongruities” as in “virgin-mother” and at once both “creature and Mother of God, Handmaid and Spouse of God” (1995, 10, original emphasis). Many LGBTQI+ people, defined by their sex and the sexuality of “other,” find particular resonance with the queer nature of Jesus’ conception within the mystery of the incarnation. In usurping the genealogy of powerful men, Mary’s status moves from village girl between households based on the patronage of men to the Theotokos and Queen of Heaven.

Finally, McNeely considers one of the prime trickster attributes of Jesus to out-trick death and the devil (2011, 170). Scripture suggests that both Enoch (Gen. 5:25)<sup>59</sup> and Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:11)<sup>60</sup> tricked death as humans, entering heaven without dying. It is a lead Mary follows, tricking death and decay through queer traditions and doctrines promoting the ultimate trick of a death/life assumption into heaven, body and soul. Mary tricks the boundary between the divine and mundane as Theotokos embodying the trait of message-bearer of G-D. As traditions struggle to manage her tricky nature, doctrine and dogma develop her backstory, assigning her titles and roles as a mediator of the divine. Other traditions of immaculate conception with queer outcomes of human impeccability suggest Mary out-tricks death by dying sinless. It is the tricky trait of the imitator of the gods.

## Conclusion: Towards Understanding Meaning

### Establishing trickster credentials

The first turn in reappraising the purpose and meaning of Matt. 1:1–18 was to establish the trickster credentials of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary—the five women referenced within the context of Matthew’s genealogy of Christ. An initial step assigned each woman one trait from Hynes’s heuristic trickster character guide (1993). A second step to further cement their trickster credentials was to deconstruct a core section of their story, identified within Niditch’s trickster plot typology, and reflect on how the trait actively “played out” within a narrative trickster plan.

Establishing characters within the trickster genre is not an exacting science, as not all such traits are present in each character. Nevertheless, by demonstrating an identified trait within a decisive section of each woman’s story and by speaking of commonalities between the women, “it is possible to speak, albeit carefully, of the

<sup>58</sup> Referencing Saint Ephraem (306–373): “With the Mediator, you are the Mediatix of the entire world.” A 2008 letter sent by five cardinals to worldwide prelates asked them to join in a petition of Pope Benedict XVI to declare a fifth Marian dogma proclaiming Mary as “Mother of humanity, Co-redemptrix, Mediatix, and Advocate for the human race.” Judged too tricky, it did not succeed.

<sup>59</sup> “Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away” (Gen. 5:25, NIV).

<sup>60</sup> “Suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind” (2 Kgs. 2:11, NIV).

women as ‘trickster figures’” (Hynes 1993, 203). The trickster traits used were deviancy, trick-playing, shapeshifting, and situation inversion, along with message bearer, mediator and imitator of the deities. In a final turn, a queer hermeneutic assisted in identifying commonalities of character between women and recontextualised their tricky “otherness” for other generations and cultures.

Previous approaches have considered meaning through commonalities of categories such as the women’s “sin,” ethnic background, and the “irregular” nature of their relationships. However, such groupings are problematic for all five women and require a “leap of faith” to place narrative purpose and meaning. As five women in a patriarchal first-century Palestinian genealogy, this study’s approach unites such categories with the trickster type and affiliations to “otherness.” In achieving the high status of appearing amidst the patriarchs in the genealogy of Christ, all five women trick the constraining forces of their “otherness.” As a genre, the power of the trickster character is to open up creative and imaginative possibilities that support “a wholly different kind of world” (Cox 1969, 3). It is an approach relevant to the purposes of an author promoting Christ as the ultimate “Other” and the inaugurator of the new order, Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ.

In concluding comments on the trickster’s antics, William Hynes highlights the threatening “otherness” of such characters in the social consciousness (1993, 214). Trickster characters hold agency as creators and destroyers, revolutionaries and saviours; in threatening the established social order (214), they stimulate visions of societal, cultural and religious reform. With reference to the five women in the genesis of Christ, Hynes considers that the trickster character holds closer affiliation to “the inchoate power of creativity” than the ordered social constructs that seek to manage and express it (214). Furthermore, citing Adolf von Harnack’s *What is Christianity*, Hynes suggests this is the same site of religious progression (214; Harnack [1900] 1957, 197).

As tricksters, these women “counter, upend and loosen” (Hynes 1993, 202) adherence to systems that enforce one dominant paradigm of constitutive value. Que(e)rying is the activity of calling out the webs and chains of the enforcement of one dominant privileged “normal” within assumptions of “right” and “truth.” Thus, the troubling, subversive and transgressive figures of the five women tricksters partner well the queer hermeneutic in resisting and disrupting normalising interpretations. In the context of Matthew’s genealogy, these tricky women are a liberating force in the development and purpose of the person of Jesus. Queer people relate to the characters and lives of the five tricky women because both hold a commonality of “other.” The women and their stories are an embodiment of the courageous spirit of *parrhēsia* within the genesis of Christ, as they queer the structure of its assumed power and male begetting through characters that “speak frankly” and “speak truthfully” to the issues of “other.”

Queer and feminist readings of tricksters recognise their “otherness” and their creative engagement with the forbidden, out-of-the-ordinary, transgressive and unorthodox. Trickster characters hold attention and entertain with *out-rageous* behaviour. A queer reading relates well to Hynes’s trickster traits (1993, 34) because all such qualities represent a positionality and associated strategies of manoeuvrability beyond the norm. In particular, “anomalous” (a-nomos viz. without normativity) and “deviancy” traits hold deep resonance with queer people, who most often find themselves defined by what they are not. Using familiar queer

language, Hynes even suggests the trickster is an “out” person, in that their activities are often “*outrawish, outlandish, out-of-bounds and out-of-order*” (1993, 34; emphasis added). By behaving so, these five tricky women join a refreshing genre that, in troubling the normative, suggests “any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective” (1993, 212, citing Douglas 1965, 365).

In aligning a trickster trait within the trickster plot, and its genre typology, this study prudently posits that the five women who appear in Matt. 1:1–18 identify well as cross-cultural and multiform trickster figures. The five women as trickster characters bring their “otherness” to the genealogy of Jesus Christ, providing an intriguing introduction to Christ’s “Otherness.”

### **In responding to why these specific women appear in the genealogy**

As tricksters, the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary begin within a climate of distress and risk. The “otherness” of the five women occurs within the intersectionality of several factors that include sex, gender limitations, marital status, lack of a male patron, childlessness, widowhood, ethnicity, economic risk, irregular relationships, perilous ethics that include “sinfulness” with possible judgement, and—essential for the socio-cultural milieu of their times—transitioning and vulnerable domestic-social status. All women risk potential accusations of various social and sexual misconduct, which could lead to their punishment, even their death.

In his conclusion of Tamar’s story in Genesis 38, Westermann highlights a factor that holds relevance on why these specific women appear, as opposed to other worthy women from the biblical corpus. Genesis 38 does not hold a trace of Tamar imploring God’s help, nor once does she ask to be rescued from her distress by God’s intervention (Westermann 1996, 56).<sup>61</sup> Neither does Rahab, Bathsheba, Ruth, or Matthew’s Mary plead for divine intervention to deal with their dilemmas; instead, they seize opportunity and initiative (as tricksters do) to create their outcomes and achieve high status. In Mary’s case, she seizes the genealogy, tricking it out of its claims to male patriarchal kingship to claim her eventual status as “Queen of Heaven.” It is a tricky takeover that, in the context of her dual role as Spouse of the Trinity and Theotokos, can “supplant even G-D” and renders her “the trickster *par excellence*” (Blais 1995, 11, original emphasis).

### **A final comment—the que(e)rying of winners as losers.**

Are any of the five women “winners?” In her feminist analysis of Tamar as a trickster, Chan (2015) concludes that she is not the winner in her story. For instance, Tamar’s tricksterish behaviour arises directly from her being trapped in a patriarchal world, facing various exigencies that could diminish or even destroy her. By having Judah’s twin boys, she supplies what he and the system requirements to continue. Having been captured by the net of a patriarchal first-century genealogy to support a high-status male messiah, one could suggest that these women continue to face discrimination and oppression (100).

All the women succeed in escaping the confines of their statuses in the world. However, traditions, the enforcers of the status quo, stifle the creative nature of their stories by bringing them back into the normative fold. For example, Rahab, the

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<sup>61</sup> Westermann argues that the story of Tamar appears to be a secular story.

courageous Canaanite prostitute, becomes an “important exemplar in rabbinic conversionary literature” (Baskin 1979, 147). Despite no textual evidence of her marrying Joshua or Salmon or giving up her trade, traditions idealise her as a righteous proselyte (Baskin 1979, 143, 147, 151).<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, applying a queer lens to Hynes’s trickster traits (deviancy, trick-playing, shapeshifting, situation inversion and imitating the divine) has allowed me to focus on these five women’s “otherness” and their struggles against heteropatriarchy and the laws, customs and forces that manage it. They demonstrate that Jesus is not a product of androcentric and patriarchal power structures but is “begotten” from women’s achievements against these same structures. All five of these trickster women offer a specific nexus to Jesus Christ, the ultimate “trickster,” who inherited from his foremothers their capacity to embody the creative power of “other.” It suggests that the writer of Matthew’s genealogy may be one of our earliest feminist and queer theologians (Jackson 2002, 46).

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<sup>62</sup> The basis of rabbis holding Rahab as an idealised proselyte is due to her praise of Israel’s Lord in Josh 2:11.

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