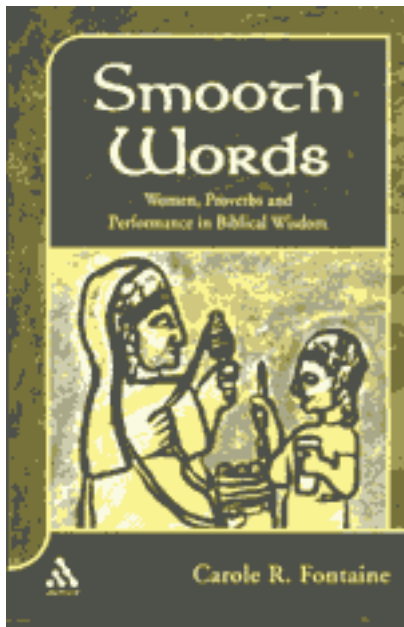


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Fontaine, Carole R.

Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom

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Carole Fontaine opens this feminist study of women's connections to the wisdom tradition with the cry "*Viva la Resistance!*" Centered on women in the book of Proverbs and richly informed by other biblical texts, related textual and material evidence from the ancient Near East, and postbiblical resources, the goal of her work is to move beyond the constraints of the male sages' portrayals of women and to explore how ancient women were practitioners and performers of wisdom.

Fontaine first considers social roles of real women and certain goddess mythologies that may have contributed to the male sages' representations of women in Proverbs. With regard to social roles, she divides her analysis into the private and public domains and, within each domain, considers women's roles as either positive or negative, depending on how the sages portray them. In the private domain, positive roles include the wife, mother, and so-called "household sage" (i.e., manager, teacher, counselor, maid, healer, mourner); the negative counterparts are the scolding wife/mother, widow, adulteress, prostitute, and uppity slave. Fontaine notes that mention of daughters and sisters is notably rare, perhaps due to their liminal social status. As for the public domain, Fontaine takes her cue no longer from roles explicitly ascribed to women in Proverbs but from those suggested by other biblical and extrabiblical texts and by material evidence. Such

roles, she posits, similarly informed the sages' representations of women. Positive public roles consist of authors (written *and* oral), "official" sages, counselors, midwives and healers, professional mourners, and the alewife; the corresponding negative role she discusses is the witch.

Fontaine then turns to the cosmic domain of ancient Near Eastern goddess mythologies that she argues contributed to the sages' descriptions of personified Wisdom and the Strange Woman. These cosmic figures were, so to speak, "in the air" of the sages' context(s): they "existed in the oral world of storytellers, glyptic and monumental art, as well as the literary imagination of the scribes" (100). With a nod to the already extensive scholarship on purported mythological precursors to Wisdom and the Strange Woman (e.g., MaPat, Isis, Inanna, Ishtar, Asherah, Anat, Lilith), Fontaine focuses her comments largely on the character traits and actions ascribed to each. She concludes that the combination of disparate elements within the "cosmic twins" Wisdom and the Strange Woman, namely, the social roles of real women *and* goddess mythologies, enables them to "stray so freely from private to public to cosmic venues and back again" (149).

Second, Fontaine draws on folklore studies to consider the role of gender in proverb performance, particularly ancient women's verbal use of proverbs. Fontaine acknowledges that the nature of available materials hampers such a study (e.g., there is no anthropological record of verbal interactions, most of the texts are male-authored and products of the literary "elite"); therefore, she argues, "we must take our evidence where we find it, and occasionally, even the gaps and silences will be counted as a proverbial 'word' spoken by women of the past" (152). Fontaine describes a proverb's "performance arena," two key elements of which are a situation of conflict and disparity in status (even momentarily) between the speaker and listener(s). She then examines evidence for women in that arena, referring to extrabiblical (i.e., the Egyptian Westcar Papyrus [P. Berlin 3033], a letter from Mari [ARM X 80], and a ritual text of Hittite "Old Women") and biblical texts (e.g., 2 Sam 14; 20) and a midrashic reading of Prov 31:1–9 as instruction by Bathsheba to Solomon (cf. *The Book of Legends [Sefer HaAggadah]: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* [ed. H. N. Bialik and Y. H. Ravnitsky], 126). Mention in the latter of Bithiah, daughter of Pharaoh, leads Fontaine to an extended discussion of the interpretive history of Solomon's "greatest and strangest love," the Queen of Sheba. Fontaine concludes that ancient women were "authorized performers" of proverbs, expected to know and perform the genre competently. "Perhaps we cannot say that [women] were producers of wisdom texts, but they were, of necessity, producers of *meanings* for those texts when used in an oral setting" (271; emphasis original).

Finally, Fontaine presents “The Wisdom of Newtons,” a collection of instructions she and her students at Andover Newton Theological School composed that imagine lost female voices of the wisdom tradition. “Wisdom and her teachings are not exhausted by either time or the gendered preferences of ancient authors responsible for the book of Proverbs,” Fontaine insists (242). So the Newton wisdom, which employs wisdom genres and is organized generally according to the structure of Proverbs, addresses such perpetual and contemporary issues as the value of wisdom, the upbringing of children, and how to navigate successfully through seminary. In addition to delightful reading, the chapter offers a pedagogical possibility for teachers of the wisdom literature. Fontaine then concludes with a brief summary of the book as a whole.

This volume is a compelling, eminently readable mosaic crafted from ancient texts, material culture, contemporary parallels, and illustrated throughout by Fontaine. Given the difficulties of recovering “women’s history,” its methodological scope is intentionally broad, as Fontaine signals upfront (“testing the limits of method and the method of limits” [5]). Understandable as this is, the latitude Fontaine assumes does occasionally seem excessive. In her analysis of “proverb performance” in 2 Sam 17, for instance, Fontaine identifies *all* of the metaphors (e.g., “as the sand by the sea” [v. 11]; “as dew falls on the ground” [v. 12]) as “proverbial phrases” (196) and “proverbial references” (197). Such an assertion pushes genre definitions that Fontaine has herself made elsewhere (e.g., 165–66), blurring any distinctions between proverbs and other forms of conventional speech. Further, whereas one expects the use of evidence from across centuries (indeed, millennia) to reconstruct the social roles of women will largely discount diachronic differences in the evidence and women’s realities, it is striking that Fontaine argues for the relevance of medieval images from Jewish texts (267) but refers only rarely to evidence for women’s roles in the postexilic period—the period to which, as she notes, the editing of Proverbs is frequently assigned (24, cf. 41). Such a disparity seems odd given Fontaine’s conviction that social roles of real women informed the sages’ portraits of women, including those of personified Wisdom and the Strange Woman.

Such matters notwithstanding, Fontaine succeeds in guiding readers on a thought-provoking, detailed search for greater understanding of the representations of women and women’s participation in the wisdom tradition. This book is important for anyone interested in wisdom literature, feminist hermeneutics, and women in the Bible and ancient Near East.