

# Teaching Against the Patriarchy

## The Gender Gap in the Field of Medieval Jewish Intellectual History

Jennifer Seligman

Male scholarship has predominated in medieval Jewish intellectual history, the field in which I am pursuing a doctorate. Though women are gaining more positions in the field of Medieval Jewish Studies, and thus we can look forward to increasing women's scholarship in this area, there is still a gap that needs closing. I believe this is due to the discrepancies in women's and men's Torah study still extant in Orthodox Judaism. Fluency in Talmud, Bible, Jewish law, and their medieval commentaries is required in order to study medieval Jewish intellectual history, and this fluency is usually obtained in the yeshiva system, where, despite much progress in women's Torah education, this study remains a primarily male pursuit. There is a "rabbinic knowledge gender gap," and I think it can be closed in academic Jewish Studies in the following manner:

Unlike Bible, Second Temple Judaism, Talmud, Jewish History, Holocaust, and Israel Studies, there is a lack of academic study of the talmudic and halakic commentaries and law codes of the medieval and early modern eras. Our understanding of this



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critically important literature would be greatly enhanced by applying academic approaches to its study. In addition, teaching this literature in the academic realm would provide greater access to women as well as those who do not have either an Orthodox or yeshiva background, as well as non-Jews. Practical ways to achieve this could be:

1. For a survey course on Ashkenazic medieval Jewish history, include short yet indicative examples of medieval rabbinic thought, in English translation: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, and Nahmanides on the Bible; Rashi and Tosafot on a brief passage of Talmud; and possibly an excerpt from Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* for contrast. This

need not take more than a week or two of lecture, and Bible and Second Temple Judaism/Talmud could be prerequisite courses if desired by the instructor and/or the department.

2. A seminar on medieval Jewish talmudic commentary and law designed for upper-division undergraduate as well as graduate students. All primary sources would be in English translation.
3. A graduate seminar (yet open to upper-division undergraduate students with the requisite language skills) on medieval Jewish talmudic commentary and law, with primary sources studied in the original medieval Rabbinic Hebrew.

I look forward to medieval Jewish intellectual history becoming an integral part of the study of Judaism and Jewish history, either as its own independent field or as part of the study of medieval and early modern Judaism. Moreover, even for those seeking to study other aspects of Jewish history, medieval Jewish intellectual history plays an important role, such as the study of the status of Jewish women in Jewish law and the development of Jewish law and Jewish observance up until the present day; it also provides ample sources for comparative work with medieval Christian Studies. It's a rich source of ore waiting to be mined.

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## Modern Jewish Thought and the Fratriarchy

Andrea Dara Cooper

In an issue devoted to patriarchy, I want to think about brotherhood. In *The Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida examines the brotherly nature of friendship and political community, arguing that any society based on fraternity is exclusionary. If communities are structured through "the economic, genealogical, ethnocentric, androcentric features of fraternity," then how can we begin to think beyond the fraternal? I propose that we examine the vertical problem of patriarchy through the horizontal sphere of fraternity in *Modern Jewish Thought*. Doing so will allow us to consider how the field has historically belonged to a "familial, fraternalist" configuration. More broadly, we will see that necessary critiques of patriarchy should be paying attention to the primary organizing principle of fraternity.

At the heart of Franz Rosenzweig's major work, *The Star of Redemption* (1921), lies an evocative reading of the Song of Songs. I am intrigued by Rosenzweig's compelling interpretation; while the Song of Songs is usually seen to focus on a heterosexual relationship between lovers, Rosenzweig homes in on the lovers' wish to become like siblings. But his reading is marked by fraternal tropes and the subsequent effacement of gender difference. He transposes the erotic energy in the Song from a celebration of difference to a longing for sameness. This transposition involves a move from revelation to communal redemption, as the erotic sphere is surpassed by neighborly "brotherliness." For

Rosenzweig, the anthropocentric and theocentric are not separable, and the language of brotherhood is not exclusive to one sphere or another. In his reading, the Song's lovers long to be united in societal fraternity. While this may suggest a neutrality of gender, it is only attained by eliding sibling difference. As the lover/beloved erotic plane is left behind, all become equal as brothers. Along the way to this shared kinship, the feminine is left behind and sexual difference becomes effaced. That all are united in the kingdom of brotherliness, the *Reich der Brüderlichkeit*, suggests that all are only equal insofar as all are masculine.

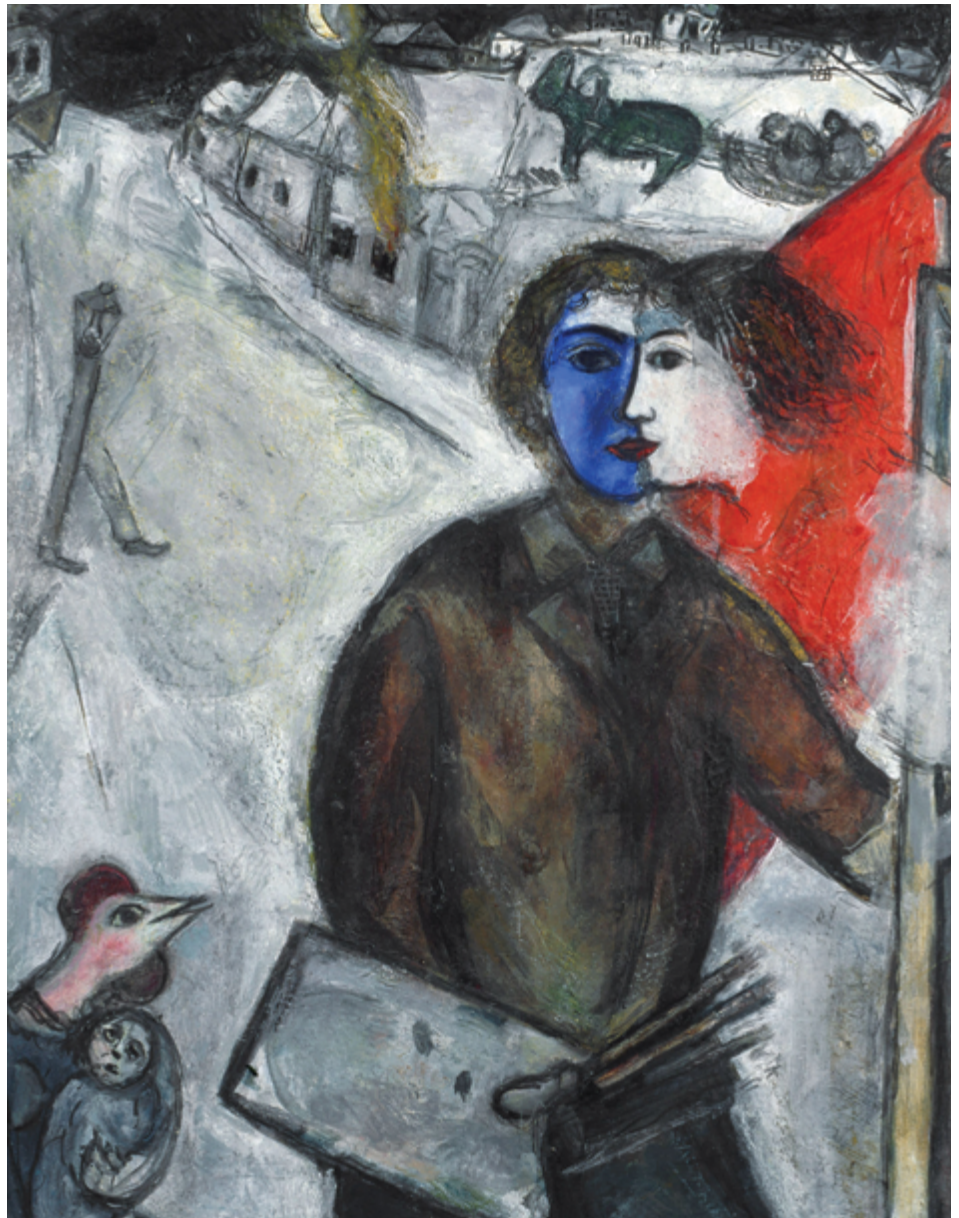
My reading is influenced by Elliot Wolfson's explanation of a fundamental motif in kabbalistic literature, in which the feminine becomes masculine in a reconstituted male androgyne: "In the ideal state, gender differentiation is neutralized and the female is absorbed back into the male." A similar transmutation takes place in Rosenzweig's reading of the Song, as all are united in brotherliness and attain equality under the bearing of the masculine. As Zachary Braiterman and Mara Benjamin have observed, Rosenzweig's version of intersubjectivity gives way to a homosocial community, a *Männerbund*. Here Jacques Derrida's critique of fraternity becomes particularly relevant: "The fratriarchy may include cousins and sisters but, as we will see, including may also come to mean neutralizing."

If we view patriarchy as a network of interconnected relationships, we can see how horizontal relationships make vertical power structures possible. In the classical politics of

friendship, brotherhood is crystalized in the communal bond. The ethical relation is figured as a friendship inseparable from fraternity—Platonic, free equals taking part in a homosocial bromance. Any relation of solidarity among nonbrothers is then only thinkable on the model of fraternization.

In my view, the model of brotherhood structures both the philosophy/theology of Rosenzweig and the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. In the move from the familial to the social level, society is construed as a relationship of brothers, in which every self is commanded to ethical relations with others because of this shared kinship. As Levinas writes in *Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence* (1974), “The other is from the first the brother of all the other men.” What happens when a celebration of difference is set aside in service of a unifying fraternal community? Brotherhood may appear to be an admirable ethical aim, but it requires dissolving the particularities of identity.

We should interrogate and make explicit the structural organizations that drive these philosophical approaches. In these works, fraternity functions on the level of both form and content—as a network of male thinkers who operate in relation to one another, and as a trope that shapes their methodologies. This coincidence is not accidental. How do these themes shore up ethical approaches that privilege the masculine? This is both a hermeneutical limitation and an



*Marc Chagall, Between Darkness and Light (Entre chien et loup), 1938–1943. Oil on paper mounted on canvas. 39 3/8 in. x 28 3/4 in. Private collection. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.*

ethical problem. What would the accepted canon of Modern Jewish Thought look like beyond, in Derrida’s words, “the homo-fraternal and phallogocentric schema” of the patriarchy—beyond the old male thinkers’ club? What questions and interpretations are overlooked?

How does this extend to our pedagogy—to the homogenous names on our syllabi? One could maintain that a syllabus on Jewish

Thought (or any area of Jewish Studies) should reflect the field; since this is how the field was historically constructed, this is how our syllabi should look. Instead, I suggest we critically examine our syllabi and the edited volumes from which we teach, exposing students to productive anachronistic and thematic frameworks that include overlooked methods. In a class on Spinoza, we might assign a contemporary essay on embodiment, or

alongside Levinas, an essay highlighting the blind spot of sexual difference.

Luce Irigaray and Derrida observe that Levinas's work is novel, even radical, because it is explicitly sexed male—unlike Heidegger's *Dasein*, or countless other works and concepts in the history of Western thought that presume to be unsexed and therefore underwrite a masculine norm. Taking a cue from Irigaray and Derrida, we can emphasize the positionality of the author rather than reflexively assigning them a normative neutrality. In doing so, we will reveal and disrupt power relations already at work in the texts we select. We can expand our notion of Jewish Thought to include alternate forms, affective networks, and nonsystematic, poetic, and epistolary sources: What other voices would be admitted if we accepted letter-writing, memoir, and testimony as accepted categories? A responsible and critical ethics of reading can lead to a more inclusive field of study. Once we start, we'll realize that it's not difficult to de-bro-ify our Jewish Thought syllabus/canon. But we have to start.

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## **"We Were Like Cancer Patients": Ruth Klüger's Still Alive and Patriarchal Silencing**

Matthew Brittingham

For professors and graduate students who do not specialize in the Holocaust, but are often called on to teach it, getting students to confront issues related to gender and the Holocaust can be challenging. There's a massive amount of material available to cover. And there's the broader tendency to generalize Holocaust experiences, a tendency to which our students and ourselves can certainly fall prey. From the historical perspective, Marion Kaplan's research on gender and German Jewry under the Nazi regime is standout work centered on women's experiences and women's voices in the midst of Nazi domination. But what about female survivors and the gendered silencing of their voices and their memories? The gendered politics of memory and vocalizing trauma is sometimes even harder for students to approach.

One way I bring the voices of female survivors to the classroom is through assigning Ruth Klüger's memoir *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (Feminist Press, 2001). In it, Klüger offers challenging perspectives on gender, patriarchy, and Holocaust memory. Klüger's memoir focuses on her often-difficult relationship with her mother, who suffered from mental health issues that were exacerbated by Nazi

terrors. Klüger charts their life together: post-Anschluss Vienna, various camp experiences, escape from a Nazi death march, hiding out and passing as non-Jews before the war's end, postwar European displacement, immigration to the United States, and living in the shadow of the Holocaust. From the very beginning of the memoir, Klüger places her Holocaust memories in the context of war memories in general, which tend to be particularly dismissive of the female voice and even silence women's trauma. For example, Klüger suggests that she is hardly ever asked about her experiences during the war, in part because "wars," she writes, "and hence the memories of wars, are owned by the male of the species.... Besides women have no past, or aren't supposed to have one. A man can have an interesting past, a woman only an indecent one. And my stories aren't even sexy" (18). As Klüger suggests here, the patriarchally inflected association of war stories with masculinity tends toward silencing female experiences during the war, including the rape of female prisoners, sexual assaults, risky pregnancies, and even abortion. In light of this quote, the very existence of her memoir—populated centrally by herself and her mother—is itself a challenge to male-dominant wartime perspectives that historically omitted female Holocaust survivors and their traumas.

Throughout the memoir, Klüger not only tells her own story, but resurrects such so-called "indecent



Ruth Klüger. Photo by Daniel Anderson / UC Irvine.

pasts." That is, beyond a Holocaust memoir, *Still Alive* is a broader challenge to World War II's patriarchal point of view, not only chauvinist, masculine glorifications of the war, but also facile divisions between who did or did not experience violence and trauma during the war. A poignant example is Klüger's resurrection of histories of rape at the hand of Soviet camp liberators. Far from being simply concentration camp liberators, Klüger "heard from Jewish women who were almost raped in their liberated camps.... Their stories strongly suggested that there were others who were unlucky, and who endured the trauma of rape as a kind of coda to their persecution by the Nazis" (159). The Soviet rape of Jewish women was certainly not the first instance of sexual violence committed against female Jewish prisoners, but it is indeed a story of traumas that complicate our often-simplistic notions of being "liberated." Of course, before "liberation," aside from the everyday terrors of camp life, laws and regula-

tions related to *Rassenschande* ("race defilement," i.e., sex between so-called "Aryans" and supposed racial "inferiors," especially Jews) did not stop Nazis soldiers and guards from raping Jewish women under their control, and a total number of victims will never be known. After the war, it was difficult to talk about rape at the hands of the Soviets or the Nazis, as victims of rape still lived in a wider world of gender norms that elevated men's narratives, might shame rape victims, and made conversations about sexual violence taboo.

Klüger also refers to the Soviet gang rape of German women, an act of revenge often understood by "the patriarchal point of view" as "not necessarily just" but certainly "understandable," rather than as abhorrently traumatic sexual violence regardless of their being German (159). In postwar Germany, as Klüger notes, the trauma experienced by these victims of rape was hidden because of its associated

dishonor and shame (much like the Korean "comfort women" who struggled with testifying about their experiences as sex slaves until only the last several decades, partly due to Korean cultural stigmas). She states this very powerfully: "An act of violence that dishonors its victim will not bring her attention, let alone sympathy. Language favors the male, by putting the shame of the victim into the service of the victimizer" (ibid.). My students often have to wrestle with this "chronicle of German women as victims" (ibid.).

One of the most complex and emotionally challenging passages for my students usually emerges from Klüger's life in America. Klüger eventually marries a former American serviceman who served in the European theater and later became a teacher of European history. When her husband's history course reached Hitler and the Nazi regime, Klüger offered to discuss the concentration camps with his class, only to have the proposition flatly

rejected. Wondering why, she suggests that her story probably appeared to him as “something improper that reflected poorly on his honor as a decorated veteran who had fought evil” (182-83). Instead, Holocaust survivors “were like cancer patients who remind the unafflicted that they too, are mortal” (183). Klüger uses this episode to reflect on another instance of silencing, only this time one much more explicitly intersecting gender and war memories. While at a dinner party with her husband’s friends, Klüger listens to a former WWII pilot recount a war story where he hunted and pinned down a German soldier. After a considerable period of time without being quite able to finish him, the former pilot “admiring and laughing at his prey ... cheerfully waved to the man with the wings of his plane” (ibid.). Klüger speaks up: perhaps the German soldier did not realize in that moment that he was part of some war game, but rather he was experiencing “the terror of death” (ibid.). Thus, the act of having “cheerfully waved”—a signal to war “gamesmanship”—was probably meaningless to the German soldier. Klüger’s challenge is silenced: “In the end, my husband’s friend is irritated and taken aback by my words. He isn’t prepared for serious objections to his merry memories. I realize that women are tolerated in these circles only when they keep their mouths shut” (ibid.). In this gendered, buddy-buddy moment, Klüger is not counted as a participant. Why not? She experienced the war, after all. As she sees it, her

Holocaust experience seems to render her outside the realm of acceptable memories of war, those memories owned by men. This is not to say that Klüger’s specific moment of being silenced was some kind of universally shared experience among women, or that men universally participated in such buddy-buddy moments of war gamesmanship either. Rather, what Klüger’s voice does provide is a door “in”—a means of discussing specific instances of silencing that connect to broader scholarly works on memory, testimony, and the Holocaust, such as that of Anne Reading (*The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust: Gender, Culture and Memory*, Palgrave, 2002).

What I can say from observations of classroom discussions is that Klüger’s memoir constantly subverts students’ expectations, most startlingly on the patriarchal silencing of female experiences in World War II, the Holocaust, and postwar life. Indeed, based on my students’ end-of-year course assessments, the most commonly uncomfortable aspects of Klüger’s memoir is her commentary on gender and violence that I highlight above. It is precisely this discomfort with female silencing in light of patriarchal narratives with which I want my students to wrestle.

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## Disrupting Biblical Patriarchy in 280 Characters: Examining the Inherent Patriarchal Nature of 2 Samuel 11-12

Shayna Sheinfeld

The Hebrew Bible is patriarchal—predominantly produced and copied by and for men. One way that I disrupt the inherently patriarchal reading of the biblical narrative in my classroom is to focus on all the figures in the narrative, rather than just on the (male, privileged) protagonist. In this case study I explore how I disrupt the patriarchal narrative of 2 Samuel 11:1-12:25 using tweets.<sup>1</sup>

### Reading 2 Samuel 11-12

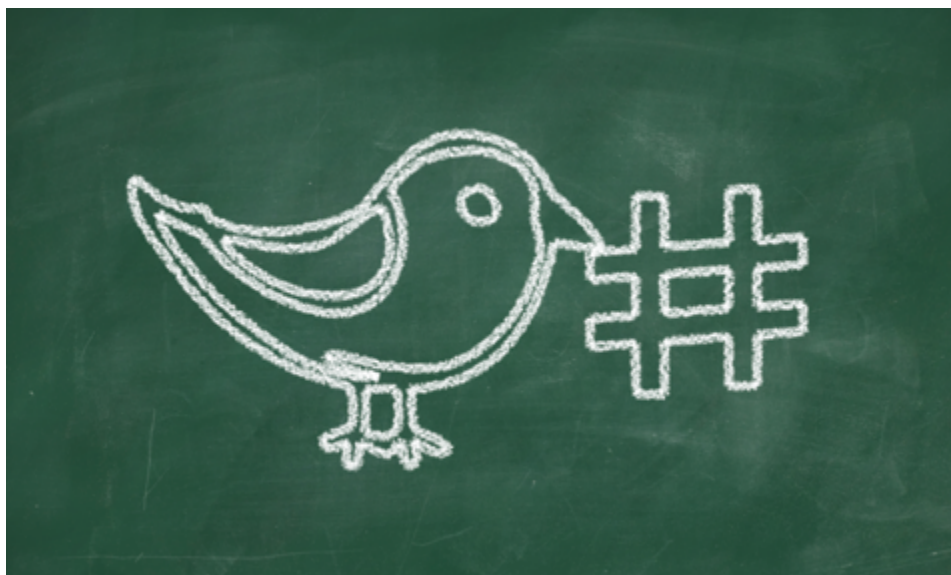
To review 2 Samuel 11-12 briefly, King David spies Batsheva bathing on a rooftop, has her brought to him, and has sex with her. Learning that she is pregnant with his child, David orders that her husband Uriah be brought back from the war so that he will have sex with her and Uriah will think the child is his. When Uriah refuses to have sex with his wife because his fellow countrymen are still at war, David sends him to the front lines, where he is killed, so that David can marry Batsheva (chapter 11). In chapter 12 Nathan confronts David on behalf of the Lord, David

accepts that he made a mistake and repents. For punishment from God, Batsheva and David's firstborn son dies, but she soon becomes pregnant again and gives birth to Solomon, who becomes the heir to the throne.

While students understand that how David treats Batsheva—spying on her while she is bathing, having sex with a married woman, attempting to trick and then kill her husband—violates today's standards, David's violations are retroactively justified through his repentance and the death of his firstborn son. David and Batsheva then go on to produce the next king of Israel. The text clearly portrays God as approving of the union despite David's actions. God's eventual approval suggests that the ends justify the means in this case, and that David's actions, while not condoned, are forgivable offenses. This reading supports a patriarchal lens and reinforces the misogynistic elements present throughout Tanakh.

### The Assignment

The Twitter assignment attempts to disrupt this underlying misogynistic and overtly patriarchal reading of the text by having students examine the actions and reactions of figures through a careful reading of the text, translated into a tweet—280 characters of contemporary language. I prepare index cards with the names of each of the characters and one of the two chapters (e.g., David - 11, Batsheva - 11, Uriah - 11, Nathan - 12, etc.). I mix these up and hand



them out randomly as students arrive to class. After some in-class analysis of the figure of David and the monarchy, we move to exploring 2 Samuel 11-12. I then explain the activity:

1. Together with their groupmates who have the matching index card, students are to read through the assigned chapter and discuss the main points of the narrative, focusing on the point of view of their character.
2. Students then create a (fake) Twitter handle for their character as a way to assign voice to their character.
3. Students create four tweets (each tweet can be a maximum of 280 characters) from the point of view of their assigned character. They are to use contemporary language and standard Twitter features (e.g., hashtags, @, images, quoting/ commenting on other tweets, etc.). They may create a new tweet, develop it as part of a thread, or in response to a particular tweet.
4. Finished tweets are written on the board and discussed as a class.

In addition, I also provide students with a sample tweet from 2 Samuel 6:12-23, from Michal's perspective, as an example:

@KingDavid Stop that dancing & get dressed #embarrassed #nekkid #showGodsomerespect

The activity itself does not need to take long; limiting the number of tweets to four means that students have to focus on the main points of the narrative for their assigned figures. Students need twenty minutes to read, develop their tweets, and write them on the board, and I allow ten minutes for discussion of the tweets and the activity afterwards.

### What This Activity Does

Using Twitter, students are able to engage in a (localized) social media discussion of the biblical narrative, which produces the potential for reading the narrative through a contemporary lens. Using contemporary language and Twitter also assists with removing the theological overtures that are often read into the narrative (e.g., "King David must be good because God chose David") in

order to produce thinkers who can also recognize the potential for harm that the text does in different settings to women and to other populations. As contemporary readers of the text, we are not unlike the “lurkers” on Twitter, who may read tweets, may periodically comment, but often are removed from “what’s at stake” in a discussion by dint of a screen.

Students are able to examine the narrative situation from the additional perspectives of (1) the silenced woman who has no control over what happens to her/her body, (2) her husband who is killed, and (3) the prophet Nathan who knows the extent of David’s misconduct. This activity helps students shift from accepting the biblical narrative in which David is tacitly exonerated at face value to thinking about the consequences of David’s actions on the people around him. This activity gives these minor characters voice as their agency is analyzed; likewise, students contend with the idea that the text has a (pro-David, promonarchical) agenda and that agenda silences those who do not support it, women most of all. Students hone their ability to approach the narrative through a critical lens, and to offer resistant readings that recognize that the character presented as God’s chosen king is problematic.

Sample students’ tweets from handle @Baesheva:<sup>ii</sup>

- → Who’s the #perv checking me out while I’m bathing?

- response to: @therealDavid  
Gonna get me some of that!  
#fullmoonrising #ispybatsheva

- @Uriah Please come home!  
#makelovenotwar
- Why did you kill my baby @God?  
#enoughdeath #ididntwanthhis

### Postactivity Discussion and Pedagogical Result

Following the chance for each group to read their tweets to the class, we discuss the activity as a class.

Students are usually insightful about the purpose of the activity. They point out that slowing down their reading to do this activity helps them recognize the inherently patriarchal perspective in the text; one student wrote on their evaluation, “The twitter activity was both the most fun and the most engaging activity we did in class. I hadn’t thought about the story in this way, but even though Batsheva seemed complicit in the text, it wasn’t a consensual relationship.” Another student announced at the beginning of the activity that she took my class because a friend of hers told her about “the tweeting thing with David and Batsheva.”

The activity helps the students recognize that just because a woman is present, and even named, does not mean the text gives her voice or agency. Perhaps most importantly, through this activity students recognize that the patriarchal nature of the biblical narrative is not harmless, even today, and that the

text and its audiences throughout history often encourage violence toward women and nonelites.

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i Note that I do not have the students tweet on the actual social media platform Twitter. Twitter is a valid pedagogy tool as well, although to use it productively it should be an all-semester investment. For more on using the platform Twitter during a semester-long course, see Megan P. Goodwin’s interview on Richard Newton’s blog, “#SyrRelBodies: US Religions and the Regulation of Bodies of Color,” April 24, 2017, <https://sowingtheseed.org/2017/04/24/syrrelbodies-us-religions-and-the-regulation-of-bodies-of-color/>.

ii Note that “bae,” an acronym meaning “before anyone else,” is an American colloquialism that refers to someone’s boyfriend/girlfriend”; this play on the name Batsheva with “Baesheva” was created intentionally by the students.