

Rahab, Comedy, and Feminist Interpretation

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Asking someone, "how do you define comedy?" will frequently elicit a response along the lines of, "I cannot give you a definition, but I know comedy when I see it". This indecisiveness among amateurs is mirrored by a lack of consensus even among professionals—scholars, specialists, and practitioners do not agree on a precise definition of comedy. However, while a simple and exact definition of "comedy" is not forthcoming, agreement does exist that various elements in various combinations contribute to the making of comedy. Nearly universal agreement says that comedy results from some experience of *incongruity*: one expects a certain action, behavior, or outcome, and instead one gets something that runs counter to this expectation.

What, then, could be more incongruous than the narrative recounted in Joshua [2](#)? Two Israelite spies, handpicked by the great leader [Joshua](#)—himself a previously successful [spy](#)—to scout out the city of [Jericho](#), are immediately discovered and thus find themselves in need of rescue by a [Canaanite](#) prostitute, who further extracts from these spies a promise for her safety when Jericho is conquered? No, [biblical humor](#) does not come as an ancient knock-knock joke or as a vignette that begins, "a [Danite](#), a [Reubenite](#), and a [Levite](#) went into a tent...". However, the [Hebrew Bible](#) is full of what can be recognized and experienced as "comedy", and Joshua [2](#), the narrative of two bumbling spies and the enemy prostitute who saves them, is one such comic episode. This story contains numerous [literary](#) features of comedy, such as comic characterization, comic plot structure, dialogue, [irony](#) and reversal, and hiddenness. It also reflects [psychological/social](#) features of comedy, including [sexuality](#) and a situational [ethic](#). All of these elements working together imbue with a comic spirit this very unusual "spy" story.

Comic characterization

Comedy is played largely by flat, stock characters who can often be simplified down to one word: [fool](#), clown, idiot, braggart, buffoon. Joshua [2](#) immediately introduces those who should be the story's heroes: two spies, chosen and sent by Joshua, a man with his own notable spy resume. However, before two verses have passed, the spies are uncovered, their buffoonery revealed to the reader, even as their presence is revealed to the [king](#) of Jericho. Buffoons from beginning to end, they are unable to complete their mission among their enemy without intervention from the one of those very enemies, and then they pilfer the words of that very same "enemy", claiming them as their own in their concluding reconnaissance report to Joshua.



The Harlot of Jericho and the Two Spies (oil on canvas), Tissot, James Jacques Joseph (1836–1902) / Jewish Museum, New York, USA / The Bridgeman Art Library.

The Israelite spies are not the only comic fools of the story. The king's messengers are buffoons of another sort, ones dispatched to expose subterfuge, yet who cannot recognize a traitor even when she is standing before them, spinning a lie. They compound their ineptitude, then, as they dash off in pursuit of the spies, conscientiously locking the gate securely against the threat that reportedly lies outside the city—thus locking that threat, lying hidden up on Rahab's roof, securely inside the city.

Playing the part opposite these comic "butts" is comedy's hero. However, true to comedy's incongruous nature, this hero is no hero. Enter [Rahab](#): a woman, a prostitute, a Canaanite. Rarely has baseball's three-strike metaphor been more apt. In the comic world, the hero is instead a "not hero", an antihero. Comedy's "not hero" sits precisely where Rahab sits, both in metaphor and in Jericho: on the margins of society. And without a traditional role or place in accepted society, comedy's "not hero" is denied access to the traditional and accepted weapons of society. Without access to power or status or

[weaponry](#), she prevails utilizing the weapons she does possess, weapons such as cunning, quick-thinking, creativity, even—when necessary to survive and prevail—her sexuality. Rahab triumphs with words, not swords; with her wits, not her fists.

Comic plot structure

The plot movement of comedy frequently reflects a U-shaped trajectory, a beginning point which quickly develops in a negative direction, a movement which is then arrested and reversed at its lowest point by a pivotal event, thus enabling an upward movement to a positive conclusion: comedy's nearly ubiquitous "happy ending". The plot of Joshua [2](#) begins, as does any good spy story, with the sending of agents on a secret mission. This mission is immediately jeopardized, however, as the presence of the spies is discovered, and a Canaanite counter-mission is launched to find them. Narratively, in this moment, the spies have arrived at their plot nadir. Rahab's intervention, then, is the trajectory-altering event, as she first hides the spies, then formulates the plan for their escape. The spies realize their "happy ending" as they stand intact again before Joshua back in the Israelite encampment. Yet, the happiest ending is reserved for Rahab herself, when she and her family are saved in Joshua [6](#), and the biblical author confirms, "She ("Her family", NRSV) has lived in Israel ever since" ([6:25b](#)).

Dialogue

Another of comedy's features is dialogue. The events of the plot are paused, as the back-and-forth between characters moves to the forefront of the action. In Rahab's first two exchanges, one with the king's messengers (vv. [3–5](#)) and one with the spies (vv. [8–14](#)), Rahab is bold and in control, securing the safety of the spies and herself, not only with her decisive actions, but equally with her well-uttered words. The third exchange (vv. [16–21](#)) seemingly then shows the spies finally taking the initiative in a story which should have been their story from the outset. However, even in their version of taking charge, adding last-second caveats to an already-negotiated pact, the spies reveal their inept nature.

They garner [courage](#) to speak only after they are no longer in imminent danger, having been let down from a window, but are still surely in a precarious situation standing (or possibly even dangling) just outside the city wall. Yet they deem this the suitable moment in which to converse with Rahab over further terms they wish to impose! Surely, less blundering "spies" would have had no other thought but to sprint for safety the very moment their feet touched solid ground.

Irony and reversal

Irony is not a device that belongs solely to the comic form. However, irony does contribute significantly to much that is comic. This irony can be simple and transparent: a character says one thing, while clearly intending another. However, comic irony can be more complex and subtle, involving some changing combination of storyteller, audience, and characters. Reversal is a device of comedy often so close in nature to irony as to be effectively the same comic tool. As already discussed, Rahab and the spies as characters are the reverse of expectation, and the comic U-shaped plot is built upon a reversal of events, which Rahab facilitates through hiding the spies and duping the king's messengers.

Dialogue, discussed above, provides two humorous ironies in Joshua [2](#). The first is when Rahab describes the Canaanites as being in heart-melting terror of the Israelites (vv. [9-11](#)). Yet, she is one who has demonstrated no fear of anyone, and furthermore she is speaking these words in the presence of two Israelites who certainly are capable of inspiring only the opposite of heart-melting terror.

Furthermore, even as Rahab declares the dread of her people, the reader is well aware, as should be the spies, that any fear in this story ought to be theirs of her, as she holds their fate delicately in her hands and in her words. A second irony of words concludes the events of Joshua [2](#). When the spies arrive back safely in camp, they offer Joshua a mission report, saying, "Truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands; moreover, all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before us" (v. [24](#)). If these words sound familiar, one has only to go back to verse [9](#) to hear the same words again, or rather to hear them as they were first uttered...by Rahab. The spies' "report" is lifted straight from the lips of a prostitute, acquired in the one location in Canaan they did reconnoiter.

Hiddenness

Hiddenness, as it contributes to comedy, includes hiddenness of knowledge, identity, motivation, circumstance, and plot developments, to list a sampling. Hiddenness is obviously an integral component in a spy tale. Or it should be. Thus hiddenness plays not a straightforward role, but instead a comically ironic role, in Joshua [2](#). Those whose assigned task it is to remain hidden are the ones revealed almost immediately, thus rendering them dependent on another to provide their needed concealment. Rahab first hides the spies on her roof, then hides the truth of her actions and the extent of her knowledge from the king's messengers (vv. [4-6](#)). Hiddenness is such a pivotal component in this story that three different words for "hide" are used in the narrative (vv. [4, 6, 16](#)), and the cumulative effect of this "hiding" is a success, as the pursuers are not able to "find" the spies (v. [22](#)).

Sexuality

Plainly stated, [sexuality](#) factors significantly in comedy. Comic elements, such as the previously discussed "not hero" and reversal, often contribute a sexual aspect to comedy. Numerous other elements can function with the same result, elements including a high tolerance for disorder and ambiguity, creative problem-solving, pragmatism over idealism, concern with bodily existence over intellectual pursuit, egalitarianism including sexual equality, and iconoclasm. These elements work together and in various combinations to create comic forms that freely use sexuality to aid comedy's presentation and its "punch". That the hero of Joshua [2](#) is a prostitute may discomfit some in the biblical audience. However, the reader alert to comic cues would probably expect this sort of twist and would certainly delight in it. Often, and often before all else, comic characters have physical needs that must be filled, and so in Joshua [2](#) the spies' first act of "viewing" the land is to "go in to" the house of the "prostitute" and "lie down there" (v. [1](#)). Yes, the activity here is only implied, but frequently a "wink, wink, nudge, nudge" is all that comedy requires.

Situational ethic

In comedy, what is "right" is whatever will address the situation "right now". Comedy's flexibility, flouting of authority, and emphasis on the immediate material realm lead to a comic ethic that is never

fixed, but instead is changeable, conforming to the demands of the situation at hand. Rahab is willing to act decisively, intervening to save the spies, and so, in that comic moment, an occupation that would otherwise be condemned goes without judgment.

The more significant application of a situational ethic in Joshua [2](#), however, is the promise vowed that Rahab and her family are to be saved when the Israelites enter Jericho as conquerors. "The ban", as it is frequently labeled, was God's command to the Israelites to destroy everything in the land (Deut. [7.1–6](#); [20.16–18](#)), a command stated in the unequivocal terms that "you must not let anything that breathes remain alive" (Deut. [20.16b](#)). Nevertheless, the Israelite spies, in order to relieve their present dire situation, make a promise that violates this explicit command. As comedy permits, Rahab's own willingness to be flexible in her commitment toward her people seems to engender a mirroring flexibility in the Israelites' commitment to a rigid application of the ban.

Thus far this article has focused on identifying various elements of comedy and where a reader might discover them in the biblical text, specifically, in this case, in Joshua [2](#). The list of various elements that contribute to creating and experiencing comedy is a long one. Those elements explored here are a small sampling of that longer list of elements and where and how they are found in the Hebrew Bible. The exploration in this article serves as a primer in how a reader can begin to uncover comedy throughout the Hebrew Bible. However, while the ability to "see" comedy in the Hebrew Bible is a critical first step, this first step is merely in aid of the next, and arguably the more important, step—deliberation upon the *purpose* of such comedy. Like any successful comedy, the comedy of the Hebrew Bible is not comedy for its own sake. It is comedy that intends to serve productive functions in society—this comedy points beyond itself to a wider meaning, purpose, and application.

Furthermore, deliberation upon the social functions of comedy moves this article to its critical next step: bringing comedy into conversation with [feminist-critical interpretation](#). At first glance, "comedy" and "feminist critique" may not present themselves as obvious partners. However, a longer look finds that the social functions of comedy overlap very significantly with the aims of feminist-critical interpretive strategies, and thus comedy can be a useful interpretive companion for feminist critique. Joshua [2](#) continues as the test case for this investigation, and three particular areas emerge in which the articulated objectives of feminist critique and the social functions of comedy correspond: engaging in subversion, enabling survival, and drawing boundaries.

Subversion

Subverting the established order, the established authorities, the established way of "doing things", is high on the agenda of [feminist critique](#)—seen readily, for example, in the practices of "reading against the grain" and adopting a "hermeneutic of suspicion". Feminist critique seeks, as one of its primary aims, to expose the patriarchal constructs of the biblical text. Comedy, however, has a more complex relationship to the status quo. Not all comedy means to be subversive; some of it is openly preservationist and pro-establishment. Nonetheless, comedy from its very beginnings was a socially permissible dissenting voice, and comedy is at its socially productive best when it challenges the structures and the agents of society, religion, and [government](#).

Even the most basic summary of Joshua [2](#)—a Canaanite prostitute rescues two Israelite spies, securing her own future rescue in the process—reveals the subversive tone of this narrative. Rahab, the one who is marginal in every identifiable way, subverts Canaanites and Israelites alike through a potent combination of her words and her actions. She unmasks the foolishness of the men she encounters and plays them all to her benefit. Yet, they are not mere men—they are soldiers, participating directly in the power structures of their respective people, ones who are in direct contact with the highest leaders of their respective people. That one so marginalized—woman, prostitute, Canaanite, residing at a literal boundary in the city wall—could so command a situation and its actors is the height of comedy's subversion. One could further argue that by exposing the folly of those with direct access to Joshua and the king of Jericho, she indirectly makes fools of them as well.

Rahab's brief "speech" (vv. [9–13](#)) to the spies is another subversive component of this narrative. Her profession of the deeds and the fear-inspiring nature of the god of these spies rings more of devout Israelite than resident Canaanite, and, therefore, her words undermine the Hebrew Bible's repeated insistence that the people of Canaan are [idol](#) worshippers who must be utterly destroyed, lest they pollute and pervert the Israelites. Rather than Rahab's words being those of a foreigner intent on undermining the Israelites before her, they are instead so exemplary that they become the source material for the spies' own report to Joshua.

Survival

Feminist-critical interpretive strategies have a particular interest in the survival of characters and voices overshadowed and overpowered in the text and by the text, to enable their survival both in the text itself and in the interpretive community's on-going readings of the text. Comedy also serves an important survivalist social function, one that shares with feminist critique a dual end of aiding survival in the comic world and as a result in the "real" world as well. First, comedy offers catharsis, a mental escape for those who are subjugated, vulnerable, endangered, marginalized. Comedy provides an opportunity for those so oppressed to stand outside the present reality and glimpse another world in which they and those like them are no longer subjugated, vulnerable, endangered, marginalized. In comedy, the underdog can prevail and survive, not merely by the skin of the teeth, but in a rather more spectacular fashion. Second, comedy also enables survival through offering a model of survival. The "not hero" survives again and again, extending the promise that survival need not be limited to the comic world. The "not hero" carries on and on. Third, following from the previous two, as comedy offers an escape into an inverted world and as it models on-going survival for those who find themselves embattled, comedy can also infuse the audience with courage, hope, and confidence that liberation in this present, actual existence, no matter how limited or ephemeral, is attainable. The "not hero" has carried on and on, so too the audience carries on and on. Comedy, in this way, weakens the grip of the controlling power, even if only temporarily. Threat made comic is threat rendered less potent.

The theme of survival in Joshua [2](#) needs no explication. Rahab engineers the survival of the spies, and, despite being in violation of the ban, the spies vow to ensure the survival of Rahab, and her family. When a woman such as Rahab prevails, survives, and goes on to ensure the survival of others, she reveals a different reality in which prostitutes are at the center of the story, not banished to the edge of

the city. She demonstrates for the audience what a "not hero" can achieve. And, through her improbable survival in the story, she offers a model and a hope for survival in the "real world", no matter the improbability of that survival.

The narrative of Joshua [2](#) along with the Hebrew Bible's other numerous stories of survival against the odds would surely be a source of escape, enjoyment, and inspiration for a people who often found themselves trying to survive under the thumb of foreign rule. Throughout these times, the Israelites in story and in reality exhibited a determination to survive. Comedy aids that determination. And a comic sensibility, in the hands of feminist interpretation, can continue to aid survival. Feminist critique highlights the fate of numerous biblical women who make a permanent exit from the text once their particular role or task in the story is complete. Rahab, however, does not suffer this same end. Rahab's story—and it is unmistakably Rahab's story—is preserved in perpetuity in the Hebrew Bible. Reading this story through the lens of comedy aids feminist critique in providing another way through which Rahab survives, as her story is told and heard yet again.

Drawing Boundaries

Comedy must have its "butt", so one of the fundamental features of comedy is drawing boundaries, dividing people into categories of "us" and "them", those on the inside of the humor and those on the outside of it, comedy's subject and object. The boundaries drawn by comedy help to establish "our" identity and to strengthen "our" community, and comedy derives much of its power to subvert "them" and to survive "them" by drawing and drawing upon these distinct dividing lines.

Feminist critique, however, is wary of these boundaries, because frequently in the biblical text the boundary is drawn between women and men, and women are cast across the self/other, us/them boundary as the "other": object, not subject. When males draw the line—male characters, male authors, male redactors, male readers, male interpreters—they determine who is on either side of it.

Women are objectified in and by the text, and they are denied the power of self-determination.

Therefore, with a central goal being that every woman becomes a subject, feminist critique would seek to interfere with established boundary markers between "us" and "them".

The narrative of Joshua [2](#) reflects one of the most significant us/them divisions in the Hebrew Bible: the Israelites and the Canaanites. Even when the literal boundary between the two crumbles, their separate cultural and ritual identities are meant to be strictly observed and are not to be crossed or muddled, as commanded by the god of [Israel](#). However, upon Rahab's entry into the story, the supposedly fixed boundary line between Israelites and Canaanites shifts before the reader's eye in no subtle way, and by the conclusion of her story, Rahab is forever resident among the Israelites. She is an outsider who is drawn in. Her own self-professed allegiance shifts away from "them" and over to "us", thus the boundary is redrawn, with a newly created space for her within "our" circle.

The comic perspective encourages the laughter that accompanies this (re-)drawing of boundaries, in which the Israelites receive the benefit of a side-switching Canaanite. However, the feminist-critical perspective injects a degree of nuance into that reading. While able to affirm an interpretive move that emphasizes Rahab as subject, not object, feminist critique would also remind the very same amused

readers that as long as reality is ordered along subject/object, us/them lines, only one side is presented and that, viewed from the other side of the boundary, Rahab's words and actions are a betrayal to those within whose boundaries she has resided.

Rahab and Delilah

To further explore and exemplify comedy in the Hebrew Bible, particularly how it functions alongside feminist-critical interpretation, a comparison between the stories of Rahab and [Delilah](#) (Judg [16.4–21](#)) is revealing. These two characters and their narratives share a striking number of similarities. Both Rahab and Delilah are named, unlike many [biblical women](#) who remain anonymous, and, unusually for the Hebrew Bible, neither woman is further identified in relation to a named husband and/or father. Rahab is identified only as a "prostitute" in Jericho (Josh [2.1](#)), and Delilah is identified only as a "woman in the valley of Sorek" (Judg [16.4](#)).

Narratively, both women are approached by men, unnamed men, who ostensibly are in charge, but who instead are dependent upon the respective woman to bring the mission at hand to a successful end.

Both women employ words as their primary weapon (Delilah does wield scissors; however, they are employed only after her words extract the truth from [Samson](#)). Each woman is successful in aiding the mission to its end. Each success involves a bargain struck with the unnamed men to the benefit of the woman. Each success involves sexual activity. With respect to the components of comedy found in the narratives, Judges [16.4–21](#) shares in common with Joshua [2](#) all the elements outlined above: comic characterization, comic plot structure, dialogue, irony/reversal, hiddenness, sexuality, and situational ethic.

Finally, Rahab and Delilah are each collaborators in one of the most significant "us" and "them" conflicts of the Hebrew Bible: Israelite versus Canaanite for the former, Israelite versus [Philistine](#) for the latter. Through this last similarity emerges their defining difference: Rahab chooses Israel; Delilah does not. Rahab is an agent in Israel's victory; Delilah is an agent in Israel's defeat. And despite the fact that, from the outset, both Delilah's choice of "side" and her reason for questioning Samson is known *and* despite the fact that Rahab is the one changing "sides" and hiding things and thus is the truly treacherous one, interpretive history labels Rahab the hero and Delilah the whore.

In all this similarity alongside a single detail of difference, one witnesses both the universality and the particularity of comedy. The characters, the unfolding of events, the comic elements are shared between these two narratives and indeed across narratives of peoples spanning time and culture.

However, the distinctive boundary drawn in each of these two narratives dictates that one and only one group will be left laughing. Comedy is ultimately a matter of perspective. As the Israelites celebrate a quick-acting, quick-talking prostitute in Jericho, surely the Philistines are gleeful over the work of a persistent, persuasive consort, sending up a new "hurrah" with each snip of her scissors. To the victor belongs the spoils...and the punch line.

Feminist interpretation aids the comic one, then, by exposing these lines and the ways and places in which they are drawn. Feminist critique remains at odds with a text and a social structure which asserts that only foolish men allow themselves to be bested by women, even clever ones. However, feminist

critique and comedy together can affirm the truth of an existence that contains both foolish men and clever women, as well as expose the shortcomings of institutions in which the former are favored over the latter. For those reading against the grain, the opportunity unfolds to admire Rahab *and* Delilah and to resist social constructs that further entrench the boundary between "us" and "them".

Among its interpretive strategies, feminist critique exposes the established patriarchal order governing the social constructs of the Hebrew Bible. As well, it brings out characters, particularly female ones, who are marginalized in the text and in the [history of interpretation](#). A third of its objectives is to unmask the subject/object dichotomy often operative in placing women at the control of men—in the text, in interpretation, and in [society](#).

Among its social functions, comedy subverts the established order. As well, it enables the survival of endangered and marginalized characters, both in the text and in "real life" beyond the text. Thirdly, comedy draws boundaries, exploiting a subject/object dichotomy to reveal society's entrenched divisions.

Working in tandem, comedy and feminist-critical interpretation can give renewed life to those existing at the margins of the text and can offer new insight into the reading of the Hebrew Bible. Together they are, much like Rahab with Delilah, a formidable pair.

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