

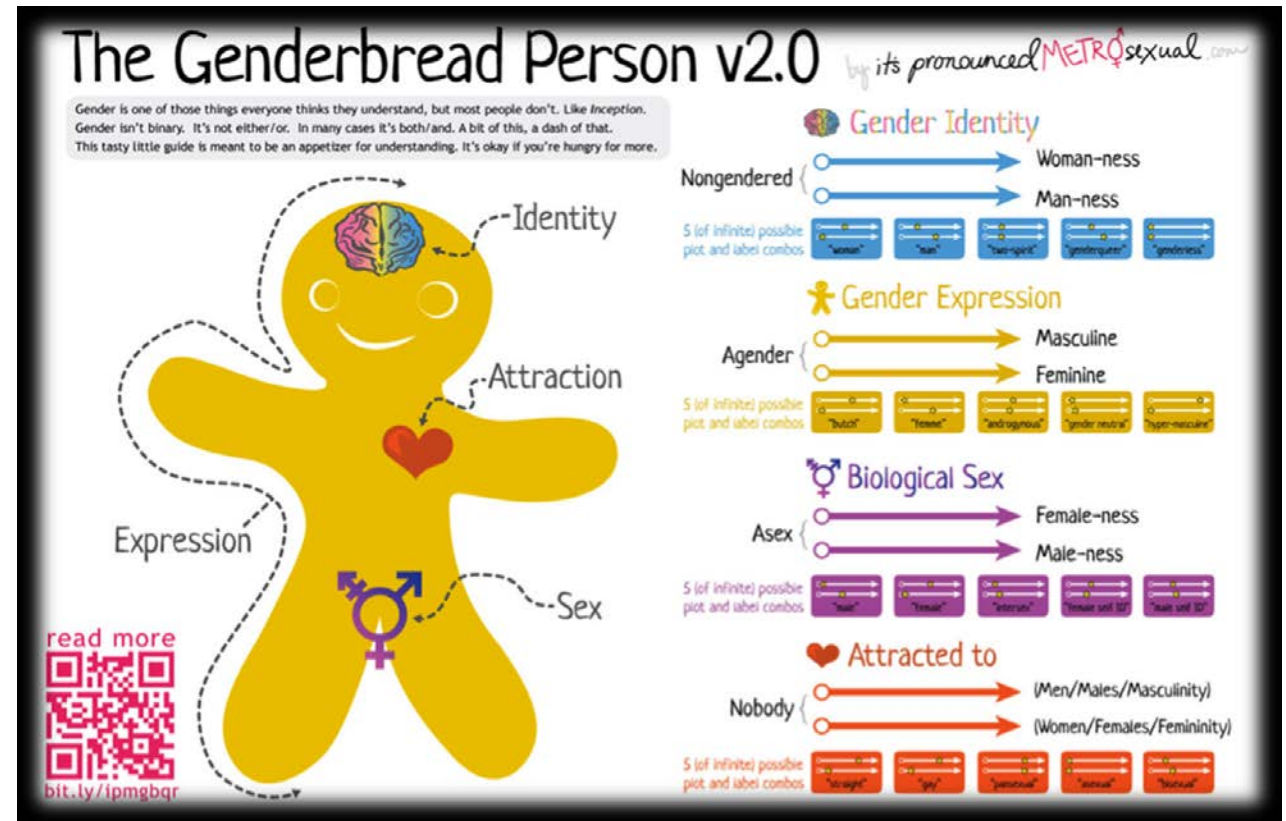
Reading
sacred texts
queerly



Queer theory – a reminder

Queer theory questions those binaries of gender and sexuality that sustain heteronormativity and cisnormativity.

Gender and sexuality are not linked, fixed, stable or 'natural'.



Studying gender and sexuality in the Bible: Things to remember

- There are no universal, fixed or timeless understandings of 'normative' gender and sexuality. The meanings ascribed to genders and sexualities is in constant flux across space and time.
- Ancient understandings of gender and sexuality were likely not the same as they are today.
- Plus, ancient texts such as the Bible are not cohesive or univocal. The Bible contains multiple and contradictory perspectives on gender and sexuality.
- We can't map onto ancient texts contemporary terms such as 'homosexuality', 'transgender', 'bisexuality'... or 'heterosexuality', 'cisgender', etc.

Queer readings of biblical texts

- Searching for queerness that *may already be present* (but is often ignored) within texts.
- Identifying and challenging heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions within biblical interpretations.
 - Identifying taken-for-granted binaries of gender and sexuality (and other binaries) within interpretations.
 - Challenging the denial of queer identities in the Bible
 - Highlighting the way queer desires and identities are rendered invisible – eclipsed by heterosexist and cissexist reading strategies, which become the unquestioned ‘norm’.
 - A bit like our discussion last week about identifying/ignoring gender violence in biblical texts.

Why 'queer' scripture?

Queer readings of sacred texts don't employ a single method or subject, but 'take as their point of departure a critical interrogation and active contestation of the many ways in which **the Bible is and has been read to support heteronormative and normalizing configurations of sexual practices and sexual identities**'.

Ken Stone, 'Introduction', in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, 2001, p. 33; cited in Derks, p.555.

Teresa Hornsby and Deryn Guest, *Transgender, Intersex and Biblical Interpretation*

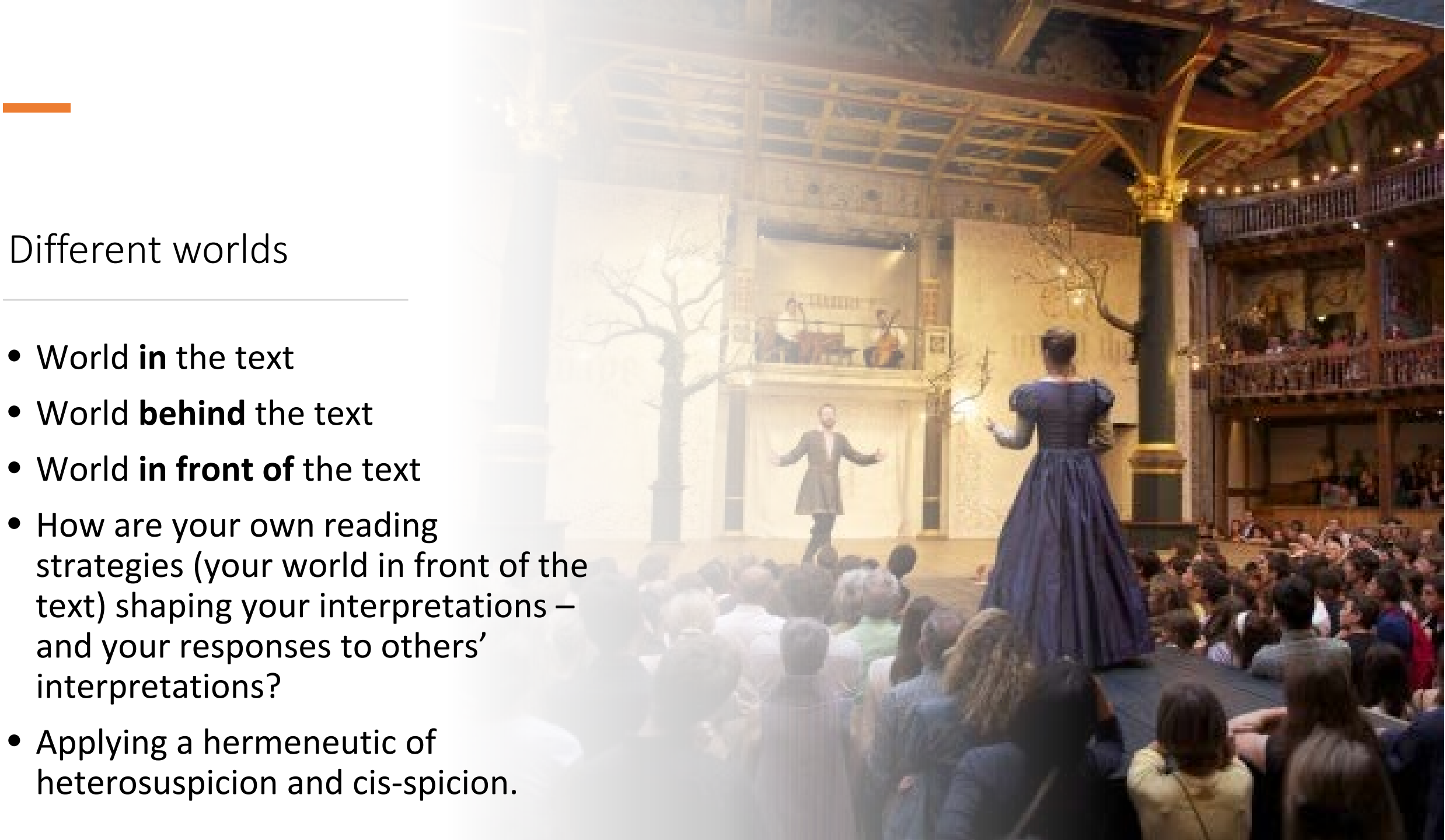
“If the power of heteronormativity resides in its unquestioned status of “normal” and its unchallenged place at the foundation of a sexuality that is “good” and “blessed,” the buttress of the whole façade is Bible translation and interpretation ... The burgeoning field of queer biblical studies has produced compelling scholarship, which seeks to show the heteronormative biases that punctuate biblical interpretation.”

“As postmodern readers of the Bible suggest, the reader makes meaning. Heteronormativity is not *in* the text, waiting to be discovered; the interpreter or reader brings the assumption of heteronormativity to the text and uses the text to justify heteronormativity.”

‘Introduction’, p. 4

Different worlds

- World **in** the text
- World **behind** the text
- World **in front of** the text
- How are your own reading strategies (your world in front of the text) shaping your interpretations – and your responses to others' interpretations?
- Applying a hermeneutic of heterosuspicion and cis-spicion.



What do you think?

- What factors are shaping your own worlds in front of the text?
 - Your gender, sexuality, ethnicity, socio-cultural status, religious beliefs
- How can we become more aware of our world in front of the text?
- How do we approach biblical texts with integrity?

Queer readings and Lesbian rules

- We need to apply a 'hermeneutic of cis-picion' and a 'hermeneutic of hetero-suspicion'.
- Grace Jantzen, 'Contours of a Queer Theology': the 'Lesbian rule' – to 'measure' the queer bumps and curves that are already in texts, but which tend to be 'straightened out' or ignored by heteronormative reading strategies.
- Reading queerly is all about reading 'with an eye towards disruption' (Kathy Rudy, 'Queer Theory and Feminism').



Genesis 1

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of *Tehom*, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (v.2)

Tehom – usually translated ‘the deep’ – a feminine noun with a masculine form, that takes both masculine and feminine pronouns. Deryn Guest calls it a ‘gender shifting’ entity from which God creates the world. While God ‘orders’ and binarizes *Tehom* during creation, there’s an awareness in the Hebrew Bible that this ordering is temporary and always shifting. *Tehom* has an awesome power.

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (v.27)

Queering gender identities – a God (‘he’) who bears both male-ness and female-ness that is reflected in his creation.

See Deryn Guest, *Transgender, Intersex and the Bible*, chapter 2

Jacob

“When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Gen. 25.27-8).

Jacob cooks and stays at home with his mother. He must ‘dress up’ to disguise himself as his (more masculine) brother (Genesis 27).



Matthias Stom, *Esau selling his birthright to Jacob* (1640s)

Joseph (Genesis 37)

- Joseph is Jacob's favourite son
- Jacob gives Joseph some sort of special coat – a “ketonet passim” (c.f. 2 Samuel 13:18)
- Some of his other behaviour queers traditional gender norms
 - See video by Peterson Toscano [here](#)
- More discussion on Joseph's gender nonconforming biblical character can also be found [here](#)



The Love of David and Jonathan
Ideology, Text, Reception

James E. Harding



David and Jonathan (1 and 2 Samuel)

“And the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul ... Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul” (1 Sam. 18.1-3)

“As soon as the boy had gone, David rose from beside the stone heap and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. He bowed three times, and they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more” (1 Sam. 20.41)

“Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me. Your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women” (2 Sam. 1.25-6).

Ruth and Naomi

“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die —
and there will I be buried.
May the Lord do this to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

(Ruth 1.16-17)





Phillip Hermogenes
Calderon, *Ruth and
Naomi* (1886)

For more details see
J. Cheryl Exum,
*Plotted, Shot, and
Painted*, ch.6

Judith

- Both conforms to and subverts traditional gender roles ascribed to women.
- A biblical character who performs some of Butler's 'gender trouble'.
- Similar to Jael (Judges 4-5)
- See Deborah Sawyer, 'Gender Strategies in Antiquity: Judith's Performance', *Feminist Theology* 10 (2001).



Samson and Delilah (Judges 16)

Sexualities and desires

Gender roles and gender fluidity

Think about the worlds **in** and **in front of** the text – how they influence interpretation.



Guercino, *Samson and Delilah* (1654)

Queering Delilah

- Her relationship with Samson
- Her sexual identity
- Her gender queerness
- Her ethnicity
- See reading by Blyth and Wijaya Mulya (listed under the week 10 module)



Queering Samson

- See reading by Marco Derks and Laurie Rowlett.
- Hypermasculinity is a masquerade that Samson uses to hide his queerness.
 - He is hairy, violent, has sex with women, is strong, authoritative, active – adopting traditional masculine traits in our gender binary.
- Delilah (who herself defies traditional roles of femininity) bedazzles Samson more than any other woman he has met, making him query his own gender identity.
 - BDSM?
 - Hair cutting as a symbol of castration – does Samson offer Delilah the secret of his strength because he wants to shed his hypermasculine persona?