

**Potiphar's Wife and Susanna:
An intersectional reading of the biblical episodes (*Genesis* 39:6-20; *Daniel*
13) and a medieval Latin rewriting**

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ABSTRACT

The article has as its starting point a medieval (twelfth-century) Latin tale, *Sadius et Galo*, from *De nugis curialium* by Walter Map. The tale – constructed on two levels of narration, having a tale within the tale – is structured around two attempts at seduction, both rejected. At the first level of narration, the subject of seduction is female and the object is male; at the second level, the roles are reversed in gender. Both scenes recall well-known biblical episodes: the former, that of Potiphar's Wife, from *Genesis* 39; the latter, that of Susanna and the Elders, from *Daniel* 13. I draw on Intersectionality as interpretative lens in my analysis. For each pair of episodes (the medieval and the scriptural) I focus on the characters, taking into account, in each case, not only gender but also class, age and ethnicity, in my exploration of the dynamics of power and violence that are brought into play. My aim is to show that potentially symmetrical episodes evolve in very different ways when centred on seduction, a strongly gender-based dynamic in patriarchal societies.

Introduction

Intersectionality is a concept developed by the lawyer and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw between 1989 and 1991 in studies examining the particularly complex situation faced in the USA by women of colour, who, in an intersection of gender and race issues, gained little benefit from feminist or anti-racist policies – those policies having as their primary targets white women and black men, respectively (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Her work has generated a successful feminist theoretical framework, widely used by researchers in various fields, including literary studies (Davis 2015). I will use Intersectionality as an interpretative lens to conduct a narratology analysis of the medieval Latin tale *Sadius et Galo*, by the cleric Walter Map, and its two biblical models: Potiphar's Wife from *Genesis* 39:6-20 and Susanna and the Elders from *Daniel* 13. In treating the biblical narrative as a cultural text, with ideological functions, I draw on the insights of Esther Fuchs and others in exploring its sexual politics, that is, its “discursive validation of the power asymmetry, the gender-based hierarchy that is at the heart of patriarchy” (Fuchs 2000: 13).

The story of Susanna is one of the four sections added to the book of *Daniel* that are absent from the Hebrew Bible and have come down to us only via the Greek text. In the *Septuagint*, the first Greek translation of the Old Testament (dating to the third century BCE and completed, as legend has it, in Alexandria, Egypt, by 72 scholars in 72 days – hence the name), it appears at the end of chapter 13. In the later Greek translation by Theodotion (second century CE), the episode, which differs on some points from that of the *Septuagint*, opens the book. Jerome of Stridon, translating in the late fourth century CE to create the Latin *Vulgate*, probably worked from both versions (in addition to the Hebrew text). He used Theodotion's wording but positioned the story as in the *Septuagint*. It figures in the Catholic Bible as *Daniel* 13, but is not included in the canon of the Jewish or Protestant Bible. In this article I have opted to refer to the biblical text using the *Vulgate* (Fischer *et al.* 2007), hereafter VUL, as it was the text circulating in the Middle Ages (the title suggests it: *Vulgata*, for the *vulgus*, the people). I add the English translations from the *New Revised Standard Version* of 1989, hereafter NRSV, where the episode of Susanna and the Elders is located in the Apocrypha, in the Book of *Susanna*.

All three narratives – *Sadius et Galo* and the biblical episodes – tell of rejected seduction; the subject of seduction can be female and the object male or *vice versa*. We shall see that, while gender relations are of primary importance in the development of each story, gender is always intertwined with attributes of ethnicity, age and social position in determining the playing out of power relations between the characters. Starting from the medieval text, I will firstly demonstrate its biblical antecedents and then compare the episodes, exploring the misogynistic power and violence dynamics that are brought into play.

Walter Map's *Sadius et Galo*

Sadius et Galo (also known as *De societate Sadii et Galonis*) is a twelfth-century Latin tale contained in *De nugis curialium* by Walter Map (James 1983), a Welsh cleric active at the court of Henry II Plantagenet and Eleanor of Aquitaine.¹ *De nugis curialium*, literally Courtiers' Trifles, is a heterogeneous collection of stories, real and imaginary, composed to entertain the court and, at the same time, to provide moral teachings. It is divided into five sections (*distinctiones*), each further divided into chapters. Only one copy of the manuscript has survived, and not in the author's own hand. *De nugis curialium* is like a *zibaldone*, a miscellany, into which the author gradually gathered his material. The unfinished state of the work is clear, as the same stories are often presented in different sections at different stages of development. The tale of Sadius and Galo appears only once, in the second chapter of the third *distinctio*, as a tale within a tale.

Galo and his best friend, Sadius, serve at the court of the king of Asia, who is Sadius's uncle. Galo is young, handsome, of high lineage and desired by the queen – the wife of his sovereign and the aunt of his best friend. Galo rejects the queen's numerous sexual advances repeatedly explaining that, out of loyalty to his master, he can grant her everything but himself. To help Galo, Sadius lies to his aunt about his friend's alleged impotence, but the queen is suspicious. To check the accuracy of her nephew's report, she sends a lady-in-waiting to Galo in order to test his virility, although she forbids the girl to have sex with him. Immediately afterwards, she regrets her decision, fearing that they may have intercourse and imagining that Galo may rape the girl. Crazy with jealousy, she plots revenge. During a public banquet organised for the king's birthday, she asks her husband for a *don contraignant*:² she wants him to force Galo to speak out his thoughts in public. This is how the second story, as follows, is launched.

Exactly one year earlier, after recovering from a long illness, Galo decided to go out for a ride in the forest to test his strength. He arrived at a castle, entered, and reached the garden. There he saw a beautiful girl (actually a fairy) sitting in the shade of a leafy tree,³ and tried to rape her. When the girl cried out, a giant came to her rescue. He challenged Galo to a duel, but a second girl, enamoured of the knight, arrived to stand up for him; she persuaded the giant to postpone the decisive fight until the following year, at the court of the king. The narration then returns to the first level: as soon as Galo finishes his story, the giant arrives at court. He is apparently accompanied not by Galo's victim – as would be expected, as the giant is supposed to fight for her – but by the girl who interceded for the knight. The two fight and Galo wins the duel.

As can easily be seen, the double narration is structured around two attempts at seduction or rape, both of which fail. In the first level of narration, the subject of seduction is female (the unnamed queen, wife of the king of Asia) and the object is male (Galo); in the second level, the roles are reversed in gender: the subject of the attempted rape is male (Galo), the object is female (the unnamed girl, sitting in the shade of the tree). Each scene recalls a well-known biblical episode.

The biblical models

a. Potiphar's Wife

The first scene, as already pointed out by some scholars, refers to an episode in the Book of *Genesis* (39:6-20).⁴ Joseph, a slave in Egypt, is the object of desire of the wife of his master, Potiphar. Unwilling to betray his master's trust, Joseph rejects the woman, saying that the master has given him power over the house and all his possessions except her. Interestingly, a connection between the two stories that has not previously been highlighted is that the answers given by the two men – the medieval knight and the Jewish slave – are almost the same. In the following quotations and translations I use bold type to highlight the exact correspondence of words. In the medieval text we read the queen's report of Galo's response to her love proposals as follows:

dicebat me sponsam et regi consecratam, et se iuratum suum, et se causa mei facturum omnia! – sed adiciebat “preter hoc”.

would he tell me that I was **spouse** and consecrated to the king, that he was his sworn man, and that he would for my sake do everything – but added “**Except that!**” (James 1983: 216-217).

Similarly, in *Genesis* we read Joseph's words:

nec quicquam est quod non in mea sit potestate vel non tradiderit mihi praeter te quae uxor eius es (VUL, Gen. 39:9).

nor has he kept back anything from me **except yourself**, because you are his **wife** (NRSV, *Gen.* 39:9).

After being rejected several times,⁵ Potiphar's wife takes revenge on the slave through her husband: she accuses Joseph of attempted rape and he is thus locked up in prison – albeit with an extremely light sentence⁶ compared to the one given to the female character Susanna accused of adultery in the biblical episode to be analysed below.

As we have seen, in the medieval text, the queen likewise exacts revenge through her husband, although she does not accuse Galo of attempted sexual assault. Nevertheless, an allegation of rape is actually made when she imagines – in a way that speaks volumes about the misogynist context in which the text was produced – what is happening between Galo and the lady-in-waiting:

Sed ab illo uiolento detinetur ut eam sibi perpetuet. O quam non inuita uiolenciam patitur!

But ah! she is being kept back by that masterful man, that he may make her his for ever. Little does she resent the constraint she suffers (James 1983: 218-219).

The queen seems to be transferring her own feelings to the lady-in-waiting: she would enjoy being raped by Galo, whom she desires. This is a common misogynistic idea inherited from the classical period and circulating in the Middle Ages, often found in literature as well as in jurisprudence and legal proceedings: that women, lustful by nature, can enjoy and therefore consent to the sexual act, even when carried out with force and apparently against their will⁷ – “*uis grata puellae*”, as we read in Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria, Book I* (Hollis 1977).⁸ This ancient misogynistic “rape myth” (Burt 1980) eventually led to the first *querelle des femmes*. Christine de Pizan, in her *Livre de la Cité des Dames / The Book of the City of Ladies*, dating from around 1405, devotes a chapter (Part II, chapter XLIV) to denouncing this idea: “*Contre ceulx qui dient que femmes veulent estre efforciees*” [Against those who say that women want to be raped]. As an example, among others, she chooses the classical figure of Lucretia – the roman *matrona* whose rape by Sextus Tarquinius eventually led, according to legend, to the fall of the monarchy in ancient Rome – and she states that, in the case of rape, the death sentence for the offender is legitimate, just and holy (Richards & Caraffi 1997: 328-331).

Going back to the biblical text, the episode of Potiphar’s Wife fits into a widespread and recurrent pattern in literature and folklore, which has been catalogued in Stith Thompson’s *Motif- Index of Folk-Literature* (1958) as K2111, labelled “Potiphar’s wife. A woman makes vain overtures to a man and then accuses him of attempting to force her”. The basic schema can be outlined as follows: an older woman falls in love with a younger man of inferior social rank; she attempts to seduce him, sure of his acceptance, and then, when rejected, accuses him of attempted rape, asking her husband for revenge. To understand the vast popularity of this pattern, suffice it to consider the popular Greek myth of Phaedra, in love with her stepson Hippolytus.

b. Susanna

The identification of the biblical hypotext underlying the second scene of *Sadius et Galo* is much less immediate and can be deduced from a small, apparently insignificant, lexical item. Galo says he met the young woman “*sub floridissima cino*” (James 1983: 226), but in Latin dictionaries the lemma “*cinus*” does not exist. Therefore, Walter Map must have borrowed it from the only well-known Latin text that contained it: the *Vulgate*, and more specifically, the Book of *Daniel* (13), which tells the story of Susanna and the Elders. The biblical episode has the young and beautiful Susanna, who is married to a powerful man, about to bathe in the garden when she is accosted by two old judges, who have long been obsessed with her. Confronted by Susanna’s refusal to submit to their attempted rape and her desperate cries, the two threaten to publicly accuse her of adultery, and by shouting in turn, they gather a crowd.⁹ The woman, subsequently sentenced for adultery, is about to be stoned to death, but God sends the future prophet Daniel to her rescue. Daniel cross-examines the two elders separately

about where they saw Susanna committing adultery. One answers that it took place under a mastic tree,¹⁰ the other says it was under an evergreen oak.¹¹ Once the falsity of the accusation is thus proved, Susanna is rehabilitated and the elders are put to death. With respect to the first of the two trees, the mastic: in Jerome's *Vulgate* we read "*sub scino*" (VUL, *Dan.* 13:54). As noted above, the lemma "(s)cinus" does not appear in Latin dictionaries; the mastic tree is called "*lentiscus*". Scholars agree that Jerome coined the term "*scinus*" when translating the episode, deciding to transpose into Latin the Greek expression "*Υπὸ σχίνου*" (IPA: *y-po skʰi:non*) (see Ziegler 1954: 230-231). He did so in order to respect the play on words in the Greek between the type of tree – the noun "*σχίνος*" (IPA: *skʰi:nos*) – and the punishment given to the elders – the verb "*σχίζειν*" (IPA: *skʰizde:n*), meaning to split: the elder will be split in half by divine wrath.¹² This lexical detail allows us to assume that, when composing the scene of the attempted rape in the shade of a tree, our Welsh cleric must have had in mind, consciously or unconsciously, the biblical episode of Susanna.

Before proceeding with the analysis, a comment is in order about the choice of words to describe Susanna's experience, which will also serve to indirectly support the validity of Intersectionality as a framework. Both for the episode of Potiphar's Wife and for that of Susanna and the Elders I often use the expression "attempted seduction" or "failed seduction". Jennifer Glancy (1995) argues that with respect to *Daniel* 13 we should not talk about seduction but rape:

Rape occurs when one person forces another to engage in sexual intercourse. Seduction occurs when one person persuades another to engage in sexual intercourse. When the elders confront Susanna and announce that she will either submit sexually to them or face execution on the capital charge of adultery, their very real threat of force defines their action as attempted rape, not attempted seduction. Nonetheless, scholarly literature consistently describes the elders' actions as seduction (289).

I do not treat the words "rape" and "seduction" as in strict opposition in the way that Glancy does: when the seducer occupies a powerful position by virtue of gender, social class or ethnicity, as in the two biblical episodes studied, the line between "seduction", by persuasion, and "rape", by force or blackmail, is not clear. Furthermore, it is only in the text by Theodotion and in the *Vulgate* that the elders use threats to persuade Susanna; in the *Septuagint*, the accusation of adultery appears for the first time only at the trial. My choice is also dictated by the intention to show the potential symmetry between the two biblical episodes. In reference to the aggressive sexual offers made by Potiphar's wife, the expressions "attempted seduction" and "temptation" are generally used by scholars, with a few exceptions.¹³ The main opposition to this nomenclature comes from Feichtinger (2016: 12), who claims that such terms imply an androcentric depiction of sexually aggressive women as fascinating, and that

[i]n the end, the captions "seduction" and "temptation" show a double gender bias: 1. A man cannot be the victim of sexual violence by a woman. 2. A woman cannot be a sexual offender.

Indeed, not only the Bible but Medieval texts depict rape as a uni-directional gendered crime and a female-male rape almost always as an impossible eventuality.¹⁴

An Intersectional reading

Having identified the two biblical models, I shall move on to compare these two attempts at seduction – polar opposites as regards the protagonists’ gender – taking into account both the medieval and the scriptural versions. The stories of Potiphar’s wife and Susanna have rarely been compared by scholars, an excellent exception being the analysis of Alice Bach (1997), who traces the similarities between the two women characters and Tamar from *Genesis* 38.¹⁵ Although I agree with some of Bach’s conclusions (as discussed below), in my opinion, the introduction of the third figure of Tamar into the analysis means the potential perfect symmetry between the other two biblical passages loses prominence. It is certainly true that Tamar shares a great deal with the other two women, especially with Potiphar’s wife, but the episode of which she is protagonist has a significantly different structure. Amy-Jill Levine (1995: 316) also sets the Potiphar’s Wife and Susanna episodes side by side but makes a comparison between Joseph and Susanna. Yet a special link between the figures of Potiphar’s wife and Susanna is indirectly suggested by the fact that Susanna is catalogued in Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index* (1958) at K2112 – labelled “Woman slandered as adulteress (prostitute). (Usually by unsuccessful suitor.) (Crescentia, Genoveva, Susanna)” – immediately following the “Potiphar’s Wife” motif at K2111.

In these two archetypal scenes of attempted seduction and revenge, the roles of the offender and the victim are opposite in gender, and since, in patriarchal societies, seduction has a strongly gender-based dynamic, a perfect correspondence between the two episodes is not possible. In my analysis, I use Intersectionality as the interpretative lens, taking into consideration not only the gender but also the class, age and ethnicity of each character, for a better understanding of the power dynamics displayed than would be obtained through analysis reduced to a simple gender-based logic. In Glancy’s (1995) reading of the mechanisms of gender representation in the episode of Susanna and the Elders, she highlights how in *Daniel* 13 the female is the object of a male subject’s gaze, in accordance with a more general configuration of gender in written texts:

man is conventionally represented as the subject of the gaze, and woman as the object of the gaze. To see is to control; to have one’s vision represented is to have one’s perception of the world ratified. To be seen is to be subject to control; to represent women solely as objects of others’ vision denies women their subjectivity (290).

As the episode of Potiphar’s Wife shows, however, the male can be the passive object of an active female gaze; the dynamics of power are in this case complicated by the intersection of various categories, of which gender is only one.

In the first episode, the attempted seduction, which sees the “weaker” sex, as understood in a patriarchal society, in the active role, can only take place in a confined and private space – the room, in the biblical episode, and the court, in *Sadius et Galo* – the only space where women could exercise a certain power in their respective social contexts. Both offenders – and I use the term because the attempted seduction develops to harassment and is followed by revenge – are older and thus more experienced than the desired youth. The victims, being “strong” in gender, must necessarily be “weak” with regard to other parameters, in order to be victims. In the Bible, the parameter is ethnic-social, as Joseph is a foreign slave in Egypt (this is a positive parameter, of course, in the broader perspective of the text); in the medieval text, the parameter is purely social, as Galo is a subordinate knight. The accusation by which the would-be seducers take revenge is that of attempted rape, a crime

traditionally – and especially in the biblical and medieval contexts – connoted by gender. As some scholars have suggested, Joseph’s “weakness” is also evident and made possible by a certain degree of “feminisation” of his character.¹⁶ Rachel Adelman (2014, 2015) points out, in two studies comparing the diasporic characters of Esther and Joseph, that the attempt at seduction is possible because Joseph, as a foreign slave in Egypt, plays at first what we might call a feminine role of passive beauty: “*erat autem Ioseph pulchra facie et decorus aspectu*” (VUL, *Gen.* 39:6), “Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking” (NRSV, *Gen.* 39:6).¹⁷ Lori Lefkowitz (2010: 86) also underlines the feminine beauty of Joseph, the youngest and least masculine of Jacob’s sons, by likening him to his sister Dinah (*Gen.* 34). Both of them are passive victims of their older brothers and “attract the lust and harassment of a foreigner with power”. It should be noted, however, that Dinah is raped while Joseph is not. The effectiveness of Joseph’s resistance to the mistress’s advances is in any case made possible by gender: unlike a mistress, a master would not have feared repercussions for having seduced a female slave; and a female slave, for her part, would never have been socially able to resist her master. As Fuchs (2000: 146) puts it:

Had Potiphar’s wife been a man coveting an unmarried woman, would there be a story to tell? Had Potiphar seduced one of his maids, it is doubtful that the biblical narrative would have bothered to refer to the incident let alone condemn it. Potiphar’s wife is condemned because as a married woman she must not have sexual access to any man other than her husband.

In the second episode, it is the “strong” gender that appears in the role of the offender, the “weak” gender in that of the victim. Susanna is strong on an ethnic-social level: she is Jewish like her offenders and wife of the most influential man among their people. This power, however, is mitigated insofar as she is a woman. We can say the same thing about the maiden sitting under the mastic tree in *Sadius et Galo*: she is a fairy, a supernatural being, and therefore strong on an ontological level. The attempt at seduction in both cases takes place in an open, public space (as it is carried out by the “public” gender) and the subsequent accusation is that of adultery, an act which, in patriarchal societies, due to the double standard, has long been punished with different degrees of severity for men and women.

For medieval society – whose vision was borrowed from Roman legislation (*Corpus iuris civilis*) – adultery was a voluntary carnal act between a woman and a man other than her husband. A married woman was therefore as guilty of adultery as a man who has slept with the wife of another. The man’s marital status was irrelevant: a married man was not committing adultery when having intercourse with an unmarried woman. At the basis of adultery was not the man’s infidelity, but the woman’s, because her act risked the procreation of illegitimate children (Lett 2014: 247). We can find almost the same patriarchal double standard about adultery in the Bible:

According to biblical law, the husband could have unlimited access to any number of unmarried women. No penalty is recorded for a man who has sexual relations outside the framework of marriage, as long as he does not intrude into another man’s preserves. The laws stigmatize as adultery only a married woman’s sexual attachment to another man. A man, whether married or not, could by contrast engage in sexual relations with additional wives, concubines and prostitutes, and even rape an unattached virgin, as long as he took it upon himself to compensate the virgin’s father. That man would however, be punished in various ways, including death, had he dallied with a married woman (Fuchs 2000: 116-117).¹⁸

Fuchs's (2000) explores the double standard in her analysis of Potiphar's Wife's story. She identifies two type-scenes involving multiple partners in the Bible: the "adultery" type, involving one wife and two concurrent husbands, which ends with exclusion of one of the men; and the "contest" type, involving two wives and one husband, where the threesome becomes stabilised: "what is permitted to the husband is not tolerated for the wife" (118). Fuchs presents the Potiphar's Wife episode as a digression from the adultery type-scene as the gender roles are reversed, the wife being the active desirous party. Joseph's gender protects him from the victimisation that befalls women in his position: "Joseph ... emerges as an autonomous and morally superior subject. He is given a chance to present his point of view which is fully supported by the narrative data" (146).

Even though they play opposite roles in the attempted seduction scenes, Potiphar's wife and Susanna have some significant shared features. Primarily, it must be noted that each woman is introduced through the figure of her husband. The first is unnamed and referred to only as "the wife of" (and the same can be said of the queen in *Sadius et Galo*, who is only presented as the wife of the king of the Asians). Susanna, although named, is nevertheless introduced after her husband and in relation to him and her father; she literally stands between the two of them:

et erat vir habitans in Babylone et nomen eius Ioachim | et accepit uxorem nomine Susannam filiam Chelciae (VUL, *Dan.* 13:1-2).

There was a man living in Babylon whose name was Joakim | He married the daughter of Hilkiah, named Susanna (NRSV, *Susanna* 1:1-2).

On this point, Glancy (1995) observes:

Susanna is the symbol of the integrity of Joachim's household, the object of the elders' desire, and the vehicle of Daniel's rise to prominence, but she does not emerge as a subject in her own right (301).

Indeed, as Bach (1997) argues, "each woman is powerless to act for herself" and "must depend on men for the resolution of her story"; Potiphar's wife "cannot achieve revenge upon Joseph directly. Her husband must put Joseph in prison. Susanna cannot defend herself against the elders. Daniel must reverse the condemnation of the community" (66). Moreover, each woman is used by the text to "stand as reminder of chastity as a code for female value" (72): the first as a negative example, to be condemned; the second as a positive one, to be followed. Once again, we can say the same of the women characters in *Sadius et Galo*: the un-chaste queen must resort to her husband to get revenge; the fairy will be defended against her aggressor by the giant.

Importantly, both Potiphar's wife and Susanna are functional to the ascent of a young man who is predestined for biblical greatness: the future patriarch, Joseph, and the future prophet, Daniel. In the medieval text, too, the two attempts at seduction, which see Galo first in the role of the victim and then in that of the offender, have as their ultimate outcome the dazzling victory of the knight against the giant. Furthermore, the victory is achieved in a duel, and thus understood in the medieval feudal system as a true divine judgment, the crowning of the physically stronger contestant as winner also showing which of the two is morally superior and in the right.

It is relevant to note that, while Potiphar's wife and Susanna have hardly ever been juxtaposed by scholars, Joseph and Susanna have been dealt with together ever since the work of the earliest biblical exegetes, and taken as models of male and female chastity – for example by Augustine of Hippo in his Sermon *CCCXLIII, De Susanna et Ioseph cum exhortatione ad castitatem* (see Lambot 1956). They are both young, both beautiful, both chaste and falsely accused. However, the similarities end there. Although each plays the passive role in the scene of seduction, Joseph can actively save himself, to the point of becoming the Pharaoh's adviser, while Susanna remains passive: she has to be saved by Daniel and, when cleared, simply goes back to her previous status.

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of the two stories, whether from the biblical or medieval Latin texts, allows an analysis that reveals some common elements in their representation of women's sexuality and rape. The two biblical episodes reflect the idea that women are not worthy of trust when they do speak out (and this occurs only rarely; Susanna, for example, addresses only the servants, women and, just inwardly, God). The false accusation by Potiphar's wife demonstrates this. Thus, according to the recurring adage that women enjoy even violent sexual intercourse (quoting Ovid's "*grata est uis ista puellis*", as noted above), rape turns out to be an invention made up at a later time by a woman who is trying to conceal her irrepressible sexuality. The elders in *Daniel* 13 make up a perfectly credible lie about Susanna. Without divine intervention, Susanna would never be believed if she accused her offenders of attempted rape; the generalised assumption based on the behaviour of Potiphar's wife just does not allow it.

Women, therefore, are always represented as lewd and willing by the narrator in *Genesis* 39, and by the characters in *Daniel* 13. It is no coincidence that in the traditional iconography of the two biblical episodes, it is always the female character who is represented naked in the scene of seduction, regardless of her role as active or passive.¹⁹ For the medieval text it is possible to say something similar, even though no accusation of rape or adultery is explicitly made. While the centre of the plot is no longer the unreliability of the woman's word, the misogynistic idea of women's "naturally" strong sexual appetite remains, along with the underestimation of rape. We have already seen how the queen transfers her burning desire for Galo to the lady-in-waiting; she does so to the point of enjoying a fantasy of being raped by him. In a comparable way, we can read the development of the second level of story. No sooner does the girl who is about to be raped by Galo cry out than a second girl, who is in love with Galo, arrives and intercedes for him, asking that the decisive fight with the rescuing giant be postponed. When, a year later, the duel finally takes place, it is no longer clear which of the two girls is present. The two female figures, one hostile to the hero and the other on his side, merge into one. Thus, the element of sexual assault is removed, since the woman who once sought revenge and the woman in love now overlap. What remains, however, are the consequences that sexual aggression against a woman has in determining the power relationship between men: the divine battle of the knight against the giant takes place, and the sexual aggressor emerges as the victor over the woman's defender.

Romance philology, because of the stratified nature of its texts, lends itself easily to comparison with literary antecedents and folklore archetypes, and Thompson's *Motif-Index* (1958) is a widespread tool of analysis. For decades now, the first episode of *Sadius et Galo* has been traced back to the biblical model of Potiphar's Wife (see note 4), but the identification of that antecedent seems to gain greater significance when coupled with identification of the biblical model for the second episode, the story of Susanna and the Elders

(be it a conscious or unconscious rewriting). Moreover, the comparison and analysis are rendered more fruitful through an intersectional reading of the narrative structures. Although Intersectionality – as a framework recently developed to handle current feminist and racial issues – may seem at first an anachronistic if not improper tool to analyse literary and sacred texts reflecting such distant and different contexts, it proves useful in revealing the narrative complexities always underlying the difference in gender. Through the juxtaposition of two pairs of potentially symmetrical episodes, the hierarchical asymmetry existing in gender difference can emerge – asymmetry that is made clearer by exploration of the other asymmetries involved, in relation to the characters’ age, class or ethnicity. The intersectional comparison of the two pairs of episodes discloses some enduring gendered power dynamics.

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NOTES

¹ It is interesting to note an aspect of the historical context of Map's writing that bears some relationship to the tale. Eleanor (the niece of the famous William IX of Aquitaine, the Troubadour) was first married to the King of France, Louis VII. In 1152, after that marriage was declared null and void (officially on the grounds of a recently discovered "close" kinship – fourth-degree – but in fact because she had failed to produce any male heirs), she married Henry II Plantagenet, King of England. As a dowry, she brought the duchy of Aquitaine and other lands which were French geographically but not politically. It was precisely for the alluring dowry that, before the celebration of her second marriage, Theobald Count of Blois and Geoffrey of Nantes (Henry's brother), tried to abduct her in order to take possession of her titles through a forced marriage. See Duby (1982: 169-175).

² The *don contraignant*, or "rash boon", is a recurring motif in chivalric literature. It consists of a blind promise, generally granted by the king or a socially elevated figure, which ensures that the requesting character, usually a knight, sets the adventure in motion. In this case, the blank pledge triggers the second-level tale.

³ It is never explicitly stated that the girl is a fairy, but she looks like a fairy, and the loneliness of the place and her proximity to the tree (only a water source is missing) constitute the typical surroundings for such creatures in medieval literature of French influence. On this point, see Gallais 1992.

⁴ In Bennett (1941: 50), Hume (1975: 418) and Varvaro (1994: 190-191) the biblical model is taken for granted, and there is no attention to the similarities and differences between the Latin medieval version and its biblical antecedent. In a recent article (Viscidi 2019), I have compared several medieval rewritings of the Potiphar's Wife episode. From an anthropological point of view the refusal of the older woman's advances can be interpreted as the moment in which the young male rejects a mother-like figure (she is sometimes the protagonist's aunt or stepmother) before setting out on an adventure that will involve his sexual initiation.

⁵ The attempt at seduction, in addition to the obvious sexual component, has a strong cultural dimension, as shown by Joshua Levinson (1997: 274-276). Levinson points out that some tannaitic *midrashim* explain the verse "One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house" (NRSV, *Gen.* 39:11) as meaning that, on the day of the last attempted seduction, Joseph was alone in the house because, unlike the other servants, he did not go to the pagan Festival of the Nile – with the implication that resistance to cultural temptation would predict successful resistance to sexual temptation.

⁶ Stiebert (2019) gives a feminist reading of this biblical episode, showing how it conveys a long-standing rape myth – that most allegations of rape are false, as women very often lie about being raped – and noting that its status as a Bible story means that it can be widely drawn on even in the present day to justify a rape culture. With respect to the lightness of Joseph's sentence, Stiebert observes "Potiphar's imprisoning rather than executing Joseph might indicate either his capacity for leniency and mercy, or his believing and trusting Joseph, or mistrusting his wife's fidelity" (76).

⁷ Lett (2014: 207) observes that, in medieval Europe, "The 'natural' feminine lasciviousness often has as a corollary the fairly widespread idea that a woman who is raped still feels pleasure" [my translation]. See also Lett (2010) which focuses on the records of rape trials in fourteenth-century municipal documents from the area of Italy now in the region of Le Marche.

⁸ Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, Book I, ll, 673-674: "*uim licet appelles: grata est uis ista puellis; | quod iuuat, inuitae saepe dedisse uolunt*" (Hollis 1977). "Brute force!" you'll say: it's force that women want, | They love refusing what they long to grant (Melville & Kenney 2008: 105).

⁹ Susanna's cries relate to a precise legal indication of the Old Testament: if a man is caught in sexual intercourse with another man's woman, and the woman has not cried out for help, they will both be stoned to death for adultery. If, however, the intercourse takes place in the fields, where the woman's screams cannot be heard, only the man will be put to death, for rape (*Deut.* 22:22-27). Susanna thus cries out to defend herself against the public accusation of adultery; the elders cry out in turn to deprive her of the possible defence. The Bible also provides precise indications in cases where a virgin girl, not promised to another man, is raped: a reparative marriage is expected (*Deut.* 22:28-29). However, the prescriptions are not always respected. In *Genesis* 34, Dinah, a virgin, is raped by Shechem then promised in marriage to the rapist, but he is then killed together with his people by Dinah's brothers, without the consent of her father, Jacob. Other biblical episodes of rape include the gang rape perpetrated against the Levite's concubine (*Judg.* 19), the seduction/rape of Bathsheba by David (2 *Sam.* 11) and the incestuous rape of Tamar (David's daughter, a different Tamar from that of *Genesis* 38) perpetrated by her half-brother Amnon (2 *Sam.* 13). On these and other biblical episodes of male-female rape, see Joanna Stiebert's (2020) monograph on rape culture and rape myths in the Bible, pages 25-32 in particular.

¹⁰ "*nunc ergo si vidisti eam dic sub qua arbore videris eos loquentes sibi qui ait sub scino*" (VUL, *Dan.* 13:54). "Now then, if you really saw this woman, tell me this: Under what tree did you see them being intimate with each other?" He answered, "Under a mastic tree" (NRSV, *Susanna* 1:54).

¹¹ "*nunc ergo dic mihi sub qua arbore comprehenderis eos loquentes sibi qui ait sub prino*" (VUL, *Dan.* 13:58). "Now then, tell me: Under what tree did you catch them being intimate with each other?" He answered, "Under an evergreen oak" (NRSV, *Susanna* 1:58).

¹² Jerome does the same with the other tree, the evergreen oak; instead of using the Latin lemma "*illex*", he uses "*prinus*", transliterating from the Greek "*πρίνοϛ*" (IPA *pri:nos*).

¹³ Stiebert refers to the Potiphar's Wife episode as "attempted rape" (2020: 12, n. 41) or as "sexual harassment" (2019, 2020: 24). She lists it, along with the story of Lot's daughters (*Gen.* 19:30-38), as one of the few cases of biblical female-male sexual violence. It must be noted, however, that Lot's daughters' action is not penalised or criticised in the biblical narrative, quite the opposite. There are also some cases of male-male attempted rape in the Hebrew Bible: it is threatened by the men of Sodom (*Gen.* 19:5) and by the men of Gibeah (*Judg.* 19:22). As Stiebert (2020: 77, n. 47) comments on these cases: "The Bible ... seems to imply that rape of a man is worse than rape of a woman. Hence, in both *Genesis* 19 and *Judges* 19 rape of a man is deemed abhorrent and females, including virgin daughters, are offered up for rape instead".

¹⁴ In medieval French (as in the quotation from Christine de Pizan's text above) the expression used to define rape – a serious crime, punished with the death penalty – was "*femme efforcier*", i.e. "to force a woman", the verb "*efforcier*" having *per se* a positive or neutral meaning: to strain, to make an effort. In that context, in both literary and legal texts, the subject of rape is necessarily male and the object female.

¹⁵ Like Potiphar’s wife, Tamar engages in an illicit seduction, although with very different intentions, and her behaviour is validated in the biblical narrative. Widow of Er and then of his brother Onan, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law, Judah, without being recognised, in order to recall him to his family duties: according to the law of the Levirate he should have married her to his third son, Shelah. When the woman’s illegitimate relationship is revealed by a pregnancy, and her father-in-law is about to condemn her to the stake, Tamar reveals her deception and Judah is thus forced to acknowledge his fault.

¹⁶ This interpretation is not unanimously shared. For some scholars Joseph’s beauty has nothing to do with feminisation. Stiebert (2019: 80) argues: “Both male and female beauty appear to have been admired (though there is more frequent reference to good-looking women) but there is no separate terminology and no implication that a beautiful male is feminine – as there is in English, for instance, with an expression such as ‘the pretty man’”. However, as Stiebert observes, Joseph’s beauty still renders him vulnerable to sexual threat.

¹⁷ Linking sexual violence to the attractiveness of the victim reflects a common rape myth. There are other examples in the Bible. See Stiebert (2020: 62-65).

¹⁸ Regarding the rape of a virgin who is not betrothed the Bible states: “If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, | the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives” (NRSV, *Deut* 22:28-29).

¹⁹ See, for example, the representations of the two biblical episodes painted by the seventeenth-century Italian artists Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, father and daughter: *Giuseppe e la moglie di Putifarre* by Orazio (1626-1630) and *Susanna e i vecchioni* (ca. 1610) by Artemisia. It is worth recalling that, when still a minor (9 May 1611), Artemisia was raped by a collaborator of her father’s, the painter Agostino Tassi. It was Orazio Gentileschi who reported the rape, as women were not allowed to sue in a court at the time, and Artemisia was called to testify under torture. Agostino Tassi was found guilty but never served a sentence. See Alexandra Lapierre’s (2000) historical novel about Artemisia Gentileschi’s life.